

# AFTER THE “MIDDLE EAST”: TURKEY AND IRAN IN A NEW REGION

「中東」の後で：地域再編のなかのトルコ・イラン関係

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20 世紀の初頭から欧米の主導で発明され、機能してきた「中東」の地域概念はもはや存在していない。同様に旧オスマン帝国の領域を指す「近東」概念もその有効性をすでに完全に喪失した。現在では「西アジアおよび北アフリカ」地域と呼ぶべき同地域において、(1)米国の影響が度重なる失政によってますます周辺化していること、(2)その間隙を埋める域外大国としてロシアと中国が急速に台頭していること、(3)域内の主要な外交アクターとしてイランとトルコが影響力を強めていること、以上の3つの顕著な傾向を指摘することができる。

こうした前提でトルコ・イラン関係をみる時、両国関係が地域的な安定にもたらす影響はどのようなものだろうか。その場合両国間の歴史的な長いライバル関係や対立関係にもかかわらず、20 世紀以降の時代における両国関係は比較的良好なままに推移してきた。1979 年のイラン革命直後の一時期はその例外であって、この時期には世俗主義的なケマル主義との齟齬が前面に出ていた。近年においてイラン・トルコ関係が大きく変化したのはトルコの親イスラーム政党である公正発展党 (AKP) の 2002 年における躍進以降である。1996 年に政権に就いた後、イランとの大幅な接近を試みたものの政権基盤が比較的脆弱だったエルバカン首相時代から、AKP の政権運営の下で軍部など世俗エリート層との抗争を経て、さらにエルドアン大統領のもとで権力の集中が進むと、両国関係の深化は経済関係から安全保障分野までに広く及ぶ新たな段階を迎えるに至った。

本論稿では以上の展開を近年の対クルディスタン問題やシリア問題、対米関係およびトルコの NATO 加入などの文脈で具体的に検証し、最後に結論部で「アラブの春」以降の地域再編のなかで両国間の互惠に基づく広範な連携関係が積極的に果たしうる役割について展望する。

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## Keywords

Arab Nationalism, Iran, Shahnameh, Ibn Khaldun, Muslim Philosophy,  
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The “Middle East” as we knew it has ceased to exist. A Euro-American centric invention of western imperialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the US Naval Officer Alfred Mahan who designated this area in terms of the distance of the United States and Europe to the “orient”. A similar rationale was meant to geographically codify the centrality of the so called “west”, when the term “Near East” was used to designate the area controlled by the Ottoman Empire, including the European terrains. Subsequently, the current borders of West Asia and North Africa were drawn rather arbitrarily out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This geo-political invention translated into political domination by the imperial powers even after the nominal independence of the successor states. This geopolitical constellation is in the process of radical change right in front of our eyes. What I prefer to call West Asia and North Africa (WANA) is swiftly moving towards a new order which will have massive repercussions for the future of world politics.

There are at least three interdependent factors in this new geo-political constellation: First, the United States is increasingly marginal to the international politics of the region; second, China and Russia are emerging as significant external powers that are filling the diplomatic vacuum left behind by the foreign policy failures of successive US governments; and thirdly regional powers such as Iran and Turkey are increasingly influential in determining the outcome of regional conflicts. No wonder then, that many strategists are trying to understand the dynamics of Iranian-Turkish relations. The future of West Asia and North Africa will be increasingly determined by the interplay of these two former imperial powers and their ability to work in tandem to stabilise the region.

In the past decade, relations between Iran and Turkey have stabilised along three themes of mutual concern: Economic transactions, opposition to a separate Kurdistan and, to a lesser extent, support for a Palestinian state. Despite their competition and disagreements, in particular over Syria, central Asia, and Turkey’s NATO membership, these three themes have contributed to cordial relations, amidst occasional outbreaks of intense rivalry, between the two countries.

Much ink has been spilled over an enduring competition between Iran and Turkey, presumably linked to a seemingly insurmountable legacy of Ottoman-Safavid antagonism or even less persuasively to a Sunni-Shi’i split engulfing the region. Analyses that cut and paste history onto contemporary world politics without critical acumen undervalues the fundamental changes of the last century. Turkey and Iran operate on the basis of their perceived national interests which are processed within the realities of the contemporary world order, rather than a remote past. It is true that modern relations between the countries have been beset by occasional outbreaks of rivalry and suspicion, for instance immediately after the revolution in Iran in 1979, when there was intense ideological friction between the secular Kemalist state in Turkey and the Shi’i-revolutionary Islamic Republic. Iran before the revolution, especially under the reign of the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah (1878-1941), was emulating the Turkish model, Pahlavi Iran and Kemalist Turkey were close ideational bedfellows.<sup>1</sup> After the revolution in Iran in the name of an Islamic order, the ideological affinity evaporated, but relations between the two countries did not deteriorate into active aggression. Turkey managed to keep a relatively neutral role during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and refrained from being dragged into the complex politics of West Asia and North Africa. For Iran, Turkey was not a major factor given that the country was focused, ideationally and strategically, on Europe and the “west”.

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<sup>1</sup> For the relationship between nationalism and governance see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Psycho-nationalism: Global thought, Iranian imaginations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

### Patterns of cooperation

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

But the power base of Erbakan was not strong enough to resist the opposition of the anti-Islamist elite and in particular the staunchly secular higher echelons of the Turkish military that are endowed with the constitutional mandate to uphold the Kemalist system in the country. At the National Security Council meeting on 28 February 1997, the generals of the Turkish national army boxed through their views on separating Islam from the politics of the government in lieu with the laicite principle institutionalised since the establishment of contemporary Turkey by Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk). Consequently, Erbakan had to retreat. In a further escalation between June 1997 and early 1998, Turkish courts declared Erbakan’s Refah (Welfare) Party illegal and forced him out of office. The reformist core of the party re-organised first as the Virtue Party which was banned in 2001 and then under the banner of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, or AKP), whereas the rather more Islamist wings merged into the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) which was created in 2001. The AKP captured the imagination of the new middle class in Turkey and the party won the parliamentary elections in 2002 forming the Turkish government. Since then, Iranian Turkish relations have re-stabilised, but they don’t remain without their pitfalls.

Erbakan was heavily criticised for his charm offensive towards Iran. As one commentator in *Today’s Zaman* put it: “I wanted to understand, for example, why Erbakan had a soft spot for no-good neighbour Iran ... I was surprised ... to see him making a difficult trip in a wheelchair to attend a National Day reception for Iran in the Swissôtel Ankara in 2010 while opting out on other countries’ receptions.”<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that the second generation Islamists in Turkey learned their lessons from the backlash against Erbakan. They have been by far more prudent and diligent in their dealings with Iran. And yet, Erdogan as well continued to strengthen the ties with the Islamic Republic not least in order to saturate the energy demands of Turkey’s booming economy. Today, Iran is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey (after Russia). As indicated, shortly after taking office, Erbakan concluded a US\$23 billion deal for the delivery of natural gas from Iran over 25 years. In February 2007, under the AKP government, Turkey and Iran agreed to seal two additional energy deals: one allowing the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to explore oil and natural gas in Iran and another for the transfer of gas from Turkmenistan to Turkey (and on to Europe) through a pipeline in Iran. This pipeline deal is at odds with Washington's

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<sup>2</sup> Abdullah Bozkurt, ‘Erbakan’s legacy and gas deal with Iran’, *Today’s Zaman*, 18 May 2012. Available at <<http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-280751-erbakans-legacy-and-gas-deal-with-iran.html>> [accessed 12 April 2013].

preference for avoiding Iran by transporting the gas through the Caspian Sea, and added a new element of friction to U.S.-Turkish relations.

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

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

Undoubtedly, Turkey has been instrumental in facilitating the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's rule and it has liaised with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in that regard. Iran views the battle in Syria not as a Sunni-Shi'i rivalry. Rather, the country's leaders have deemed Syria a valuable ally in the Arab world, and a convenient conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon, ever since the Iran-Iraq war when Hafez al-Assad was the only regional leader supporting Iran. Thus, the Ba'athist-secular state in Damascus is not a “natural” ally of the Islamic Republic. But Syria and Iran have shared a common vision about regional affairs and they have pursued their “Muqawamah” (resistance) policy towards Israel and in support of Palestine. The fact that the Khaled Meshal wing of HAMAS broke with Assad and shifted their headquarters away from Damascus to Doha in 2012 was a significant blow to this “axis of resistance”, but it is too far-fetched to argue that Iran and HAMAS have severed their long-standing ties as some analysts argued at the time. Palestine continues to be on the Iranian agenda. Turkey, on the other side, seems aware that it can't take the Iran factor out of the regional equation so the AKP has treaded carefully when it comes to the Syrian crisis, adamant to reassure Iran that Turkey is not acting on behalf of the United States and Israel in opposing the Syrian regime. In fact earlier this year, Turkey broke with the United States more openly in the build-up to the Afrin military campaign against the US-backed “Syrian Democratic Forces”.

The oppositional politics in Syria may have halted a decade of deepening engagement between Turkey and Iran and set the limits for closer relations in the future. Yet, at the same time the fallout has been contained. There have been no public recriminations about each other’s motives in Syria, in itself an indicator that both countries are not willing to jeopardise their relations, even over such an emotive issue such as the civil war that has ravaged Syria in the past couple of years. Iran is interested in a Syrian government that is independent, does not fall into the strategic sphere of the United States and continues to support the Palestinian cause for statehood via Hezbollah. Turkish motives are not necessarily seen in opposition to those aims.

From the perspective of the political elites in Iran, Turkey’s tentative move away from a strategic alliance with Israel towards rather more pro-Palestinian policies was welcomed as a firm indicator for the shift in Turkey’s strategic preferences in West Asia. Erdogan has been openly critical of Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza, repeatedly likening Israeli military campaigns to acts of state terrorism. At the same time, Erdogan has sought to establish closer ties to the Palestinian leadership and this as well was largely welcomed in Tehran. A few weeks after the elections in the Palestinian territories in January 2006, Erdogan hosted in Ankara a high-ranking Hamas delegation led by Khaled Meshaal. Erdogan was hoping that the visit would highlight Turkey’s ability to play a rather more prominent diplomatic role in the region. But the meeting was arranged without consulting the United States and Israel and irritated both governments, which wanted to isolate HAMAS. Likewise, Turkey adopted an independent position at odds with Israeli policy during the crisis in Lebanon in 2006 which was supported by Iran. Erdogan sharply condemned the Israeli attacks, and in several major Turkish cities there were large-scale protests and burnings of the Israeli flag, pictures that were enthusiastically broadcasted by Iran’s state-owned media conglomerate. Turkish nongovernmental organizations also have condemned Israel’s policies in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories culminating in the “flotilla crisis” which was defused by an Israeli offer to compensate the families of the Turkish nationals that were killed during the raids of the ships in May 2010. While Ankara and Tehran have not been willing to coordinate their policies on Palestine, from the Iranian perspective Turkey’s pro-Palestinian stance is indicative of the changes within the country. The issue of Palestine has been at the heart of the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic Republic since 1979, and while Iran is not willing to concede its claim to regional leadership in that regard, it routinely displays an automatic proclivity towards countries that embrace the cause for Palestinian statehood.

### **Themes of Rivalry**

If Syria exemplified Turkey’s newly found self-confidence as a regional power in West Asia and North Africa, its wholehearted embrace of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s rule in Syria facilitated its rivalry with Iran which acts upon a similar claim and which has firmly supported Assad’s rule due to the strategic reasons mentioned above. Tensions between the two countries were exacerbated even further when Turkey agreed to station a NATO missile defence shield in eastern Anatolia which has been “sold” by successive administrations in the United States as a deterrent to Iran’s burgeoning missile capability.<sup>3</sup> The Iranian military establishment reacted nervously prompting one general of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, to warn, “Should we be threatened, we will target NATO’s missile defence shield in Turkey and then hit the next

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<sup>3</sup> See ‘Part of NATO missile defence system goes live in Turkey’, *CNN*, 16 January 2012. Available at <<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/16/world/europe/turkey-radar-station/index.html>> [accessed 14 April 2013].

targets.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time and rather typically, both countries were quick to contain the fallout: Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reassured his Iranian counterpart Ali-Akbar Salehi during a joint news conference in Tehran in January 2012 that Turkey “would never take any step that could negatively affect our relations with our neighbour ... We would never accept any attack on any of our neighbours from our soil. We don't want such a perception of threat to exist, especially against Iran.” In return, Salehi put the remarks of the IRGC general in context underlining that “some people, knowingly or not, express views without much knowledge and by stepping beyond their responsibilities, and it causes misunderstandings.”<sup>5</sup>

Turkey is increasingly caught between US demands and securing its own interests in the region, it is negotiating, in many ways, the “burden” of being a NATO partner on the one side and its geostrategic position in the Muslim world which does not readily yield to claims to US hegemony, on the other. The nuclear issue and the sanctions regime is a case in point. Caught between US demands to tighten sanctions against Iran and safeguarding its own economic interest, Ankara reduced oil imports from Iran by 20 percent when the sanctions regime was reinforced in 2012.<sup>6</sup> These measures were complemented when Turkey agreed to ceasing to act as a financial intermediary — through the state-owned Halk bank — to process Iran’s multi-billion oil trade deals with countries such as India — in effect, contributing to the economic warfare on Iran led by the United States. However, the AKP has been reluctant to enforce unilateral sanctions by the European Union and the United States beyond the measures contained in UN Security Council Resolution 1929, despite repeated demands to that effect especially from Washington.

Moreover, AKP officials have repeatedly signalled that they won’t support any military action against Iran and that they are supportive of Iran’s nuclear energy programme. This explains why Erdogan has tried to act as a mediator in the nuclear issue culminating in the Tehran agreement which was successfully negotiated with Brazil’s former President Lula and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in May 2010.<sup>7</sup> The initiative was eventually shot down by the European Union and the United States, but the fact that Erdogan (and Lula) was willing to spearhead a major diplomatic campaign, and by that knowingly impinge on US demands to determine diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear file, indicates Turkey’s newly acquired assertiveness in international affairs. More recently, and in response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the spokesman of the Turkish government reiterated this position: “While there is no evidence that Iran is violating the agreement, the U.S taking this decision means to take the exact opposite position of its allies.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ali-Akbar Dareini, ‘Iran threatens to hit Turkey, if US, Israel attack’, *Associated Press*, 26 November 2011. Available at <<http://news.yahoo.com/iran-threatens-hit-turkey-us-israel-attack-153655802.html>> [accessed 18 April 2013].

<sup>5</sup> ‘Turkey gives assurances to Iran on NATO missile shield’, *Today’s Zaman*, 5 January 2012. Available at <<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-267694-turkey-gives-assurances-to-iran-on-nato-missile-shield.html>> [accessed 22 April 2013].

<sup>6</sup> See further ‘Turkey says no new US request to cut Iranian crude’, *Today’s Zaman*, 5 December 2012. Available at <<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-300224-turkey-says-no-new-us-request-to-cut-iranian-crude.html>> [accessed 21 April 2013].

<sup>7</sup> For the full text see ‘Text of the Iran- Brazil-Turkey deal’, *The Guardian*, 17 May 2010. Available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/17/iran-brazil-turkey-nuclear>> [accessed 22 April 2013].

<sup>8</sup> ‘Turkey: US decision on Iran deal unfortunate step’, *Anadolu Agency*, 9 May 2018.

## Conclusion

Turkey and Iran have tried to mitigate the vicissitudes of a radically fluctuating international environment which is creating a fundamentally new order in West Asia. Yet despite the turmoil that has engulfed the region, in particular after the Arab revolts, both countries have retained cordial relations characterised by occasional outbreaks of crisis that are quickly contained and ameliorated through diplomatic channels.<sup>9</sup> Crucially, both states act in support of each other’s national sovereignty and stability. When demonstrations broke out in Iran in January 2018, Turkey was quick to voice its support for the government of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Iran opposed the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016.

Analytically, this proclivity towards diplomacy over the rhetoric of threats indicates to me that there is a strategic consensus among the political elites currently ruling both countries that they have to act as neighbours and can’t afford to jeopardise relations, even over rather more contentious issues such as Syria and Iraq. In many ways, Turkey and Iran are too embedded within each other to be separated or to act antagonistically. This interdependence is not merely apparent in terms of mutual security concerns that a common border inevitably brings about, it is also lodged in the cultural tapestry that holds the Iranian-Turkish dialectic together. After all, these two successor states to some of the greatest empires in human history have interacted with each other almost since the beginning of time. Today, there are millions of Turkish speaking Iranian-Azeris that have natural ties to Turkey and one hears Persian widely spoken in Istanbul quarters such as Laleli. Persia and Turkey, in short, share too much to be thought in distinct and antagonistic terms.

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<sup>9</sup> On the Arab revolts see further: Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab revolts and the Iranian revolution: Power and resistance today*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.