

A Sigh of Relief: The Turkish Perspective on the Interim Deal with Iran

Gallia Lindenstrauss

Overall, the official Turkish response to the signing of the interim deal by Iran and the P5+1 was positive. Turkish President Abdullah Gul posted on his Twitter account that it was a significant step forward and that he hoped the parties would quickly reach a final agreement. Gul welcomed the fact that the solution was reached through negotiations and noted that in the past, Turkey had facilitated similar diplomatic deliberations between Iran and the world powers.¹ An announcement by the Turkish Foreign Ministry² referred to the agreement with Iran as the “first positive, tangible development” since the Tehran declaration of 2010,³ which was the culmination of negotiations between Turkey, Brazil, and Iran in an effort to solve the crisis between Iran and the global powers. On November 26, 2013, in his weekly speech to representatives from his party in the parliament, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan welcomed the signing of the agreement as well. Erdogan noted that this development was proof that Turkey was right in signing the Tehran declaration, along with Iran and Brazil.⁴ Of note in these comments is not only the positive tone regarding the interim deal, but also the emphasis placed on the notion that it is actually a direct continuation of Turkey and Brazil’s accomplishment in their joint contacts with Iran in 2010. This statement contains implicit criticism of the United States for not supporting the agreement in the past (even though Turkey and Brazil believed they were acting in accordance with prior understandings with the United States). In addition, this statement can be construed as critical of

Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at INSS, specializing in Israel-Turkey relations and Turkish foreign policy.

American anger at Turkey and Brazil's vote in the UN Security Council in June 2010 against a fourth round of sanctions on Iran.

Turkey's positive attitude regarding the interim deal was consistent with its previous policy toward the Iranian nuclear program. Turkey stresses that Iran has a right to develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes, and that the best route to promoting this objective is negotiations rather than sanctions and threats of a military strike. Several factors may explain this Turkish position; first, Turkey is interested in developing a civilian nuclear program, and therefore warns against a monopoly of the current nuclear powers and the establishment of a kind of "nuclear OPEC." In this context, Turkey has declared its right to enrich uranium on its soil in the future.⁵ Second, Turkey fears that a preemptive strike on Iran (American or Israeli) may take a toll on Turkey. Turkey fears that a potential Iranian response may include a military strike, and that as a NATO member Turkey may be among those targeted. Third, given the existing trade relations between Turkey and Iran and the desire to see them expanded, the international sanctions on Iran are perceived as potentially negative for the Turkish economy. Furthermore, the Turkish public harbors strong anti-American sentiments, and Iran is viewed as one of the countries confronting what is perceived as American hegemony.⁶

Although the official Turkish rhetoric emphasizes Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program, Turkey has expressed its opposition to Iran choosing the path of nuclearization for military purposes.⁷ Moreover, Turkey stressed the importance of diplomacy and its support of the vision of the Middle East as a "weapons of mass destruction free zone" (WMDFZ). In this context, it extensively criticized Israel and the "hypocrisy of the West" for ignoring Israel's nuclear capability.⁸ In addition, Turkey continues to perceive itself as relying, first and foremost, on the NATO nuclear defense umbrella, but there are already signs indicating that it is developing capabilities that could be converted, when necessary, into a military nuclear program. One such sign is its civilian nuclear program: a first civilian reactor for energy use is under construction with the help of a Russian government company, Rusatom, and is expected to be completed in 2020; in October 2013, an agreement was signed with Japan for the construction of a second reactor⁹ and there are also plans to build a third reactor.¹⁰ In addition, Turkey has a program for the future development of an intercontinental ballistic missile. Moreover, it was apparently successful in developing a medium-range (800 km) ballistic missile,¹¹ and is making progress in developing independent

satellite capabilities.¹² Furthermore, the fact that a Chinese company won a Turkish tender for the purchase of missile defense systems is also perceived, should they complete the deal, as evidence that the continued close relations between Turkey and NATO can no longer be taken for granted.

At the time the interim deal was signed, Turkey and Iran were attempting to improve their relationship; recent years have seen increased tension due to their opposing positions regarding Syria's civil war.¹³ One expression of these attempts to improve relations was Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Iran in January 2014, during which Turkey and Iran signed three trade agreements, and Erdogan expressed his hope that trade between the countries would reach about 30 billion dollars by 2015. According to official estimates, in 2012, the volume of trade was about 21.8 billion dollars, while in 2013, it was approximately 13.5 billion.¹⁴ The reason behind the sharp decline from 2012 to 2013 was the tightening of the sanctions regime against Iran, leading to restrictions on importing Iranian oil and gas and a significant decline in Iran's ability to pay for products imported from Turkey. From this point of view, Turkey hopes that the interim deal, and more so, any final agreement with Iran, will significantly contribute to Turkish-Iranian trade relations.¹⁵ Consequently, at a joint press conference held by President Gul and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani during the latter's visit to Ankara in June 2014, Gul stated that Turkey supports an agreement that will completely lift the sanctions on Iran.¹⁶

Not long after the interim deal signing, widespread incidents of corruption were exposed in Turkey, and senior officials, among them ministers and even Erdogan and his family were implicated. While these incidents have led the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to focus on domestic affairs, they are also relevant in the Iranian context, seeing as one of the corruption scandals involved exchange of oil for gold between Iran and Turkey. There is nothing new in the information that Turkey acquired energy products from Iran and deposited payment in Turkish banks to assist Iran in facing the banking sanctions against it or in the fact that this money was used to purchase large quantities of gold that were later sent to Iran. However, the scope of the corruption exposed in this context indicates that these transactions were on an even larger scale than that estimated by the West.¹⁷

Given the turmoil in the Middle East in recent years and the tension between Iran and Turkey, especially in the context of the Syrian civil war, it is rather surprising that Turkey adopted a consistent position, openly declaring its

support of Iran's right to develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes, ignoring Iran's violations of its commitments as a signatory state to the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT). Turkey's positive response to the interim deal is also in line with this position. However, a thorough examination of the pattern of relations between Turkey and Iran shows that Turkish dependence on energy imports from Iran and Iranian dependence on Turkey to circumvent some of the sanctions, as well as the fact that the two countries are neighbors and have no territorial dispute, allow them to maintain a certain level of ongoing cooperation. From this perspective, Turkey's sympathetic attitude toward some of Iran's claims in the nuclear context is less surprising. At the same time, we can see initial Turkish steps preparing for a future in which Iran does succeed in acquiring military nuclear capability. From this point of view, Turkey's NATO partners, and in particular, the United States, should maintain their current commitments and perhaps even expand them in the future if they wish to prevent Turkey from joining the nuclear arms race.

Notes

- 1 Abdullah Gul, Twitter posts, November 24, 2013, 5:36 and 5:38 AM, <https://twitter.com/cbabdullahgul>.
- 2 "Turkey Welcomes Iran Nuclear Agreement," *Today's Zaman*, November 24, 2013.
- 3 Turkey and Brazil, at the time non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, reached an agreement with Iran in 2010 according to which 1,200 kilograms of Iranian uranium enriched to a level of 3.5 percent would be stored in Turkey, and in exchange, Iran would receive 120 kilograms of uranium enriched to a level of 20 percent for its research reactor in Tehran. Since the P5+1 had reservations regarding this proposal, as it addressed only half of the quantity of enriched uranium in Iran at that time and de facto accepted Iran's right to enrichment capabilities for military purposes, viewing it as an Iranian trick to block imposition of further sanctions, the agreement was not implemented. Emily B. Landau, *Decade of Diplomacy: Negotiations with Iran and North Korea and the Future of Nuclear Proliferation*, Memorandum No. 115 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2012), p. 114, fn. 20. For the full text of the declaration, see "Text of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey Deal," *Guardian*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/17/iran-brazil-turkey-nuclear>.
- 4 Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Between Allies and Rivals: Turkey, Nuclear Weapons and BMD," *IFRI Proliferation Papers*, No. 49, 2014, p. 12.
- 5 Sinan Ulgen, ed., *The Turkish Model for Transition to Nuclear Energy* (Istanbul: Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, December 2011), p. 156.
- 6 Kibaroglu, "Between Allies and Rivals," p. 14.

- 7 Aaron Stein, "Understanding Turkey's Position on the Iranian Nuclear Program," *WMD Junction*, January 12, 2012.
- 8 "Gul: Turkey Will Not Accept Iran Possessing Nuclear Weapons," *Today's Zaman*, January 3, 2013.
- 9 "Turkey and Japan Sign Formal Agreement to Build Second Nuclear Plant in Sinop," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 30, 2013.
- 10 For further reading, see Yoel Guzansky, Ephraim Asculai, and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Civilian Nuclear Programs in the Middle East: Nuclear Spring or Nuclear Autumn?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 1 (2012): 104-5.
- 11 "Turkey Achieves MRBM Capability," *Middle East Newslite Morning Report*, February 13, 2014.
- 12 "Satellites Best Answer to Internet Censorship Criticisms: Turkish Minister," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 15, 2014.
- 13 For further reading see Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Turkey: Looking Beyond the Current Challenges," in Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz, eds, *Strategic Survey for Israel 2013-2014* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2014), p. 88.
- 14 "Turkey, Iran Eye Trade Boost Despite Tensions," *Daily Star*, January 30, 2014.
- 15 Yeliz Candemir and Joe Parkinson, "Turkey Expects Boon to Trade with Iran from Nuclear Deal Easing Sanctions," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2013.
- 16 "Rouhani Visits Turkey to Boost Ties," *Iran Primer*, June 11, 2014.
- 17 Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, "Iran's Turkish Gold Rush," *Foreign Policy*, December 26, 2013.