



# Turkey-Iran Relations: A Long-Term Perspective

By Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar July 11, 2016

Simplistic binary readings generally fail to explain the trajectory of Turkish-Iranian relations. The geostrategic rivalry between these two regional powers has deep historical roots, is subject to long-term patterns, and is amenable to realignments as a result of shifts in regional and international balances of power. For these reasons, assessing Turkish-Iranian relations requires a broader understanding than the prevalent narrow topical analysis provides.

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## Historical patterns in Turkish-Iranian relations

Historically, Turkey and Iran have been mirror images of one another, rarely seeing eye to eye but unable to part ways due to their geographical proximity. Turks were exposed to Persian culture on their move westward and inherited indelible political and religious legacies. Iran is home to a large Turkic minority, and historically, Persia was ruled by Turkish royal families such as the Safavids and the Qajars from the early 16th century, when they accepted Twelver Shiism, until the Pahlavi era in the 20th century.

The Ottoman-Safavi split was essentially a rivalry of two Turkic dynasties, which respectively carried the banners of orthodox Sunni Islam and Shia Sufism.<sup>1</sup> The modern histories of Turkey and Iran have followed a similar path: Their early attempts at Westernization sowed the seeds of later estrangement from that process because of both countries' inability to fulfill their national ambitions in purely Western terms. Turkey's break with Westernization took the distinct form of Turkish conservatism, which allowed for pragmatic cooperation with the West, while Iran embraced revolutionary zeal with a strong anti-Western tone.

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran attempted to use an Islamic approach to overcome its traditional Shia isolation in the wider Muslim world. Without organic links with the Sunni world, Iran's initial civilizational call for Islamic revolution failed to resonate in the wider region. Iran was left to pursue revolution in one country, which nonetheless set the stage for limited Iranian leadership in much of the Shia world.<sup>2</sup> Similarly,

Turkey responded to its post-Cold War identity crisis with a multidimensional approach that focused on opening up to and building ties with traditional zones of influence from the Balkans to the Caucasus.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in broad terms, pro-Western Turkey and anti-Western Iran competed in the post-Cold War era not only in the Middle East but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Gulf, and even the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater.

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## The shadow of the Iraq War

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq provided a watershed moment through which to assess Ankara's and Tehran's regional policies. First, both countries opposed the American invasion and occupation, which they feared could restrict their room for maneuver in their historical sphere of influence. Second, they were suspicious that America would support Kurdish nationalism in northern Iraq and were wary of the invasion's broader impact on the Sunni-Shia balance in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its initial opposition to the invasion, Ankara stood closer to Washington in pursuit of Turkey's regional goals. This was largely because, first, Turkey did not want to see Iraq collapse into disunity—with possible domestic and regional spillover effects—and, second, its national interests would have been broadly undermined if the United States had been humiliated and had withdrawn from Iraq without putting into place a new political order that could ensure a sustainable Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish coexistence.<sup>5</sup> In removing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, however, Washington had put itself in a paradoxical situation in which it required Iran's cooperation to stabilize Iraq, given Iran's close bonds with the Shia majority, while simultaneously, pro-Iranian Shia militias were increasingly targeting U.S. troops in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, aiming to contain the chaos in Iraq, boost its regional and international clout, and prevent any escalation in the U.S.-Iranian conflict, Turkey positioned itself as a possible mediator between Iran and the United States. The most famous Turkish attempt to bridge the U.S.-Iranian gap came in May 2010 when, hoping to head off a new round of international sanctions on Iran's nuclear program, Turkey and Brazil persuaded the Iranian administration to sign a declaration agreeing to limits on its nuclear program. While the deal was rejected by the United States and never implemented, Turkey's mediatory role fit its policy of minimizing the prospects of escalation between the United States and Iran.<sup>7</sup> It also fit Iran's conventional approach of seeking Turkey's cooperation and minimizing competition at times of international isolation. While Turkey and Iran continued to compete from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and from the Gulf to Afghanistan, the two countries were able to compartmentalize their growing energy and commercial relations, which increased to historical highs due to the international sanctions on Iran that cut it off from many other markets.<sup>8</sup> Ankara and Tehran also appeared to reach a tacit understanding on the common fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and its Iranian arm, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan.

The Arab uprisings ended this semblance of harmony. The Syrian conflict and Turkey and Iran's divergent policy choices became deal-breakers for the two rival regional powers. While Turkey framed the growing conflict as a humanitarian issue and an opportunity to enhance its regional clout, Iran saw the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad's regime as a critical threat. This was because the Iranian establishment considered Syria to be a firewall that would block the disruptive impact of the Arab Spring from toppling regimes friendly to Iran or from reaching its own borders.<sup>9</sup> Turkey worked through proxies but refrained from directly embroiling itself militarily, while Iran employed more direct proxies such as Hezbollah and later deployed its own paramilitary assets to prevent the fall of Damascus. Iran did not hesitate to use the sectarian card in the conflict, employing Shia militias in Syria and Iraq against what it called the forces of extremism,<sup>10</sup> which included not only Al Qaeda and its offshoots—including the Islamic State—but also almost all Sunni rebel groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>11</sup>

On the Turkish side, the initial thought was that Assad's days were numbered and that the war would therefore cause minimal damage to Turkish interests. Ankara also believed that Tehran could be convinced of the need for a political transition that would remove Assad but co-opt elements of the regime to avoid total disintegration.<sup>12</sup>

Despite occasional outbursts against Turkish policy in Syria from leading figures in the Iranian establishment, Iran generally chose to limit tensions with Ankara until the summer of 2013 due to the crippling economic effects of international sanctions and the lame duck administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>13</sup> This approach also fit Turkish interests but proved unsustainable, as Ankara was unable to decisively turn the tide in Syria without greater support from its Western partners, nor was it able to persuade Iran to support a negotiated end to the Syrian crisis. Therefore, following the election of President Hassan Rouhani and the disclosure of direct talks between the United States and Iran, Tehran felt it had a freer hand to pursue its interests in Syria—and thereby undermine Turkish interests—thanks to the diplomatic cover provided by the talks.<sup>14</sup> It became evident that the United States would not decisively counter Iranian interests in Syria and Iraq, particularly after the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 emphasized long-standing fears among U.S. policymakers that the terrorist group or other radical groups could take over Syria if the Assad regime collapsed.<sup>15</sup>

While Iran aggressively pursued its goals—emphasizing the fight against what it regarded as Sunni extremism—the marginalization of Sunni interests drove Turkey and Saudi Arabia to set aside their ideological differences to stand together against Iranian expansionism. Alienated by the United States' unwillingness to intervene decisively in Syria, Ankara and Riyadh together escalated their military support for the anti-Assad rebels in Syria—support which accelerated after Saudi King Salman ascended to the throne in January 2015 and brought a new activism to Saudi foreign affairs.<sup>16</sup> But the ensuing Turkish- and Saudi-backed rebel offensives, in turn, precipitated Russian military intervention in Syria to rescue the Assad regime beginning in September 2015 and put Turkey and Russia on a collision course over their competing agendas in Syria,

which culminated in Turkish fighters downing a Russian jet after it strayed into Turkish airspace.<sup>17</sup> Iran's approach to Syria has therefore hurt Turkey's interests but has also prevented Tehran from capitalizing on the diplomatic opportunities presented by the historic 2015 nuclear accord that it concluded with Western powers, China, and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

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## The prospective panorama of relations

The interaction between the sectarianism stoked by both the Sunni and Shia elements involved in the Syrian civil war and escalating Iranian-Arab and Turkish-Kurdish confrontations is shaking the foundations of the regional order and undermining security and stability. Iran has successfully employed the sectarian card as part of its outer defense in the Levant, particularly in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.<sup>19</sup> But Iran is surrounded by Sunni-majority countries and can only hope to realize its domestic and regional goals in cooperation—or at least coexistence—with the rest of the neighborhood. For Turkey, its official discourse against sectarianism does not change the fact that it is now seen as a pro-Sunni power and, in general, has alienated Shia actors in the region. This does not bode well for Turkey's broader aims of regional integration nor its internal dynamics given its large Alawite and Kurdish populations, who feel threatened by the Islamic State and remain suspicious of the growing Turkish affinity with Sunni causes.

Obviously, neither Iran nor Turkey can eliminate the sectarian tensions unleashed over the past five years; nobody can put the genie back in the bottle. The Gulf monarchies are apprehensive about Iranian encroachment in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and beyond. In response, they are relying on a military buildup and the power of religious orthodoxy to help deter and roll back Iranian intrusion into what they regard as a rightfully Sunni Arab sphere of influence.<sup>20</sup> This combination of geostrategic rivalry with sectarianism and ethnic solidarity, whereby the Arab powers aim to crowd out non-Arab claimants—Turkey and Iran—for regional leadership, creates a volatile regional setting that is not conducive to stabilization efforts. Even worse, Ankara and Tehran do not seem interested in finding a middle ground or stopping the current cycle of conflict—the necessary first step to stabilizing the region and shaping a new, sustainable regional order in accordance with their national interests.

Despite these difficulties, against the convenient backdrop of American retrenchment, there are strong reasons for both Ankara and Tehran to explore opportunities for détente and seek possible avenues for cooperation. The Syrian crisis has pitted Iran and Turkey against one another, but whether through the current stalemate or after some future settlement, the two countries share and will continue to share common challenges. Looking several moves ahead, it will be important to set the parameters for cooperation now in order to address three main challenges.

First, Kurdish separatism is a real possibility in both Syria and Iraq and is a more distant—if just as divisive—threat in Turkey and Iran. The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq enjoys strong U.S. support and continues to flirt with the idea of independence. Syrian Kurdish fighters are building de facto autonomy on the ground and enjoy military support from both the United States and Russia, though this is likely to dry up once the Islamic State is defeated. In Turkey, the PKK has resumed its terror campaign against the Turkish state.<sup>21</sup> Iran will be watching these developments closely, nervous about its own Kurdish minority and well aware that the PKK seeks to overturn the existing state order in both Turkey and Iran. Indeed, the PKK and its offshoots' continued threat to Iran's national unity was again demonstrated by the recent clashes in northwestern Iran.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the Russian attempts to fill American shoes through military activism in Syria and to a lesser extent in Iraq are a medium- to long-term threat to both Turkey's and Iran's regional objectives. Russia has previously worked to counter Turkish and Iranian efforts to build influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Moscow has now carried its destabilizing influence right into Syria and Iraq—the traditional spheres of influence for Turkey and Iran.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the recent flare-up in the Azeri-Armenian conflict carries the risk of undoing Turkish regional designs, including energy pipelines, as well as Iran's internal balances with its large Azeri minority.<sup>24</sup> Thus, beyond short-term concerns about the future of Damascus, Iran is likely to find itself in a similar position to Turkey, with its regional interests undermined by Russia and eventually forced to confront Moscow's meddling.

Third, extremism is a common threat that requires a joint response. Iran has been willing to instrumentalize the Islamic State to legitimize its regional claims, pointing to Arab promotion of religious orthodoxy as vindication of Iran's association of Sunnism with terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Turkey, on the other hand, faces a multifaceted dilemma in that it feels the need to confront the Islamic State as a security threat but has broader qualms about the transition to a post-Islamic State order that could maximize Iranian clout, bring Kurdish autonomy or independence to its southern border, and further tip the Sunni-Shia balances in both Iraq and Syria in Iran's favor.

The more responsible course for Iran and Turkey would be to fight terrorism—separate from its sectarian alignment—as a broader strategy and try to respect traditional Sunni-Shia balances in the region. This might help to stabilize a disintegrating region. Yet both countries are far from abandoning their claims in the broader geostrategic competition. Indeed, Turkish moves to deepen ties with Saudi Arabia and its recent rapprochement with Israel might remove any remaining ground for cooperation with Iran.

Both Turkey and Iran, for different reasons, have recently sought Europe as a partner in overcoming their specific problems—the influx of refugees in Turkey's case and economic isolation in Iran's case. Progress in these areas might pave the way for further cooperation, provided that the European Union comes out with a strategic vision to enlist both countries against what it perceives as the twin threats of terrorism and

immigration. In this vein, a Turkey-EU deal backed up by Turkish-Iranian cooperation in Syria could have positive humanitarian effects while also addressing the European Union's perceived threats, essentially serving to keep the Syrian people in Syria.

Iran is also well situated to emerge as an alternative energy supplier for both the European Union and Turkey and is desperate for European investments to start accruing the economic benefits of the nuclear deal.<sup>26</sup> Turkey has been willing to facilitate the transfer of Iranian gas to the Western markets and sees a commercial opportunity in helping Iran to overcome the adverse effects of international sanctions, given that both Turkey and Iran need alternative modalities for economic growth.<sup>27</sup>

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## Conclusion

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.

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## Endnotes

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