

Turkish-Iranian Relations: From “Friends with Benefits” to “It’s Complicated”

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ABSTRACT

A few years after Turkey and Iran appeared to be growing closer, the pendulum has swung back and the two sides are increasingly at odds. The turmoil in Syria has brought the long-term competition between Ankara and Tehran for regional influence to the fore. Iran has doubled down on its wager that the current regime in Damascus can weather the storm, while Turkey is betting that a post-Assad Syria would be more closely aligned with its own regional interests. But despite significant differences and growing antagonism, over Syria and more broadly, Turkey and Iran still have substantial reasons to cooperate. These include mutual interests in dealing with restive Kurdish populations and robust trade, particularly Turkey’s reliance on Iranian oil and gas. History suggests that Ankara and Damascus will find ways to manage tensions, so the rivalry for regional influence is more likely to simmer than boil over into outright conflict. The Turkish-Iranian relationship will continue to resist simplistic caricatures.

Just a few years after key officials in Washington were branding Turkey “Iran’s lawyer” with regard to the latter’s contentious nuclear program, relations between Ankara and Tehran have soured. Between 2009 and 2011, Iran’s and Turkey’s immediate interests aligned, prompting Ankara to adopt a more conciliatory policy towards the Islamic Republic. More recently, however, tensions stemming from Iran’s refusal to grant Turkey economic concessions and the longstanding competition for influence in Iraq and Syria have led to an uptick in tensions. What explains the shift and what are the future prospects for relations between the two sides?

The spread of the Arab revolts from geopolitically inconsequential Tunisia to vitally important Syria has driven a

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wedge between Iran and Turkey. The recent tensions have followed a period of unusual warmth that began about a decade ago and peaked between 2009 and 2011. Turkey's diplomatic defense of the Islamic Republic was driven by a desire to help resolve Tehran's ongoing nuclear row with the West diplomatically, as well as a larger strategy to further integrate the region economically.

While Turkey's decision to further develop its ties in the region began in the 1980s, Ankara's outreach to Iran intensified under the AK Party's rule

While fearful of an Iranian nuclear weapon, Turkish policy makers took a different approach to the issue than their Western counterparts. Ankara believed that the threat was far in the future and that diplomacy should be given more of a chance to be successful. Turkey embarked on the dual track strategy of reaching out to Iran

economically and politically, with the aim of convincing the regime's moderates to be more forthcoming with the international community.¹

The Turkish approach to the Iranian nuclear issue is reminiscent of its policies during the Iran-Iraq war, and reflective of the broader Turkish-Iranian relationship. The two sides are willing to cooperate when their interests align, but cooperation is tempered by the mutual recognition that the two countries are natural competitors jousting for influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. This rivalry has continued, more recently spilling into other areas in the Middle East. Turkey and Iran are perhaps best described as often suspicious and contentious neighbors who nonetheless manage to cooperate when their interests align.

Tensions Dominated the Late 1990s

The Turkish-Iranian relationship dramatically improved after the 1998 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, and Iran's decision to crack down on PKK-allied insurgents operating from its own territory. Iran's decision to do so was tied to an uptick in violence by PKK-allied Kurdish insurgents, who would later establish themselves as the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). The convergence of interests eventually led the two neighbors to sign a series of agreements aimed at combating these two groups.²

Despite some progress, tensions still marred the relationship. Turkey continued to claim that Iran supported the PKK and a violent and far more radical group known as the Turkish Hezbollah.³ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, flare-ups and high tensions were common. At one point, Iranian officials claimed that the Turkish air force bombed a village in northwest Iran. Turkey countered with claims that members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) and their

alleged allies in the Turkish Hezbollah were responsible for a series of assassinations of prominent Turkish secularists.⁴ Despite these difficult times, Iran and Turkey managed to avoid escalation and instead took steps to try to ameliorate, or at least manage, tensions.

The AKP and Iran Patch Things Up

Relations improved noticeably after the 2002 election of the Justice and Development Party (the AKP or AK Party). Led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AK Party doubled down on Turkey’s diplomatic efforts to re-engage with its neighbors in the Middle East. While Turkey’s decision to further develop its ties in the region began in the 1980s, Ankara’s outreach to Iran intensified under the AK Party’s rule. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu championed a more assertive role for Turkey in the Middle East and intensified efforts to engage regional countries, a policy dubbed “zero problems” for the country’s emphasis on fostering state-to-state cooperation, initiating free trade zones, lessening visa restrictions, further integrating infrastructure, and offering mediation services.⁵ In this regard, the relationship with the Islamic Republic was considered to be both an opportunity and a challenge.

Early Turkish efforts to expand its “soft power” included a concerted effort to negotiate a settlement to the Israeli-Syrian conflict and to mediate between the Hamas and Fatah factions in the Palestinian territories. Foreign policy makers believed that if the conditions to resolve these conflicts were put in place, Turkey could disentangle Syria from Iran’s influence and thereby remove Tehran’s strategic entry point to the Levant.⁶

Ankara also believed that its conciliatory policies would create the conditions for greater economic access in Iran for Turkish firms. Ankara reasoned that further trade with Iran would lead to considerable political and economic benefits for Turkey. Deepening trade was linked to a broader strategy to increase economic development in the volatile Kurdish majority southeast. Ankara also believed that the establishment of regional trade zones, similar to the one Iran is currently operating on the island of Kish, would lead to greater economic opportunities for the region’s ethnic Kurdish population, and to the Turkish

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economy as a whole. As a byproduct, increased trade and cooperation would help establish more robust diplomatic ties between Ankara and Tehran, which Turkish policy makers could then use to facilitate talks between Iran and the United States to try to resolve the nuclear issue.

Ankara also saw an opportunity to take advantage of the international sanctions on Iran. Turkish policy makers have a history of using Iran's economic isolation for their own advantage and as a tool to try to reduce their chronic trade deficit with the Islamic Republic.

While Iran remains a critical source of energy for the Turkish Republic, repeated Turkish efforts to convince Iran to lessen its import tariffs have failed

During the 1980s, Ankara and Iran negotiated oil deals based on barter and credit. Taking advantage of the Western-led embargo of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, Turkey insisted on paying for Iranian crude with Turkish industrial goods. The goods were of low quality and priced similarly

to, or in excess of, better made Western European products. Iran initially tolerated the barter deals, but after the 1986 drop in oil prices began to insist on cash payments. Turkey refused, and the episode led many in Tehran to conclude that Turkey was not a trustworthy actor and only interested in exploiting Iran to maximize its own economic interests.⁷

The lingering resentment, in combination with Iran's weak economy, has prevented the deepening of Turkish-Iranian economic ties. While Iran remains a critical source of energy for the Turkish Republic, repeated Turkish efforts to convince Iran to lessen its import tariffs have failed. At the height of the most recent rapprochement, Turkish President Abdullah Gul visited Tehran and asked his Iranian counterparts to deepen trade and to open up the Iranian economy to Turkish investment.⁸ Tehran rebuffed his approach and suggested that Ankara should be thanking Iran because Turkey's diplomatic engagement had turned Ankara into a more influential regional player.⁹

According to the International Crisis Group's latest Iran report, *In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War, and Lessons from Turkey*, a Turkish participant on the trip said:

"Look, you're under sanctions, let's increase our trade". But they said, "No, we don't want that". Instead of thanking us for trying to stop the sanctions, they said, "It's you that owe us, you've been making yourselves into a big regional player at our expense!" It's as if they see our big embrace as a threat to their Persian identity. In fact, they much prefer Americans, South Africans, anything that's far away."¹⁰

Iran Embraces Ankara's Independent Foreign Policy

Politically, Ankara's increasingly independent foreign policy, its refusal to support fully the US's policies in the region, and Prime Minister Erdogan's public break with Israel engendered a certain amount of good will in Iran. Moreover, the AKP's determination to brand itself as a culturally conservative political party, comfortable with taking on many of the taboos in Turkish society, like the headscarf issue and the role of the military in domestic and foreign politics, garnered further approval from the Iranian leadership.¹¹ During the height of the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement, large segments of society in Iran believed that Turkey was in the process of realigning its strategic interests and pursuing policies that were independent of the political framework established by the United States and its Western allies.¹²

For its part, and at least before the spread of the Arab revolts to Syria and the subsequent shift in Turkey's policies, Ankara maintained that robust diplomatic engagement would coax Iran into being more forthcoming with the West. However, Turkey was wary of Iran's hardline approach to the Israel-Palestine issue, its support for Hezbollah, and its support for Shiite groups in Iraq. In this regard, Turkey's effort to mediate a resolution to the Syria-Israel issue was part of a larger strategy to create more stable and peaceful conditions in the Middle East. This policy included a concerted effort to deepen ties with Syria and to engage Hamas constructively. In both cases, these policies were in competition with Iran's overall political efforts in the region.¹³

The differences in policies shed light on Turkey and Iran's differing and competing political visions for the Middle East. In the Levant and beyond, both sides supported Hamas and Hezbollah, albeit for completely different reasons. Iran supported the two groups because of their anti-Israel platforms, believing that the two were part of the large contingent of groups and states working in opposition to American policies in the region. Turkey believed that incorporating the two groups into the region's political system would lead the groups to moderate their political demands and their tactics, which would eventually result in more peace and stability. Therefore, Iran and Turkey initially found themselves both supporting the engagement of these two groups, but the fundamental

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differences underlying that initial support eventually contributed to the current tensions. This underlying antagonism was further exacerbated by the spread of the Arab revolts, which exposed the differing long-term political objectives and led to a reemergence of the long-running competition for regional leadership.

Before the start of the Arab revolts, the primary battleground was Iraq—a territory that the two have been competing for influence in for centuries. During the 2009 parliamentary elections, Iran threw its weight behind the Shiite-dominated Dawa political party led by the

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current leader Nuri al-Maliki, while Turkey supported Iyad Allawi's non-sectarian al-Iraqiya bloc. After his election, al Maliki tightened ties with his Iranian backers, while turning his ire toward Turkey. Turkish-Iraqi relations suffered noticeably, even though Turkish officials did make some efforts to temper the hostile rhetoric and highlight their non-sectarian foreign policy approach. In

2011, Prime Minister Erdogan made it a point to visit the shrine of Imam Ali and to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most senior Shiite cleric.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Turkey's silence in the aftermath of the Saudi decision to send troops to quell the largely Shiite rebellion in Bahrain, its ardent support for regime change in Syria, and its perceived sympathies for Sunni-backed political parties continued to reinforce the perception that Turkey is party to the group of regional Sunni states working with the West against the Islamic Republic.

Between 2009 and 2011, however, Turkey and Iran's mutual interests with regard to the nuclear issue largely covered up the tensions in Iraq and elsewhere. Turkey's vocal, and still ongoing, support for Iran's enrichment program¹⁵ has been a thorn in the side of Western efforts to rally international support to universally condemn and sanction Iran. The AKP has also maintained that it will not mandate the enforcement of unilateral actions imposed by various countries, leaving the decision about whether to do so up to private businesses. The sanctions have nonetheless had an impact in Turkey: Tupras, Turkey's only refining company, has cut its import of Iranian crude by 20 percent and turned to Western-supported Saudi Arabia and Libya to make up the difference.¹⁶

Turkey's differences with the West over the issues of enrichment and sanctions led some ill-informed commentators in the West to attribute Turkey's Iran policy to the AKP's cultural conservatism and alleged Islamism.¹⁷ However, when viewed through the prism of shared interests, Islam appears to have little



Photo: REUTERS, Ümit Bektaş

Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Iranian counterpart Ali Akbar Salehi (L) attend a news conference in Ankara.

to do with it. Turkey has identified nuclear power as a critical component of its future energy plans. Like Iran, Turkey has a rigid interpretation of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and like Iran, Ankara believes that it has the inalienable right to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.¹⁸

Wary of Western overreach on the nuclear issue, Turkey continues to support Iran's right to enrichment so long as it conforms to its obligations under the NPT. Thus, Ankara has stopped short of calling on the Islamic Republic to suspend enrichment, in favor of more general calls for Iran to be more forthcoming with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). More recently, external events like Israel's brutal countering of Turkey's *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to Gaza and the subsequent severing of relations with Israel have also prompted Ankara to take a harder line in its promotion of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (MENWFZ).¹⁹

On the Iranian nuclear issue, Turkey is adamantly opposed to a military strike, arguing that foreign intervention will negatively affect Turkey's most pressing security concerns.²⁰ Policy makers argue that a strike will inflame tensions in Turkey's already turbulent Kurdish majority southeast and, in a worst case scenario, lead towards an Iraq-like conflict in Iran. Intent on preserving stability, Turkey and Iran have both advocated for a lesser role for foreign

powers—i.e., the United States—in the region, in favor of a more regionally-based security framework. In Turkey, this approach is driven by a sense that the US’s regional policies do not always sufficiently account for Turkey’s interests and are at times actually detrimental to its political and economic interests. Ankara argues that in the aftermath of American interventions, like the two wars in Iraq and the sanctions against Iran, Turkey’s economic, security, and political

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interests were negatively and disproportionately impacted.

Despite incentives to cooperate, the most recent political rapprochement was quickly consumed by the aforementioned difficulties in Iraq

and ongoing differences about Iran’s maintenance of high tariffs and import barriers for Turkish exports.²¹ The differences, however, were manageable and relations continued to plod along. In Turkey, the determination to prevent further instability drove its leadership to continue to speak out against US-led efforts to isolate Iran over its nuclear program. In Iran, some still held out hope that the AKP could be counted as a trusted partner.

The Arab Revolts Expose an Old Rivalry

The interest-driven relationship continued even after the start of the Arab revolts. Both Iran and Turkey, albeit for radically different reasons, supported the Tunisian revolts and the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. At the outset of the Libyan revolt, the two were also slow to recognize the Libyan rebels, opposed outside intervention, and initially called on Muammer Gaddafi to listen to the rebels’ demands and implement reforms to pave the way for a top-down democratic transition.²² Iran was wary of the West becoming involved, while Turkey worried that its substantial economic interests in Libya would be threatened by foreign intervention.

However, as Qaddafi’s brutality increased and the world began to line up behind the idea of a no-fly zone, Turkey, after overcoming initial reservations, eventually supported the NATO mission. Turkish leaders reasoned that the increasing bloodshed was anathema to their foreign policy ideals, and much more pragmatically, that Ankara’s support for the winning side would ensure that its economic interests would be preserved. Moreover, the AKP believed that its regional popularity would help Turkey gain further influence with Libya’s future leadership. This policy position was bolstered by the sense that Turkey was “on the right side of history” and that its support for regional democratic movements was the correct political, moral, and strategic choice.

Turkey's political turnaround, combined with the history of suspicion, drove Iran to sharpen its attacks against Ankara's policies. But despite the tensions in Libya, both Iran and Turkey called on Bashar al Assad to reform. For both, Syria is the centerpiece of their Middle Eastern policies and a foreign policy success story. Since Syria's 1998 decision to quit harboring Ocalan, it has become an important transit route for Turkish trucks en route to the oil-rich Gulf States, a trading partner, and an important partner in Turkey's fight against the PKK.²³

For Iran, Syria is its critical corridor to the Israel-Palestine conflict, an important source of legitimacy for the clerical government. The Islamic Republic espouses a curious foreign policy that blends elements of Persian nationalism, political Islam, and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Islamic Jihad and Hamas in the Palestinian territories are part of a broader effort to promote both an anti-Israel, an anti-imperialist agenda, and to confront the US's presence in the region. However, Iran's support is tempered by the principle of *maslahat*, or national interest. Consequently, Iran tries to walk a fine line between its Islamic ideal and its immediate national interest, which goes a long way toward explaining Iran's support for the rigidly secular Baathists in Syria, even though it has described the Arab revolts as an "Islamic Awakening."

The importance of Iran's partnership with Syria is amplified when one takes into consideration Iran's relative military weakness compared to its regional foes. Iran's aging air force, small navy and outdated military forces pale in comparison to the better-equipped and American-allied Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) armed forces.²⁴ Saudi Arabia in particular has used its oil revenues and close political ties with the United States to secure some of the world's most advanced military equipment. Iran, therefore, has to contend with these better-equipped armed forces, while also having to deal with the spread of a rapidly anti-Shiite strain in Sunni Islam. Syria remains the primary arena for Iran to counter what it perceives to be a strategy designed to isolate the Islamic Republic and bring about the conditions for internal or external regime change.

Syria allows Iran to continue to meddle in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which the clerical leadership frequently uses to attack the Saudis for the per-

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ceived lack of progress on the issue. In turn, strong and continued ties with Hezbollah have the added benefit of being a security threat to Israel and also countering Saudi influence in Lebanon. Losing Assad, and replacing him with a pro-Sunni regime, is perceived as disastrous by many in Tehran. The anxiety is exacerbated by the likelihood that the pro-Iranian Baathist regime is likely to be replaced with a hardline Sunni majority party with financial ties to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Therefore, Iran has argued against outside intervention, vaguely calling for a Syrian-led pathway to peace. Tehran has also opted to send members of the IRGC to help Syrian armed forces loyal to Assad defend against attacks by groups funded by the GCC and allied with the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC).

From Cooperation to Competition: Turkey and Iran Square off in Syria

At the outset of the Syrian uprising, the AKP was wary of upsetting regional stability. Turkey worried that a messy political transition would allow the PKK to

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gain a renewed foothold on Turkey's longest land border.²⁵ In tandem, Erdogan reasoned that he could leverage his good relations with Bashar Assad and convince him to make top down democratic reforms. Turkey supported a controlled transition and a more long-term path towards democratic reform. After initially backing Assad

without reservation, Iran eventually changed its position and began calling for slow, controlled Syrian-led reforms. According to Ali Larijani, Iran's speaker of the parliament:

We [Iran] believe that any reforms should come from inside [Syria], without outside pressure. And these groups are made up of Syrians. They can participate in the [reform] process, give their thoughts and provide solutions. We are moving toward finding a peaceful solution—which means democratic reform through peaceful behavior, not violence.²⁶

Moreover, some policy makers in Iran have blamed the escalating violence on interference by foreign powers. They argue that Turkey has aligned itself with these countries, which are working to control the outcome in Syria on the basis of their own political and economic interests.²⁷

At the outset of the Syria revolts, both Ankara and Tehran had a shared interest in convincing Assad to make top-down reforms. However, as Assad continually rebuffed Turkey's efforts to engage Damascus and the death toll climbed, the AKP was eventually forced to change its position and join the growing, largely Western and Gulf state calls for Assad to step aside immediately. Among the Turkish leadership there was a sense that Turkey and the international community had the "responsibility to protect", and that its support for Assad's ousting was not only morally prudent, but also in Turkey's political interest. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu argued in his speech at the 2012 United Nations General Assembly that "the responsibility to protect the people of Syria is our fundamental duty."²⁸

While the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has certainly become a component of Turkish foreign policy, Ankara is also worried about the disintegration of the Syrian state and the prospect of a prolonged sectarian conflict. Eager for a quick and managed transition, Ankara dedicated its diplomatic efforts to unifying Syria's fragmented opposition. This has led Turkish policy makers to back and host the Muslim Brotherhood-tied SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).²⁹ While the AKP has worked to stay above the sectarian fray, there is no denying that it is much more comfortable with the ascendance of Sunni political Islam than is Iran.

The Iranian-Turkish relationship will continue to be issue based, rather than rooted in shared values or overlapping visions for the region

From the Iranian perspective, the AKP's very public support for the FSA and SNC, compared to Turkey's silence on the uprising in Bahrain, reveals Turkey's pro-Western bias. According to Iran, the Syrian revolts have been hijacked by hostile powers intent on solidifying political and military influence in the Middle East. As proof, Iranian policy makers point out that the ramping up of support for the Syrian opposition coincided with the quiet acquiescence of the Saudi-led, and therefore American-backed, military campaign to crush Bahrain's largely Shiite protesters.³⁰

Iran and Turkey differ in how they intend to implement their two policies in Syria. Turkey supports international action, coordinated through the UN and with support of the Arab League, for the establishment of safe-zones in Syria. Iran disagrees, arguing that the solution should be a result of internal dialogue and implemented in top-down reforms. These two policies, while sharing the same goal of reform, differ significantly. Turkey sees its support for the FSA and SNC as part of a larger moral responsibility to help stop the daily killings and believes that its adamant support for Assad's overthrow places Turkish policy on the right side of history. Iran disagrees, arguing that Syria used to be a

peaceful place and that the foreign support for the rebels are the main cause for the violence and casualties.

This outlook is likely to continue to hamper the Iranian-Turkish relationship. As tensions continue, Iran is likely to view Turkish efforts to expedite Assad's downfall as a threat. Iranian policy makers have made it clear that they believe that Turkey has ulterior motives, accusing Ankara of being part of a foreign plot to quell the demands of the people in Syria. Thus, the growing antipathy has had an effect on tangential, but ultimately related, issues and will likely continue to fester.

Rivalry Redux

The Arab revolts were simply the latest catalyst for the relationship's return to the type of tensions that dominated the Turkish-Iranian relationship during the 1990s. Despite areas of overlapping interest, the 2009-2011 Turkish-Iranian rapprochement was driven by unrealistic expectations on both sides. Iran hoped to benefit from the AKP's more independent foreign policy. Turkey believed that it could take advantage of its popularity and Iran's isolation to win economic and political concessions from the Islamic Republic, while at the same time pursuing policies that were aimed at decreasing Tehran's regional influence. In the end, neither side's approach was feasible and both were likely to be undone by fundamental differences in long-term interests and contradictions in policy implementation.

These differences are not likely to be resolved in the near future, making it likely that the Iranian-Turkish relationship will continue to be issue based, rather than rooted in shared values or overlapping visions for the region. More specifically, Turkey and Iran both offer starkly different political visions for the region. The resulting political antagonisms are evident in Iraq, Syria, and in relations with the United States, the European Union, and other major international institutions. The rivalry is likely to grow more intense in the coming years, as both continue to work to shore up political support by backing competing political factions and supporting different political outcomes.

These antagonisms reflect a political rivalry that has waxed and waned for centuries. While outright conflict remains unlikely, the potential for more amicable relations is undercut by perceptions on both sides that a strategic gain for one is in most cases a loss for the other. At the same time, the two sides have some overlapping interests that foster a degree of cooperation and tamp conflict escalation. In rhetoric and actions, leaders in Tehran and Ankara will continue to provide fodder for both those who foresee the two countries growing inexorably closer and those who expect inevitable conflict escalation; the reality is likely to be far more complex.

Endnotes

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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. According to a Tehran-based political analyst, "After the new Turkish government chose to support the Palestinian nation, defend Iran's nuclear program and introduce domestic reforms to recognize people's religious freedoms, the attitude of Iran's public opinion and mass media toward Turkey was very positive. As a result, Iranian policymakers who set the country's foreign policies, considered those instances as opportunities to further strengthen bilateral relations. They were not affected by common emotions which usually govern the public opinion or mass media." Email interview with a Tehran-based political analyst, January 8, 2012.
12. Email interview with a Tehran-based political analyst, January 8, 2012.
13. According to a Tehran-based political analyst, "although the Syrian government is non-democratic, it has been in the frontline of struggles against the Zionist regime for many years and has also fought against domination of the United States' hegemonic power on the fate of Muslims in the region, especially in Lebanon and Palestine, and has cut the hands of the United States and the Zionist regime of Israel from Syria." Email interview, February 18, 2012.
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