

TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Karen Kaya

Synopsis: Bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran are entering a new phase. As recently as early 2011 they were friendly neighbors in agreement on many issues and their relationship had reached the level of strategic partners. Nowadays Iranian officials voice threats to strike Turkey and have adopted a rhetoric that they will “crash and burn” Turkey. They have openly expressed their unhappiness with the country.

The views expressed in FMSO publications and reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
I. BACKGROUND ON TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS	3
II. CURRENT ISSUES	
a. The Arab Spring and the Regional Competition for Influence	5
b. NATO Radar Facilities in Turkey	8
c. Nuclear Talks and Turkey as Mediator	10
d. PKK/PJAK- Cooperation or Not?	14
e. Trade Relations	17
III. INTERNAL DIVISIONS IN IRAN	19
IV. GOING FORWARD and IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.	21
NOTES	23

INTRODUCTION

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran are entering a new phase. As recently as early 2011 they were friendly neighbors in agreement on many issues and their relationship had reached the level of strategic partners. Nowadays Iranian officials voice threats to strike Turkey and have adopted a rhetoric that they will “crash and burn” Turkey. They have openly expressed their unhappiness with the country.

How did this dramatic change happen?

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.

This monograph analyzes the factors that have led to this dramatic change. It shows how the situation between Turkey and Iran has changed by comparing past relations to present ones.

I. BACKGROUND ON TURKISH-IRANIAN RELATIONS

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.¹ Relations have been dominated by alternating phases of imperial and religious rivalry and cooperation, with a steady underlying competitive streak for regional dominance.

Political map of the region



Source: http://www.proiecte49.ro/a_physical_map_tr.html

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 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.² 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. (Section 2 discusses each of these issues in more detail.)

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 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.³

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 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.

II. CURRENT ISSUES

a. The Arab Spring and the Regional Competition for Influence

In February 2011 Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed that the Arab revolts were "Islamic" and that they were in line with Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. "The enemies try to say that the popular movements in Egypt, Tunisia, and other nations are un-Islamic, but certainly these popular movements are Islamic and must be consolidated."⁵ Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad also claimed that the uprisings were inspired by the Iranian brand of Islam. "The final move has begun...a great awakening is unfolding. One can witness the hand of Imam in managing it," Ahmadinejad declared on February 11, the day that Mubarak was toppled.⁶

Despite Iran's claims that the revolutions were analogous to its own revolution, recent developments have proven otherwise. In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist parties are engaging in politics and holding elections and praising the 'Turkish model,' not the Iranian-style theocracy.⁷ Thus, the Arab Spring has highlighted the ideological differences between the two countries. So far Turkey's ideology seems to be winning.⁸ All the debates about the Middle East include a discussion on the Turkish model, and political parties in the Middle East are praising it in their efforts to win elections, leaving Iran concerned about Turkey's increasing popularity in the region. Turkey represents a model of Muslim democracy, a legitimate political system, and a popular actor in the Middle East, and stands out as a source of inspiration to the people.

The changing landscape of the Middle East and the different sides that the two countries have taken have also highlighted their opposing policies. In particular, events in Syria have exposed the different sides that Turkey and Iran are on regarding the uprisings and, more generally, dissimilar values regarding democracy, liberty, secularism and human rights. Turkey has taken a stance against Syria, calling on Bashar Assad to step down, and hosts Syrian opposition groups. The first statements that signaled the worsening of relations between Turkey and Iran was an article published on "Sobesadegh," attached to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), which called on Turkey to pursue "a more realist policy" in Syria. It warned that if Ankara continues with its present stance, Iran will "choose Syria over Turkey."⁹

Turkey currently hosts around 25,000 Syrian refugees on its border and harbors the Syrian opposition, providing sanctuary to members of the Free Syrian Army, a militia of military defectors fighting the Syrian government forces. In addition, with its newly self-acclaimed role of a rising regional actor in the Middle East, Turkey has taken it upon itself to call for an international conference on Syria. Its goal is to establish a forum similar to the Libya Contact Group, which helped the Libyan opposition to topple the Gadhafi regime. Iran is aggravated by this stance against Syria, which is Iran's only ally in the Arab world. Turkey's harsh words against the Syrian regime and its support of the opposition have put Iran and Turkey on opposite sides of the issue. Iran has thus claimed that Turkey has lost its credibility as an objective mediator on the nuclear issue (discussed in detail in section 2c).

In contrast to Turkey's position on Syria, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, has openly taken a stance against the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria by singling them out as an American-Zionist conspiracy.¹⁰ This open support, which has been accompanied by economic and military aid to the Syrian government, reveals how concerned Tehran is with the fate of its most valuable regional alliance. (Syria was the only Arab country that supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.) Iran's efforts to ensure the continuation of the Shi'ite regime of Assad is indicative of its goal of having Shi'ite regimes in the region stay in power. Syria is Iran's channel to Hezbollah and Hamas. The collapse of the Shi'ite regime in Syria would mean the end of Iran's ability to exert influence in Lebanon and Jordan through Syria. In contrast, Turkey has taken the side of the people of the Arab Spring, participated in NATO's mission in Libya, condemned the Syrian regime's barbarism and supported the opposition, hosting the rebels and army in exile.¹¹

The two countries are also in complete disagreement over the future of Iraq. In his "The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," Sean Kane of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) writes, "The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq is re-ordering the political dynamics not only in Iraq, but also in the broader Middle East. Nature abhors a vacuum, and a number of actors are seeking to fill the outsized role that America has played in Iraq over the last eight years... The two rising powers in the region, Iran and Turkey, share borders with Iraq and are rapidly becoming the most influential actors within the country."¹²

In fact, following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, many had predicted that Iraq would fall into an ethno-sectarian conflict and become a region for which many different actors would compete for influence, particularly Iran. Iran viewed Iraq as its natural sphere of influence and followed a sectarian strategy, which entailed trying to influence the country via the Shi'ite population. As in Syria, Iran would like to see Iraq dominated by Shi'ites, such that it could control the regime there. It would thus establish what has been called a "Shi'ite Crescent" - a strategic belt that would extend from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean via Iraq (where Shiites would dominate most of the country) to Syria. Turkey, on the other hand, has advocated Iraq's territorial integrity and a representative and pluralistic structure in Iraq.

b. NATO Radar Facilities in Turkey

In September 2011 Turkey agreed to host one of the early-warning radars of NATO's early warning missile defense system in its southeast, 435 miles west of the Iranian border.¹³ The other countries hosting radars are Spain, Portugal, Poland and Romania, creating a broad system that protects every NATO country against medium-range missile attack. Tehran views this system as a U.S.-led plot to protect Israel against a possible counterattack by Iran, in the event that Israel targets Iran's nuclear facilities. It has threatened to make the radar in Turkey its first target in the event of an attack. Turkey says that the radar system is not being positioned with any particular country in mind and has expressed its opposition to identifying Iran explicitly as a potential attacker. It has also vehemently opposed sharing any intelligence gained from the radar with Israel.¹⁴

The NATO missile shield radars are placed in Turkey, Spain, Portugal, Romania and Poland.



Source: The Atlantic Council at acus.org

The AN/TPY-2 X-band radar is designed to intercept medium-range missiles at very high altitudes.



Source: rian.ru

Iranian officials have bashed Turkey's plans to host the NATO missile shield. General Yahya Rahim Safevi, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's military advisor, threatened Turkey with adverse consequences unless it abandons its policies regarding NATO's missile shield and Syria.¹⁵ Similarly, Iranian Brigadier General Hacizade said, "We have prepared ourselves. If there is an attack on Iran, our first target will be the missile shield systems in Turkey, and then we'll turn to other targets...The missile shield to be placed in Turkey is there not because NATO wants it to be, but because the U.S. wants to protect Israel. They are trying to deceive the entire international community, starting with the Turks,

into thinking that NATO wants to do this. In today's world, the Zionist regime (Israel) conducts its acts with the U.S., and the U.S. conducts its acts as NATO. However, we believe that the Turks are knowledgeable enough to prevent such a conspiracy. The Muslim Turkish people will destroy this system when it's time."¹⁶ In mid-December 2011 Hussein Ibrahimi, the acting president of the Iranian Parliament's Foreign and National Security Commission echoed these sentiments, saying that Iran would retaliate by striking the radar site in Turkey, should Iran be attacked.¹⁷

c. Nuclear Talks and Turkey as Mediator

On November 12, 2008, the *New York Times* interviewed Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who stated that Turkey wanted to use its growing role in the Middle East to mediate between the newly-elected Obama administration and Iran.¹⁸ Erdoğan repeated this offer in a speech three days later at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., asserting that Turkey was uniquely positioned for the job, given its good rapport and increasing trade with Iran, along with its cultural and religious ties.¹⁹ Erdoğan said that he believed Turkey could be very useful in resolving relations between Iran and the United States. He highlighted Turkey's new-found role as peace broker and said that, given the trust Turkey had built up with Iran, it was in the unique position of being able to facilitate talks with Tehran.

At the time Turkey's position on Iran's nuclear program was that it was counterproductive to try and get Iran to halt it while allowing other countries to maintain nuclear arsenals, and that this was unlikely to reduce tension. Erdoğan instead called for a nuclear-free zone, urging those countries pressuring Iran to eliminate such weapons themselves, which would be a better basis for a comprehensive solution.²⁰ He argued, "We are against the possession of nuclear weapons in our region...but those who ask Iran not to produce nuclear weapons should themselves give up their nuclear weapons first."²¹ Though Israel was not mentioned directly, his comments calling for a nuclear-free zone were interpreted as meaning, "but Israel has nuclear weapons too."²² Following Erdoğan's offer, then-Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hassan Qashqavi indicated that Iran would not oppose Turkish mediation of nuclear talks with the West, saying "We will certainly not create any obstacles in the way of such moves."²³

The then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan also spoke of a deep confidence gap between the sides and said

Then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan (right) and his Iranian counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki in Ankara, July 2008.



Source: Associated Foreign Press

Turkey was trying to rectify any misunderstandings and ensure that the two sides better understand their mutual concerns. Being a NATO member and a candidate for European Union membership, and at the same time having good ties with eastern neighbor Iran, Turkey "has means of easy dialogue with the parties," he said.²⁴ Indeed, even in August 2008, when Iran faced increased sanctions due to its nuclear ambitions, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Turkey to discuss energy agreements, trade ties and cooperation against terrorism. Despite the lack of movement in nuclear talks, it appeared that Turkey had maintained its position as a possible mediator between the sides.

What was Turkey's calculation in trying to take up this role? Turkey did not want new tensions, particularly military ones, in its neighborhood. In addition, it wanted to play a bigger role as a regional actor. Highlighting its Muslim identity, it argued that it could provide Iran with a dignified disengagement plan, because if Iran were to make any concessions it would more likely make them to a fellow Muslim-majority state with which it had long and friendly relations.²⁵

At the time Turkish policymakers seemed to be in denial regarding the nature of proliferation risks on Turkey's borders. Turkish observers had typically found it difficult to imagine circumstances under which Iran would employ nuclear weapons against Turkey and viewed direct state-to-state conflict as unlikely.²⁶ Their main concern was the broader question of the role and impact of a nuclear-armed Iran for Turkey and the region as a whole. A nuclear Iran would affect military balances and perceptions not only in the Middle East, but also in Russia, the Balkans and the Aegean. These factors likely played a role in Turkey's offer to mediate between the U.S. and Iran.

Turkey's approach to preventing such a development, however, was one of engagement and persuasion. As part of this policy, it took the view that it was better to engage Syria and Iran than to isolate them. Turkey even voted against further UN sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council in June 2010, thereby straining its relations with the U.S. The Turkish government's argument was that the 'no' vote was necessary to keep Iran from leaving the negotiating table, insisting that a Turkey that had influence over Iran was better for NATO and the West.

The November 2011 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),²⁷ which warned that Iran appeared to be on a structured path to building a nuclear weapon, brought a renewed sense of urgency to the matter. The report triggered talks of a possible Israeli attack on Iran, causing concern. It appeared that after nearly ten years of negotiations, inspections, reports, resolutions and sanctions, no progress had been made and the international community was still at a deadlock with Iran over its nuclear situation.

By 2012, despite worsening relations with Iran, Turkey was still trying to revive negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council: France, the UK, China, Russia, and the U.S., plus Germany) over Iran's nuclear enrichment program by hosting talks in Istanbul in April 2012. In early January 2012 Iran's chief negotiator on nuclear issues, Saeed Jalili said that Iran was willing to resume negotiations with the P5+1 and that Turkey would be the ideal venue for these negotiations.²⁸

Shortly after, with the drastic change in Turkish-Iranian relations, and Iran's increasingly confrontational stance against Turkey, Iranian officials started making contradictory remarks about their willingness to have the talks take place in Istanbul. On March 28, 2012, the Turkish Prime Minister visited Tehran for talks on the matter.

Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Iran's Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in March 2012



Source: Milliyet.com

Following his visit, Alaadin Burucerdi, the President of the External Relations Commission of Iran, said that, due to Turkey's position on Syria, the P5+1 and Iran, meetings that were scheduled to take place in Istanbul on April 13-14 should not take place in Turkey.²⁹ He said that due to Turkey's position on hosting the "Friends of Syria" meeting, Turkey had lost its credibility as an objective actor to host the talks. Iran voiced its desire to have the talks in Baghdad, Damascus or Beijing instead of Istanbul. All of these cities are in countries that are allies with Iran. Thus, by voicing this desire, Iran was indicating that it would like to hold negotiations on

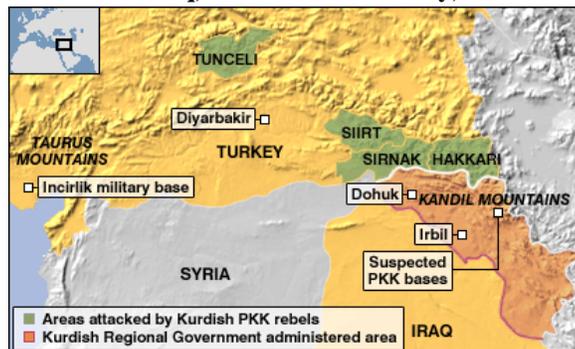
its own terms and signaling that it no longer saw Turkey as a strategic ally. It appeared that Iran wanted to have some kind of psychological advantage by having the talks at a place of its own choosing. However, following this, Iranian Foreign Relations Spokesperson Ramin Mihmanperest made a damage-control statement on how important Turkey-Iran relations were, revealing discrepancies within Iranian domestic politics (discussed in detail in section III).

The April talks eventually took place in Istanbul as originally planned, but Iranian officials secured Baghdad as the location for the next round of meetings to take place on May 23. On this issue, the perception in Turkey is that Iran has not sufficiently appreciated Turkey taking so many risks for Iran's sake, some of which have caused a lot of negative perceptions about Turkey across the world.

d. The PKK and PJAK: Cooperation or Not?

Both Turkey and Iran have an interest in suppressing Kurdish separatism and violence, but Iran has, at times, also found Kurdish terrorism to be a useful tool to pressure Turkey.³⁰ In the last decade cooperation between the two countries has dominated in this area and, despite worsening relations between Turkey and Iran, the common threat posed by Kurdish militants in northern Iraq has been the glue that bonds the countries in a joint fight. As recently as October 2011 the two countries managed to put their differences aside to deal with this issue and pledged to coordinate efforts to battle this threat.³¹

The PKK and PJAK are based in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq, which border Turkey, Iran and Iraq.



Source: Bbc.co.uk

During the early 1990s, when Turkey was fighting a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism war against the PKK. Iran was providing logistical support to the PKK as a way to exert power on the country and to have some kind of leverage, particularly on the issue of sharing the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers (explained in section D). Turkey also suspected 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.³²

In the mid-1990s Iran also became involved with fighting its own version of Kurdish militants, the PJAK, and a common interest in containing this situation forced the two countries to work together. Partly inspired by the PKK, the PJAK was founded as a civil society movement in Iran in the late 1990s to promote Kurdish nationalism among Iran's five million Kurds. However, within a few years the group's increasing success and acts of violence against Iran's security service provoked a government crackdown. This forced its leadership to move near the PKK's main camp in the Iraqi portion of the Qandil Mountains near the Iran-Iraq-Turkish border. Following this move, the PJAK became increasingly militant and began to receive military training and logistical assistance from the

PKK.³³ Since then, the group has routinely targeted Iranian troops and reportedly is getting stronger.

In 2007 and 2008 Turkey intensified its operations against the PKK, due to the group's increasingly violent attacks. Similarly, in Iran the PJAK intensified its attacks against IRGC troops, prompting the IRGC to target them in return. Iran's IRGC and the Turkish military started coordinating efforts to battle Kurdish militants in northern Iraq.³⁴ In what appeared to be an attempt to leverage Ankara's long-standing frustration with the PKK into Turkish support for its fight against the PJAK, Iran stepped up its efforts to confront a resurgent PKK. In August 2007 the then-Turkish Foreign Minister (now President) Abdullah Gül said that Tehran had a right to defend its borders and that he would support Iran launching attacks on PJAK bases in northern Iraq.³⁵ In turn, then-Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki expressed understanding for Turkey's position on attacking the PKK in remarks he made at a November 2007 Istanbul Conference on Iraq.³⁶ Interior Ministry officials from both countries also announced that they viewed the PKK and the PJAK as being one and the same and declared their intentions to tackle the issue by exchanging intelligence and increasing security cooperation.³⁷ This announcement represented an important shift in terms of bilateral cooperation between one of the U.S.'s strongest allies and one of its major adversaries.

On April 15, 2008 Iran's Deputy Interior Minister Abbas Mohtai told journalists that, "PKK and PJAK are both parts of a unified terrorist organization which conducts operations in Turkey and Iran under different names."³⁸ The Turkish Interior Ministry also announced in statement that "Turkish and Iranian officials have signed a Memorandum of Understanding expressing their willingness to develop cooperation in security issues. The increase in some terrorist movements in the region

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Ekber Salihi in October 2011



Source: Haberturk.com

damages both countries, and the most influential way to battle this problem is the exchange of intelligence and security cooperation.”³⁹ Iran started handing over captured Turkish Kurds to Turkey, while Turkey delivered Iranian Kurdish insurgents to the Iranian military.⁴⁰

According to the Turkish press, an August 2011 Turkish National Intelligence Organization report noted that Iran had suspended its intelligence cooperation with Turkey in the fight against the PKK,⁴¹ although this has not been evident in their official stances. In October 2011 the two sides re-iterated their determination to work together on the issue. Following a meeting at the Turkish Foreign Ministry in Ankara between the two Foreign Ministers, Davutoğlu said, “Our joint determination against the PKK and PJAK will continue. We will work together... until the terror threat is completely eradicated. This terror organization threatens all the countries in the region and we must act with solidarity to fight against it... We view the PKK and PJAK as a common threat against regional stability, the Kurdish, Turkish and Iranian people.”⁴² He also claimed that there had been important cooperation between the intelligence and security institutions of the two countries and that important strides had been made against this common fight. The discrepancy between the Turkish National Intelligence Report and the official lines might be a function of a growing division among Iranian officials (discussed in detail in section III).

e. Trade Relations

One of the main tenets of Turkey's new foreign policy under the AKP has been to develop economic and trade relations with its neighbors, including Iran, to ensure cooperation and good relations. Most of the trade is natural gas, but there is economic cooperation in other fields as well: more than 70,000 Turkish trucks go through Iran to take goods to and from Central Asian republics each year. Trade volume between the two countries was around \$15 billion as of February 2012.⁴³

Proposed Natural Gas Pipeline from Iran to Europe via Turkey.



Source: Hurriyet.com

Many of the natural gas deals were initiated in 2007, when Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran in which the two countries agreed to transport natural gas to Europe from Iran and Turkmenistan, despite objections from the U.S.⁴⁴ In July 2007 then-Iranian Oil Minister Sayyed Kazem Vaziri-Hemaneh and then-Turkish Energy Minister Hilmi Güler signed a deal to facilitate the export of Iranian natural gas to Europe via Turkey and gas from Turkmenistan to Europe via Iran, and agreed to develop part of the South Pars field in the Persian Gulf, with a reported investment of \$3.5 billion.⁴⁵ According to the agreement, Turkey would have the right to 50 percent of the natural gas from the South Pars field, both for its own use and to market it to any country it wishes. The two sides also signed an official contract, following the completion of feasibility studies by Turkey.⁴⁶ In August of that year, Turkey's energy minister visited Iran again to work on the details of the agreement. They decided to establish a joint company to build a pipeline to transport natural gas from Iran to Europe.⁴⁷

At the time, Turkey pursued this deal despite U.S. objections: it came as the U.S. Congress was considering legislation that would impose sanctions on foreign companies investing more than \$20 million in Iran's oil and natural gas sector, and Washington openly opposed the deal.⁴⁸ In comments regarding

Europe obtaining energy resources from Iran, U.S. Embassy spokesperson in Ankara Kathryn Schalow expressed that the U.S. was against “any kind of agreement” with Iran.⁴⁹ U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack also made it clear that Washington believed that it was the wrong time for a NATO ally to be investing in the Iranian oil and gas sector.⁵⁰ However, the deal’s potential to make Turkey an energy corridor and a regional power had trumped the U.S. position on the issue.

In 2009 Turkey cancelled its plan to invest in this project due to U.S. pressure and declining European interest in energy cooperation with Iran, which brought the profitability of the project into question. However, trade relations with Iran continue to be an area of cooperation and the trade volume between the two countries is expected to reach a total of \$30 billion by 2015.

III. INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN IRAN

Iran is hard to read because of its multilayered government and decision-making mechanisms. There is the government (President Ahmadinejad and his advisors), the opposition, and Spiritual Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. These sides typically voice conflicting opinions on issues, and it is unclear whether this is a strategy they use to make themselves difficult to decipher (i.e., a good cop-bad cop strategy) and gives them an advantage by appearing to side with various different groups. Alternatively, this may demonstrate a true division between the hardliners and reformists in the government, in addition to a division between President Ahmadinejad and the Spiritual Leader. There are examples that suggest both possibilities, and the truth might be a combination of a real discrepancy within the regime and some strategizing.

One example of this can be seen in the recent issue of whether the nuclear talks should be held in Istanbul or not (see section 2c). The inconsistencies within Iran are also evident in the different stances on Syria.⁵¹ The issue of the crackdown in Syria has turned out to be very divisive. In a 24 August 2011 interview with the Hezbollah-owned TV station el-Manar, Iranian President Ahmadinejad claimed that the Syrian government and people should come together and find a solution, and that it was not right for the sides to be killing each other. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Ekber Salihi has also taken this stance.

Meanwhile, the opposition has questioned Iran's stance on Syria, arguing that the resources allocated to Syria should be used for the Iranian people. Recently, former Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Sadr blamed Ahmadinejad's government for failing to use Iran's regional capacity to coordinate with Turkey and international bodies to reach a regional solution for Syria. Sadr claimed that if the current Iranian government had a better international status, it could have attracted the Syrian opposition to mediate and control the ongoing crisis in Syria. Reformist diplomats have also held the government responsible for Iran's inability to influence Bashar Assad to end the suppression of protesters. One of them, Jordan Ali Sobhani, has advocated for an immediate change in Iran's stance on Syria.

In contrast, Spiritual Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has openly taken a stance against the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria by singling them out as an

American-Zionist conspiracy. This open support, which has been accompanied by economic and military aid to the Syrian government, reveals how concerned Tehran is with the fate of its most valuable regional ally.

In trying to analyze these discrepancies, a rational approach would be to focus on the views of the President and the Supreme Leader. The opposition's position can be left aside, because it is unclear whether they are just opposing the government or whether they believe in their stance. Thus, it can be assumed that the discrepancy arises from a growing regional and international reaction against Syria which is forcing Iran to soften its criticism of the protesters in Syria. Saudi Arabia's stance on Syria, the Gulf Countries' recalling their ambassadors, Turkey's stance, and even Iranian allies such as Russia and China's critical messages to Assad have sent messages to Iran.

Under these circumstances, Iran had to revisit its stance, such that it would not be seen as the strongest and perhaps only supporter of the Assad regime. Moreover, Iran might be assessing the possibility that Assad will fall and investing in a post-Assad environment by not being too harsh on the opposition in Syria. This way, Iran is gaining the support of both sides, while reducing the negative effects of a possible overthrow of Assad. However, since it would be problematic for the Supreme Leader to change his official stance, the discrepancy between the Supreme Leader's position and the official line of the government is likely a strategic and deliberate maneuver.

Nevertheless, this situation still does not rule out the possibility of a growing difference of opinion between the President and the Spiritual Leader, and there are incidents that suggest this as well. A case in point is when Ahmedinejad unilaterally dismissed the only clerical member of the cabinet, the Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi, on April 17, 2011. Khamanei reversed the decision a few days later with full parliamentary support. Ahmedinejad demonstrated his position on this by refusing to attend cabinet meetings for ten days, but eventually accepted Moslehi's reinstatement when offered the choice to acquiesce or resign.⁵²

IV. GOING FORWARD AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.

Now that Iran has taken an openly adversarial position against Turkey, made threats and openly expressed discontent, a new era has started in the bilateral relations. Iran seems to have made a choice. It does not regard Turkey as an influential player at nuclear talks. Relations from now on are not likely to collapse, but will never be the way they used to be. The two countries will co-exist with mutual suspicions and calculations on what kind of a game the other is about to play. Turkey's role as a mediator is no longer likely.

The worsening relation between Turkey and Iran is a positive development for the U.S. This deterioration in the Turkey-Iran relationship will likely increase the importance that Turkey attaches to its security relationship with the U.S. and the credibility of NATO's extended deterrence.

The U.S. has long been hoping to see Turkey follow a more realistic policy towards Iran. The US had been disturbed by what it saw as Turkey's naiveté about Iran's nuclear program. For instance, in 2010 Turkey voted against US proposals for increased sanctions against Iran at a UN Security Council meeting, leading to a crisis in Turkey-U.S. relations. However, the current situation between Turkey and Iran is bringing Turkey back into closer relationship with the U.S., and both sides are hailing a "golden age or relations."

There are two main reasons for the improvement in relations between the US and Turkey since 2010. First, NATO has placed one of its missile defense system radars on Turkish soil. Second, the Arab Spring revolutions and Turkey's policy against Syria have ended debates on whether Turkey has been "turning east."

Iran will lose in Turkey one of the main supporters of its nuclear program, making it even more dependent on Syria and increasing its need to ensure the continuation of the Assad regime. In order to achieve this, it is possible that Iran will assume a mediator role between the Syrian opposition and the regime. Ahmadinejad openly expressed such a possibility in an October 2011 interview on CNN.⁵³ In the interview he said that Iran was ready to be a bridge between the Syrian government and the opposition. This would give Iran credibility with both the opposition and the regime, and would buy time for Assad to stay in power, if not enabling him to stay in power completely. If the Syrian regime falls, Iran will

lose its only ally in the region and its pathway to Hezbollah, drastically reducing its sphere of influence in the region.

The best outcome for the U.S. would be for Syria to become politically open and change its stance towards Iran and its support for Hezbollah, shifting the region's radical axis. If the Assad regime is removed, the country's ties to Iran and Hezbollah may be dismantled. This would be the most game-changing outcome of the Arab Spring for the Middle East. In addition, if the revolts spread to Iran, the number-one problem facing the Middle East could be overcome.

NOTES

¹ “Turkey-Iran Relations Should be Encouraged,” *Today’s Zaman*, August 22, 2007, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=120059>

² Ibrahim Kalin, “Turkey and the Middle East: Ideology or Geo-Politics?” *Private View*, Autumn 2008, No 13, p.34.

³ “Iranian Terrorist Connection Once Again on the Agenda,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 13, 2000, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=iranian-terrorist-connection-once-again-on-agenda-2000-07-13>

⁴ “Turkish Leader Volunteers to be U.S.-Iran Mediator,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12turkey.html

⁵ “Khamenei: US Must Be Removed from Islamic World,” *Matzav*, February 21, 2011, <http://matzav.com/khamenei-us-must-be-removed-from-islamic-world>

⁶ “Iran Fanning Islam's Messianic Hopes?,” *Cbn.com*, March 27, 2011, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2011/March/Iran-Fanning-Islams-Messianic-Hopes/>

⁷ “Ennahda takes Turkey as model for democracy,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 27 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=ennahda-takes-turkey-as-model-for-democracy-democracy-2011-10-27>

⁸ “Arab Attitudes Toward Iran: 2011” Arab American Institute Poll, July 2011, <http://www.aaiusa.org/reports/arab-attitudes-toward-iran-2011>

⁹ “Arabs look to Turkey, not Iran, says poll,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 28, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=arabs-look-to-turkey-not-iran-says-poll-2011-07-28>

¹⁰ “Khamenei: Syria's Anti-Israel, So We'll Defend It” *Israel National News*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/154314>

¹¹ Turkey has also called on Egypt to adopt a secular system. See “Laiklik ateizm değil, korkmayın! (Secularism isn't Atheism, Don't be Afraid!),” *Gazete Vatan*, September 13, 2011, <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/laiklik-ateizm-degil-korkmayin/399589/1/Haber>

¹² “The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition,” *United States Institute of Peace Report*, June 11, 2011, http://www.usip.org/files/resources/Turkish_Iranian_Competition.pdf

¹³ “Turkey agrees to host missile early warning radar for NATO,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/02/turkey-missile-warning-radar-nato>

¹⁴ “İsrail’e İstihbarat Yok (No Intelligence to Israel),” *Stargazete*, February 18, 2012, <http://www.stargazete.com/politika/israil-e-istihbarat-yok-haber-426168.htm>

¹⁵ “İran’dan Türkiye’ye Füze Kalkanı Tehdidi (Iran Threatens Turkey due to its Decision to Host a NATO Missile Shield Radar),” *Milliyet (Nationality)*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Dunya/SonDakika.aspx?aType=SonDakika&ArticleID=1448993&Date=10.10.2011&Kategori=dunya&b=Iranda%20Türkiyeye%20füze%20kalkanı%20tehdidi>

¹⁶ Michael Segall, “Iran: The Syrian Highway in the Fight Against Israel Is Still Open,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 24, 2011, <http://jcpa.org/article/iran-the-syrian-highway-in-the-fight-against-israel-is-still-open/>

¹⁷ Sinan Ülgen, “Turkey and the Bomb” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Carnegie Papers, February 2012, <http://m.ceip.org/2012/02/15/turkey-and-bomb/9nof&lang=en>

¹⁸ “Turkish Leader Volunteers to be U.S.-Iran Mediator,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/12/world/europe/12turkey.html?_r=1&sq=TURKEY.

¹⁹ “Başbakan ve Brookings (The Prime Minister and Brookings),” *Sabah (Morning)*, November 17, 2008, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/haber,222D03C2EA724C8B87E3C52486F79896.html>.

²⁰ “Erdoğan’dan ABD’ye İran Eleştirisi (Erdoğan’s Criticism of the U.S. on Iran),” *Milliyet (Nationality)*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Yazdir.aspx?aType=SonDakikaPrint&ArticleID=1016223>.

²¹ “Erdoğan’s Challenging Remarks on Nuclear Power Spark Debate,” *Today’s Zaman*, November 18, 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=159015>.

²² “Doğu ve Batı Arasında Türkiye (Turkey between East and West),” *Mustafaakyol.org*, November 17, 2008, http://www.mustafaakyol.org/arsiv/2008/11/dogu_ve_bati_arasinda_turkiye.php.

²³ “Iran Says Won’t Hinder Turkish Mediation with U.S.,” *Reuters*, November 17, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE4AG1V220081117>.

²⁴ “Turkey ‘Facilitating’ Iran Nuclear Negotiations, Says Foreign Minister,” *Associated Foreign Press*, July 21, 2008, <http://afp.google.com/article/ALEqM5isWaNYvM5cHocsznpNpv-TrAA4A>

²⁵ “ABD-İran Hattında Türkiye Arabulucu Olabilir Mi? (Can Turkey be a Mediator between the US and Iran?),” *Sabah (Istanbul)*, December 3, 2008, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Yazar.aspx?aType=YazarDetayArsiv&ArticleID=1016395&A>; and Alon Ben Meir, “Mediating the Nuclear Impasse,” *Middle East Times*, July 23, 2008, http://www.metimes.com/Opinion/2008/07/23/mediating_the_nuclear_impasse/6657/

²⁶ Ian O. Lesser and Ashley J. Tellis, *Strategic Exposure: Proliferation Around the Mediterranean*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996.

²⁷ “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Report by the Director of the IAEA, 18 November 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>

-
- ²⁸ “Iran’s Conditions for Throwing Its Weight behind Turkey in 5+1 Talks,” Iran Diplomacy, January 9, 2012, <http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/93/bodyView/1896944/Iran%E2%80%99s.Conditions.for.Throwing.Its.Weight.behind.Turkey.in.5+1.Talks.html>
- ²⁹ “İranlı Yetkili: Nükleer Görüşmeler İstanbul Yerine Şam'da Yapılsın (Iranian Official: The Nuclear Talks should be held in Damascus instead of Istanbul),” *Haberler (News)*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.haberler.com/iranli-yetkili-nukleer-gorusemeler-istanbul-yerine-3504462-haberi/>
- ³⁰ Richard Weitz. “Global Insights: Turkey’s Transnational PKK Problem,” *World Politics Review*, 25 October 2011, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10444/global-insights-turkeys-transnational-pkk-problem>.
- ³¹ “Terör Tehdidi Tümüyle Tasfiye Edilene Kadar Birlikte Çalışacağız (We will Work Together until the Terror Threat is Eradicated),” *Haberturk (Turkish News)*, 21 October 2011, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/681396-teror-tehdidi-tumuyle-tasfiye-edilene-kadar-birlikte-calisacagiz>
- ³² “Iranian Terrorist Connection Once Again on the Agenda,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 13, 2000, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=iranian-terrorist-connection-once-again-on-agenda-2000-07-13>
- ³³ “PJAK Faces Turkish-Iranian Storm,” Jamestown Institute Report, Ibid.
- ³⁴ “Turkey Forms Alliance with Iran against Kurds.” Assyrian International News Agency, October 16, 2007, <http://www.aina.org/news/2007101522389.html>; “İran’la Teröre Karşı İşbirliği Mutabakatı (Agreement to Cooperate Against Terror with Iran).” *Referansgazetesi.com*, April 17, 2008, http://www.referansgazetesi.com/haber.aspx?HBR_KOD=95037&KTG_KOD=284; “PJAK Faces Turkish-Iranian Storm.” Jamestown Institute Report, November 8, 2007, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373776>
- ³⁵ “Gül Lends Support to Iran’s Anti-PEJAK Operation in Iraq,” *Today’s Zaman*, August 25, 2007, <http://www.todayzaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=120351>
- ³⁶ “Kurdish Militant Group Seen as Significant Threat,” *Mianeh.net*, December 17, 2007, <http://www.mianeh.net/en/articles/?aid=097>
- ³⁷ “İran’la Teröre Karşı İşbirliği Mutabakatı (Agreement to Cooperate Against Terror with Iran),” *Referansgazetesi.com*, Ibid.
- ³⁸ “PJAK, PKK, Two Sides of the Same Coin,” *Presstv.ir*, April 14, 2008, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=51584§ionid=351020101>
- ³⁹ “İran’la Teröre Karşı İşbirliği Mutabakatı (Agreement to Cooperate Against Terror with Iran).” *Referansgazetesi.com*, 17 April 2008, Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ “PJAK Faces Turkish-Iranian Storm.” [Jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org) 8 November 2007, Ibid.

⁴¹ Ercan Yavuz, "Syria reverts to 90's, Iran abandons Turkey in terror struggle," *Today's Zaman*, August 5, 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-252871-syria-reverts-to-90s-iran-abandons-turkey-in-terror-struggle.html>

⁴² "Terör Tehdidi Tümüyle Tasfiye Edilene Kadar Birlikte Çalışacağız (We will Work Together until the Terror Threat is Eradicated)," *Haberturk (Turkish News)*, Ibid.

⁴³ Sinan, Ülgen. "Turkey and the Bomb," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Carnegie Papers, February 2012, <http://m.ceip.org/2012/02/15/turkey-and-bomb/9nof&lang=en>

⁴⁴ "Turkey, Iran Agree to Carry Gas to Europe," *The New Anatolian*, July 16, 2007, <http://www.thenewanatolian.com/tna-27706.html>

⁴⁵ "U.S. Says Turkey's Gas Deal with Iran Particularly Unwise," *Todays Zaman*, July 17, 2007, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=116873>; and "Turkey/Iran: Gas Deal Marks New Stage in Energy Cooperation," Radio Free Europe, July 19, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/07/4875c449-63c9-4724-b9b9-6aad1caf4bef.html>

⁴⁶ "Turkey Returns to Energy Chess Game," *Todays Zaman*, July 16, 2007, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=print&link=116758&yazarAd>

⁴⁷ "Turkey, Iran Increase Energy Cooperation," *Turkish Daily News*, August 20, 2007, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=81307>

⁴⁸ "Turkey May Face Sanctions if Iran Gas Deal Goes Forward," *Turkish Daily News*, July 18, 2007, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=78555>

⁴⁹ "ABD Gas Anlaşmasına Karşı Çıktı (The U.S. Opposed the Gas Agreement)," *Yeni Safak*, July 16, 2007, <http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/gundem/?t=16.07.2007&c=1&i=56185&ABD/gaz/anlasmasina/karsi/cikti>

⁵⁰ "Turkey/Iran: Gas Deal Marks New Stage in Energy Cooperation," Radio Free Europe, Ibid.

⁵¹ Muhammed Ataie, "Iran Supports Assad (but not at any cost)," November 9, 2011, *Foreign Policy*, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/09/iran_supports_assad_but_not_at_any_cost

⁵² "Meeting the Challenge: Stopping the Clock," Bipartisan Policy Center Report on U.S. Policy toward Iranian Nuclear Development, February 2012, p.31

⁵³ "Ahmedinejad Proposes a Political Experiment," CNN.com, October 25, 2011, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/25/ahmadinejad-proposes-a-political-experiment/>