

Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Turkish-Iranian relations in the 2000s, when the two countries initiated an unprecedented rapprochement. It argues that modification of foreign policy paradigms in Turkey and Iran led to the rationalization of bilateral relations that paved the way for improvement of economic and political ties between the two states. In addition to the rationalization, a supportive regional context helped them expand their relations. However, structural differences prevent the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement from turning into a strategic partnership. Moreover, restructuring of the regional context and rise of the specter of a conflictual relationship, which is still alive, threaten the future of Turkish-Iranian relations.

Parallel to Turkey's "new" Middle East policy that started in the early 2000s,¹ Turkey-Iran relations have gone through an unprecedented period of rapprochement. Ideological and security issues that dominated the relations between the two neighbors have been gradually replaced by pragmatic considerations on each side. A number of developments both at the state level and regional level have promoted pragmatism. The ensuing improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations has been crowned by a rapidly increasing volume of economic interactions between the two countries as well as security and diplomatic cooperation on a number of issues. In addition to the upgrading of bilateral ties, the two countries' regional approaches related to the Palestine issue, preservation of territorial integrity of Iraq, Iran's right to have "peaceful" nuclear technology, etc. have ostensibly

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converged. However, a number of developments that took place in 2011, including the revolt in Syria, the escalation of terror activities perpetrated by the PKK, and the Turkish decision to host US radar system, have overshadowed Turkey-Iran relations.²

Most analysts tended to attribute emerging sources of tension in bilateral relations to the revival of an historical Turkish-Iranian rivalry that dates back to the 15th century.³ It is widely assumed that interwoven geopolitical and ideological considerations accompany that rivalry. Nevertheless, the arguments that underline historical competition between the two countries do not suffice to comprehend the highs and lows in Turkey-Iran relations. If the historical rivalry has such a decisive impact on bilateral relations, how can the rapprochement in Turkish-Iranian relations over the last decade be explained?

This paper argues that rationalization has established the groundwork for improvement of economic and political relations between Turkey and Iran. By rationalization I mean the promotion of economic interactions and cooperation that

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includes downgrading ideological differences and avoiding interference in each other's internal affairs. Thus, ideological and security concerns that dominated bilateral relations in the previous decade have been replaced by pragmatic considerations and cooperation. Additionally, a supportive

regional context helped the two countries expand their relations. Especially the divergence of the Turkish approach towards the Middle East from the West on a number of issues contributed to the improvement of Turkish-Iranian ties. However, Turkey-Iran relations did not turn into a strategic partnership due to the ideological and political differences of the two states. Moreover, the Arab spring has profoundly altered the regional environment and has led to Turkey's reconciliation with the West, particularly with the United States, on a number of issues in the region including the uprising in Syria. It also culminated in the differentiation of Turkish and Iranian regional perspectives and it is this new regional context that accounts for the emerging tensions between Turkey and Iran.

Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations

The relationship between Turkey and Iran was on the verge of collapse in the mid-1990s. At the outset, these two states are built upon fundamental structural differences extolling incompatible ideological and policy orientations. More-

over, during the 1990s they competed regionally for a leadership role among the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, adversely hastening tensions between them. The harsh rhetoric of mutual accusations between the two governments that the other party interfered in its internal affairs and supported disruptive movements against each other culminated in the withdrawal of the Turkish and Iranian ambassadors in February 1997.⁴

In the aftermath of the establishment of the new governments in both countries, the two neighbors restored diplomatic relations with the appointment of new ambassadors to Ankara and Tehran in March 1998. Yet, the turning point in Turkish-Iranian relations was former Turkish President A. Necdet Sezer's official visit to Iran in June 2002.⁵ During that groundbreaking visit, the two sides agreed to sideline ideological differences, cooperate on security issues, and embark on advancing economic and cultural interactions. Since then while security issues were resolved to some extent and ideological differences lost their salience, economic interactions between the two countries increased steadily.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in November 2002 gave a new impetus to the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian relations

Rationalization of Turkish-Iranian relations could be attributed to several factors. First, both countries have remarkably modified their foreign policies, regional approaches, and mode of relations with the neighboring countries since the late 1990s. Iran's "détente" policy under the leadership of President Khatami had a remarkable effect on this process of rationalization. In order to enhance Iran's international and regional standing, Khatami devised two foreign policy approaches: "Dialogue among Civilizations" and "détente with neighbors."⁶ To establish stronger ties with the regional countries, the Khatami administration toned down Iran's revolutionary rhetoric that challenged the legitimacy of the ruling regimes and the regional status quo. This policy helped improve Turkey-Iran ties, which were adversely affected by the revolutionary rhetoric, accompanied by security concerns. Accordingly, Iran sought to establish a sound partnership with Turkey by increasing cooperation on security issues and expanding economic interactions that would continue independent of the ruling political parties and factions.⁷

The modified foreign policy approach of Iran, however, was not the only factor. Despite the Khatami administration's attempt to decrease tensions with neighboring countries, security issues deriving from the terrorist activities of the PKK and radical Islamists in Turkey continued to adversely affect bilateral relations for a while after Khatami's acceding to power. Although Turkey and Iran

had previously established joint mechanisms to handle security risks that caused tensions throughout the 1990s, Ankara continued to level charges against Tehran for sheltering PKK members and radical Islamists. The latter factor has considerably lost its impact as of the 2000s, because the security forces dealt a heavy blow to the Turkish Hezbollah in 2000. Later on, activities of radical Islamists dropped from the Turkish public agenda. In the meantime, Southeastern Turkey was greatly pacified, because the PKK ceased its activities inside Turkey's borders shortly after its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested. These developments

The modified foreign policy approaches and the changing national contexts in Iran and Turkey facilitated the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian ties

that mitigated Turkey's security concerns to some extent provided a good opportunity for the Turkish government to modify its policy towards the Middle East. Thereby, Ankara adopted a new regional policy promoted by the then Foreign Minister Ismail Cem to "reconcile" with the regional countries by building on its

historical, cultural, and economic assets.⁸ Turkey moved to replace a security based approach towards the region with an economic perspective. Even Turkey's National Security Council recognized the importance of increasing trade with the neighboring countries to further bilateral relations.⁹ Consequently, Turkey approached Iran to settle bilateral problems through dialogue and to enhance political, economic, and cultural cooperation.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in November 2002 gave a new impetus to the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian relations. Above all, the AKP's foreign policy strategy, with its emphasis on primacy of pro-active diplomacy that espoused to reach "zero-problems with neighbors" and to establish economic interdependence with neighboring countries through promoting bilateral economic transactions, complemented the rationalization process.¹⁰ Additionally, under the AKP governments, the 'traditional' Turkish elite, skeptical about Iran's foreign policy motivations towards Turkey, was steadily replaced by a comparatively more "pragmatic" group, who has been enthusiastic about doing business with Iran.¹¹

The changing domestic context in Turkey has found a frank reception in Iran that welcomed the rise of the AKP, which evolved from the Islamist Milli Görüş Movement.¹² While the conservative elite in Iran has considered this development as part of the broader Islamic awakening in the Muslim world that was prompted by the Islamic revolution, the reformist elite has regarded the AKP as a successful model for the compatibility of Islamism with democracy and modernity. Thus, the Iranian perception of Turkey as a sternly secular

country subservient to the Western powers was gradually replaced by a positive approach. Iranian authorities considered the AKP leadership as more sincere than their predecessors in their attempt to buttress Turkey's relations with its neighbors and to advance relations between Ankara and Tehran.¹³ Additionally, the AKP's apparently autonomous and active regional policy bolstered the new image of Turkey in Iran.

In short, the modified foreign policy approaches and the changing national contexts in Iran and Turkey facilitated the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian ties. Moreover, Ankara's energy demand and Iran's vast oil and gas reserves were influential in this process. Turkey's need for energy increased 6-8 percent per annum since the late 1990s due to increasing demand of domestic consumption. Given the limits of its domestic energy reserves, Turkey has become dependent on energy imports.¹⁴ In order to secure its gas supply, Turkey has worked to diversify its suppliers. Turkey viewed Iran, which has the second-largest reserves of gas in the world, as a viable supplier in addition to Russia. Iran, then desperately in need of foreign exchange earnings, was also enthusiastic to begin exporting gas. Eventually, Turkey signed an agreement with Iran to buy \$23 billion worth of Iranian gas for 25 years in August 1996. However, due to financial and technical reasons, the flow of gas through the pipeline, which was projected to be operative in December 1999, started in December 2001.¹⁵

As a result of the rationalization, the two countries have been involved in promoting bilateral economic interactions. In addition to the Turkey-Iran Joint Economic Commission that was established in the 1980s, the Turkish-Iranian Business Council was set up in November 2001 to expand economic and commercial ties. Large groups of businessmen have accompanied political delegations paying official visits to respective capitals.

Turkey-Iran economic relations have traditionally relied on the transportation and bilateral commerce, which were strongly interconnected with politics.¹⁶ Parallel to rationalization, bilateral trade gradually increased from around \$1.2 billion in 2001 to \$4.3 billion in 2005 and \$10 billion in 2010. It exceeded \$15 billion in 2011.¹⁷ Turkish and Iranian leaders resolved to increase their respective bilateral trade volume to \$30 billion by 2015. Turkish energy imports from Iran constituted the backbone of the trade relations. As of 2010, Iran provided nearly a quarter of Turkish natural gas consumption and of Turkish oil imports.

The process of rationalization helped diversify the economic relations between the two countries by adding new dimensions, namely direct investments, energy cooperation, and tourism, to the bilateral economic interactions. Beginning with the 2000s, Turkish contractors and entrepreneurs enthusiastically sought their fortune in Iran. Although some major Turkish investors, like TAV and Turkcell, failed to sustain their investments in Iran due to the opposition

of influential political factions, Turkish entrepreneurs sustained their interests in the Iranian market. Besides failures, there are some success stories. The most remarkable and successful Turkish investment in Iran was realized by GUBRETAS, which bought Razi Petrochemical, the country's chemical giant, in February 2008. Turkish firms also undertook numerous projects such as construction of hotels and housing complexes. Reportedly, more than 7,500 Turkish

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workers have been working in housing construction in Iran as of June 2011.¹⁸ At the same time, in the face of mounting US and EU sanctions on Tehran, a considerable amount of Iranian capital was invested in Turkey to sustain its international network. Some of the Iranian capital that previously invested in Dubai was

also transferred to Turkey, due to the former's succumb to the US pressure. A growing number of Iranian businessmen established various companies principally in Istanbul. Iranian investments in Turkey reportedly reached a volume equal to \$110 million in 2010.¹⁹ Additionally, according to the numbers given by Turkish officials, Iranians have accounts worth nearly \$3 billion deposited in Turkish banks.²⁰

Tourism has also become an important part of Iran-Turkey relations in this process. The number of Iranian tourists visiting Turkey increased from around 330,000 in 2001 to over 1.8 million in 2010. The growing number of tourists and expansion of bilateral trade led to the establishment of new flight destinations. The two neighbors also modernized existing border gates, namely Gürbulak/Bazergan, Kapıköy/Razi and Esendere/Sero, and are projected to establish a new one at Dilucu/Maku.

Supportive Regional Context

The new regional context that emerged after the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 has also positively affected bilateral relations between the two countries. In this new regional context, Turkish interests ostensibly converged with Iranian interests and the two states' regional perspectives have developed similarities.²¹

Above all, the new regional context provoked common threat perceptions stemming from the US occupation in Iraq. The ambiguity that prevailed over the future of Iraq due to the "vagueness" of intentions of the United States and the latter's failure to establish a stable and powerful government there has made the possibility of disintegration of Iraq the principal concern of the two neighbors.

Sharing the common concern for the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which might have encouraged separatist movements among the Kurdish minorities living within their borders, on every occasion both countries defended the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity. Sectarian conflicts between the Shiites and the Sunnis that intensified in Iraq in 2006 were another shared concern. Alarmed by the potential spread of the sectarian conflicts and instability in Iraq to the entire region, both countries supported the establishment of a strong national government in Baghdad.

Moreover, the Qandil Mountain near the Turkey-Iraq "tripoint" in northern Iraq has become a platform for separatist and terrorist movements' incursions into Turkey and Iran, which raised identical security concerns in the two countries. After its unilateral cease-fire in August 1999, the PKK transferred most of its militants and arms to the Qandil Mountain. After its recognition by the United Nations as the occupying power, control of Iraqi territories was nominally transferred to the United States, which warned Ankara against cross-border operations into Iraq to strike the PKK camps. Thereby, northern Iraq became a safe haven for the PKK. Exploiting this safe haven and military equipment left behind by the retreating army of Saddam Hussein, the PKK resuscitated its attacks into Turkey from 2004 onwards. In the meantime, an offshoot of the PKK, PJAK (the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) that emerged throughout the early 2000s, started to wage an armed struggle against the Iranian government.²² The PJAK, which also settled in the Qandil Mountain, utilized the "safe haven" in northern Iraq provided by the Kurdistan Regional Government and the US forces that occupied Iraq to attack Iranian territories. In order to counter the mounting attacks of the PKK and the PJAK, Turkey and Iran advanced their cooperation on security issues. Both Turkey and Iran designated the PKK with its offshoots and the PJAK as terrorist organizations and coordinated their military operations. Turkey and Iran signed an agreement during President Ahmadinejad's visit to Turkey in August 2008 on cooperation against smuggling, organized crime, and terrorism. That agreement entailed intelligence sharing and the establishment of a committee to oversee the implementation of the agreement.²³

During this same time frame, Turkey and Iran shared an identical viewpoint on Syria. Syria has been an ally of Iran since the Islamic revolution. Throughout the 1990s, Syria and Iran were apparently part of an axis in confrontation with the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership. In addition to historical disagreements between Turkey and Syria over the status of the Hatay province and tensions over the shared waters of the Euphrates River, Damascus sheltered the PKK leadership after the mid-1980s. Consequently, the two countries nearly came to the verge of war in 1998. Following Turkey's threat of use of force against Syria for

sheltering the PKK, the two neighbors signed the Adana agreement in October 1998. After the Syrian government deported the PKK leadership and enhanced its cooperation with Turkey on security issues in accordance with the Adana agreement, bilateral relations between Ankara and Damascus improved. Under the AKP governments in Turkey and Bashar Assad in Syria, the two countries deepened cooperation in many areas.²⁴ As a result, the two countries lifted visa

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requirements and institutionalized bilateral cooperation through the establishment of a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council. Furthermore, they decided to establish free trade and a visa-free area (with the participation of Lebanon and Jordan) in March 2011.

Although the Syria-Iran axis was considered by many observers as a challenge to the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership, Iran tried to avoid direct confrontation with Turkey. When the tension escalated between Syria and Turkey in 1998, Tehran sought to mediate between them instead of lending its unconditional support to Damascus, its traditional ally. Subsequently, Iran welcomed the improvement of Turkish-Syrian relations, which proceeded parallel to the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian ties. Moreover, Iran publicly declared its willingness to be part of a newly emerging regional “integration” process that was catalyzed by the AKP government.

Turkey’s position on the Palestine issue has apparently moved closer to that of Iran. Since the early 2000s, Turkey has increasingly become generous in lending support to the Palestine National Authority and become vocal in its criticism towards Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. Turkey also condemned Israeli settlements and occupation in the Palestinian territories. Thus, its position vis-à-vis the Palestine issue has become closer to Iran’s policy. It was well illustrated in February 2006, when Turkey hosted a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Me-shal. Hamas was being sanctioned by wider segments of the international community because of its intransigence in its rejection of Israel’s legitimacy. Thus, Turkey followed Iran in manifesting its political support for Hamas, which led to frustration of its partners in the West.

After Israel besieged Gaza and carried out a military operation there in December 2008, the most fervent reaction came from Turkey. Prime Minister Erdoğan rebuked Israeli President Shimon Peres for murdering innocent Palestinians, and afterwards for disregarding international law. Turkey’s growing pro-Palestinian position led to cooling off of its relations with Israel. Eventually,



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Turkey and Israel confronted each other in May 2010 over the Mavi Marmara incident. Israeli armed forces intervened in the Mavi Marmara ferry that was leading a flotilla, which was intended to ship civilian volunteers and humanitarian aid to Gaza, and, thereby, to break the Israeli blockade. Military operation against the ferry, however, resulted in the death of nine Turkish citizens, which led to virtual collapse of Turkish-Israeli relations.²⁵ Consequently, despite the difference between Turkey and Iran on the legitimacy of Israel, both countries' approaches vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue apparently converged in opposing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the siege of Gaza, and supporting the Hamas government.

In addition to ostensibly converging interests in the Middle East, the two countries have adopted identical positions in championing the international standing of the Islamic world vis-à-vis the wider international community, particularly the West. First, both countries encouraged the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to be more active in governing the affairs of the Islamic world and they strived to make the OIC more effective and active in international politics. Second, Turkish and Iranian leaders have constantly called their Muslim counterparts to solve their problems on their own initiatives, and have expressed their uneasiness with the Western interventions in the Muslim world. Third, both

countries supported the initiative of a “Dialogue among Civilizations.” Iran, which positioned itself on the international scene as the regional leader that was ready to confront the West, i.e., American imperialism and Zionism, in the name of defending the rights of oppressed Muslims, moderated its radical discourse

Turkey has challenged the Western idea of containment of Iran, and opposed to the US and the European sanctions that targeted persons and companies associated with Iran’s nuclear and missile programs

and foreign policy during Khatami’s presidency. Khatami’s call for “Dialogue among Civilizations” that implied the change in course of Iranian foreign policy prompted the international community and the United Nations to promote “Dialogue between the Civilizations.” Turkey furthered that call for dialogue and became the co-chairman of “the Alliance of Civilizations” platform that was established under the auspices of the United Nations.²⁶ Turkey has also intensified its efforts in the struggle against Islamophobia in the West.

Turkey’s position regarding the Iranian nuclear program has been another issue that contributed to the rapprochement between the two neighbors. Iran has continuously rejected Western, particularly Israeli and American, claims that it has been pursuing its nuclear program towards military ends. Contrary to Western charges, Iran has argued that its program has been carried on solely for peaceful purposes and has accused the West of trying to prevent Iran’s technological and scientific advancement by raising concerns over its nuclear program. Iran maintains that it has an internationally recognized right to conduct research on and to use peaceful nuclear technologies under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Indeed, Iran has been a party to the NPT since the 1970s. Hence, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was authorized by the NPT to verify the commitment towards non-proliferation of nuclear arms by non-nuclear weapons states, has been actively monitoring Iran’s “declared” nuclear facilities. Until recently, despite concerns expressed by the IAEA on Iran’s nuclear program, the IAEA has not found sound evidence to support arguments that Iran is using its nuclear program for military purposes.

Against this background, Turkey has admitted Iran’s right to have and use peaceful nuclear energy. Giving some credit to Western arguments, however, it has asked Iran to allay international concerns by expanding its cooperation with the IAEA. After the revelation of undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran in August 2002, the United States increased pressure over Iran to halt its nuclear program by orchestrating an international response. Then, concerned with the tension that was prompted by the US and Israeli threat to use force against Iran, Turkey

constantly called for a diplomatic and peaceful solution to the issue. When negotiations between Tehran and the West stalled, Ankara got involved in the process either to facilitate diplomatic negotiations, or to mediate between the parties.²⁷

Upon a request from US President Barack Obama, Turkey, with Brazil, successfully persuaded Iran to accept the uranium swap agreement in May 2010. The Vienna group that was representing the Westerns interests, however, rejected the agreement on the grounds that it failed to meet their requirements to prevent Iran's access to nuclear weapons. Next month, Turkey, which was disappointed with the Western rejection of the agreement, voted against a new round of sanctions on Iran as a non-permanent member at the UN Security Council.²⁸ Iranian officials appreciated that decision and viewed it as a substantial sign of ongoing Turkish support for the country's nuclear program.²⁹

As the new regional context that emerged in the Middle East after 2003 has led to ostensible convergence between Turkey and Iran, it has also brought divergence between Western and Turkish approaches on several issues.³⁰ The most dramatic manifestation of diverging Turkish interests with the West, particularly with the United States, came in March, 2003, when the Turkish parliament rejected a government-sponsored motion that would have authorized the United States to transfer US military personnel and equipment to northern Iraq via Turkey. In July 2003, US forces in Iraq arrested 11 Turkish Special Forces active in Sulaymaniyah, in the north of Iraq, in a humiliating way. This incident flamed anti-Americanism among the Turkish people. In addition to the US blockade that prevented Turkish military's entrance into northern Iraq to fight the PKK militants based there, inaction of the US forces towards the PKK has become another contentious matter in the Turkish-American relations. By exploiting that situation, Iranian officials tried to provoke the Turkish public against the United States and to turn that case into an opportunity to promote Turkish-Iranian security cooperation against terrorism.³¹

Turkey's position regarding the Palestine issue has considerably diverged from the West after the victory of Hamas in the parliamentary elections in January 2006. Contrary to the Western policy of containing Hamas, Turkey continued its engagement policy by viewing it as a political party. As noted above, Turkey has gradually attempted to champion demands of the Palestinian people and advocated Hamas's right to rule as a legitimate political institution, at the expense of risking its previous strategic relations with Israel. Improvement of

The Iranian perception of Turkey was well illustrated when Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei met Turkish President Abdullah Gül in February 2011

Turkey-Syria relations was another area of disagreement between Turkey and the West. By leveling charges against the Syrian administration for helping international terrorism and for its involvement in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, former Prime Minister of Lebanon, in February 2005, Western countries have sought to isolate Syria. Despite these Western attempts, Turkey furthered its relations with this country, which marched towards “integration.” Similarly, Turkey has challenged the Western idea of containment of Iran, and opposed to the US and the European sanctions that targeted persons and companies associated with Iran’s nuclear and missile programs.

Despite the relative recovery of Turkish-US relations under the Obama administration, officials from both sides have admitted that Turkey and the United States have disagreements on certain issues such as their divergent positions on Iran and Palestine.³² Major points of disagreement have led some analysts and Western political figures to assert that Turkey was turning to the East by distancing itself from the West and through its association with Iran. Indeed, any step taken by the Turkish government that raised doubts among the Western capitals about Turkey’s intentions was often welcomed by Iran. Any divergence between the Turkish and Westerners perspectives and growing disagreements were seen by the Iranian leadership as Turkey’s re-association with the Islamic world by relinquishing its alignment with the West and its Western aspirations. In turn, this was a boost to Iranian-Turkish bilateral relations. The Iranian perception of Turkey was well illustrated when Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamaneï met Turkish President Abdullah Gül in February 2011. Khamaneï, in that meeting, praised the change in Turkish foreign policy by underlining “the country’s independence from the West as well as its distance from the Zionist regime in solidarity with the Palestinian nation,” as the key factors that brought Turkey closer to the Islamic Ummah.³³

Limits of the Turkish-Iranian Relations

Notwithstanding the improvement of ties between Turkey and Iran since 2000, it would be mistaken to argue that the two countries have established full-fledged cooperation. Indeed, there are a number of factors that limit further progress of their relations.

Above all, several structural differences between Turkey and Iran have prevented further improvement of bilateral relations. For one, in terms of the political regimes, they represent two different “models” in the region. Even though Iran has moderated its revolutionary ambitions, the Islamic revolutionary ideology continues to dominate its politics, both internally and externally. Therefore, the Iranian regime has been keen on maintaining protective measures over its

economy and control over its politics and society. Unlike “revolutionary” Iran, both in economic and political terms, a liberal, secular and Western-oriented political regime operates in Turkey. The illiberal structure of Iran’s economy and politics, however, prevents its integration into the world economy, and, thereby, the expansion of economic relations between the two countries. Indeed, President Gül highlighted that factor as the most important obstacle that hampered expansion of their bilateral trade.³⁴

As an extension of “revolutionary politics,” Iran has been “skeptical” towards the West and views itself in a constant struggle with it, particularly with the United States and “Zionism.” Accordingly, the Middle East emerged as the primary area of “con-

frontation” between Iran and the United States. Whereas Washington has been trying to sustain its domination in the region through various means, Tehran has been leading the “resistance front” against the West, “Zionism” and the United States. Unlike Iran’s “confrontationist” strategy against the West, Turkey has maintained its alliance with it. Turkey’s interests and policies differed from the West on some issues, as noted above; however, the alliance relationship with the United States has continued to be the most important pillar of Turkish foreign policy. The differences between Turkish and Western approaches do not stem from a “strategic” difference or confrontation, but from assessments of how certain Western policies adversely affect Turkey’s interests.

In contrast, Turkey and Iran have different worldviews and have developed strategic relationships based on their distinctive structural models, which impede a deepening of their bilateral relationship. Consequently, they assess regional developments based on dissimilar regional approaches. Therefore, despite the ostensibly converging Turkish and Iranian perspectives, beneath the surface, they disagree on many issues or on how to address them. For instance, whereas Iran has supported Hamas as a means of confronting the West and Israel, Turkey’s support for Hamas stemmed from its conviction that the involvement of Hamas in legal and democratic politics would help its “normalization” and, thereby stability and peace in the region. Similarly, unlike Iran, which has expressed the view that Israel is “the enemy of Islam and the Muslims” and has extolled it as an illegitimate and imperialist entity, Turkey recognizes Israel as a legitimate state. Cooling off of relations between Israel and Turkey was based on contextual developments, rather than ideological considerations that pit Iran

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against Israel. In the same manner, Turkey advanced its relations with Syria for political reasons, which were completely different from the reasons that lay behind the long-standing Iran-Syria “alliance.”

Because of the structural differences between the two countries, and the ensuing differences in their regional perspectives, Turkey has been apparently reluctant to advance its “rational” relations with Iran to “strategic” and regional levels. Hence, Turkey did not extend to Iran the offer to establish a “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council” as it has to other neighboring countries as part of its foreign policy to enhance its relations regionally. Consequently, the two countries failed to cooperate at the regional level as an institutional platform and make common decisions on some regional issues, even though they might have similar discourses. For instance, even though they have hosted regular trilateral meetings with Afghanistan and Pakistan with regard to the solution of their bilateral problems, they did not act jointly. Likewise, Iranian officials have continuously offered regional cooperation between Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran; yet Turkey has preferred to deal with Syria and Iraq on its own. As it is well illustrated through Turkey’s initiative to establish a common economic zone involving Syria and Iraq, it did not encourage Iran to join this process. Similarly, while Iranian officials highlighted the importance of regional cooperation between the two countries in bilateral meetings, Turkish officials mostly neglected to express that theme.³⁵

Additionally, economic interactions between Iran and Turkey have not increased to the levels the political leaders apparently aspired to realize. Although the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries has dramatically increased, there is a structural imbalance in favor of Iran. Turkish exports to Iran recorded an approximately ten-fold increase from its level of around \$350 million in 2002 to more than \$3 billion in 2010. Turkish imports from Iran, which was around \$850 million in 2002 and \$7 billion in 2010, however, have exceeded more than twice the level of its exports. This trade deficit is largely due to Turkey’s import of hydrocarbon resources from Iran, which accounts for nearly 90 percent of total imports. For this reason, while the Turkish side has been continuously complaining about this trade deficit, the Iranian side has been uneasy with the level of its non-mineral exports to Turkey.

Moreover, in spite of the ostensibly growing economic and political relations, the two countries have failed to overcome major issues related to work permits, transportation and shipment, and the high level of custom taxes that prevented further improvement of economic transactions. Those problems have been adversely affecting Turkish-Iranian economic interactions despite numerous promises made by officials from both sides to solve them as soon as possible. Mostly, they failed to conclude official agreements on previously negotiated issues. For

instance, the “preferential trade agreement” that was anticipated to be signed during President Gül’s visit to Iran has not materialized. On other occasions, Turkey and Iran failed to realize projects that they agreed upon in principle. The most dramatic example of the latter situation was the freezing of the well-publicized memorandum of understanding on energy cooperation due to technical problems and American pressure.

In accordance with that memorandum, first drafted in November 2007 with great enthusiasm, the Turkish Petroleum Corporation would have explored, produced, and traded natural gas in the South Pars gas field of Iran. However, the parties failed to conclude a final agreement on energy

The Iranian government has accused Turkey of intervening in the internal affairs of Syria and serving the interests of the imperialist powers to weaken the “resistance front”

cooperation. Instead of the previously drafted memorandum, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız stated in January 2011 that Iran offered Turkey to explore new oil and gas fields, which Turkey was inclined to channel to private companies.³⁶ As a result, many steps taken by high-level officials to strengthen bilateral relations not only in economic terms, but also political and cultural terms, remained inconclusive. Although international pressure orchestrated by the United States to isolate Iran played an important role in nullifying Turkish and Iranian efforts to advance bilateral relations, such as cooperation in the banking sector, the lack of political determination and bureaucratic inertia in both countries are also responsible for these failures to a great extent.

Emerging Sources of Tension in Turkish-Iranian Relations

While the rationalization of bilateral relations and the supportive regional context helped the improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations, the structural differences between the two countries have prevented the evolution of that relationship into a strategic partnership. This situation, however, did not prevent Turkey’s quest for friendly relations with Iran. Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, meeting with his Iranian counterpart on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony of the Kapıkoy/Razi border gate on 16 April 2011, stated that “We are declaring to the world that Turkey and Iran will remain friends forever.”³⁷ Ironically, soon after that statement, the “Turkey-Iran friendship” has been overshadowed by a number of concomitant developments.

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

popular uprisings inspired by the Arab spring spread to several Arab countries, challenging the ruling regimes. Among them, the uprising in Syria has affected Turkey-Iran relations most adversely. Both countries initially underestimated early demonstrations against the Assad administration, which held good relations with both countries. Following

Another major blow to Turkey-Iran relations came in September 2011, when Turkey announced that it accepted the deployment of US radars on its soil within the framework of the NATO missile defense shield program

the initial demonstrations in Syria, Turkey supported the Assad administration, provided that he would deliver reforms. Recognizing the need for reform in Syria, Iran also welcomed the “reform package” announced by Assad in April 2011. However, the Syrian regime resorted to violence to repress demonstrations against its government. These political protests

grew daily. Against the background of this escalating violence, unlike Iran that has given unconditional support to the Assad administration, the Turkish government allowed the Syrian opposition to organize in Turkey.³⁸ Iran, however, has described the Syrian opposition as a “puppet of the Zionist regime” and condemned the imperialist powers that aimed at destroying the so-called “resistance front.” Furthermore, the Turkish position towards the Syrian opposition provoked a negative reaction in Iran. The Iranian government has accused Turkey of intervening in the internal affairs of Syria and serving the interests of the imperialist powers to weaken the “resistance front.”³⁹ In return, Turkey has charged the Iranian government with encouraging the Assad regime to pursue a violent crackdown instead of persuading it to make reforms.⁴⁰

Shortly after Turkey and Iran stood on opposite sides over the unrest in Syria, the murkiness surrounding the arrest of the PKK leader Murat Karayilan exacerbated tensions between Turkey and Iran in August 2011. The Turkish Intelligence Agency reportedly informed its Iranian counterpart of the location of the places of sanctuary of Karayilan and his militants in the Iranian region of the Qandil Mountain. In spite of that information, he briefly escaped from being arrested, which led to speculations in the Turkish press arguing that Iran made an agreement with Karayilan against Turkey.⁴¹ Around the same time, both Turkey and Iran were conducting military operations against the PKK and the PJAK, respectively. Soon after the attempted arrest of Karayilan, the PJAK declared a unilateral cease-fire in September 2011, which boosted speculations in Turkey that an “agreement” between the PKK and Iran existed. Iranian authorities, however, rejected those claims. Recently, Foreign Minister Davutoglu said that instead of speculations, official statements of the involved parties should

be taken into account. He also highlighted that “intense cooperation between Turkey and Iran” against terrorism is still under way, which enabled the breakthrough in the strained relations.⁴² Although officials in the two countries denied the existence of such an agreement, the reported Iran-PKK ties resounded in the Turkish media and public opinion.

Another major blow to Turkey-Iran relations came in September 2011, when Turkey announced that it accepted the deployment of US radars on its soil within the framework of the NATO missile defense shield program. Turkish officials argue that because those radars have included only the early warning system and they are merely defense-oriented systems, they do not pose a threat to the security of any of Turkey’s neighboring countries. Despite Turkish protests that the shield is not aimed at Iran and its sole aim is to ensure the security of members of the alliance, many analysts have argued that Iran is the real target of the project. In fact, high-level officials of other leading members of the alliance said that the aim is to prevent Tehran’s long-range missiles. In light of those expressions and against a background of Iran’s skepticism towards the West and NATO, Iran regarded deployment of the radars on Turkish soil as a considerable source of threat to its security for a number of reasons. First, Malatya, where the radar would be deployed, is 1200 km away from Tehran, which would help NATO to easily monitor Iranian military movements. Second, the radar system to be established in Turkey would neutralize any missile attacks. Moreover, it might also damage the capability of Iran to react to any attack; hence undermining its “capacity for deterrence.” Third, Iran was concerned with the Israeli role in deployment of the radar and possibility of intelligence sharing between NATO and Israel. Thus, by undermining Iran’s missile “capacity for deterrence,” it may encourage Israel’s decision to go ahead with military attacks on Iran.⁴³ Therefore, high-level Iranian officials including President Ahmadinejad, Foreign Minister Salehi, and Defense Minister Vahidi voiced their concerns over Turkey’s decision to host a radar system on its soil, which was also severely criticized in the Iranian media.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Turkey and Iran modified their foreign policies in the late 1990s, which evolved from ideological and security concerns to pragmatic considerations. The ascendance of pragmatism on both sides paved the way for the rationalization of Turkish-Iranian relations. The regional context that emerged after the US occupation of Iraq, in which Turkey’s regional policy diverged from the United States and apparently became closer to the Iranian perspective, supported the rapprochement between Tehran and Ankara. As a result of the rationalization,

the two countries have consolidated their bilateral ties and have reached a considerable level of economic interactions.

It appears that structural differences between Iran and Turkey, particularly the latter's ongoing alliance relationship with the West, constituted the major constraint in Turkish-Iranian cooperation, given Iran's "existential" confrontation with the West. Recently emerging sources of tension between the parties could be explained by the realignment of Turkey's relations with the West and reconciliation of Turkish interests with the West in the newly emerging regional context. In the aftermath of the Arab spring, especially in the Syrian case, Turkish interests and politics are again converging with the Western ones. Realignment of Turkey's relations with the West, particularly with the United States, leads to "doubts" among the Iranians about the course of Turkish foreign policy. Thus, the regional context that was conducive for the advancement of Turkish-Iranian relations has been reversed, and has produced sources of tension between Turkey and Iran.

Recently emerging tensions between Iran and Turkey indicate that despite the rationalization of bilateral relations, the specter of former 'modus operandi', which was marked by ideological confrontation, regional rivalry, and security concerns, still continues. Incumbent governments, both in Tehran and in Ankara, tend to downplay "tensions" in bilateral relations and maintain rational politics. However, widespread criticism of Turkish policies in the Iranian media and public opinion, and vice versa, reveal how the future of Turkish-Iranian relations might be one of confrontation rather than rationalization.

Endnotes

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