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**Closer Iran-Turkey Ties:
Regional Implications and Significance for Israel**

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The past year has seen evidence of progress in the gradual rapprochement process between Turkey and Iran, and in the words of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, "A new era of military and defense cooperation between our two countries has begun." Some of the most prominent examples of this rapprochement include the historic visit of the Iranian Chief of Staff to Ankara in August 2017, a first visit of this nature since the Islamic Revolution in 1979; the meeting of Presidents Rouhani and Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the Astana talks (September 9); and the agreement reached by the two leaders and Russia regarding the de-escalation zone around Idlib (September 16), for which these three are patrons and guarantors. In addition, Erdogan plans to visit Iran (on October 4). In the economic sphere, Iran, Turkey, and Russia have signed a three-way deal on oil and gas for drilling in Iran – an important matter for Turkey, which has no significant energy sources within its borders. This positive sentiment comes after years of tension regarding the war in Syria, where Iran has supported the Assad regime with fighters, supplies of weapons, and funding. While Turkey strongly supported the opposition factions fighting against Assad, Iran in effect has ensured the continuation of the regime.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the central factors underlying this rapprochement are the success of Russia and Iran to maintain the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the growing strength of the Syrian Kurds, which have led Turkey to acknowledge that it has no choice but to cooperate with the victorious Russian-Iranian axis in order to minimize the losses it incurred due to the civil war in Syria. Iran and Russia presumably feel the need to work with Turkey because of its potential to cause damage, as shown by its extensive support for the rebel forces in Syria – aid from which it has only recently partially retreated. Turkish attention is at present directed mainly toward the Kurdish issue, and specifically to the effort to ensure that the Kurds will be unable to set up an independent entity in northern Syria, particularly in view of their close military cooperation with the United States in the war against the Islamic State, which at present is focused on taking al-Raqqah.

However, through the agreement reached in the Astana talks regarding Idlib, Turkey will acquire a status that will boost its position in Northern Syria beyond just the Kurdish issue.

In the Kurdish context, the shared interests of Turkey and Iran are also clear with respect to the decision and insistence of the President of the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq, Massoud Barzani, to hold a referendum on September 25, 2017 on the question of establishing an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. This issue is very disturbing for neighboring countries, as well as the American government. Iran is strongly opposed to this move, because of the risk it poses of dividing Iraq as well as spilling over to the large Kurdish minority in Iran. This criticism was sounded, for example, during visits of the Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, to Barzani. Turkey is also not happy with the referendum, particularly with the decision to hold it also in the disputed territories in Iraq, above all Kirkuk.

The expanding range of shared interests between Iran and Turkey includes the crisis in the Gulf since June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut off ties with Qatar and imposed an air and sea embargo. In this crisis, Turkey and Iran found themselves on the same side and have helped Qatar cope with the consequences. For Turkey, the alliance with Qatar is one of its few most stable relationships in recent years, and also has an ideological basis as a "Muslim Brotherhood axis" of sorts. Ankara's decision to set up a military base in Qatar and accelerate implementation of this decision following the Gulf crisis is striking evidence of the strength of the ties between these countries. In addition, Turkey believes that if the Gulf states and Egypt manage to defeat Qatar, it itself will be the next target for their hostile activities.

The new rapprochement between Turkey and Iran dovetails with the similar rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, which enabled the talks in Astana and Turkey's consequent involvement in the arrangement in Syria. This relationship was reinforced significantly following the declaration by Erdogan on September 11 that a down payment was made to Russia for implementation of the deal to purchase an S-400 air defense system – a deal that prompted tension in Turkey's relations with the United States, which is opposed to this move. This joins the still open issue of Turkish assistance to bypass the sanctions imposed on Iran for its nuclear program. There was a recent salient development in this context when US federal prosecutors announced that a warrant had been issued for the arrest of former Turkish Finance Minister Zafer Caglayan on charges of being involved in bypassing the sanctions. The corruption and bribes involved in the "gold for oil" deals, through which Turkey helped Iran to evade some of the consequences of the banking sanctions, are also attributed to the Turkish President's close circle. Erdogan and the current Finance Minister responded strongly to the US decision to charge Caglayan.

The failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016, and the fear of another such attempt, has heightened the tension between Turkey and the United States. The most problematic issue is Turkey's request that Washington extradite the religious preacher Fethullah Gulen, who is suspected of being behind the failed attempt. In addition, there are problems with the West arising from requests for political asylum in Western countries by members of the Gulen movement, and cases of Western citizens arrested in Turkey on suspicion of involvement in the coup, arrests that from the outside appear arbitrary and baseless. These matters and the lobby activities around every such case cause ongoing tension in relations and create a space for Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Russian rapprochement.

For Israel, apart from the deep conflicts that continue to cast a shadow on relations with Turkey, mainly in the Palestinian context, and above all Turkey's relations with Hamas and incitement against Israel during the al-Aqsa events, the developing ties between Ankara and Tehran add a serious issue to the differing agendas of the two countries. In fact, in most matters at the top of Israel's defense agenda – the future situation in Syria, particularly the continued Iranian presence there; relations with the Gulf states versus Qatar; relations with Egypt, which contrast with the prolonged crisis between Cairo and Ankara; and the tension with Iran on all issues – the two countries are currently on opposite sides. Moreover, while developments on the ground have forced Turkey in some cases to change its policy in ways that do not reflect deep convergence of interests with Iran, at present there is no significant meeting of Turkish and Israeli interests.

The intensity of the threat posed to Israel by the current cooperation between Turkey and Iran should not be exaggerated, since it clearly has its limits and there are still matters that divide Ankara and Tehran. Nevertheless, if Israel hoped that Turkey would share Jerusalem's concerns about Tehran and that these shared concerns could be leveraged, it appears that the current rapprochement between Turkey and Iran neutralizes this possibility, at least for the present.