

Turkey-Iran Relations: A Sectarian Future?

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The Syrian war and ensuing crisis in Iraq have put Turkey and Iran in an unprecedented sectarian rivalry. Competition over Iraqi Kurdistan will be a major test for the future direction of the strained relations between the two regional powers.

Growing Turkish-Iranian tension is the latest manifestation of regional turmoil after the start of the Syrian civil war. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and top Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials repeatedly <u>accused</u> Iran of trying "to create two Shia states in Syria and Iraq." Erdoğan also commanded the attention of the international community at the February 2017 Munich conference with the words, "This is very dangerous. It must be stopped." Iran swiftly <u>summoned</u> the Turkish ambassador over Erdoğan's comments and declared that there is a limit to its patience, warning Turkey not to repeat such remarks—otherwise, Tehran "will have to respond." In fact, Ali Akbar Velayati, a key advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, responded by <u>calling</u> on Turkish soldiers to leave Iraq and Syria or the people would "kick them out." Although Turkey's salvos may be <u>interpreted</u> as supporting the Gulf countries and courting the Trump Administration, such public skirmishes between Turkish and Iranian officials have become the new normal since the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), indicating a new chapter in Ankara-Tehran relations.

The Syrian war and the ensuing crisis in Iraq have put Turkey and Iran in an unprecedented sectarian competition. It is important to consider the leaderships of the pro-Islamic AKP and of the Islamic Republic of Iran and examine how their perceptions of each other have evolved in the past decade. Four transformative phases in their bilateral relations are significant in explaining why rising anti-American sentiment and a shared pro-Islamic vision in Ankara and Tehran are far from heralding a Turkish-Iranian rapprochement in the near future: (1) the grand reset of bilateral relations after the AKP rise to power in 2002; (2) close cooperation under Ahmet Davutoğlu, then Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs; (3) disenchantment after the "Arab Spring"; and, (4) growing securitization and sectarian competition in Syria and Iraq.

Grand Reset (2002-2007)

In 2002, Erdoğan's AKP came to power to the surprise and concern of Turkey's secularist civilmilitary bureaucracy. Tehran especially welcomed the rise of the AKP due to the aggressive anti-Iran policy of the secularist Turkish generals during 1990s. As the offshoot of Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party, the AKP—in its initial years—was treated with deep skepticism by the Turkish secularist establishment. Erbakan long cultivated a strong friendship with the Iranian mullahs on the basis of religious brotherhood and anti-western defiance. Shortly after becoming prime minister in 1996, he <u>made</u> his first foreign visit to Tehran at the expense of provoking the ire of the Turkish military. The 1997 military intervention to oust Erbakan bolstered Turkey's rapprochement with Israel in an unexpected way. Tehran was irritated when the Israeli air force was allowed to train over Turkish mountains—similar to Iranian territory—courtesy of Turkish generals who <u>declared</u> Iran "a terrorist state."

Learning from Erbakan's mistakes and anxious about Turkey's secularist military, the AKP leadership avoided appearing too close to Iran and focused only on rehabilitation of relations through bilateral trade and intelligence cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Given that Iran's direct assistance to Kurdish separatist groups in southeast Turkey (primarily Kurdish Hezbollah, a Kurdish Islamist group, and PKK) was a staple policy during the 1990s, the Turkish military welcomed such a pragmatic warm-up in Ankara-Tehran relations. Economic ties proved to be beneficial for both countries and grew exponentially; the volume of trade rose from \$1 billion in 2002 to \$8 billion in 2007, reaching \$16 billion in 2011.

Close Cooperation (2007-2011)

Consolidation of power by the AKP after consecutive electoral victories ushered an era of Ankara-Tehran cooperation, blessed by a shared Muslim identity and a desire not to align with any superpower. The efforts of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu were critically significant. Despite his neo-Ottoman vision of the Middle East, which could potentially threaten Tehran, Davutoğlu approached Iran on the basis of Muslim solidarity. Turkey's souring relations with Israel after the 2008-2009 Gaza war also played a role in furthering the close relationship. The AKP leaders' <u>ample support</u> to Tehran during the mass protests of the 2009 Iranian presidential election also strengthened bilateral relations.

The most remarkable aspect of the cooperation was Turkey's bid to take a mediating role regarding Iran's nuclear program. The AKP leaders' public statements, however, went beyond mediation and were largely perceived as supporting Tehran. For example, Erdoğan repeatedly <u>pointed out</u> the western powers' double-standard of focusing on Iran's nuclear bid and not paying attention to Israel's nuclear weapons. The fact that such anti-western sentiments were also shared by Turkish nationalists made the Ankara-Tehran collaboration based not only on Islam but also on a kind of Third World solidarity, especially after courting Brazil's strong support. Indeed, Turkey, Iran, and Brazil agreed in 2010 to a deal by which Iran would ship its enriched uranium for processing in Turkey, aiming to thwart new international sanctions on Tehran. As two Turkey experts on nuclear weapons <u>observed</u> at the time, "The nationalists in Turkey applaud the Iranian leadership and their 'dignified' policies for protecting Iran's rights and national interests against the world's 'only superpower.""

Despite the close cooperation between Ankara and Tehran, Turkey's NATO membership has always been a source of worry for the Islamic Republic. The NATO protection may also explain why the AKP leadership did not perceive a potentially nuclear Iran as a real threat to Turkey.

The Disenchantment of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring ushered a winter for Turkish-Iranian relations. The Syrian uprising, in particular, put Turkey and Iran on divergent paths that eventually led to a direct confrontation. Disenchantment began with Turkey's call to the Asad regime for reforms and to Syrian opposition meetings in Ankara in summer 2011. Soon after, as part of NATO's missile defense shield, Turkey and the United States signed an agreement for the deployment of the Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance System in the eastern Turkish city of Malatya. Tehran perceived the attempt as a type of Turkish-Israeli rapprochement against the Islamic Republic; and the regime forces threatened to hit radars in Malatya if the United States or Israel attacked Iran.

Moreover, increasing sectarian policies of the Iraqi Prime Minister at that time, Nouri al-Maliki, deeply irritated Turkey. The issue of an arrest warrant on December 11, 2011, for Tariq al-Hashimi, Iraq's Sunni vice president, led to reciprocal public accusations in Ankara and Tehran. Turkey's increasing push against the Asad regime by supporting armed rebels worsened relations. As retaliation, Iran started to provide support to the PKK once again.

Nonetheless, the Ankara-Tehran economic ties were not hit quickly. Dating back to 2009, the international sanctions on Iran proved to be a factor that propelled the AKP closer to the Iranian regime thanks to the <u>oil-for-gold trade</u> of \$13 billion volume—first revealed to the public by the December 2013 corruption case against top Turkish ministers as well as Erdoğan's family. The Turkish state bank, Halkbank, was <u>a key link</u> in the chain to evade the sanctions. Although he forced the ministers to resign their posts after public outrage, Erdoğan denied the allegations and swiftly removed the prosecutors, <u>claiming</u> there is a global plot against him led by the United States, Israel, and the Gülen movement.

Syria-Iraq Nexus: Sectarian Competition (Post-2014)

The Syrian civil war has entered a new phase after the rise of the Islamic State and its incursion into Mosul in summer 2014. The power vacuum in both Syria and Iraq has facilitated Turkish and Iranian expansion of influence, and most often, the two sides blamed each other in sectarian language—an unprecedented development in modern Turkish-Iranian relations.

A Turkish diplomat who served in Baghdad at the time told this author that Turkey's initial reluctance to fight against ISIL—which was partially due to ISIL storming a Turkish consulate in Mosul to take 49 hostages—led to a public propaganda campaign, portraying a Turkey-ISIL-Israel

alliance against the Shia in Iraq and Syria with insulting Turkey-Israel flags in Baghdad streets. Iran's quest to mobilize non-state actors and Shiite youth groups dictated its harsh sectarian language as well. As Afshon Ostovar acutely <u>observes</u>, "religion matters little in Iran's state-to-state relationships, but it figures more prominently in Iran's relations with non-state groups." Ankara's perception of "Iranian expansionism" and Tehran's perception of "Turkish expansionism" are frequently and purposefully coded Sunni versus Shia expansionism, as the two actors competed for support in the Arab streets.

Such deep perceptions of threat resulted in Iran's direct military interference to defend the Iraqi and Syrian regimes against ISIS. Turkey has become especially worried about the Shiite militias in Iraq, primarily the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which have been receiving training and guidance by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Bashing General Qassem Soleimani, who oversees Iran's military operations abroad, Turkey's President Erdoğan <u>said bluntly</u>, "So, what is their objective? To increase the power of Shia in Iraq. That's what they want."

The Syria-Iraq crisis, thus, led to Turkey reimagining itself as a Sunni power in a sectarian power play in the region, pursuing <u>close alignment</u> with the Gulf countries and even providing strong support to Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen.

What the Future Holds

The Trump Administration's signal to pursue an aggressive Iran policy comes at a time when Ankara-Washington relations are most fragile. Turkey and the Gulf states appear to be natural partners for Trump's policy on Iran. However, Turkey's expectations from the United States, especially on the issue of the PKK's activism in Syria and Iraq, will pose challenges to Washington. The Pentagon still perceives PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurds as a significant partner in the war on ISIS and thus <u>advises</u> the Trump Administration to carry out Obama's armament strategy.

Nonetheless, Ankara and Washington have overlapping interests in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Iranian influence increases remarkably. Muhammad Pakpour, a top commander of the IRGC, recently <u>declared</u> that Iranian intelligence agencies have boosted their information gathering and surveillance in Iraqi Kurdistan by about 70 percent. <u>Iran's alignment with the PKK</u>, whose advances in Iraq's Sinjar region led to the <u>current military confrontation</u> between pro-Barzani Peshmerga and the PKK-backed local Yezidi militia, may lead to close cooperation between Ankara and Washington in the Trump era. To Turkey's chagrin, Tehran and Baghdad reached <u>an agreement</u> for a new pipeline project to export crude oil from the northern Iraqi fields of Kirkuk via Iran. Turkish officials <u>believe</u> that the Sinjar region, where Shiite militias are most populated, will be critical for Iran's pipeline plan.

Iraqi Kurdistan is indeed a key place to observe where Turkish-Iranian relations will be headed in the next decade. Bordering the Ottoman and Persian Empires, this Kurdish area and its people have historically been critical in shaping the nature of regional competition. For the first time, however, the region is characterized by sectarian loyalties. Sunni Arab frustration in post-2003 Iraq is still very much alive and the Syrian war's bitter outcomes have fundamentally shaken the trust between Sunni and Shiite communities in the entire Middle East. It is hard to imagine Ankara remaining oblivious to growing Sunni frustration, especially if Tehran and Damascus continue to provide support to the PKK and meddle in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iran's PKK card, however, is complicated. The Syrian Kurds' aspirations of self-governance present a challenge not only to the Asad regime but also to Iran, which has a large restive Kurdish population. Heavily invested in the Asad regime, Iran pursues a balancing act between Turkey and Kurds in northern Syria—a policy that is also employed by Russia. A similar balancing act appears to have emerged after the Astana talks as Russia aims to limit Iranian influence in the future of Syria, putting Ankara and Tehran under Moscow's lead. As the protector of Sunnis, Turkey demands that Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shiite militias remove their forces from Syrian territory—a demand that overlaps with Russian interests in the long term. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's <u>visit</u> to Moscow to discuss Tehran's attempt to establish a permanent military presence in Syria is the latest manifestation of the divide between Russia and Iran.

The Trump Administration's aggressive policy toward Iran may further deepen Ankara-Tehran strife, which is especially likely in case of a hardliner victory in upcoming Iranian elections coupled with Erdoğan's expected referendum win in April 2017. A hawkish regime in Iran may push further a sectarian agenda in Iraq, and a domestically stronger Erdoğan may seek to choose pursuing a tougher policy in order to garner US support and build stronger ties with the Gulf states. Whether Turkey would play a balancing role between Washington and Tehran will largely depend on the Turkish assessment of a pro-Kurdish separatist threat on its borders.