

Turkey and Iran: A Renewed Regional Rivalry*

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Tehran and Ankara have enjoyed close relations since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ascent to power in 2002, but their character has been substantially altered by the "Arab Spring" uprisings. The collapse, or near-collapse, of numerous Arab regimes has created a power vacuum in the region, which both Ankara and Tehran, the self-defined heirs to the respective Ottoman and Safavid/Qajar Empires, have sought to fill. Most recently, Turkey and Iran have found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict that has erupted in Yemen. Tehran is supporting the upstart (Zaydi) Shi'i Houthi militia, while Ankara provides logistical support to the Sunni Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia to bolster the beleaguered Yemeni president 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi.

Two months ago, Erdoğan declared that "Iran's efforts to control the region are intolerable."¹ In response, at least 65 Iranian MPs demanded that President Hassan Rouhani cancel Erdoğan's April state visit to Iran, in light of the Turkish president's "careless statements."²

A New Page in Turkish-Iranian Relations

From the 1937 Treaty of Sadabad to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Turkey and Iran enjoyed friendly relations. Efforts by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, to export his Islamic worldview to secular Turkey introduced a new and more contentious element to the relationship. Turkey's 1980 military coup soured the atmosphere even further: The Turkish military, the designated guardian of secularism in Turkey, viewed the Islamic Republic as a threat, and the Turkish government put Iran on its list of state sponsors of terror. Relations between Tehran and Ankara

¹ "Erdoğan: Tahammül etmek mümkün değil" [Erdoğan: It is impossible to tolerate], *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2015.

² "[İranlı 65 milletvekilinden Ruhani'ye Erdoğan Mektubu](#)" [A letter from 65 Iranian MPs to Rouhani on Erdoğan], *Hürriyet*, April 6, 2015.

in the 1990s were hostile, in part due to suspicion in Turkey that Iran was responsible for assassinating secular Turkish journalists, such as Bahriye Üçok, Ahmet Taner Kışlalı, and Uğur Mumcu.³

With the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in Turkey in 2002, Ankara's relations with Iran began to change. The Ergenekon trials in Turkey, which began in 2006-2007 and were consolidated into one case file in 2012, resulted in the conviction of high-level military officers, academics, lawyers, and journalists of plotting to overthrow Erdoğan's government. Consequently, the standing of the secular military in Turkey was seriously weakened, leaving the AKP as the unchallenged master in the political field. In addition, former foreign minister and current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu changed Turkey's foreign policy from one based on Kemalist-Western principles to one based on a Neo-Ottomanist worldview, which promotes an independent foreign policy based on its rich Ottoman history. This policy, which was also known as "zero problems" with its neighbors, led Turkey to remove Iran from Turkey's list of state sponsors of terror.

Turkey first put its new policy towards Iran into action with the signing of the "Tehran Agreement" (2010) involving Brazil, Iran, and Turkey. Turkey hoped that by playing an active role in brokering a resolution to Iran's standoff with Western powers over its nuclear program, it would earn prestige in the international community. However, the agreement was stillborn, and Ankara did not reap the expected benefits. Concurrently, the expansion of trade between Iran and Turkey, and particularly Turkey's growing demand for Iranian natural gas and oil, led Ankara – which at the time (2009-2010) held the rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council – to oppose U.N. sanctions on Iran. Ankara continued to cooperate with Iran even after additional sanctions were imposed, allowing Tehran to circumvent sanctions on its oil exports and financial institutions by paying for Iranian oil and gas exports in gold bullion that was transferred to Iran via Dubai.⁴

Despite this cooperation, Turkey was pressured by its Western allies to install a NATO early warning military radar system in Turkey's Malatya Province, which Iran viewed as a threat directed at its military capabilities.⁵ Ankara did not change its position on this issue despite Iran's protests. At the same time, in 2011, Erdoğan became the first Sunni leader to visit Imam Hussein's shrine in

³ Abdullah Bozkurt, "[Iran's role in the murder of Uğur Mumcu](#)," *Today's Zaman*, January 26, 2015.

⁴ Fehim Taştekin, "[Rüşvet çarkında dönen İran altınları](#)" [Iranian gold in the cogs of bribery], *Al-Monitor*, December 20, 2013.

⁵ "[Malatya'daki NATO üssü faaliyete geçti](#)" [The NATO base in Malatya entered into service], NTVM SNBC, February 27, 2012.

the city of Najaf in Iraq in order to emphasize the importance of Islamic unity between Sunnis and Shi'is.⁶

The “Arab Spring” and the Renewal of the Rivalry

The expanding civil war in Syria and the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq in 2011 reignited the regional rivalry between Ankara and Tehran, placing them on opposite ends of the Sunni-Shi'i conflicts engulfing Syria and Iraq. Turkey provided support to Sunni groups in Iraq and Syria, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Free Syrian Army, and the opposition Sunni Iraqi movement led by Ayad 'Allawi. Ankara also adopted a firm and outspoken anti-Asad policy. Iran, for its part, supported the Asad regime in Syria and the Shi'i political parties in Iraq.

The rivalry between Ankara and Tehran is also playing out in the Kurdish arena. Turkey, which has been engaged in a peace process with the leading Kurdish nationalist organization in Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has built important diplomatic ties and developed valuable commercial trade with Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Ankara opened a general consulate in Erbil, the capital of the KRG, in 2010, and has normalized its relations with it. This has allowed the KRG to independently export the oil produced in the KRG through Turkey to India, China, and Israel.⁷ The KRG is landlocked, which makes Turkey a vital ally. For Turkey's part, Ankara's leverage with the KRG balances Iran's influence with the Shi'i government in Baghdad.

However, Iran has also been active in the KRG. It demonstrated its support for the KRG in the aftermath of the jihadi Islamic State's attacks during the summer of 2014 by providing light weapons to some of the KRG *Peshmerga* units. It cultivates influence in Sulaymaniyah, which is the KRG's second city and the base for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the main rival of the KRG President Masoud Barzani's Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The Ankara-Tehran competition for influence in the KRG is likely to influence the KRG's thinking regarding the question of declaring independence. It is reasonable to assume that Turkey will support Kurdish independence in Northern Iraq while Iran will oppose it, because Iran would prefer that the KRG energy resources remain under Baghdad's authority.

Friends, For the Time Being

The rivalry between Turkey and Iran is multi-dimensional. Although Turkey does not openly oppose a nuclear Iran, the nuclear issue is nonetheless a source

⁶ “[Erdoğan'ın ilklerle dolu Irak ziyareti](#)” [Erdoğan's special visit in Iraq], *Hürriyet*, March 29, 2011.

⁷ “[Kürt petrolü İsrail'de depolanıyor](#)” [The Kurdish oil is stored in Israel], *Hürriyet*, November 4, 2014.

of tension. Tehran's steadfast defense of its nuclear program has led Ankara to finance the building of three nuclear reactors of its own. These plants, which will provide fuel for Turkey's electrical grid, will be built – with the help of Japan and Russia – in Akkuyu, İğneada, and Sinop. Turkey's investment in nuclear energy is intended to provide Ankara with an independent energy source, thus helping to maintain the overall balance of power with Tehran. As the EU3+3 moves closer to finalizing a nuclear deal with Iran, it is worth noting that Turkey's path to nuclear energy may be easier than Iran's has been, because Turkey is a full member of NATO and a candidate for membership in the EU.

Iran's policy of cultivating Shi'i militias as a means of projecting regional influence is creating common ground between Israel, Turkey, and Sunni Arab states. Despite Ankara's continued support for Hamas, Turkey has made several recent gestures that may be signals that it would like to normalize relations with Israel. For example, during a televised interview on Channel Two News, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç suggested mending relations between the two countries.⁸ In addition, the government has sponsored renovations of the Great Synagogue in Edirne,⁹ and a Turkish diplomat in Tel Aviv made statements affirming the "brotherhood" between the two countries.¹⁰ However, these statements could also be perceived as directed towards Iran. Ankara may be using the prospect of restoring its ties with Israel as a bargaining chip in its relations with Iran. Nevertheless, Turkey still has not modified its demands for normalizing relations with Israel, which would require Israel to open its borders with the Gaza Strip and pay reparations to the families of the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla victims.

Erdoğan's April visit to Iran, which ended with a joint declaration that committed the two countries to cooperation in the energy field and on finding a solution to end the bloodshed between Muslims in the Middle East, demonstrated that neither side was eager to escalate the competition. However in the wake of a new coordination between the Saudis and the Turks against the Asad regime in Syria, these statements appear to be nothing more than "lip service." The depth and quality of Turkish-Iranian relations will pivot on Iran's support for Asad. If Asad's grip on power deteriorates further, relations between Turkey and Iran may become increasingly tense, leaning more towards open rivalry than cooperation.¹¹

⁸ [? אחר 6 שנים: רוח חדשה מטורקיה?](#) [After 6 years: A new wind from Turkey?], *Mako*, March 31, 2015.

⁹ ["Türkiye'nin en büyük sinagogu Edirne'de açıldı"](#) [Turkey's biggest synagogue was inaugurated in Edirne], *Euronews*, March 27, 2015.

¹⁰ ["AKP İsrail'le 'yeni sayfa' mı açıyor?"](#) [Is AKP opening a 'new page' with Israel?], *Zaman*, April 7, 2015.

¹¹ ["Fleş İddia: Türkiye ile Suudi Arabistan anlaştı"](#) [Latest allegation: Turkey and Saudi Arabia reached an agreement], *Hürriyet*, May 7, 2015.

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