

Turkey and Iran: Two Regional Powers and the Relations Pendulum

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Over the past decade, despite periodic hostile statements on the one hand and high level visits on the other, Turkey-Iran relations have experienced few surprising developments. As Hakki Uygur has argued, “The Turkish-Iranian relationship can be considered one of the most consistent and predictable sets of relations in the Middle East region.”¹ During this time, Turkish-Iranian relations have fluctuated within a defined range whereby despite the intense competition, they never reach the point of deep crisis. However, even in the case of shared interests, the two states have not proved capable of achieving close strategic cooperation.

One of the stable features of the Middle East regional system since the end of World War II has been its multipolarity, meaning, that it contains more than just one or two dominant regional powers. Indeed, the current system has five states that can be identified as regional powers: Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In such a system, when one power grows excessively strong, the other actors naturally attempt to counterbalance it. In this way, the strengthening of Iran in recent years has encouraged closer relations between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. This in turn has made it an Iranian interest to establish closer relations with Turkey. Although Saudi Arabia has also made attempts to establish closer relations with Turkey, it has encountered difficulties stemming from the confrontation between Turkey and Egypt, the ideological proximity between the Turkish Justice and Development Party and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and especially

the warm relations between Turkey and Qatar. The developments stemming from Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war and the fact that both Iran and Turkey have regarded the Kurdish steps toward independence in northern Iraq as a threat have contributed to the warming of relations between Ankara and Tehran. At the same time, Turkish-Iranian relations have been characterized by tensions stemming from what Iran regards as Turkey's neo-Ottoman intentions and its attempts to increase its influence in the Middle East, as well as Iran's aspirations toward regional leadership.

This article will examine the major issues in Turkish-Iranian relations as well as the interests that from Ankara's perspective bring Turkey closer to Iran.

The Kurdish Question

Over the years Turkey and Iran have been partners in an effort to prevent the Kurds from moving forward toward independence. They expressed resolute opposition to the September 25, 2017 referendum in the territory of the Kurdish Regional Government and the disputed territories regarding the question of independence, out of fear that Kurdish independence would serve to inspire the Kurdish minorities within their borders. Each country has invested in developing relations with competing elements among the Kurds in northern Iraq: Turkey has forged a close relationship with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), whereas Iran has established close ties with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The fact that Iran and Turkey support competing elements in the internal Kurdish environment has had an impact on relations among the regional powers, although it has also helped restrain certain actions, for example, by quashing similar aspirations in the past to hold a referendum. Although in recent years it has been Ankara that has significantly advanced the Kurdish Regional Government by allowing oil to be exported from the region in a manner that circumvented Baghdad, it has been estimated that one quarter of Iran's trade with Iraq is actually conducted with Iraq's Kurdish region.² The severe reaction following the Kurdish referendum – particularly the coordinated action between Tehran, Ankara, and Baghdad to suspend international flights to the region, and the Turkish and Iranian military maneuvers in conjunction with forces of the Iraqi military along the border with the Kurdish Regional Government – has created an extremely problematic situation for the Kurds. Without the demonstration of such a unified position, it is doubtful whether the Kurds

would have withdrawn peacefully from Kirkuk, as they did on October 17, 2017, and from a number of additional disputed areas.³

Ankara is also interested in tactical and intelligence cooperation with Tehran against the Kurdish underground – the PKK – and its Iranian branch, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).⁴ Yet while the Kurdish underground is an issue at the top of the Turkish security agenda, it is less of a priority for the Iranians. For this reason, when Turkey proclaimed that the two states were about to embark upon a joint military operation against the Kurdish underground, Tehran was quick to issue a denial.⁵

Iraq

The question of Iraq's future beyond the Kurdish question has implications for relations between the two states, each of which has a different perception of the desired situation: Iran would like to continue to see Iraq as a weak country under its influence, controlled by the Shiites, whereas Turkey would like to see the country controlled by as broad a coalition as possible, with the Sunni minority also having influence.⁶ Particularly since the withdrawal of American forces in 2011, mounting Iranian influence in Baghdad and the strengthening of the Shiite militias have been causes for concern in Ankara. For example, in February 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Iran of “Persian nationalism” and attempting to divide both Iraq and Syria.⁷ In October 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi voiced fierce opposition to the continued Turkish military presence of some 2,000 troops in the country's northern region, and Erdogan responded by telling him that “he should know his place.”⁸ Turkey's claims were that these forces are in northern Iraq at the invitation of the Kurdish Regional Government in order to train the Peshmerga forces, and there is no urgency in their departure. Despite the shared view between Ankara and Baghdad regarding the referendum on Kurdish independence, Baghdad has not softened its position that these forces must be removed.⁹ That being the case, it is likely that tensions between Ankara and Baghdad will reemerge in the future and that they will have an impact on relations between Tehran and Ankara.

The Iranian Nuclear Program

When the international sanctions were imposed on Iran because of its nuclear program, one of the ways in which Tehran succeeded in circumventing the negative impact of the banking sanctions was “gold for energy (oil/natural

gas)” deals. Turkey regarded the manner in which the international community had conducted previous negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program as faulty and as economically detrimental to its interests. Therefore, in 2010, in conjunction with Brazil, it presented a deal that was meant to prevent the intensification of international sanctions against Iran. The deal, however, ultimately did not receive the support of those negotiating with Iran.¹⁰

“Gold for energy” schemes constitute an issue that has a continuing presence in Turkish-Iranian relations; the brokers of these deals have been accused *inter alia* of bribing Turkish government ministers. This stems in part from the fear that the Trump administration could reinstate the international sanctions on Iran, once again making Tehran in need of Turkish assistance. Moreover, in view of the conviction in the United States in January 2018 of Hakan Atilla, a Turkish banker, for violating the sanctions on Iran, Ankara fears heavy fines will be leveled on certain Turkish banks. During the trial, incriminating evidence regarding the scope of the corruption and the Iranian-Turkish cooperation in this context was revealed.¹¹

Despite Turkey’s assistance to Iran in its effort to overcome the negative impact of the sanctions, Turkey is not interested in seeing Tehran attain nuclear capability. It is also evident that Turkey’s efforts to arm itself and increase its capacity to produce advanced weaponry on its own have stemmed in part from the regional arms race in general, and the threat of Iranian missiles in particular. It is especially difficult to see the Turkish intention to develop long range missiles as anything but a response to Iran’s missile capabilities.¹² An important issue in this context is whether in the event that Iran achieves a declared military nuclear capacity, Turkey will follow in its footsteps. Turkey’s situation as a NATO member in this context is better than that of Saudi Arabia. However, the poor state of Turkey’s relations with its NATO allies, and its traditional suspicions that at the moment of truth NATO will not come to its aid, may also encourage Ankara to pursue the road to proliferation.

Syria

The outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Iran’s staunch support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the resolute position adopted by Turkey calling for the ouster of the Syrian ruler has positioned Turkey and Iran on different sides of the divide and introduced significant tension in their relationship. In Tehran, the call to topple Assad has been understood as part

of a neo-Ottoman policy aimed at reinstituting Turkish control over regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire.¹³ In practice, Turkey even allowed the Islamic State organization and other Sunni extremist groups to use its territory to gain strength, based on the view that in order to topple Assad, all means were permitted. When the Islamic State began carrying out attacks inside Turkey, Ankara increased its supervision of the Turkish-Syrian border, and in this manner contributed to the international coalition that achieved the Islamic State organization territorial defeat.

With Tehran's success, in cooperation with Russia, in reestablishing Assad's control of large areas of the country, and with the strengthening of the Kurds in northern Syria, Ankara has been forced to rethink its policy.¹⁴ Turkey is in need of Iranian and Russian cooperation to prevent the Syrian Kurds from advancing toward independence. Turkey would not have been able to intervene militarily in Syria (in August 2016 in northwestern Syria, in October 2017 in Idlib, and in January 2018 in Afrin) without Moscow's consent, in light of Russia's dominance of the air space over northern Syria. Ankara also does not wish to see the scenario of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq repeat itself in northern Syria. Ankara is particularly troubled by the dominance of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is a branch of the Kurdish underground, the PKK.

From Tehran's perspective, the picture is somewhat more complex. Whereas the Iranians are also troubled by the Kurdish underground and by the possible separatist intentions of the Kurds in Iran, some see a role for the Kurds in creating an Iranian corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁵ In addition, in the course of the civil war in Syria, the Assad regime did not object to the strengthening of the Kurds in northern Syria, and there was even tactical cooperation between the Kurds and the Assad regime from time to time, which has influenced Iran's relations with the Democratic Union Party. In view of the Iranian-Russian success in keeping Assad's regime in power, Turkey prefers to be part of the process of forging a settlement in Syria in order to influence it in a manner that suits its interests.

Qatar and the Other Gulf States

The crisis in the Persian Gulf, which saw Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt sever relations with Qatar in June 2017, created fertile ground for closer relations between Iran and Turkey. Turkey, which signed an agreement with Qatar to establish a military base there, accelerated

the plan's implementation in light of the crisis. In addition, Turkey and Iran helped Qatar transport goods as a means of dealing with the economic embargo that was imposed on it. The initial list of demands presented by Saudi Arabia as conditions for ending the crisis included a demand to remove the Turkish forces from Qatar,¹⁶ although in the new list of demands, presented in July 2017, the removal of Turkish troops was not a condition.¹⁷ The base built by Turkey was designed to accommodate approximately 5,000 troops, yet thus far it has been staffed by only approximately 100.¹⁸ In the past, Turkey's plans to build a base in Qatar were also presented as anti-Iranian.¹⁹ However, in view of the fact that the Turkish support strengthens Qatar against Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led bloc in the current crisis, it is actually consistent with short term Iranian interests. Still, the Turkish-Qatari alliance rests on the shared ideological foundation of support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement and therefore constitutes a competing axis vis-à-vis the Iranian-led Shiite axis and the Saudi-led Sunni axis.

The crisis in Qatar and its impact on Turkey's relations with the other Gulf states is consistent with the Iranian interest of distancing Turkey from Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has invested significant efforts in attempting to improve relations with Ankara, and has used the tool of financial investment to this end. From Turkey's perspective, this is important, in light of the sharp decline in foreign investments in the country stemming in part from the impact of the July 2016 failed coup attempt.²⁰ Still, after the failed coup, Erdogan felt that it was Iran that stood by its side, noting suggestively to the United Emirates: "We know very well who in the [Persian] Gulf was happy when the coup attempt took place in Turkey."²¹ In general, there are concerns in Ankara that the fall of the Qatari regime would result in increased pressure on Turkey on the part of the Gulf states, which makes Turkey a less unbiased mediator and a more resolute supporter of Qatar.

Israel and the Gaza Issue

The deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations since 2008, and particularly the resolute positions voiced by Erdogan and other Turkish politicians against Israeli policy regarding Gaza, was in many ways consistent with the Iranian interest of weakening Israel and strengthening Hamas. In other ways, however, it turned Turkey into the flagbearer for opposition against Israel. For example, in a comprehensive survey among Arab respondents in 2010 and 2011, Erdogan was selected as the most admired world leader,

surpassing Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.²² Competition between Turkey and Iran also emerged regarding who would be the patron with the closest relations with Hamas. At the same time, the *Mavi Marmara* incident of May 2010 and the six years it took to resolve the dispute that ensued between the states, inter alia benefited Iran by causing the cessation of Israeli Air Force training in Turkish airspace.

In light of the close relations between Israel and Turkey that characterized the 1990s, and the fact that this relationship also benefited Israel vis-à-vis Iran (Israeli Air Force training in Turkish territory and, as indicated by different media sources, intelligence gathering in the process),²³ Tehran had reason for concern regarding the June 2016 Israeli-Turkish normalization agreement, which resulted in the reinstatement of ambassadors in Ankara and Tel Aviv. This agreement, which Washington had also promoted over the years, was consistent with the American interest of improving relations between Israel and Turkey and added another dimension to Iran's dissatisfaction. Still, in light of the resumption of Erdogan's severe statements against Israel, also in the context of the Temple Mount crisis of the summer of 2017²⁴ and on the issue of the Kurdish referendum, in which he accused the Israeli Mossad of involvement,²⁵ and following US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, it is clear that the normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey is extremely vulnerable and that distrust between the two states will make it more difficult for them to cooperate in a manner that poses a significant threat to Iran.

Trade and Energy Relations

Despite repeated declarations regarding both sides' aspirations to increase the scope of their mutual trade to a total of \$30 billion, and despite a trade agreement with preferential terms that went into effect in January 2015,²⁶ trade between the states has amounted to only \$10 billion.²⁷ This is in contrast to 2012, when mutual trade amounted to \$22 billion, due particularly to the "gold for energy" deals. During Erdogan's visit to Iran on October 4, 2017, the two sides agreed to conduct trade in the local currencies.²⁸ In 2016, after years of a Turkish trade deficit, for the first time the trade balance was in Turkey's favor, much to Ankara's satisfaction and perhaps marking a positive future trend.

Turkey is a significant importer of energy from Iran. During the first seven months of 2017 Iran replaced Iraq as the largest supplier of oil to Turkey, providing more than 50 percent of Turkey's total oil consumption.²⁹ Iran also constitutes Turkey's second largest supplier of natural gas³⁰ and intends on increasing these exports. Despite disagreements on the matter in the past, Tehran has honored a mediated decision, which stipulated the payment of \$1.9 billion in compensation to Ankara for being charged excessively high prices between 2011 and 2015, and has already paid 40 percent of this sum through the supply of natural gas.³¹

Conclusion

As regional powers, Iran and Turkey play significant roles in the Middle East. At the present time, both states are also challenging certain aspects of the international order – in part regarding the Islamic world's limited influence within major international institutions – and have complicated relations with the world powers. Iran views the United States as a force that threatens and seeks to replace its current regime, and, to a certain extent, so does Turkey. In comparison to the past, when it was Turkey's pro-Western policies that made it suspicious in Tehran's eyes,³² Tehran views Ankara's anti-Western and anti-Israeli positions with satisfaction. At the same time, Turkish-Iranian cooperation has limitations stemming from the aspirations of each of these actors to achieve a more dominant position in the region.

One of the elements contributing to the stability of a multipolar regional system is the fact that each actor can theoretically cooperate with another actor in the system.³³ On the other hand, in the Middle East multipolar regional system, Iran and Israel, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, view the present reality as a zero-sum game, and will not cooperate with each other. Moreover, to a lesser extent, the Turkish-Egyptian crisis continues and has thus far evaded resolution. As a result, and due to the crisis with Qatar, it appears that Turkish-Iranian relations will continue to grow closer. This can create a dangerous situation in which the multipolar regional system loses flexibility and becomes a bipolar system based on blocs: Iran and Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel on the other.

Notes

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