



Turkey and Iran: the struggle for power and influence in the middle east

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ABSTRACT

Turkey-Iran policies have gone through an unprecedented period of rapprochement. Ideological and security issues that dominated the relations between the two neighbours have been gradually replaced by pragmatic considerations on each side. A number of developments both at the state level and regional level have promoted pragmatism. The ensuing improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations has been crowned by a rapidly increasing volume of economic interactions between the two countries as well as security and diplomatic cooperation on a number of issues. In addition to the upgrading of bilateral ties, the two countries' regional approaches related to the Palestine issue, preservation of territorial integrity of Iraq, Iran's right to have "peaceful" nuclear technology, etc. have ostensibly converged. However, a number of developments that took place in 2011, including the revolt in Syria, the escalation of terror activities perpetrated by the PKK, have overshadowed Turkey-Iran relations. Moreover, the Arab spring has profoundly altered the regional environment and has led to Turkey's reconciliation with the West, particularly with the United States, on a number of issues in the region including the uprising in Syria. It also culminated in the differentiation of Turkish and Iranian regional perspectives and it is this new regional context that accounts for the emerging tensions between Turkey and Iran

Key Words: Iran, Turkey, Sunni, Shiite, AKP, Middle East, Nuclear deal, regional policy.

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Introduction

Since the wave of protests from the Arab Spring hit Syria in January 2011, Turkey and Iran have witnessed diverging opinions and positions. The two countries are now evolving toward a more confrontational stance and they are openly at odds over several issues. The most important reason for this is the regional and international systemic changes that are taking place. These include taking up different sides in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, particularly regarding Syria; Turkey's agreement to host a NATO defense shield radar on its territory; Iran's confrontational stance that Turkey has lost its credibility as an objective actor to mediate or facilitate any nuclear talks; and a rising competition for influence in the Middle East. Turkish-Iranian relations is an obvious example which shows how desecuritization of a number of internal issues, formerly known as security issues, can transform the positions and priorities of a country's foreign policy. In the past, Turkish-Iranian relations were mainly formed within the framework of security concerns. However, in the first decade of the 21st century, the Turks security policies regarding Iran have drastically changed. Meanwhile, the Arab Revolutions have posed a challenge to such desecuritization process. The Arab Spring has intensified the historic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, two of the Middle East's most powerful nation-states. Although economic cooperation between the two countries has improved in the past decade, Turkey and Iran are increasingly at odds on a number of issues in the Middle East,

particularly Syria. The outbreak of the Arab Spring has given the historical rivalry between Turkey and Iran new impetus. As the unrest and pressures for change have spread, Turkish-Iranian relations have become increasingly strained. Turkey and Iran have clashed over a number of issues, most notably Syria.

I. Examining the Turkish-Iranian relationship before the Arab uprisings

As two of the region's strongest non-Arab states, with similar geographic and demographic sizes and tradition of statehood, Turkey and Iran have not perceived one another as an existential threat. Yet, their myriad social, political, religious and ethnic differences have often pitted them against each other, as has geostrategic orientation, particularly Turkey's ties with the U.S. and Israel and Iran's hostility toward both.² However, they also share deep historic, cultural and economic ties. Over the past two decades, their economies have become increasingly intertwined. Iran supplies nearly a fifth of Turkey's oil and natural gas; Turkey is its neighbour's gateway to Europe, with more than a fifth of Iran's land trade transiting its territory. This link became a lifeline for Iran during its most vulnerable recent periods,

² Gül den Ayman, "Regional Aspirations and Limits of Power: Turkish-Iranian Relations in the New Middle East," *Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 20, No.1, 2012, p. 15.

the 1980-1988 war with Iraq and the peak of nuclear sanctions in 2011-2013.³

Turkey and Iran, the two non-Arab states in the Middle East, are key countries in the region. Neither has suffered from border violations or similar problems since 1639 – which marked the signing of the Qasr-i Shirin treaty, which brought an end to 150 years of intermittent warfare between the Ottomans and Şafavids and established a boundary between the two empires that has remained unchanged until today.⁴ Relations have been dominated by alternating phases of imperial and religious rivalry and cooperation, with a steady underlying competitive streak for regional dominance. Historically, despite ideological differences between Turkey's secular establishment and Iran's Islamic Republic, geopolitical realities and economic imperatives have forced the two to work together on a number

³ Ali Hussein Bakir, "Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Revolutions: A Vision of the Present and the Future," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, July 4, 2011.

⁴ According to Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS), Iran is Turkey's main gas provider after Russia, some ten billion cubic metres annually, while after Iraq, Iran is Turkey's largest oil supplier. "Sector Report", 2015. Between March 2014 and March 2015, more than 110,000 trucks carried goods through the Bazargan border post, compared to nearly 45,000 crossing Iran's border with Afghanistan during that period. "2014-2015 Annual Report", Iran Road Maintenance and Transportation Organisation. A senior Turkish diplomat said, "the phrase we hear the most when visiting Tehran in the aftermath of the nuclear deal is, 'we never forget the friends who stood by us during tough times'". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 5 April 2016.

of issues. Besides general border security, Turkey and Iran's shared concern to contain Kurdish militant organizations has led to close cooperation between the two countries. In addition, Turkey's energy needs dictated a \$23 billion natural gas agreement with Iran, signed in 1996, and there has been a steady increase of trade volume between the two countries since that time). While Turkey does not want a nuclear Iran, the perception of Iran as a member of the "Axis of Evil" has, until recently, not prevailed in Turkey.⁵ In fact, Turkey has tried to play a mediatory role between the United States and Iran, claiming that it is in the unique position of having friendly relations with both. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a major turning point in relations. Until then Iran was friendly with the U.S. and Israel, on the side of the West, which was in line with Turkey's position during the Cold War. After the revolution Turkey feared the export of this ideology into the country. Iran, as an Islamic theocracy, represented an ideological opposite to Turkey's secular democracy. Iran became hostile to the U.S. and Israel, further making it an adversarial neighbor for Turkey.

This continued in the 1990s, when Turkey was fighting a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism war against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). Iran (along with Syria) was providing logistical support to the PKK, as a way to exert pressure on Turkey and to have leverage, particularly on the issue of sharing the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Turkey suspected

⁵ Ibrahim Kalin, "Turkey and the Middle East: Ideology or Geo-Politics?" *Private View*, Autumn 2008, No 13, p.34.

that Iran was supporting radical Islamic groups such as Hezbollah, which were trained in or financed by Iran to engage in terrorist acts in Turkey.⁶

In the mid-1990s, Iran was fighting its own version of Kurdish militants [the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, (PJAK), the Iranian offshoot of the PKK], and a common interest in containing this situation forced the two countries to work together. Things really started changing when the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002. The AKP had a new vision of Turkish foreign policy: Turkey would try to engage all the parties in the region; bolster Turkey's economic prospects and create a zone of economic integration and regional stability. It would do this by playing up its cultural and historical ties with Muslims, the people of the Balkans, Central Asians, Arabs and Europeans. As a result, Turkey engaged all its neighbors, including Syria and Iran. It managed to bring Israel and Syria to the table for proxy negotiations and tried to bring them together to hold direct talks in 2008. It offered to mediate between the U.S. and Iran on nuclear matters.⁴ Elsewhere in the Middle East it ventured into Israeli-Palestinian and intra-Palestinian negotiations. It also tried to mediate in the Georgian-Russian conflict. The AKP's aim in all this was to increase its stature and visibility in the world. Basically, Turkey's new foreign policy, called "zero problems with our neighbors," was geared towards the goal of emerging as a regional

⁶ Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: University Press, 2007, p. 61.

leader in the Middle East and playing an important role as a mediator in some of the region's toughest conflicts. The Arab Spring and subsequent developments changed all this, and brought relations with Iran to the hostile point they are at today.⁷

II. In the context of the "Arab spring", from cooperation to competition

The outbreak of the Arab Spring has given the historical rivalry between Turkey and Iran new impetus. As the unrest and pressures for change have spread, Turkish-Iranian relations have become increasingly strained. Turkey and Iran have clashed over a number of issues, most notably Syria. Turkey's assertive policy in the Middle East poses a challenge to Iranian regional ambitions. Turkey views itself as an ascendant power in the Middle East. Indeed, many Arabs have regarded Turkey, with its high growth rate and relatively democratic political system, as a model for their own political evolution.

The Arab Spring has intensified the historical rivalry between Turkey and Iran. Ankara and Tehran have viewed the Arab Spring quite differently. Iranian leaders have sought to portray the Arab Spring as an "Islamic Awakening" inspired by Iran's own 1979 Islamic Revolution, which overthrew the Shah, while Turkey has seen

⁷ Dan Tschirgi, Turkey and the Arab World in the New Millennium. (eds.) T. Y. Ismael and M. Aydin, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st century: A Changing Role in World Politics*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp. 103-119.

the Arab Spring as the expression of widespread popular yearning for greater democracy and transparency and possibly an opportunity to enhance Turkey's regional influence. The Arab Spring appears to have reinforced the Iranian leadership's perception of the geopolitical order in the Middle East as being in Iran's favor. But the reality may be quite different; the Islamic Republic is vulnerable to the same social, political, and economic forces that led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes.⁸ Iran's image in the Arab world has suffered a marked decline in the last five years. A June 2011 James Zogby poll showed a serious reversal of Iran's popularity in Arab countries in comparison to five years previously. In the earlier poll, large majorities in Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Emirates said that Iran played a positive role in the region, but in the June 2011 poll, the figures were almost exactly reversed.⁹

a. *The Syrian Crisis: a zero-sum game*

The main cause of strains in relations between Turkey and Iran has been differences over Syria. When the unrest in Syria initially broke out, Erdoğan advised al-Assad to introduce reforms that could defuse social tensions. Al-Assad promised to introduce reforms to Turkish

envoys and interlocutors. However, he instead stepped up repressive measures aimed at stifling the unrest. In response, Turkey increased its criticism of Assad's policies and began to strengthen ties to the Syrian opposition, allowing it to organize and hold meetings on Turkish soil. This support for the Syrian opposition sparked a sharp deterioration in relations with Damascus and created strains in relations with Tehran, which backed Syria. At the same time, it has exposed the limits of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy. Ankara has been forced to recognize that it needs American support more than it initially supposed. The swagger and exaggerated rhetoric about Turkey as a medium-sized power has been replaced by a much more sober and realistic appraisal of the difficulties Turkey faces in Syria. Internal discontent with Erdoğan's handling of the Syrian crisis has also increased.

In Syria, after unsuccessful attempts to press the allied regime of Bashar al-Assad to reform, Turkey converged with Sunni Gulf monarchies in calling for a regime change in Damascus and in sustaining the Syrian opposition forces both logistically and financially. On the other hand, Iran gave strong support to its longstanding ally in Damascus. Therefore, the crisis progressively transformed into both civilian conflict and a proxy war between the most influential regional actors, also becoming the main fault line of the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East. Having both ideological and geopolitical dimensions, Sunni-Shia rivalry has increasingly intensified after internal developments in Iraq (a Sunni regime under Saddam Hussein with a

⁸ Alireza Nader, "Iran's Human Rights Abuses," testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, Washington, D.C., September 22, 2011.

⁹ Dan Murphy, "A Stunning Shift in Iran's Image in the Arab World," Christian Science Monitor, September 7, 2011.

sizeable Shia community), brought the country closer to Iran, and reached its peak with the conflict in Syria. For the Sunni camp, led by Saudi Arabia, a change of regime in Damascus – even through international military intervention – would imply a reduction of Iranian influence and aspirations in the Middle East. On Iran's side, a post-Assad Syria ruled by Sunnis, who represent the majority of the Syrian population, would be the worst scenario as this result would weaken the Shia crescent, endanger Tehran's ties with Lebanese Hezbollah and reduce its regional leverage. Deterioration of Turkish-Iranian relations due to the Syrian crisis has also impacted on intelligence cooperation to counter PKK and PJAK activities. This was an important element of bilateral rapprochement in the last decade. After the PKK attacks in 2012, Ankara feared that Iran could exploit the Kurdish card to destabilize the Turkish domestic context. This was the catalyst for starting a peace process with the PKK, after secret negotiations between Erdoğan's government and Abdullah Öcalan (the PKK leader detained in a Turkish prison). The results of the fragile ongoing process are still uncertain.

b. Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq

The competition and rivalry between Turkey and Iran has intensified in Iraq. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq has created a power vacuum and could eventually shift the regional balance of power, especially if Iraq backs Iranian policies toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Iraq's foreign policies are currently more aligned with Iran than any other regional country.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has expressed support for the Assad regime and has allowed Iran to use Iraqi territory and airspace to ship weapons to the Syrian regime.¹⁰ Iraq also remains antagonistic toward Saudi Arabia, Iran's archfoe in the Persian Gulf. Iran views Iraq as critical to the realization of its national security ambitions. From the Iranian perspective, it is vital that Iraq remain a friendly and pliant state that supports Iranian national security interests. Religious factors also influence Iranian policy. Two of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites are located in Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq. Iran's Shi'a theocracy would like to ensure that Iraq and its clerical establishment do not emerge as a threat to Iran's concept of religious rule, or *velayat-e faghih* [rule of the supreme jurist]. Turkey is an obstacle to Iran's ability to achieve its political ambitions in Iraq. Ankara has a strong interest in the emergence of a politically stable, independent, and economically prosperous Iraq aligned with Turkish interests. It does not want Iraq to become an Iranian client state. However, Turkey lacks Iran's close ties to key Shi'a political actors and parties, such as Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Sadrist block. It also does not have as active an intelligence and paramilitary presence as Iran.

¹⁰ Michael S. Schmidt, and Yasir Ghazi, "Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, with a Nudge from Iran," *New York Times*, August 12, 2011; Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Flying Aid to Syria over Iraq," *New York Times*, September 6, 2012.

However, Turkey has established strong economic and political ties to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Iran also maintains close political and economic relations with the KRG; two-way trade stood at around \$4.5 billion in 2011.¹¹ But Iran's relations with the KRG are not as close as those of Turkey and have been marred by periodic tensions. Iranian officials have accused the KRG of facilitating PJAK attacks on Iranian territory.¹² Political competition between Turkey and Iran in Iraq has intensified in the last several years. The two countries backed opposing political blocs during Iraq's last parliamentary elections, with Iran supporting Shi'a parties, and Turkey backing the secular and Al-Iraqiya coalition.¹³ But while many Iraqis view Iranian policies as being sectarian, Turkey has tried to portray itself in a nonsectarian light. On his visit to Iraq in March 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan met with Iraq's most esteemed Shi'a religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Sistani. He also made a point to visit Shi'a shrines in Baghdad, as well as Sunni holy places.¹⁴ Both visits were designed to underscore Ankara's support for a stable, nonsectarian approach to Iraq's future. Turkey's relations with the central government in Iraq, however, have significantly deteriorated

¹¹ "Iran-KRG Trade Ties Improve," *The Kurdish Globe*, June 25, 2011.

¹² "Iran Criticizes Iraqi Kurdistan for Giving Land to PJAK," *Iranian Students News Agency*, July 11, 2011.

¹³ Sean Kane, "The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," *Special Report*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, June 2011.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

since then. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki strengthened ties with Iran after the U.S. withdrawal. At the same time, Maliki has sought to steadily consolidate his control over Iraq's political institutions, especially the security services, and to circumscribe the influence of the Sunnis and Kurds.¹⁵ Maliki's attempt to curtail the influence of the Kurds and the Sunnis has strained relations with Ankara. His decision to issue a warrant in December 2011 for the arrest of Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who was charged with abetting terrorism the day after the last American troops had left Iraq, particularly alarmed Turkey. Turkish officials saw the arrest warrant for Hashimi as part of a broader effort by Maliki to reduce the power of the Kurds and Sunnis. The Turks fear that Maliki's attempt to curtail Sunni and Kurdish influence could increase the risk of a return to the type of sectarian violence that occurred in 2006 and 2007 and could lead to the breakup of Iraq, with the Kurds in the north gaining full independence.

III. Regional implications of the "Arab spring" on the Turkish-Iranian relations

Initially, the Arab spring that resulted with the overthrow of long-established political regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, has changed the regional context that had enabled the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement. In a short period of time,

¹⁵ Tim Arango, "Vacuum Is Feared as U.S. Quits Iraq, but Iran's Deep Influence May Not Fill It," *New York Times*, October 9, 2011, p. 6.

The Iranian government has accused Turkey of intervening in the internal affairs of Syria and serving the interests of the imperialist powers to weaken the "resistance front" popular uprisings inspired by the Arab spring spread to several Arab countries, challenging the ruling regimes. Among them, the uprising in Syria has affected Turkey-Iran relations most adversely. Both countries initially underestimated early demonstrations against the Assad administration, which held good relations with both countries. Following the initial demonstrations in Syria, Turkey supported the Assad administration, provided that he would deliver reforms. Recognizing the need for reform in Syria, Iran also welcomed the "reform package" announced by Assad in April 2011. However, the Syrian regime resorted to violence to repress demonstrations against its government. These political protests grew daily. Against the background of this escalating violence, unlike Iran that has given unconditional support to the Assad administration, the Turkish government allowed the Syrian opposition to organize in Turkey.¹⁶ Iran, however, has described the Syrian opposition as a "puppet of the Zionist regime" and condemned the imperialist powers that aimed at destroying the so-called "resistance front." Furthermore, the Turkish position towards the Syrian opposition provoked a negative reaction in Iran. The Iranian government has accused Turkey of intervening in the internal affairs of Syria and serving the interests of the imperialist powers to weaken the

"resistance front."¹⁷ In return, Turkey has charged the Iranian government with encouraging the Assad regime to pursue a violent crackdown instead of persuading it to make reforms.¹⁸

With each failure to find an accommodation, the context of Turkey's and Iran's rivalry has become more complex and disagreements more intractable. What they have in common in Syria is that neither can tolerate a divided country or complete disorder. What is critically important for Iran, however, is that whatever order there is preserves Syria's geostrategic orientation as part of the "axis of resistance": to project power into the Levant, generally, and to keep its strategic depth vis-à-vis Israel via its link with Hizbollah, in particular. While Turkey would like to see Assad gone and a more inclusive Sunni-led order emerge in Damascus that would be friendlier, its absolute priority is to have a stable border and a curb on PKK-led Kurdish aspirations. Both seek to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity as well, but ensuring Shiite majority rule is as critical for Iran as a more inclusive role for Sunnis in governance is for Turkey.¹⁹ These objectives are not

¹⁷ Hassan Shafiee and Mohsen Sabri, "Inspecting the Factors Influencing the Prospects of Turkish-Iranian Relations," *Middle-East Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2012, pp. 75-95.

¹⁸ See Bülent Aras, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Iran: Ideology and Foreign Policy in Flux," *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol.18, No.1 (2001), pp.105-124; Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, "Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.17, No3, Fall 2010, pp.101-117.

¹⁹ Ibid,

¹⁶ Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey's Syria Policy: The Challenge of Coalition Building," *GMF On Turkey*, February 17, 2012.

necessarily mutually exclusive, and interests in Syria at least are probably more closely aligned today than for five years. Both have increasingly focused on fighting IS and pushing back against the PYD's announcement of a federal system in the north that they fear could intensify centrifugal forces rending the country. They need dialogue, however, to accommodate differences in their priorities: containing the PYD-YPG for Turkey, saving Assad for Iran.²⁰ For now, there are more reasons to believe the two will persist on their current path than change course. That Turkey sees Iran as increasingly encroaching on its historic sphere of influence, especially in and around the Aleppo and Mosul battlefields, exacerbates tensions. Having pushed IS out of the towns of Jarablous, al-Rai and Dabiq near the Turkish border between August and October, Syrian rebels backed by the Turkish army began to advance southwards to fulfil Erdoğan's pledge to clear a 5,000-sq. km zone in northern Syria. If they reach strategically important al-Bab east of Aleppo, held by IS but coveted by the YPG as a land bridge between its Kobani and Afrin cantons, they would come dangerously close to the Syrian army and Iranian-allied forces, as well, on the other side, to U.S.-backed, YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic

Forces (SDF) north of Aleppo.²¹ Turkey claiming that an Iranian made drone killed four of its soldiers near al-Bab on 24 November is an ominous sign.²² Similar dynamics exist in Iraq. Turkey's insistence on a role for the proxy militia it has trained on its Bashiqa military base east of Mosul, the Sunni Arab al-Hashd alWatani (also known as "Mosul Knights"), beside the Peshmerga of Barzani's pro Turkish KDP in the operation to retake Mosul from IS triggered an Ankara-Baghdad war of words. Turkish officials contend that Baghdad's opposition to a Turkish role and presence in the north derives from its alliance with Tehran.

Ultimately Turkey and Iran, as neighbours, will have to live with the outcome of the conflicts now burning around them. Any sustainable solution will require a regional power balance tolerable for both. This can only be achieved if they cooperate, rein in their proxies and recognize one another's core strategic and security interests in Syria and Iraq.

Unlike Iran, Turkey has become a country of quick and unusual foreign policy reactions. The list of regional issues that cause troubles for Ankara is long, and that makes its foreign policy a bit unstable. In contrast, Tehran refrains from abrupt foreign policy reactions, an important difference that might give Iran an advantage. Iranian political elites likely think that they have a historic opportunity (since the revolution) to come

²⁰ Ibrahim Kalin, Erdoğan's chief adviser, said, "the national security threat ... from Kurdish separatism is more acute for Turkey than for Iran". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 16 June 2016. A senior U.S. official said, "two years ago, Erdoğan had three priorities, in this order: Assad, Kurds, IS. Today it is Kurds, IS, Assad". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 29 June 2016.

²¹ International crisis group, *Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016, pp. 10-12.

²² Ibid

back into the international system through legitimate mechanisms. Not wanting to lose this opportunity, Tehran acts calmly, even on critical matters. A deep examination of what Iranians say about regional issues reveals that Iran is not much concerned about Turkey's capacity to harm its interests.²³ As a result, Iran will be the more tolerant partner in the Turkey-Iran compartmentalization strategy, lest its grand strategy of reviving links with the global Western system be at risk.

Conclusion

Today's geostrategic competition between Turkey and Iran is the latest iteration of an old power game, but with an increasingly ominous twist as they warily eye each other's moves in Iraq and Syria, prime their proxies and, in Turkey's case, prepare to escalate direct military involvement. How the two choose to deploy their power, with whom they align and whether they can manage or overcome their differences is vitally important not only to them, but also to their neighbours and other states with a stake in the Middle East. Among the actors involved in the region's wars, however, no two are more suited to identify ways toward renewed mutual accommodation than Turkey and Iran. They have extensive communication channels and long

experience in striking geostrategic deals, engage in intensive trade and importantly share a core interest in preserving their neighbours' territorial integrity. This complex background defines both countries' geostrategic options. It will take political leadership to define areas of cooperation and to limit the destructive effects of confrontation in today's highly charged and competitive regional context. Only by finding common ground can Turkey and Iran contribute to a mutual goal of secure and stable regional order. Events since 2011 have proven that the alternative is disorder, humanitarian suffering, and spillover effects that threaten both nations' respective domestic balances.

In line with its new policies, Turkey has sought to promote its role as a regional power. It has also tried to assume a mediatory role in the international relations and to present its new regional policy based on minimizing the challenges with its neighbors. However, following the Arab Revolutions, the policy partly failed due to the changes in political structures and the formation of new regional alliances. This time, Turkey's policy with regard to the Arab countries is not based on eliminating the problems with the neighbors. But, Turkey's new policy is aimed at accelerating regional developments and changing the surrounding region based on its own interests. This policy has seemingly sparked a new round of economic and political rivalry between Iran and Turkey and if the regional problems deteriorate, the likelihood of a return to the previous form of bilateral relations is not unexpected.

²³ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran's Politics and Regional Relations: Post-Détente," *Perceptions*, Vol.12, No 1 Spring 2007, pp.29-34.

The Islamic Republic's threat perceptions of Turkey could lead to a significant deterioration of relations between the two countries. The Iranian-Turkish relationship in the coming years could in some ways resemble relations between the countries in the 1990s. Iran is increasingly accused of backing the PKK—as it did in the 1990s. However, Iran, increasingly isolated by the international community, is unlikely to cease its economic cooperation with Turkey. Turkey faces important constraints as well. Given its dependence on Iranian energy, especially natural gas, Turkey has a strong stake in preventing relations with Tehran from deteriorating too badly and in not taking actions that could give Tehran an excuse to step up support for the PKK. U.S. officials should thus not expect Ankara to automatically fall in line with all U.S. policy initiatives. Ankara will seek to retain a degree of flexibility regarding its policy toward Iran and may be hesitant to support some U.S. initiatives if they are seen to conflict with broader Turkish national interests vis-à-vis Iran.

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