

Middle East Places in Iran and Turkey Foreign Policy

Meghdad Ebrahimzadeh Shermeh

Department of Political Science, Ayatollah Amoli, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran

Abstract: As a long-standing order breaks down, Turkey, Iran, and the Arab states of the Levant and the Gulf face both new competition and fresh opportunities for cooperation. In the past decade, Turkish-Iranian cooperation visibly intensified. Turkish energy needs and Iran's vast oil and natural gas resources have been an important driver of the increasing Turkish-Iranian cooperation. Iran is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, behind Russia. Iran is also an important source of crude oil. However, the degree of cooperation between the two countries should not be exaggerated. Turkey and Iran have historically been, and continue to be, rivals rather than close partners. While they may share certain economic and security interests, their interests are at odds in many areas across the Middle East. The two states have fundamentally different political identities and ideologies. The Arab Spring has given the political and ideological rivalry between Turkey and Iran greater impetus. The fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, in addition to uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, has undermined the political order in the Middle East. Turkey and Iran both have sought to exploit the emerging "new order" in the region to achieve their respective interests in the Middle East. Relations have been strained by a number of issues. The most important factor contributing to the growing strains in relations has been Turkey's support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Syria is Iran's only true state ally in the Middle East. Since 1979, the Secular, Alawite-dominated, Baathist Syrian regime and Iran's Shi'a theocracy have strongly supported each other. Assad's downfall would be a serious strategic blow to Iran and could result in the growth of Turkey's influence. It could also have a demonstration effect on Iran, strengthening internal opposition to the Iranian regime and deepening the current divisions within the Iranian leadership. Iraq has also become a field of growing competition between Turkey and Iran. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq has created a power vacuum that Iran has attempted to fill. The sectarian conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni has drawn Turkey and Iran into the Iraqi conflict on opposing sides. While the Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraq is not as significant as the tensions over Syria, it could gain new strength with Assad's downfall, leading to widespread sectarian violence that could be highly destabilizing.

Keywords: Middle East. Security, Challenge, Iran, Turkey.

1. INTRODUCTION

Support for Islamic-oriented extremist organizations in Turkey are particularly worrisome for Turkey's secularist leaders. On the subject of Turkish-Iranian relations, Atila Eralp of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara noted the special problem that Iran poses for Turkey. Iran's domestic and foreign policy orientation since the 1979 revolution presents a direct challenge to Turkey's interests. Since the revolutionary Iranian regime appeared as a factor in international politics, Turkey has sought to restrain the increasing polarization between the West and Islam, which has potential consequences for Turkey's westernization process. During the mid-1980s, efforts were made by both countries to improve relations. Then-prime minister Turgut Ozal began the effort in the belief that trade links were the backbone of Turkey's relations with Iran and the Middle East, and a number of economic agreements were signed between Iran and Turkey during his tenure. Relations between the two are of such a pragmatic nature that Iran showed a level of restraint in exporting its Islamic revolution to Turkey that it did not show toward other countries in the Middle East (Aras and Yorulmazlar, 2016).

Turkish-Iranian cooperation has visibly intensified in recent years, thanks in part to Turkish energy needs and Iran's vast oil and natural gas resources. However, Turkey and Iran tend to be rivals rather than close partners. While they may share certain economic and security interests, especially regarding the Kurdish issue, their interests are at odds in many areas across the Middle East. Turkey's support for the opposition in Syria, Iran's only true state ally in the Middle East, is one example. Iraq has also become a field of growing competition between Turkey and Iran. Iran's nuclear program has been a source of strain and divergence in U.S.-Turkish relations. However, the differences between the United States and Turkey regarding Iran's nuclear program are largely over tactics, not strategic goals. Turkey's main fear is that Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms could lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. This, in turn, could increase pressure on the Turkish government to consider developing its own nuclear weapon capability. U.S. and Turkish interests have become more convergent since the onset of the Syrian crisis.

However, while U.S. and Turkish interests in the Middle East closely overlap, they are not identical. Thus, the United States should not expect Turkey to follow its policy toward Iran unconditionally. Turkey has enforced United Nations sanctions against Iran but, given Ankara's close energy ties to Tehran, may be reluctant to undertake the harshest measures against Iran.

2. TURKEY AND IRAN GEOPOLITICAL APPROACHES IN MIDDLE EAST

After the end of World War II, Turkey concentrated its primary attention on improving ties to the West. Except for a brief period in the mid-1950s, relations with the Middle East were largely neglected. In the last decade, however, Turkey has rediscovered the Middle East and emerged as an increasingly important actor in the region. The more-active Turkish engagement in the Middle East in recent years does not mean that Turkey is turning its back on the West or that its policy has become "Islamicized." Rather, the opening to the Middle East represents an attempt to adapt Turkish policy to changes in Turkey's strategic environment precipitated by the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the main rationale behind the U.S.-Turkish security partnership and reduced Ankara's dependence on Washington for its security. At the same time, it opened up new opportunities and vistas in areas that had previously been neglected or had been off limits to Turkish foreign policy, particularly the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Turkey has sought to exploit the new diplomatic flexibility and room for maneuver by establishing new relationships in these areas (Bush, 2015; 16).

With the end of the Cold War, the locus of the threats and challenges to Turkish security shifted. During the Cold War, the main threat to Turkish security came from the north—from the Soviet Union. Today, Turkey faces a much more diverse set of security threats and challenges: increasing violence and sectarianism in Syria; rising Kurdish nationalism and separatism; sectarian violence in Iraq, which could spill over and draw in outside powers; the possible emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran on Turkey's doorstep; and a weak, fragmented Lebanon dominated by groups with close ties to Iran and Syria. In short, Turkey has focused more heavily on the Middle East because that is where the main threats to its security are located. Turkey's new foreign policy outreach to the Middle East, however, has little to do with a revival of the imperial ambitions of the Ottoman period. Turkish officials specifically reject the term Neo-Ottomanism in describing Turkey's foreign policy.² they seek to build on Turkey's historical and cultural ties to the countries of the Middle East to promote a more peaceful and stable regional security environment in the region and to expand Turkish influence, not to create a new Ottoman empire.

The AKP's Islamic roots have influenced Turkish policy. But they are not the driving force behind it. Turkey's relations with Iran should be seen in this larger strategic context. While Turkey's relations with Iran have visibly improved in the last decade, especially in the economic field, the depth of the rapprochement between the two countries should not be exaggerated. Despite rhetoric about Islamic solidarity, important political, ideological, and religious differences exist beneath the surface that limit any far-reaching improvement (International Peace Institute (IPI) 2013).

The Islamic Republic is at heart a revolutionary state that has sought to transform the regional order in its own image. Although it has largely failed to achieve this objective, it has managed to make its power felt throughout the Middle East, whether in the Levant, Iraq, or the Persian Gulf. The removal of Saddam Hussein, the rise of Hezbollah and Hamas, America's preoccupation with Afghanistan, and the pressures unleashed by the Arab Spring at one point emboldened Iran's top leadership to the point that they may have regarded the United States as a receding power. But Turkey's increasing influence posed a challenge to Iran's regional ambitions. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 fundamentally changed Iran's role as a pillar of stability and protector of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi had been brought to and maintained in power through large-scale U.S. political, military, and economic support.

The Iranian revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah viewed the United States not only as the oppressor of the Iranian people but also as the guarantor of repressive Arab regimes in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic's early foreign policy was focused on liberating the Arabs from U.S. "domination." But Iranian attempts to undermine regional governments were not limited to the Arab world. Iran also sponsored the persistent but relatively low-level efforts of Islamist groups, such as Turkish Hezbollah, to undermine the Turkish government in the 1980s and 1990s.

Turkey, however, was not Iran's primary target. The war with Iraq (1980–1988) sapped much of Iran's energies and led to its isolation in the Middle East. Iran also focused some of its energy and resources on combatting Israel in Lebanon. Turkey, although secular and pro-Western, did not pose an immediate threat to the Islamic Republic. Relations between the two countries were not particularly warm until the beginning of the 21st century, but neither did they reach the level of outright hostility. Iran was mainly preoccupied with economic reconstruction after the end of its war with Iraq and did not have the capability to project great power beyond its borders. The U.S. policy of dual containment in the 1990s effectively checked both Iran and Iraq's influence in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East. Iran also began to moderate some of its own foreign policies to improve relations with neighboring countries and attract desperately needed investments and trade for its economy (**Bush, 2015; 19**).

The U.S. defeat of Iraqi forces in the 1990–1991 Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States as the region's undisputed preeminent power. Iran continued to challenge U.S. interests in the Middle East but was unable to effectively shape the region's security order as it may have wished.

3. THE SYRIAN CRISIS: IRAN AND TURKEY

The political crisis in Syria has concerned major regional and international actors within the past two and half years in such a way that in a short period of time, a new political alignment has taken shape at the regional level as well as in the international arena. Currently, given the outlooks of the actors and their different strategic considerations towards the crisis in question, there are two political axes. As two major regional powers, Iran and Turkey have been placed separately in these two coalitions; Iran, Russia, Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas form the anti-Western coalition and Turkey, the United States, European Union and the Persian Gulf countries are in the opposing side (**Ahmadi and Ghorbani, 2014: 63**).

The main cause of strains in relations between Turkey and Iran has been differences over Syria. When the unrest in Syria initially broke out, Erdoğan advised al-Assad to introduce reforms that could defuse social tensions. Al-Assad promised to introduce reforms to Turkish envoys and interlocutors. However, he instead stepped up repressive measures aimed at stifling the unrest. In response, Turkey increased its criticism of Assad's policies and began to strengthen ties to the Syrian opposition, allowing it to organize and hold meetings on Turkish soil. This support for the Syrian opposition sparked a sharp deterioration in relations with Damascus and created strains in relations with Tehran, which backed Syria. At the same time, it has exposed the limits of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy. Ankara has been forced to recognize that it needs American support more than it initially supposed. The swagger and exaggerated rhetoric about Turkey as a medium-sized power has been replaced by a much more sober and realistic appraisal of the difficulties Turkey faces in Syria. Internal discontent with Erdoğan's handling of the Syrian crisis has also increased (**Stephen, Larrabee & Nader 2013:27**).

From the view point of the authors, intervention of major regional and international players has led to the prolongation and exacerbation of the crisis in Syria. The most important regional and international actors of the Syrian crisis can be placed in two distinct coalitions; Iran and Russia in one side and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United States are in another coalition. Of the major players involved in the crisis, this article has dealt with the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey and their distinct motivations and strategic considerations towards the Syrian crisis. From an Iranian perspective, efforts made by the pro-Western actors at overthrowing Assad's regime and arming the opposition would shift the alignment of regional coalitions, disrupt the balance of power at Iran's expense, undermine the resistance front and at last lead to U.S. dominance in the Middle East. In contrast, Turkey, in the first months of the rise of the Syrian crisis, sought to replace Assad's regime with a one consistent with its national interest – like Iraq for Iran - in order to expand its influence in the region. This Turkish mentality took shape within Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist thinking on increased regional power and turning into a pivotal player. It is worth noting that after Turkey failed to topple Assad's government, it has adopted a new outlook in such a way that the intensity of initial tensions between Iran and Turkey have declined significantly. It has also encouraged the Turkish government to take part in regional collaborations for resolving the crisis rather than the Western solutions to the crisis.

4. THE KURDISH ISSUE: IRAN AND TURKEY

Tensions between Turkey and Iran have been exacerbated by differences over the Kurdish issue. Turkey and Iran have some convergent interests on the Kurdish question. Both countries have large Kurdish minorities on their soil and do not want to see the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Iran has fought a low-level insurgency by the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But recent tensions over Syria have made cooperation on the Kurdish issue more difficult. The shared interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state has led the two countries to share intelligence regarding the PKK and, on occasion, to coordinate attempts to combat PKK and PJK attacks. In summer 2010, Turkey and Iran intensified cooperation to protect their borders and increased coordination of intelligence and other activities against the PKK.²⁰ However, as a result of the growing strains over Syria, intelligence cooperation has been significantly cut back since the end of 2011. **(Dastmali, 2016:8).**

The cutback in intelligence cooperation with Iran has complicated Turkey's ability to combat PKK attacks. The PKK attack in the Semdinli district of Hakkari at the end of July 2012, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Turkish soldiers, involved the transport of heavy weaponry to the city and the deployment of significant logistical equipment to the area. In the view of Turkish experts, such a large operation could not have been carried out without the knowledge of Iran. Turkish officials believe that Iran is connected to the upsurge of PKK violence since the end of 2011. Shortly after the explosion of a bomb in the town of Gaziantep on the Turkish- Syrian border, which killed nine people, Hussein Naqavi, the spokesman of Iran's parliamentary Affairs Commission, issued a statement warning Turkey that it should keep out of Syria when it was unable to deal with its own internal affairs. Naqavi's statement was seen in Ankara as a veiled warning that if Turkey continued its support for the Syrian opposition, it could face further threats to its internal order.

These incidents suggest that the nature of the PKK threat may be changing. Many Turks feel that Turkey is not simply facing an upsurge of Kurdish nationalism but that the PKK has become an instrument in a wider struggle with Syria and Iran.²³ In response to Turkey's support of the Syrian opposition, Iran may have begun to actively step up support for the PKK and turned a blind eye to PKK activity along the Turkish-Iranian border **(Dastmali, 2016:12).**

5. CONCLUSION

Simplistic binary readings generally fail to explain the trajectory of Turkish-Iranian relations. The geostrategic rivalry between these two regional powers has deep historical roots, is subject to long-term patterns, and is amenable to realignments as a result of shifts in regional and international balances of power. For these reasons, assessing Turkish-Iranian relations requires a broader understanding than the prevalent narrow topical analysis provides.

Turkish-Iranian economic, political, and security ties improved significantly after the AKP's assumption of power in November 2002 and especially after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Though it is committed to secularism, AKP's core constituency consists of observant Muslims from the Anatolian heartland who are less inclined to view Islamic Iran as the dire threat that the Turkish secular elite often portrays it as. The AKP's broader attempt to improve relations with the Muslim Middle East also facilitated warmer ties with the Islamic Republic.

However, the growing ties between Turkey and Iran under the AKP were primarily motivated by common concerns about the Kurdish issue and shared economic interests, rather than religious and ideological affinity. Despite the rhetoric about Muslim solidarity and common political interests, beneath the surface, important ideological and strategic differences continued to exist that limited—and continue to limit—the degree of rapprochement between the two countries.

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