

The War Turkey Did Not Want

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Turkey is deeply frustrated by the outbreak of the war in Iran, which Ankara perceives as the realization of some of its worst strategic scenarios, and it is working to end the fighting as quickly as possible. The war poses challenges to Turkey, ranging from missiles being launched into its territory to fears of a significant refugee wave and a renewed flare-up of the Kurdish issue emanating from Iran. Regionally, Ankara has accused Israel of pushing the United States into going to war and is concerned about the strengthening of Israeli–American influence in the region and is responding with unusual military steps, such as deploying fighter jets in Cyprus. Economically, the confrontation is also expected to exacerbate inflationary pressures in Turkey, which imports about two-thirds of its energy needs, some of which come from Iran. As a result of all these challenges, Turkey is accelerating its military buildup, while discussions there are growing about the need for nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence. At the same time, however, Iran’s weakening could open new opportunities for Turkey to consolidate its influence throughout the region.

Turkey’s frustration over the outbreak of the war on February 28 stands out against the backdrop of the diplomatic efforts Ankara has invested over the years to avoid exactly this development. Ankara believed that the solution to the Iranian nuclear issue was diplomatic and opposed the use of military means to dissuade Iran from advancing its nuclear program. In fact, the way the war has developed in recent days reflects some of the negative scenarios Ankara had assessed would materialize if war with Iran broke out. In a speech delivered by Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on March 9, he emphasized that the “[primary objective is to keep our country away from this fire](#),” in reference to the war. Turkish rhetoric about the war blames Israel as the party that dragged the United States into attacking Iran and as a decisive factor in the administration’s decision to take that step.

The clearest direct result of the war for Turkey has been the [launch of missiles into its territory](#) and their interception by NATO systems. Although no damage was caused, the very fact that Turkey, too, has become a target of Iranian attacks is an extremely negative development from Ankara’s perspective. Although there has been an attempt to downplay the severity of the attack—by claiming that it was unclear where the missile had been directed (at least in the first case), and by suggesting that the launches targeting Turkey reflected a weakening of Iran’s central command and were local initiatives—the launch of the second missile made these arguments less persuasive, since it became harder to claim that this incident was a one-time event.

One of Turkey’s central fears regarding instability in Iran is the arrival of a large wave of refugees into its territory. Just as the wars in Iraq and Syria had negative consequences for Turkey in this respect, so too might this war. Turkey, which shares a border with Iran, fears that Iran’s internal instability as a result of the war will once again lead to such an outcome.

Another concern is the possible resurgence of the Kurdish issue. Following the May 2025 announcement by the Kurdish underground—active militarily since the 1980s—that it was disbanding, and after the al-Sharaa regime’s gains in January 2026 in capturing territories previously held by the Kurdish-dominated autonomous region in northeastern Syria, any strengthening of the Kurds in Iran could reverse the trend. Among Iranian Kurds, PJAK, the Iranian branch of the Kurdish underground, remains active. Reports, although [denied](#), that Iranian Kurds were being armed to operate militarily in western Iran have heightened Ankara’s concerns in this regard and led it to press Washington not to move in that direction.

Turkey also has economic concerns. It imports about [two-thirds](#) of its energy consumption, and therefore instability in the energy market, as well as rising prices, will affect it and make its efforts to curb inflation in the country more difficult (as of February 2026, [the annual inflation rate was 32%](#)). Despite fluctuations, Iran is Turkey’s second most important gas supplier, accounting for about [13% of Turkey’s natural gas imports](#).

Turkey’s concern over instability in Iran and the fall of the regime there runs even deeper, as it fears that a government aligned with the United States and Israel could emerge in its place, contributing to Israel’s growing regional influence. Statements by Israeli politicians regarding the vision of “[Greater Israel](#)” and “[Biblical Israel](#),” as well as remarks identifying Turkey as the “[next major threat](#),” reinforce the perception that excessive Israeli influence in Iran would be disadvantageous from Turkey’s point of view.

Moreover, the war is affecting areas of considerable interest to Ankara. For example, the launch of drones toward Cyprus, attributed to Hezbollah, and [especially toward the British base at Akrotiri](#), triggered a broad Western response. Greece, France, Italy, Germany, and Spain sent aircraft and ships to the area, and a British destroyer and a Dutch frigate are also expected to arrive. In light of Ankara’s dissatisfaction with the reinforcement of Western forces on the island, it decided to deploy six F-16 aircraft to its northern part. Although Turkey already has significant ground forces in northern Cyprus and also operates a drone base there, the deployment of fighter jets—a step it has not taken for several decades—is an exceptional move.

[The targeting of drones at Nakhchivan](#)—the Azerbaijani exclave bordering Turkey, Iran, and Armenia—also concerns Turkey, which sees it as a worrisome escalation. Unlike the attempt to downplay the severity of the missile-launch incidents involving Turkey, Azerbaijan sharply condemned the launch of drones into its territory and responded by evacuating its diplomats from Iran. The arrest of operatives acting on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps who [had planned](#) to strike Israeli and Jewish targets in Azerbaijan, as well as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, has increased tensions between the two countries.

Although there has been no apparent attempt to invite international forces in Azerbaijan’s case, unlike in Cyprus, any active Azerbaijani entry into the war would greatly complicate Turkey’s calculations, since Ankara sees itself as a guarantor of Azerbaijan’s security. In this context, conspiratorial claims have circulated on social media in Turkey, alleging that the strike on Azerbaijan was in fact staged and carried out by Israeli forces operating in Iran. It should also be noted that the Azeri minority is the largest minority group in Iran, and Azerbaijani action there could have internal repercussions within the country.

Qatar's becoming a focal point for Iranian attacks is also a source of concern for Ankara. Although it is still unclear what conclusions will be reached in Doha as a result of the war, it is already evident that renewed thinking will be required there regarding the appropriate means of defending the country. Unlike the blockade imposed on Qatar in 2017, when Turkish assistance mitigated its negative consequences and, at least from Turkey's perspective, even prevented the takeover of the country, this time Turkish support for Qatar appears to have only limited deterrent significance.

As became evident after the 12-day war between Israel and Iran in June 2025, Turkey's response to the war has become introspective and has turned toward accelerated military buildup. Capability gaps in the air force, air defense, cyber, and missile spheres have been identified and are being addressed. Although NATO's interception system functioned effectively in intercepting the missiles fired toward Turkey, the need for local capabilities in this context is being emphasized. Even before the outbreak of the war on February 28, there had already been a lively discussion about Turkey's need for nuclear weapons of its own. Now, the heavy blows suffered by Iran from Israel and the United States—especially given that Iran did not achieve a military nuclear capability—are serving as justification for those in Turkey who support advancing a military nuclear program.

Although Turkey did not want the war, it would be a mistake to assume that it will necessarily end up on the losing side of it. Ankara has the ability to curb the war's destabilizing consequences, whether by stopping the flow of refugees or in relation to the Kurdish issue. It should be noted that the large wave of refugees from Syria reached Turkey because Ankara opened its borders, assuming that the Assad regime would fall quickly. Similarly, regarding the Kurdish issue, the influence of the Kurds in Iran should not be exaggerated. Just as Israel's weakening of Hezbollah yielded positive results for Turkey in Syria, the current war, which is likely to weaken Iran for the foreseeable future, may also be exploited by Turkey to advance its interests in the region, particularly in Iraq, where both Turkey and Iran struggle for influence. In all likelihood, contrary to Turkish perceptions, Israel's influence on developments in Iran in the postwar period will be limited, and Ankara will be able to make optimal use, from its own perspective, of its network of ties in Iran.

At the same time, the current war sharpens Turkey's existing perception of Israel as a threat, alongside the mirror-image perception in Israel, which sees Turkey as a growing threat. The tendency to blame Israel for inciting the war and decisively dragging the United States into the conflict, as well as conspiracy theories claiming that Israel is staging false-flag operations to draw Turkey and Azerbaijan into the war, are indications of this. In light of Israel's aspiration to improve its strategic position as a result of the current campaign, it must ensure that its military successes are not translated into a regional perception of it as an aggressive and unrestrained actor. It should therefore accompany its military achievements with a broader vision that also includes positive regional elements. In the bilateral context, Israel and Turkey should further develop the tactical coordination mechanisms between them to ease tensions. In addition, Washington, which sees both Israel and Turkey as important partners, should be attentive to the significance of the campaign in Iran for Turkey–Israel relations.

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