

Turkey's Iran Policy: Between Diplomacy and Sanctions

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed the fourth round of sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran on June 9, 2010. Turkey, along with Brazil, voted in opposition to sanctions while Lebanon abstained from the vote. Turkey and Brazil's votes were particularly critical because they demonstrated a lack of unity within the international community. The rationale behind Brazil and Turkey's votes derived from the fact that the nuclear swap deal signed by Iran is, so far, the only concrete deal. It represents the only legal basis that the international community can build upon and hold Iran accountable. Although both countries' "no" votes were consistent with their diplomatic efforts, many analysts are criticizing Turkey in particular for not voting with its traditionally strong allies such as the US. Turkey's vote against the new round of sanctions represents an important milestone not because Turkey is abandoning its long-time allies but because Turkey is learning to make its own foreign policy calculations and decisions.

A brief overview of the sanctions passed in the past could help us better situate the latest round of sanctions within the proper context. The attention paid to Iran's nuclear program extends back to January 2002 when President Bush declared Iran to be part of the "Axis of Evil" along with Iraq and North Korea, especially because of their development of long-range missiles. Later in the same year, Iran revealed the existence of two nuclear sites under construction. In October 2003, the UK, France, and Germany (EU-3) reached an agreement with Iran (Tehran Declaration) to cooperate with the IAEA and to suspend its nuclear enrichment and reprocessing activities. These diplomatic efforts were not supported by the Bush administration and the US decided to demonstrate a tough stance against Iran through pressure, military threats, and sanctions.

With the addition of China, Russia, and the US in June 2006, the EU-3 came to be called

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P5+1. In return for Iran's suspension of uranium enrichment, P5+1 offered to stop their efforts to move forward with sanctions. When this offer failed to materialize, IAEA made a more concrete and workable offer to Iran. According to this new offer, Iran would send half of its enriched uranium (1,200 kg) to a third country for a period of one year. At the end of the year, Iran would receive low enriched uranium to be used for medical purposes. This would ensure that the uranium could not be used for any other purpose since it would be in the form of fuel rods. This deal, which was modified in March 2008, constituted the basis of the nuclear deal reached between Iran, Brazil, and Turkey.

Since the Ahmadinejad government's declaration that Iran would start enriching uranium in 2006, negotiation attempts were accompanied by threats of further sanctions. However, P5+1's "dual track" approach, namely pursuing negotiations while pressing for further sanctions, has produced no concrete result in terms of Iran's full cooperation. This approach was developed by the US in order to include Russia and China in pressuring Iran. However, these countries were uncomfortable with proceeding too rapidly towards sanctions, especially considering their own economic and strategic interests in the region.

UNSC passed three rounds of sanctions (1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008)) aimed at halting Iran's nuclear enrichment program prior to the latest one, Resolution 1929 (2010). Despite its various reports on Iran's noncompliance that led to UN sanctions, IAEA remains inconclusive to this day in its assessment of whether Iranian nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. While sanctions may have made it more difficult for the Iranian government to continue its enrichment activities, they have also led to increased tensions in the region.

Turkish Diplomatic Efforts

As one of the most important regional stakeholders, Turkey has engaged with Iran, in full coordination with P5+1 countries, as part of its efforts to reduce tensions and achieve peace and stability in the Middle East. Turkey has its own security concerns and does not want a nuclear arms race in the region. Turkey is all too familiar with the fallout from past sanctions, as they ultimately led to military engagement and have caused wars in the region. Iraq is a good example of this and Turkey's economy and security have suffered greatly from the destabilization created by the invasion of Iraq. Such concerns led to Turkey's involvement in the



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negotiations with Iran especially when the Vienna group's (Russia, France, the US, and IAEA) efforts to reach an agreement with Iran proved unsuccessful.

In the context of Vienna group's failed attempts, Brazil and Turkey offered themselves as negotiators, focusing particularly on the group's nuclear fuel swap offer to Iran. As a nonpermanent member of the UNSC, Turkey believed it was well positioned to assume a mediating role on the Iranian nuclear issue. According to Turkey and Brazil, the international community supported their negotiation efforts with Iran. President Obama's letter to Brazilian president Lula in May 2010 contained both words of encouragement as well as expression of US suspicions about the positive prospects of the Brazilian and Turkish efforts.¹ The significance of this letter has been a matter of controversy, however, as it shows that the American administration may have hedged that the negotiations would not reach a final agreement in the end. This became clear when the US officials quickly downplayed the significance of the agreement, while at the same time, declaring that a deal had been reached over a fresh round of sanctions.

In line with its belief in diplomacy instead of threats and sanctions, Turkey has been pursuing the "diplomatic track" as opposed to the "dual track" approach, adopted by the P5+1 countries on the Iranian nuclear issue. It is in this context that Turkey's "no" vote needs to be understood. The Turkish government has stated time and again that sanctions have been counterproductive and damaging for diplomatic efforts. This was true especially because the agreement over sanctions

Photo: AA, Kyahan Özer

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was declared shortly after the nuclear swap deal was signed. The deal was the most concrete and the only agreement that Iran had signed.

Turkey would have liked to see the international community welcome this development and praise it as the first significant step in achieving Iran's cooperation. Instead, the international com-

munity moved forward with sanctions while simply referring to the Brazilian and Turkish efforts in the text of the Resolution 1929. As one of the three signatories to the nuclear swap deal, Turkey saw no choice but to vote "no" to the sanctions in order to protect its reputation as an honest broker. Standing behind the deal, Brazil and Turkey's intent was to send a message to Iran that channels of negotiation were still open. Iran has continued to comply with its terms by submitting its proposal to the IAEA even after the additional sanctions passed by the US Senate and the EU. While Iranian President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric against additional sanctions has been confrontational, Iran has reaffirmed its commitment to the nuclear swap deal with Brazil and Turkey. The deal is still alive thanks to Brazil and Turkey's votes against the Resolution 1929. If Turkey had not fully stood behind its signature, the only concrete deal could have been jeopardized.

In the aftermath of Resolution 1929, the US and European countries moved quickly to implement and build upon the specific measures of the resolution. Many items in the resolution are focused on banning as well as showing vigilance over financial activities of certain institutions, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as well as military, and private individuals suspected of aiding Iran's nuclear activities. Soon after the US efforts to build and expand upon the resolution's measures, the Russian President Medvedev publicly criticized the US administration for going beyond the scope of the resolution. After meeting with President Medvedev, French President Sarkozy declared that France was ready to engage Iran on the basis of the nuclear swap deal reached by Brazil and Turkey.

In addition to the concerns that the latest round of sanctions will likely achieve very little, there seems to be a serious difference of opinion between the US and Europe as to where the emphasis should lie and on what track the bulk of efforts should be placed. While the US and some European powers are more focused on strengthening the sanctions regime in order to isolate and contain Iran, countries such as Russia and France may be more interested in focusing on the negotia-

tions track. While “dual track” strategy seems logical as a carrot and stick approach, the application of this strategy will probably create frictions within the international community. In turn, this would prevent the international community from achieving its main goal, securing Iran's full cooperation with the international community over its nuclear program. At the moment, P5+1 countries seem to be focused mainly on the sanctions track; however, there are signs that this might change. The ambassadors of the US, France, Great Britain, and Germany recently visited Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu, encouraging Turkey to continue its diplomatic efforts on the Iranian nuclear issue.

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While insisting on diplomacy, Turkey has already declared that it would comply with the UN sanctions and act in accordance with the requirements of Resolution 1929. Effectively, Turkey will have to follow the “dual track” approach adopted by the international community. Yet, the fact that Turkey has reiterated its insistence on the diplomatic track by voting against the sanctions will ensure Turkey's position as a reliable negotiating partner.

Implications of Turkey's “No” Vote for Turkish-American Relations

Turkish-American relations were historically characterized by Cold War dynamics. As the only Muslim-majority member, Turkey played its role in the security structure of NATO as a strategic ally of the US. Since the end of the Cold War, shifting regional dynamics have pushed Turkey to find itself at odds with the demands of its traditional allies, such as the US. This was particularly striking with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when Turkey refused to allow US forces to enter Iraq via Turkey. Turkey was worried that it might have to bear a heavy burden in terms of economic loss and security problems. Turkey was now starting to act upon lessons drawn from previous conflicts in the region.

In search of a foreign policy in sync with the conditions of the post-Cold War era, Turkey has adopted a new approach towards its neighbors. Turkey's neighborhood policy requires that Turkey have a more active role in finding solutions to regional tensions and conflicts. Turkey's activism in the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue is consistent with its attitude to resolve similar regional problems and conflicts. The US, too, is seeking to adjust to the new realities of the Middle East, while trying to maintain its traditionally strong alliances. The two countries

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are in search of a common ground on issues such as the Iranian nuclear issue.

Turkey believes that it can play a unique role that other countries may not

be able to play because of its historical and geo-political advantages in the region. This was the logic at play when Turkey engaged Syria. The criticisms against Turkey leveled at the time argued that Turkey was turning away from the West. But now, the US is considering restoring normal relations with Syria, which were frozen since 2005 in the wake of the Hariri assassination in Lebanon. For Turkey, political engagement and economic integration have, so far, worked with Syria. Syrian engagement could represent an example for the viability of diplomatic initiatives with Iran.

Turkey's "no" vote has been presented as a Turkish vote against US interests especially within Washington political circles. It was interpreted as yet another instance of anti-Americanism on the part of Turkey. Reasons for this type of analyses have more to do with America's domestic political dynamics than America's foreign policy. One of the most important reasons is that US public opinion on Iran has demonized Iran and its regime since the hostage crisis in 1979. President Bush's attribution of the "Axis of Evil" to Iran can be viewed in this context. It was because of this background that President Obama's promise to "engage Iran without preconditions" was the source of a political controversy and even outcry. The Obama administration is forced to show that it is not "soft on Iran," which the sanctions are supposed to demonstrate. The "dual track" approach, in that sense, was a necessity to allow for more engagement with Iran in a political context where most analysts are hawkish in their approach to Iran. Nevertheless, the US will still need to do a lot more on the diplomatic track if it wants to demonstrate its serious commitment to diplomacy despite the domestic constraints. Turkey's consistent emphasis on the diplomatic track will surely enhance Turkey's position as an honest broker in the region and a reliable partner in the international arena.

Another domestic reason why the US wants to appear tough on Iran is the US support for Israel's security in the region. American politicians seem convinced that Iran has every intention of secretly developing nuclear weapons to eventually attack Israel. More balanced reports on the capability of Iranian missile delivery systems show that Iran is far from the necessary precision and sophistication for such an attack. Many analysts in the US cite Iranian officials' statements regarding Israel as proof that Iran is out to destroy Israel. The US political climate is not so enthusiastic about Turkey's arguments that Iran could be rendered a reliable

negotiating partner if enough time and effort were to be spent. Turkey's recent entanglement with Israel in the wake of the flotilla crisis makes this even more difficult. Some circles are ready to "punish" Turkey for its engagement with regional actors that Israel considers a security problem for its existence. Turkey can try and mitigate the impact of misrepresentation of her priorities by making a sustained effort in explaining its policy objectives clearly.

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Turkey's Iran Policy

Although the nuclear swap deal was not met with open arms especially in the US, Turkey will continue its diplomatic efforts. If Turkey were to falter out of frustration, the critiques would portray Turkey as an important but immature diplomatic partner. If Turkey can manage to sustain and speed up the diplomatic track by achieving increased Iranian cooperation, the sanctions track will not have undermined diplomacy as Turkey fears. While acting with the international community on the implementation of sanctions, Turkey may have to intensify its efforts in achieving Iran's full cooperation in order to avoid a more serious stand off between Iran and the international community.

At the same time, Turkey will need to pay special attention not to appear that it supports Iran unconditionally. Those in favor of full isolation and containment of Iran will continue to argue that Turkey's Iran policy is part of its larger move away from the West. Turkey can overcome such criticisms by achieving tangible results in its negotiations with Iran through patient and sustained diplomatic efforts. Iran is a very important political actor in the region despite its serious shortcomings and domestic political instability. Turkey's engagement with Iran can allow it to move towards a more stable political system domestically and acquire recognition internationally. This process will not be easy for Turkey who will find itself having to deal with contradictions between Iran's domestic problems and its foreign policy. At the same time, the demands of the international community may complicate Turkey's position as a negotiating partner strongly committed to diplomacy.

Turkey adheres to a regional vision with political engagement, economic integration, and the free flow of goods and services as the main instruments to achieve peace and stability. However, as we have seen in the recent flotilla crisis, other actors in the region may not necessarily share that vision. Turkey will have

to convince them that peace and stability should not be sacrificed for a narrowly defined sense of security. In a region where political rhetoric can cause much damage, Turkey will need to develop a vocabulary that reduces tensions. Much of the international pressure on Iran derives from certain statements made by Iranian leaders more so than any real danger Iran may pose in the region. Turkey may have to make it an important part of its diplomatic efforts to help Iran adopt a more constructive rhetoric.

At the same time, Turkey needs to better explain its position on the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Such a scenario is a direct threat to Turkey's own security. Turkey is strongly committed to a "nuclear free zone" in the Middle East. Iran is no exception for Turkey. Turkey realizes that its interests are closely tied to stability and peace in the Middle East. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, this would be a seriously destabilizing development with serious implications for Turkey's vision for the Middle East. However, a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, as contemplated by some, would create an equally unstable region. Turkish insistence and commitment to the diplomatic track derive from this desire to move the Iranian nuclear issue away from these two possible "lose/lose" scenarios.

Despite international criticisms, Turkey's "no" vote constitutes a significant milestone in her recent foreign policy initiatives. Turkey needed to stand behind the nuclear swap deal in order to maintain her credibility and show to the international community that Turkey is serious about pursuing diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear issue. It is also indicative of Turkey's ability to initiate, sustain, and develop her own policy perspectives according to her own definition of self-interest. The fact that Turkey's opposition to sanctions was not at the expense of its international alliances will be better appreciated when and if Turkey can convince others of the preeminence of diplomacy.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.politicaexterna.com/archives/11023#axzz0s59oCpkE>.