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Report

Turkey & Iran: Islamic Brotherhood or Regional Rivalry?



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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) welcomes Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan (R) at the presidential office in Tehran, Iran, 29 TAHERKENAREH

In the past, competition and disagreement particularly over Syria, central Asia, and Turkey's NATO membership have affected relations between Turkey and Iran . However, three themes of mutual concern - economic transactions, opposition to a separate Kurdistan and, to a lesser extent, support for a Palestinian state – have alleviated tensions and brought about cordiality amid occasional outbreaks of intense rivalry, between the two countries.

Much has been written about the enduring competition between Iran and Turkey, presumably linked to a seemingly insurmountable legacy of Ottoman-Safavid antagonism or even less persuasively to a Sunni-Shi'a split engulfing the region.

Analyses that cut and paste history onto contemporary world politics undervalue the fundamental changes of the last century. Turkey and Iran operate on the basis of their perceived national interests that are processed within the realities of the contemporary world order, rather than a remote past. It is true that modern relations between the countries have been beset by occasional outbreaks of rivalry and suspicion, for instance immediately after the revolution in Iran in 1979, when there was intense ideological friction between the secular, Kemalist state in Turkey and the Shi'a-revolutionary Islamic Republic. Iran before the revolution, especially under the reign of the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah (1878-1941), was emulating the Turkish model. Pahlavi

Iran and Kemalist Turkey were close ideological bedfellows. After the revolution in Iran in the name of an Islamic order, the ideological affinity evaporated, but relations between the two countries did not deteriorate into active aggression. Turkey managed to keep a relatively neutral role during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and refrained from being dragged into the complex politics of West Asia and North Africa. For Iran, Turkey was not a major factor given that the country was focused, ideologically and strategically, on Europe and the West.

Sites of Cooperation

The dynamics changed drastically in 2002 with the ascendancy to power of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP). Iran already figured rather more prominently on the radar of the first generation of Islamists who took power in Turkey and who re-orientated Turkish foreign policy more firmly towards West Asia and North Africa. Necmettin Erbakan, who came to power in 1996 as the first Prime Minister with Islamic persuasions, chose Iran as his first destination for a foreign visit, a great affront to the pro-West elite in the country for whom the Islamic Republic represented everything Turkey should not be (he visited again in 2009 after a 11-year long ban on his participation in Turkish politics). While in Tehran, in July 1996, Erbakan concluded a US\$23 billion deal for the delivery of natural gas from Iran over 25 years. He also facilitated with Iran the establishment of the so-called Developing Eight (D-8) comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nigeria, Turkey and Iran.

But the power base of Erbakan was not strong enough to resist the opposition of the anti-Islamist elite and in particular the staunchly secular higher echelons of the Turkish military that are endowed with the constitutional mandate to uphold the Kemalist system in the country. Consequently, in 1998, and under pressure by the military, Turkish courts declared Erbakan's Refah Party illegal and forced him out of office. The core of the party re-organised under the banner of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, or AKP), which won the parliamentary elections in 2002 and formed the Turkish government. Since then, Iranian-Turkish relations have re-stabilised, but they aren't without their pitfalls.

Erbakan was heavily criticised for his charm offensive towards Iran. As one commentator in Today's Zaman put it: 'I wanted to understand, for example, why Erbakan had a soft spot for no-good neighbour Iran ... I was surprised ... to see him making a difficult trip in a wheelchair to attend a National Day reception for Iran in the Swissôtel Ankara in 2010 while opting out on other countries' receptions.'

There is no doubt that the second generation Islamists in Turkey learned their lessons from the backlash against Erdogan. They have been by far more prudent and diligent in their dealings with Iran. And yet, Erdogan continued to strengthen the ties with the Islamic Republic at least in order to meet the energy demands of Turkey's booming economy. Today, Iran is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey (after Russia). As indicated, shortly after taking office, Erdogan concluded a US\$23 billion deal for the delivery of natural gas from Iran over 25 years. In February 2007, under the AKP government, Turkey and Iran agreed to seal two additional energy deals: one allowing the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to explore oil and natural gas in Iran and another for the transfer of gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey (and on to Europe) through a pipeline in Iran. This pipeline deal is at odds with Washington's preference for avoiding Iran by transporting the gas through the Caspian Sea, and added a new element of friction to U.S.-Turkish relations. Indeed, in 2011, bilateral trade between Iran and Turkey stood at more than US\$16 billion, projected to expand up to US\$30 billion in 2015.[2]

It is indicative of the rather novel depth of Turkish-Iranian relations that the two countries are also cooperating in the realm of national security. If relations would be merely pragmatic, based on short term economic gain and tactical manoeuvres, it would be unlikely that Ankara and Tehran would trust each other enough to cooperate on internal matters with transnational security implications such as the issue of Kurdish separatism. The breakthrough on this front came during Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Tehran in July 2004, when Turkey and Iran signed a security cooperation agreement that branded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) a terrorist organisation. Since then, the two countries have stepped up cooperation to protect their borders. Similar to Turkey, Iran faces security problems in its Kurdish-populated areas: over the last years, an Iranian group affiliated with the PKK, the Party for a Free Life in Iranian Kurdistan, has launched attacks against Iranian security officials. Tehran has reacted by shelling PKK bases in the Kandil Mountains in close liaison with the Turkish military.

At least until the uprising in Syria which started in 2011, Iran also facilitated closer Syrian-Turkish relations. Strained in the 1980s and early 1990s, they reached a crisis point in October 1998, when Turkey threatened to invade Syria if Damascus did not cease supporting the PKK. In the face of Turkey's overwhelming military superiority, Damascus backed down, expelling PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, to whom it had given safe haven, and closing PKK training camps. The shift in Syrian policy opened the way for a gradual improvement in relations. This rapprochement was underscored by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Ankara in January 2005 - the first trip by a Syrian president to Turkey since Syria's independence in 1946. Despite Turkey's support for the

opposition to Assad's rule that puts it in direct confrontation to the policies of Iran, it is surprising that this competition over Syria did not undermine the central signposts of Iranian-Turkish relations. Undoubtedly, Turkey has been instrumental in facilitating the opposition to Bashir al-Assad's rule and it has liaised with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in that regard. Iran views the battle in Syria not as a Sunni-Shi'i rivalry. Rather, the country's leaders have deemed Syria a valuable ally in the Arab world, and a convenient conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon, ever since the Iran-Iraq war when Hafez al-Assad, the former Syrian president and Bashar al-Assad's father, was the only regional leader supporting Iran. Thus, the Baathist-secular state in Damascus is not a "natural" ally of the Islamic Republic. But Syria and Iran have shared a common vision about regional affairs and they have pursued their resistance policy towards Israel and in support of Palestine. The fact that the Khaled Meshaal (Palestinian political leader and charmain of Hamas, a Palestinian resistance movement) wing of Hamas broke with al-Assad and shifted its headquarters away from Damascus was a significant blow to this "axis of resistance", but it is too far-fetched to argue that Iran and Hamas have severed their long-standing ties. Turkey, on the other hand, seems aware that it can't take the Iran factor out of the regional equation so the AKP has treaded carefully when it comes to the Syrian crisis, adamant to reassure Iran that Turkey is not acting on behalf of the United States and Israel in opposing the Syrian government.

The oppositional politics in Syria may have halted a decade of deepening engagement between Turkey and Iran and set the limits for closer relations in the future. Yet, at the same time the fallout has been contained. There have been no public recriminations about each other's motives in Syria, in itself an indicator that both countries are not willing to jeopardise their relations, even over such an emotive issue such as the civil war that has ravaged Syria in the past couple of years. Iran is interested in a Syrian government that is independent, does not fall into the strategic sphere of the United States and continues to support the Palestinian cause for statehood via Hezbollah. Turkish motives are not necessarily seen in opposition to those aims. From the perspective of the political elites in Iran, Turkey's tentative move away from a strategic alliance with Israel towards rather more pro-Palestinian policies was welcomed as a firm indicator for the shift in Turkey's strategic preferences in West Asia. Erdogan has been openly critical of Israeli policy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, repeatedly likening Israeli military campaigns to acts of state terrorism. At the same time, Erdogan has sought to establish closer ties to the Palestinian leadership and this as well was largely welcomed in Tehran. A few weeks after the elections in the Palestinian territories in January 2006, Erdogan hosted in Ankara a high-ranking Hamas delegation led by Khaled Meshaal. Erdogan was hoping that the visit would highlight Turkey's ability to play a rather more prominent diplomatic role in the region. But the meeting was arranged

without consulting the United States and Israel and irritated both governments, which wanted to isolate Hamas.

Likewise, Turkey adopted an independent position at odds with Israeli policy during the crisis in Lebanon in 2006, which was supported by Iran. Erdogan sharply condemned the Israeli attacks, and in several major Turkish cities there were large-scale protests and burnings of the Israeli flag, pictures that were enthusiastically broadcast by Iran's state owned media conglomerate. Turkish nongovernmental organisations also have condemned Israel's policies in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories culminating in the "flotilla crisis" (in which the flotilla attempted to break through the Israeli blockade of Gaza) which has been recently defused by an Israeli offer to compensate the families of the Turkish nationals who were killed during the raids on the ships in May 2010. While Ankara and Tehran have not been willing to coordinate their policies on Palestine, from the Iranian perspective Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance is indicative of the changes within the country. The issue of Palestine has been at the heart of the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic Republic since 1979, and while Iran is not willing to concede its claim to regional leadership in that regard, it routinely displays an automatic proclivity towards countries that embrace the cause for Palestinian statehood.

Themes of Discontentment

If Syria exemplified Turkey's newly found self-confidence as a regional power in West Asia and North Africa, Turkey's wholehearted embrace of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria facilitated its rivalry with Iran which also shows similar self-confidence and which has firmly supported Assad's fledgling regime. Tensions between the two countries were exacerbated even further when Turkey agreed to station a NATO missile defence shield in eastern Anatolia that has been sold by successive administrations in the United States as a deterrent to Iran's burgeoning missile capability.[3] The Iranian military establishment reacted nervously prompting one general of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) to warn, "Should we be threatened, we will target NATO's missile defence shield in Turkey and then hit the next targets." [4] At the same time and rather typically, both countries were quick to contain the fallout:

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reassured his Iranian counterpart Ali-Akbar Salehi during a joint news conference in Tehran in January 2012 that Turkey "would never take any step that could negatively affect our relations with our neighbour ... We would never accept any attack on any of our neighbours from our soil. We don't want such a perception of threat to exist, especially against Iran." In return, Salehi put the remarks of the IRGC general in context underlining that "some people, knowingly or not, express

views without much knowledge and by stepping beyond their responsibilities, and it causes misunderstandings.”[5]

Turkey is increasingly caught between US demands and securing its own interests in the region. It is negotiating, in many ways, the burden of being a NATO partner on the one side and its geostrategic position in the Muslim world, which does not readily yield to claims to US hegemony, on the other. The nuclear issue and the sanctions regime is a case in point. Caught between US demands to tighten sanctions against Iran and safeguarding its own economic interest, Ankara reduced oil imports from Iran by 20 percent.[6] This measure was complemented when Turkey agreed to ceasing to act as a financial intermediary — through the state-owned Halk bank — to process Iran’s multi-billion oil trade deals with countries such as India — in effect, contributing to the economic warfare on Iran led by the United States. However, the AKP has been reluctant to enforce unilateral sanctions by the European Union and the United States beyond the measures contained in UN Security Council Resolution 1929, despite repeated demands to that effect, especially from Washington. Moreover, AKP officials have repeatedly signaled that they won’t support any military action against Iran and that they are supportive of Iran’s nuclear energy programme. This explains why Erdogan has tried to act as a mediator in the nuclear issue culminating in the Tehran agreement that was successfully negotiated with Brazil’s former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in May 2010.[7] The initiative was eventually shot down by the European Union and the United States, but the fact that Erdogan (and Lula) was willing to spearhead a major diplomatic campaign, and by that knowingly impinge on US demands to determine diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear file, indicates Turkey’s newly acquired assertiveness in international affairs. More recently, Erdogan reiterated the stance of his government in a joint statement issued in Tehran upon his visit in March 2012: “The government and nation of Turkey have always clearly supported the nuclear positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and will continue to firmly follow the same policy in the future.”[8]

Conclusion

Turkey and Iran have tried to mitigate the vicissitudes of a radically fluctuating international environment. Yet despite the turmoil that has engulfed the region, in particular after the Arab revolts, both countries have retained cordial relations characterised by occasional outbreaks of crisis that are quickly contained and ameliorated through diplomatic channels. Analytically, this proclivity towards the language of diplomacy over the rhetoric of threats indicates to me that there is a strategic consensus among the political elites currently ruling both countries that they have to act as neighbours and can’t afford to jeopardise relations, even over rather more

contentious issues such as Syria and Iraq. In many ways, Turkey and Iran are too embedded within each other to be separated or to act antagonistically. This interdependence is not merely apparent in terms of mutual security concerns that a common border inevitably bring about, it is also lodged in the cultural tapestry that holds the Iranian-Turkish dialectic together.

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