

# TURKEY AND IRAN: BETWEEN FRIENDLY COMPETITION AND FIERCE RIVALRY

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**Abstract:** The article starts by stressing the distinctive features of Turkish-Iranian relations. It argues that in order to understand the different stages in Turkish-Iranian relations one needs to define the fine line between competition and rivalry, which are usually used interchangeably. It explains the common concerns that united and fostered cooperation between Turkey and Iran as well as the differences that persisted after the US invasion of Iraq. Delineating under what sort of conditions Turkey emerged as a competitor in Iraq, it evaluates the main instruments Ankara and Tehran employed in their efforts to affect the future of that country. In an effort to explain why this competition heightened, carrying the risk of transforming the two countries' relationship to a rivalry, it elaborates on both countries' approaches and concerns *vis-à-vis* Syria and the role of the US in shaping the two countries' interactions.

**Keywords:** Turkish-Iranian relations, Turkish-Iranian cooperation, Syrian conflict, Kurdish question, US Middle East policy, future of Iraq

Most academic works, news articles and commentaries evaluating contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations refer to the Ottoman-Safavi struggle during the early sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Creating an image of the two countries as “eternal enemies” at first sight may seem to offer an easily comprehensible picture of what is currently going on. What it has done in reality, however, is to distance us from actual dynamics and determinants of conflict and cooperation between the two neighbors, which were heavily influenced by US Middle East policy.

This article argues that in order to understand the different stages in Turkish-Iranian relations one needs to define the fine line between competition and rivalry, which are usually used interchangeably. It is true that both denote a contest among opponents. Competition can be positive as well as stressful and aggressive like rivalry. Yet a closer look would reveal that they imply different actions and attitudes. For our purposes it is more important to comprehend that competition would allow both sides to view each other clearly, often enabling them to learn more from losing than winning. In sum, competition may be friendly while rivalry is commonly hostile. Moreover, rivalry is not a dichotomous concept. In other

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words, two separate bins—one holding competition, and the other one rivalry—do not exist. Rather, competition and rivalry may be viewed as a continuum, with very stubborn rivalry at one end and competition at the other end, involving irreducible high-stakes win-lose issues.<sup>2</sup>

In international relations, rivalries often correspond to situations where actors perceive a threat and consequently try to balance each other. As Stephen M. Walt argued, while we evaluate the threat posed by another state we usually take into consideration the state's aggregate strength (size, population, and economic capabilities), geographical proximity and its offensive capabilities. Yet without a display of offensive intentions that often denote threats to vital interests or core values it would not be possible to define the threat or observe balancing behavior assumed to be its outcome.<sup>3</sup>

### **Distinctive Features of Turkish-Iranian Relations**

One of the distinctive features of Turkish-Iranian relations is the element of stability. Stability could be defined as the “probability of the two countries’ continued political independence and territorial integrity without any significant probability of becoming engaged in a war for survival”.<sup>4</sup> In this vein, the most important factor that nurtured a sense of stability between Turkey and Iran has been the common realization that they could not eradicate each other, therefore, they have to recognize each other’s existence. That realization was the result of prolonged wars in which neither of them succeeded in eliminating the other. The rough power balance that exists between the two countries comprises one of the main contributors of stability and non-violent interactions. The long demarcation line that was drawn by the Kasr-i Sirin Treaty (1639) remained mostly intact despite several wars and crises the two countries had gone through.<sup>5</sup>

The history of Turkish-Iranian relations also demonstrates that whenever a window of opportunity emerges that would empower one of these countries at the expense of the other, usually the countries would revise their goals, especially those having to do with territorial gains. That was the case during both the Crimean War of 1853-56 and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. Yet it should also be stressed that they often share a common concern with regard to external powers’ involvement in the region and, as a result, they hesitate to fully cooperate with third parties. Unless they think that their interests are in full harmony with an external power they are inclined to believe that if the status quo disappears and a major power tries to dominate, they would be adversely affected, too. Historically the relationship of the two countries shows that these two contradictory tendencies—using opportunities offered by external powers and preventing these powers to dominate—have co-existed. They were either adopted by different groups inside

of the governing elite or assumed by the same personalities at different times in response to changing conditions. For example, we see that the Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihat ve Terakki Komitesi) did not only aspire to use Iranian territories in order to reach Afghanistan and the Caucasus area to establish a durable influence in Iran, especially in the Kurdish and Azeri regions, it also wanted to guarantee Iran's integrity and sovereignty after the war. That project failed and the Ottoman forces were forced to evacuate Tehran in November 1918. It is interesting to observe that when the balance of power shifted in favor of Iran, Tehran started to demand territory from Turkey during the Paris Peace Conference and then at the Sevres Conference.<sup>6</sup>

Another striking feature of Turkish-Iranian relations is that territorial issues between the two countries often intersected with the problem of controlling Kurdish tribes inhabiting both sides of the border. The history of the two neighbors shows how Turkey and Iran have engaged in a fierce competition to gain the loyalty of and establish patronage over each other's Kurds. The two countries' relations were strained especially after the 1925 Kurdish rebellions in eastern Anatolia. In 1930, when Kurds launched a rebellion around Mount Greater Agri (Ararat) in Turkey, Kurdish bands armed by Armenian nationalists entered Turkey across the Iranian border to support the rebellion. After Ankara asked Iran for a border rectification that put Mount Lesser Agri, the base of the 1930 incursions, inside Turkey in 1931, both countries reached a border agreement in 1932. The agreement gave the entire territory of Mount Agri to Turkey and left Kotur (near Van) to Iran.<sup>7</sup>

When we come to the mid-1980s we see that what strained the two countries' relations was the Iranian involvement in the insurgency launched by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Notwithstanding an agreement signed between Ankara and Tehran in November 28, 1984, prohibiting any activity within their borders which was detrimental to the security of the other, some PKK units had begun to operate in the mountains along the still porous Turkish-Iranian border, and continued to use Iran as a platform from which to strike at targets inside Turkey until the late 1990s. In 1994, Turkey and Iran were drawn into a proxy war between the Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the de facto autonomous Kurdish region, created by the US-led allies in northern Iraq. While Ankara provided support—including arms—to the KDP, Tehran backed the PUK, which had in turn aligned itself with the PKK. The factional fighting lasted until September 17, 1998, when the KDP and the PUK signed a US-brokered peace deal.<sup>8</sup>

Territorial issues alone did not constitute the main cause of friction between Turkey and Iran. While the sectarian divide between the two constitute both a motive and an instrument for Iran's territorial desires over Iraq, the Ottomans' focus was Azerbaijan and the Caucasus region where ethno-linguistic ties seemed

to offer opportunities to establish a sphere of influence. It must be noted that religion was not only used in a sectarian sense, as the goal of unity under Islam was also sought. The utilization of pan-Islamism by the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II (1876-1909) was to remind the Iranians of their “moral responsibilities” to their Muslim brothers. The Ottomans sought pan-Islamism also to curtail Iran’s collaboration with Russian and Armenian revolutionaries during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. After the Islamic Revolution it was Ankara’s turn to accuse Tehran of attempting to export its regime to Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

It could be argued that Turkey and Iran have aspired not to annihilate but to transform each other to become “allied” and “united,” especially against external powers. The almost equal balance of forces between the two countries compelled them to coexist, whereas their ethnic, cultural ties constituted a fertile ground for the aspirations of “unity.” Historically, Turkey and Iran have continually influenced each other and have presented strong alternatives to each other’s political systems. After the Reza Khan coup in 1921, Mustafa Kemal and Reza Shah were determined to oppose external powers, especially the British role and influence in the region.<sup>10</sup> In such an environment Ankara supported the proclamation of the republic in Iran, but after the cessation of the Shi’i ulama’s support to the republican project as a result of the abolishment of the Caliphate by the Kemalist regime, Reza Shah declared a monarchy. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, however, Turkey became an easy destination for regime opponents who were the main targets for Iranian intelligence operatives in Turkey through the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fearing Turkey’s support of Iranian dissidents, Iranian intelligence utilized Turkish Islamists to target foreign diplomats and assassinate prominent Turkish secularists, including the journalists Cetin Emec and Ugur Mumcu and the academics Muammer Aksoy and Bahriye Ucok.<sup>11</sup>

## Dynamics of Cooperation

An examination of the two countries’ relations in the Cold War years reveals that the existence of common enemies has encouraged good neighborly relations and cooperation in the strategic field. The common perception of threat from the Soviets caused Turkey to withdraw its support of the Turks in Iran fearing that disintegration would produce similar separatist activities with regard to its own Kurds. The same fear of possible Communist takeover in Iran, however, led Turkey to openly side with Britain and the West against Muhammad Mussadegh in the early 1950s.<sup>12</sup> After the fall of Mussadegh, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact and its successor, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), but it was only Turkey that became a NATO ally. Ten years later it was the Shah who was disturbed by Menderes’s approach to the Soviets and the new policy designed to build closer

relations with the Arab states. Following the Islamic Revolution, the emergence of a virulently anti-Western, anti-secular regime on Turkey's eastern border should have been cause for concern in Ankara. Turkey officially recognized the new regime, quickly warning the US and the USSR against interfering in Iran's internal affairs. Turkey's balanced diplomacy allowed it to both condemn the storming by Khomeini's supporters of the US embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 and led it to reject a US request to use the airbase at Incirlik in southeast Turkey in the event of military action to try to rescue the hostages. For Turkey, which again worried about the possibility of a civil war and thereafter Soviet control in Iran, the emergence of an "independent" and "non-aligned" Iran was a welcome development. Ankara, thanks to the deterrence already established by the US, was not worried about an aggressive Iran. What disturbed Ankara after the Islamic Revolution, however, was the potential of Iran's Kurds, who had supported the uprising against the Shah, to establish a distinct political entity in the northwest of the country. That is why when Khomeini issued a call to jihad against his government's opponents and the nascent Kurdish nationalist movement was crushed at the cost of thousands of lives, Ankara remained silent.<sup>13</sup>

Temporary strategic alignments between Turkey and Iran did not mean that they were fully exploiting all the opportunities that would provide common benefits. The two major obstacles impeding full-fledged cooperation included ideological factors and the hostility between the US and Iran, both of which have often intersected. Multi-dimensional cooperation first of all required an ideological impetus strong enough to by-pass the conditions created as a result of US-Iran hostility. In this respect it was not a surprise to see that the agreement to import natural gas from Iran was signed in 1997 when the Turkish government was led by the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) whose leader, Necmettin Erbakan, made his first trip abroad to Tehran a year earlier. It was the Turkish leadership's ideological commitment that made this agreement operational in spite of the fact that it was in clear defiance of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which forbade foreign companies from making "investments" in excess of \$20 million a year in Iran's energy sector. The Turkish side demanded the addition of a "take it or pay it" clause to the agreement—that would be detrimental to Turkey's interests in the long run—to avoid potential pressures from the US.<sup>14</sup>

## **Relations in the 2000s**

Turkish-Iranian relations gained a new momentum in the first half of the 2000s after the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power in November 2002. However, any analysis would be incomplete if the emergence of a new Middle East after the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which urged Turkey and Iran

to enter into an implicit strategic alignment, is not taken into account. In fact, both Turkey and Iran were disturbed by the occupation of Iraq. Indeed, there was a similarity between the two countries' approaches to Iraq after the American invasion since they both viewed the developments in Iraq from a security angle. Given the historical background and the record of threats from Iraq, Iran defined the new Iraq as its top-priority national security interest. The Bush Administration's regional policy, which was largely focused on defining Iraq as a counterweight to Iran, building regional alliances against Tehran and establishing long-term military bases at Iran's border, has compelled that country to oppose it. Iran was determined to prevent the US from using Iraq as a base of operations to eliminate Iran and sought to avert Iraq appearing as a unitary and strong state hostile to Tehran next door. Turkey's primary concern was also related to its own security needs. Ankara was especially fearful of the emergence of a US-Kurdish alliance that seemed to be built after Turkey's refusal to allow its soil to be used by American troops during Iraq's invasion. Ankara believed that if Iraq were to break up, not only ethnic violence and ethnic cleansing would be likely to occur, but the spillover effects of that conflict could prove destructive. From the Turkish perspective any alteration of the recognized, already demarcated borders of Iraq was unacceptable. Initially one of the main concerns of Turkey was the violation of the rights of the Turkmen who form Iraq's third largest ethnic group. The idea of an ethnic federation and the Iraqi Kurds' annexation of Kirkuk as well as the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq were strongly opposed by Ankara. Though Turkey intended to continue its fight against the PKK threat through military operations, it faced both American and Kurdish leaders' strong objections. While aspiring to defend Turkmen's rights at international platforms Ankara was unable to receive enough support and felt isolated.<sup>15</sup>

War in Iraq paved the way towards a growing strategic-military alignment between Turkey and Iran on the Kurdish insurgency. Actually that was what Ankara had long aspired for, but never been able to realize. In November 1993 and again in June 1994, Iran publicly pledged to suppress all PKK activity on its territory. In practice, little had changed since Iran held the Kurdish card in Turkey as leverage against possible moves of Ankara, the ally of the West. On July 24, 2004, during Erdogan's first official visit to Tehran, Turkey and Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on security cooperation, which remained limited to shared intelligence and joint operations against Kurdish militants. Ankara wanted to curb the activities of the PKK, which found safe haven in northern Iraq while Iran was fighting with the Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which was formed by a group of Iranian Kurds affiliated with the PKK.<sup>16</sup>

However, Turkish-Iranian alignment in the security area was not solid. Compared to Iran, Ankara's anxieties were much more focused on the possibility

of the spillover of the Kurdish demands for independence and their potential to undermine Turkey's security and stability than on the deployment of American troops in Iraq. Unlike Turkey, Tehran did not take its own Kurdish problem as an issue of primary importance. It felt more confident because of its historical relations with Iraqi Kurdish groups. As long as Iraqi territorial integrity was maintained and, more importantly, Tehran was able to separate its relations with its own Kurds and Iraqi Kurdish groups—controlling the first, while developing ties with the second—there seemed to be no problems. Nevertheless, there has been one major difference. While from Ankara's perspective increasing cooperation with Iran was also expressing a change in Turkey's definition of its identity and, consequently, the perception of its environment, for Tehran it was more as a result of realistic concerns. Intent on developing the two countries' relations beyond existing parameters, Ankara aspired to explore several other possible areas of cooperation. Amicable relations with Ankara offered Tehran the prospect of breaking its international isolation, which has economic repercussions as well as political and diplomatic. However, in spite of the declared economic development projects in this new era, Turkish-Iranian cooperation remained limited. Sanctions imposed on Iran constituted one major impediment. Besides, to the extent that Turkey has been perceived as a US ally, it was not considered a reliable partner. That fact has made Tehran reluctant to take quick and efficient steps towards realizing a multi-dimensional partnership.

There was no room for threat perception for Turkey as a consequence of Iran's nuclear program in an environment in which Ankara desired to expand cooperation in spite of Tehran's hesitancy. In fact, Ankara sought to de-escalate the nuclear crisis and act as a mediator. After several attempts to facilitate dialogue between Iran and the West, on May 17, 2010, Turkey and Brazil managed to persuade Tehran to agree a deal involving the exchange of 1,200 kilos of Iranian low-enriched uranium, which would be temporarily stored in Turkey, for 120 kilos of nuclear fuel. However, the agreement deal was rejected by the US and its allies, who argued that it would have left enough low-enriched uranium in Iran's hands for the production of a nuclear device.<sup>17</sup>

### **Turkish-Iranian Competition over Iraq**

Though Iran did not hesitate to wage war against the US with its proxies fighting in the streets of Baghdad and across the Shi'a south, it did not take long for Iran to approach Iraq from the angle of opportunities that appeared after the toppling of Saddam. Tehran quickly perceived the benefits of sectarian affinity with Iraq since most of Iraq's Shiite leaders were trained and groomed in Iran. It attempted

to empower the Kurds' position at the national level with an eye on balancing their interests through Shi'a groups.<sup>18</sup>

Tehran succeeded in establishing an area of influence in Iraq. Those modes of influence also involved an ambitious expansion of its economic and trade relations. While trade with Iraq became one of Iran's priorities, Iranian merchants and businessmen considered certain parts of Iraq, especially predominantly Shi'a areas such as Basra, to be ideal markets for Iranian exports. In fact, when Tehran's influence in Afghanistan is considered, we see that it was not the first time Iran had pursued an ambitious economic diplomacy to establish zones of influence. As a result, Iran became Iraq's top trading partner; the volume of trade between them reached \$8 billion in 2010, most of it in Iran's favor. Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) have enjoyed growing ties ever since the overthrow of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. Trade and economic relations between Iran and the KRG have made considerable growth over the past 12 years: from \$100 million in trade exchange value in 2000 to \$3 billion in 2011. In 2013 it is expected that the value of trade would exceed \$4 billion.<sup>19</sup>

Ankara was initially an observer of Tehran's economic, political and diplomatic activities. However, its aspiration to build ties with different segments of Iraqi society gradually allowed it to emerge as a competitor. While Tehran continued its asymmetrical fight against the US and its proxies, Turkish business, encouraged by the US, has taken part in Iraqi reconstruction efforts, especially in the Kurdish area. Turkey has learned from Tehran's presence and the policies that it pursued in Iraq. Following the example of Iran, Turkey also started to foster dialogue with all groups. Turkey opened a consulate in March 2009 in the predominantly Shi'a city of Basra to establish a platform for Turkish trade and investment. In this vein it would not be wrong to argue that similar capabilities resulted in similar aspirations for Turkey and Iran.

Besides, Turkey did not shy away from Baghdad and the southern provinces as many international partners of Iraq have done, despite huge security and safety concerns. During the October 2009 visit of a delegation of Turkish businessmen and eight ministers to Baghdad, led by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara signed 48 agreements promising cooperation on trade, oil and gas, transportation, infrastructure, health care, terrorism and several other areas. Consequently, most foreign companies operating across Iraq had become Turkish, including some 100 companies in the southern province of Basra. Of a total of 2,241 foreign companies from 78 countries, 1,085 were registered in Turkey. As of October 2012, Turkish companies represented 48 percent of all foreign companies in the region. In 2011, 8,588 Turkish firms exported some \$8.3 billion worth of goods to Iraq. The export volume increased to \$10.7 billion in 2012, an increase

of 29 percent on a yearly basis. In sum, the Iraqi market became the destination of 7.1 percent of all Turkish exports.<sup>20</sup>

Although during the period following the US invasion Turkish-American relations were strained over Iraq, this rift healed by 2007, leading to a two-year period in which the United States prompted Ankara to play a highly productive role in bringing Iraqi factions together and building a new Turkish relationship with the KRG. In time, important changes in the Turkish approach and policies *vis-à-vis* the Iraqi Kurds became obvious. Turkey was gradually leaving its previous attitude with respect to its strong objections to recognizing the KRG. Several factors have played a role in this transformation. Turkey faced the limits of its power when attempting to bargain with the US. Its economic successes and expanding trade with the Kurdish region and in the Middle East in general increased its self-confidence in a way that it overcame its threat perception.<sup>21</sup>

At the political level, Turkey's rising political competitive position could also be explained by Iran's failures in its strategy. Parties and personalities emerged, both home grown and upon return from exile supported by Iran. Tehran has sought to build balanced relations with all Shi'a factions. It was able to exert great influence upon the Iraqi political process through pro-Iran Shi'a political parties like Hezb Al-Dawa (or Islamic Call Party), the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist. Iran also supported the moderate Sunni factions that have less enmity towards Iran. Initially, Ankara showed sensitivity mainly to Turkmen's rights over Mosul and Kirkuk who traditionally had been concentrated in northern Iraq and had no desire to live in a Kurdish-dominated independent state. Ankara's efforts to use the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITC) from 2003 onwards to unite the Turkmen in a single bloc and maximize their ability to prevent the Kurds from declaring independence brought it into direct competition with Iran.

At the onset, electoral democracy in Iraq was welcomed by Tehran since it advantaged the Shi'a majority. However, the asymmetric war against US targets in which Iran had been involved from 2005 to 2008, produced opposite results. By early 2006 it was apparent that Iraq was descending into an all-out inter-communal civil war with ISCI and Badr brigades which became increasingly militarized. It is important to note that as a result of its covert actions and the support Tehran gave to violent encounters, many Iraqis lost their sympathy for Iran and anyone who had been associated with it during the dark years of the civil war. Its impact on the political front was even stronger. After the suppression of the civil war by the deployment of 30,000 additional American troops, Iran became one of the biggest losers. In spite of the surge strategy implemented by the US, southern Iraq remained under the control of Shi'a militias and disrupted by the occasional Sunni terrorist attacks. Iran's closest ally, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), effectively controlled Basra and other smaller cities in the south. It also controlled Sadr city in Baghdad. That

situation eventually became a personal affront to Prime Minister al-Maliki. It is important to note that after he had ordered an attack, the US also decided to help and when the people of Basra saw that the Iraqi government was determined to take back the city from the Iranian-backed militia, they rose up against it, too, which brought an end to the militia rule in southern Iraq. In the 2009 provincial elections Iraqi political parties with ties to Iran—including both the Sadrist and ISCI—were virtually swept from office. Instead, Iraqis voted overwhelmingly for the most secular parties and those least tied to Iran. Even Muqtada as-Sadr was forced to renounce violence and disband the militia. In the 2010 national elections the same trend continued. Ayad Allawi's Al-Iraqiya Alliance, a cross-confessional, predominantly Sunni, mostly secular coalition of parties that came together in an effort to replace Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, took 91 seats and al-Maliki's State of Law 89 out of a total of 325.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly enough, now it was Turkey's turn to benefit from electoral democracy in Iraq. In 2009-10, Turkey openly opposed a bid by al-Maliki for a second term. The priority given to creating an image of a relatively stable and secure country led Washington to having a fully "inclusive" government. The heated division among the main Iraqi parties created an opportunity for Tehran to bring them around to its preferred solution—a unity government that involved all parties and political interests—that later made it too weak and, in spite of their differences, too dependent on Iran. Turkey strongly reacted to that development. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his displeasure over Iran's growing influence in Iraq after the US withdrew its troops from Iraq in late December. Erdogan complained to US President Barack Obama with these words: "You [US] left Iraq in the hands of Iran once you withdrew."<sup>23</sup>

Al-Maliki, who was keen on protecting his position, ultimately brokered his re-election with Tehran's support. He secured his position by monopolizing power through his personal control over the defense, interior, and intelligence ministries, the politicization of Iraq's judiciary and the central bank, while subverting the army's chain of command and turning its best-equipped, best-trained units into his own praetorian guard. While political opponents have been targeted for arrest, al-Maliki's bent for concentrating power is increasingly being viewed by Kurds as well as Sunnis as veering dangerously in the direction of a new authoritarianism.

### **Political Crisis in Iraq**

The decision regarding the withdrawal of American troops was based on the assumption that Iraq was stable and democratizing. Therefore, there was no longer a need for a large US military presence. In his December 2012 speech, Obama welcomed the troops from Iraq saying, "We are leaving behind a sovereign, stable

and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people.” In contrast to these assumptions Iraq remained a very fragile country whose sovereignty was questionable.<sup>24</sup>

The withdrawal pushed Iraq to the brink of political crisis with shocking speed. On the first day of the US withdrawal, al-Maliki accused Sunni Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi and Finance Minister Rafe al Issawi (both leaders of the political rival Al-Iraqiya Alliance) of being involved in terrorist acts and ordered him to be put on trial. Moreover, he announced that the cabinet had deposed Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Mutlaq, though the Iraqi constitution clearly stipulates that removing the deputy prime minister requires a vote in parliament. While al-Maliki resorted to open threats to form a *de facto* Shiite government if the Sunnis opposed his policies, the Sunnis, who were rejecting federalism, have started to ask for it in order to avoid al-Maliki’s discriminatory and isolating policies implemented against them.<sup>25</sup>

The withdrawal created an area of fierce competition between Turkey and Iran that was kept under control due to the US dominant presence. It was not the first time the two countries had been engaged in a competition to dominate. In fact, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union both wanted to become models for newly independent republics. However, their aspirations remained limited because of the roles of the Russian Federation and the US in that area.<sup>26</sup>

Turkish-Iranian competition over Iraq was indirectly influenced by the two countries’ opposed expectations and approaches towards the Arab upheavals. Ankara and Tehran viewed the uprisings from very different angles. While Tehran reacted to the uprisings by defining them as an “Islamic Awakening” and supported Shi’a uprisings in Bahrain and Egypt, while silencing dissent at home, Ankara saw them as an opportunity to bring the Muslim Brothers to power in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Ankara’s expectations were raised to a level to claim that it had the will and power to lead these developments. Yet the two countries’ differences were not spelled out loudly until the beginning of the Syrian crisis. Even before the worsening of the Syrian crisis, the new steps taken by Ankara to enhance further its relations with the KRG had created disturbances in both Baghdad and Tehran.<sup>27</sup>

Ankara started to believe that, due to its economic investments, not only would it put the Kurdish region under its influence, but also that it would benefit from its energy resources. This approach was often supported by arguments related to Turkey’s energy needs. It has been argued that Turkey’s fast growing economy (as much as 7 percent per year) cannot be sustained without huge additional energy inputs. A total of 29 percent of Turkey’s energy needs are met from oil and another 31 percent from gas. The Turkish government is under pressure to secure the supply of these strategic commodities to drive the growing economy. Turkey imports 98 percent of gas and oil, while domestic production comprises only 2 percent. It is

expected to pay over \$60 billion for its energy needs in 2013, amounting to almost 70 percent of Turkey's current account deficit (CAD). Ankara has undertaken extensive, direct interactions with Erbil. Turkey broadened its energy cooperation with Erbil since 2012, including deals to exchange KRG-produced crude for Turkish-refined products such as heating oil. The KRG and Turkey have agreed—in principle at least—to build a series of pipelines that would allow the Kurds to export oil and gas directly to Turkey and, from there, onward to the rest of the world. It was assumed that establishing a special patronage relationship with the KRG—and its estimated reserves of 40-50 billion barrels of oil and 3-6 trillion cubic meters of natural gas—would not only decrease its heavy dependence on supplies from Russia and Iran, but would also advance Ankara's aspirations of becoming one of the world's most vital oil and gas transport hubs, particularly for exports to Europe. What has complicated the matter is that all revenues from these exports would go directly to the KRG rather than flow first through Iraq's central treasury.<sup>28</sup>

According to Baghdad such deals were illegal and could spark armed conflict against the KRG. Al-Maliki harshly criticized Turkey for what he termed its "surprise interference" in his country's internal affairs, claiming that "Turkey's role could bring disaster and civil war to the region." Ankara defended itself, arguing that it wanted to benefit from all of Iraq's potential, not just the 20 percent represented by northern Iraq. Turkish involvement was not just limited to KRG, but also included government contracts in the south of the country. Still Turkey's trade volume with Iraq is around \$15 billion, the bulk of which is with the KRG, while only \$4 billion is with the rest of the country.<sup>29</sup>

Ankara's explanations did not soften Nouri al-Maliki's government reaction. In fact the al-Maliki government fired a shot across Turkey's bow by expelling TPAO from an exploration deal in oil-rich Basra province over political disputes between Baghdad and Ankara. The message was clear that the Shiite prime minister would target Turkish companies doing business in Iraq in response to Ankara's criticisms of the central government's marginalization of Kurds, Sunnis and some Shiite groups not aligned with Iran. In such a tense climate not only was Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yildiz's plane denied permission to land in the northern Iraqi city of Arbil in December 2012, but Turkey was also criticized by the central government of Iraq for Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's visit to the oil-rich Iraqi city of Kirkuk without consulting the Iraqi authorities first.<sup>30</sup>

The issue became a concern for Washington, which viewed Ankara's feud with al-Maliki as unnecessary and counterproductive. Yet the Turkish government showed its determination to drive a hard bargain in the energy game in its immediate and extended neighborhood where usually bigger powers are considered to be final arbiters on the distribution of hydrocarbon resources. It has rejected Washington's

concerns based on its reading of the Iraqi constitution and the presence of numerous American oil companies in the KRG. According to some scenarios, barter deals and Turkish investment in the KRG would escalate confrontations in Iraq that could lead to the dissolution of that state in a way in which its territories might be divided between Turkey and Iran, a development that would not please the US.<sup>31</sup>

## The Syrian Imbroglia

Turkish diplomats initially tried to find a quick solution to the Syrian crisis by supporting radical reforms that would include the opposition in the political process. At that stage, even Iran was advising Assad, through its president and the secretary general of Hezbollah, to open dialogue with the opposition. But Ankara was frustrated by Assad's intransigence, his cosmetic reforms and decision to pursue the military option. After that, Turkey excused itself from the role of mediator and became party to the long conflict alongside the opposition.

Turkey's standing against the Syrian regime brought uncalculated consequences, transforming Ankara's perception of Syria from an opportunity to a security threat in multiple dimensions. Tensions escalated between Turkey and Syria when the latter shot down a Turkish F-4 Phantom warplane on June 22, 2012. A year later on September 16, 2013 a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Syrian military helicopter after it entered Turkish airspace ignoring repeated warnings to leave.<sup>32</sup> The same year a deadly combination of car bombs, artillery shells and stray gunfire have spilled across the frontier, leaving over 70 Turks dead. Furthermore, radical Islamist groups have fought battles with moderate rebel forces and Kurdish militia increasingly close to Turkey's porous border, leaving scores of Turkish citizens injured by stray bullets.<sup>33</sup>

It was the Syrian crisis that changed Turkey's and Iran's approaches to Iraq and, consequently, to each other, in a way that would carry the potential of the transformation of Turkish-Iranian relationship from competition to a state of rivalry. Unlike Ankara, the Iranian leaders' top priority has been to prevent the fall of the Assad government since they have lost the Palestinian card after the Hamas leadership left Damascus and the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Egypt. In this respect the survival of the Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad, is regarded by Tehran to be of vital interest for the preservation of the Islamic regime. Tehran has been worried that such a fall would trigger several crises for the Iranian leadership: It would impact its influence in the Middle East, threaten Hezbollah's ability to dominate events in Lebanon, and could encourage unrest in Iran. Iran is extremely troubled by the upheavals in the region because of the Kurdish issue. Bengio argues that "if the upheavals reach Iran, the Kurds in that country will be the pioneer for change because of the double repression under the Islamic republic,

the synergy of cooperation with the other parts of Kurdistan, and the nationalist fervor among organizations in the diaspora.”<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the common fear from a post-Assad Syria, related to the possibility of Sunni forces taking power in Damascus, united Iran and the central government in Baghdad. For al-Maliki the most frightening aspect of the crisis is the probability that the Sunni awakening in Iraq would grow if the Assad regime falls. Iraq’s four Sunni-dominated provinces (al-Anbar, Salah ad-Din, Ninawah and Diyala) have been signaling that they will seek regional status, as allowed by the federalism procedures of Iraq’s constitution. Al-Maliki has insisted that such moves would be illegal, despite the fact that they are clearly mandated by the constitution. Iraq’s support of Iran’s allies, particularly Syria, compelled it to take several steps. Baghdad has maintained a direct relationship with the Syrian regime and refused entry to Syrian refugees, which is in contravention to Iraq’s international obligations. In contrast, it was claimed that the Iraqi authorities have allowed militia volunteers to go to Syria to defend the Syrian regime. Moreover, Iraq has allowed the passage of Iranian aid to Syria, even though Iranian aircraft crossing Iraqi airspace were supposed to be searched. Baghdad has also provided Syria with discounted oil to meet the growing needs of Syria’s military operations.<sup>35</sup> A recent step showing the willingness of Iran and Iraq to expand their alignment involved the signing of an agreement on mutual security, political and cultural cooperation in March 2013.<sup>36</sup>

### Indicators of the Deterioration of Turkish-Iranian Relations

Turkey’s Syrian policy has been harshly condemned by Tehran. An article that entitled “Iran’s Serious Stance in the Face of Syrian Events,” that was published in one of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ media outlets warned that

[s]hould Turkish officials insist on their contradictory behavior and if they continue on their present path, serious issues are sure to follow. We will be put in the position of having to choose between Turkey and Syria. Syria’s justification in defending herself along with mirroring ideological perceptions would sway Iran towards choosing Syria.<sup>37</sup>

Turkish politicians were also outspoken in criticizing Tehran’s failure to object to the growing civilian death toll in Syria as observed in Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc’s message delivered at a meeting of the Women’s Branch of the AKP in which he said, “I am addressing you, the Islamic Republic of Iran,” “You bear the word Islamic, but I don’t know how deserving you are of it. Over the last two days have you uttered one sentence about what is happening in Syria?”<sup>38</sup>

Ankara’s frustration with Tehran has other dimensions as well. Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yildiz, who has long been uneasy over

Iran's policy of charging too much for gas that it has been supplying to Turkey, announced on March 14, 2012 that Turkey had decided to take this country to an international court of arbitration over the price of Iranian natural gas as Tehran refused to offer a discount. The agreement between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds to build a natural gas pipeline to transport at least 10 billion cubic meters of gas annually would represent only just over a fifth of Turkey's current consumption. It has been claimed that when Yildiz complained about Iran during a cabinet meeting, he not only accused the country of being unappreciative of Turkey's gestures, he allegedly criticized Davutoglu over his handling of the Tehran regime.<sup>39</sup> According to Turkish media there has been a divergence of opinion between Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Though it is difficult to know which approach will dominate the future of Turkish-Iranian relations, steps towards lessening Turkey's dependence on Iranian gas are continuing.

Besides verbal accusations there have been changes in the military-strategic field that could be taken as more serious indicators of the nature of the two countries' relationship. Adopting a neo-realist view, one could assert that since a perception of threat would result in an arms race or alliance building, depending upon the power capabilities of the concerned state, these outcomes could also be taken as indicators of emerging or continuing rivalries. However, Turkey has long been a NATO ally. Therefore, the issue is not alliance building, but whether or not and to what level its goals match that of the alliance. On September 2, 2011, Turkey announced that it had agreed to deploy an early warning radar at Kurecik in eastern Anatolia, about 435 miles (700 kilometers) west of the Iranian border on its territory, as part of NATO's missile shield. Although Turkish officials were careful to avoid admitting that it was primarily targeted at Iran, Iranian officials issued a string of furious denouncements of the Turkish decision accusing the AKP of serving Western interests by participating in a direct threat to Iran's security that, they predicted, would also be used by Israel if it decided to launch an attack on Iran. In response to Ankara's support for the Syrian opposition, Tehran also threatened to strike the NATO missile shield in Turkey in case of an Israeli-American attack. However, the Iranian Foreign Ministry later gave assurances that those threats were not official policy.<sup>40</sup>

Iran was further outraged by NATO's decision to deploy six Patriot batteries at Turkey's request after a shell killed five civilians in the Akcakale district of Sanliurfa province in 2012. Tehran viewed the deployment of NATO Patriots as more of a provocation than a deterrent. According to Tehran the deployment has demonstrated how Western powers were maintaining their military presence in the region even in the environment of Arab uprisings.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are all aligned with the opposition against Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad and therefore, indirectly,

against Tehran. However, because of obvious differences among the three countries as exemplified by Saudi financial backing of the Egyptian military after the ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, and Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's choice to support different factions in Syria, it does not seem possible to define this grouping as a serious alliance-building activity that would strongly threaten Iran's vital interests.

### **Uncalculated Consequences**

Ankara's worsening relations with Syria and Iran brought two closely related developments that threaten Turkish security: the possibility of the PKK to re-engage in armed struggle and the regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish problem. In August 2009, the Turkish government announced that it would undertake a major opening towards Turkey's Kurdish minority, known as the "democratic opening." However, the return of 34 PKK members from northern Iraq home to Turkey backfired badly when these Kurdish expatriates were met by huge welcoming crowds at the Habur border crossing and later in Diyarbakir.<sup>42</sup> Beginning in the summer of 2011, Ankara stepped up its war against the PKK to unprecedented levels on all fronts and, simultaneously, put into effect a Syrian policy that sought to topple the Assad regime and replace it with a "brotherly regime" dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. In the second half of 2011, PJAK paying attention to the PKK's counsel pulled its military forces to their bases in the KRG, thereby ending the military struggle against Iran. However, clashes between PJAK and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps have continued, with deaths on both sides. This development, which preceded the US withdrawal from Iraq by a few months, was interpreted as an indication of the harmonization of the PKK's military wing base at Kandil Mountains with the Tehran-Damascus axis.

The government of Iran has reversed its longstanding anti-Kurdish policies to bolster Assad and increased pressure on Ankara by providing the Kurdish fighters with a degree of logistical support, free passage, and refuge in a way to greatly reinvigorate the Kurdish armed struggle against Turkey. The increased terror actions in the summer of 2012 posed a serious threat to Turkey's national security. Furthermore, Ankara's direct or indirect support of Syrian rebels also led to the regionalization of Turkey's Kurdish issue. While Assad's forces lost most of the control of the border areas adjacent to Turkey, the Kurds living in the areas close to the Turkish border benefited from the situation and in the summer of 2012 declared their autonomy. In addition to the PKK presence in Iraq, another hostile autonomous region in Syria under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian branch of the PKK, was created. Indeed it is this environment that necessitated Ankara to seek peace with the Kurds in Turkey.<sup>43</sup>

Soon after Abdullah Ocalan called off the hunger strikes that were initiated on September 12, 2012 by around 60 Kurds being held in Turkish prisons who were demanding an end to Ocalan's solitary confinement, the Erdogan government announced its intention to restart formal negotiations with the Kurds and work directly with Ocalan as their representative. It should be noted that Ocalan threatened the Turkish state government by stating, "If I do not succeed, then Turkey will have to suffer from a civil war."<sup>44</sup> In January 2013, the talks with Ocalan reconvened. In this equation the KRG is increasingly viewed as part of the solution to Turkey's most pressing national security threat and a potential ally in delegitimizing PKK violence and encouraging a broader political accommodation that fully reconciles the Turkish state and its Kurdish populace. However, the stumbling blocks in "the solution process" have not altogether disappeared.

As for Tehran, the withdrawal of about 4,000 PKK militants from Turkey is a frightening development. Iranian officials have serious fears that the PKK will join with the Iranian Party PJAK to focus on the struggle against Iran. The wave of arrests of Iranian Kurdish politicians revealed Tehran's fears.<sup>45</sup> The situation became more complicated after PJAK warned President Hassan Rouhani that if Tehran continues military operations against Kurdish forces in Iran, the group will "turn Iran into a second Syria."<sup>46</sup>

## **Ankara's Syrian Dilemma and its Relations with the US**

With more than 200,000, Syrian refugees sheltering in camps,<sup>47</sup> Ankara has seriously considered interventionist measures, such as establishing a buffer zone within Syria. In the aftermath of Syrian firing into refugee camps near the border, Turkey has also threatened to invoke Article 5 of the NATO charter, which obligates all members of the organization to come to the defense of any member who is attacked.

Meanwhile, several important developments, especially with respect to the Kurds, required Ankara to revise its position. The main principle, which was expressed in the intention to get rid of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, remained unchanged. France, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are against a political settlement that entails negotiating with the regime. They maintain their uncompromising stances and demand military intervention or weapons assistance to the opposition. There is, however, neither a European consensus on the problem nor the prospect of US military intervention. While Germany does not favor such a tough position, since it has to pay attention to Russia because of the two countries' energy cooperation, France and Turkey alone cannot achieve regime change in Syria. The US does not see the armed opposition as an alternative to the Assad regime. It, rather, views the Syrian armed opposition as being made up of mostly

anti-US and anti-Israel groups, without clear political platforms and some even linked to al-Qaeda. In such an environment the most disturbing for Ankara are the open statements of American experts in favor of maintaining a stalemate in Syria. For example, according to Luttwak, it would be disastrous if President Bashar al-Assad's regime were to emerge victorious after fully suppressing the rebellion and restoring its control over the entire country. But a rebel victory would also be extremely dangerous for the United States and for many of its allies in Europe and the Middle East. Since a victory by either side would be equally undesirable for the United States a "prolonged stalemate" is the only outcome that would not be damaging to American interests.<sup>48</sup> Ankara—which, as opposed to its allies, directly faces a security risk—is worried about a collapse of the state structure in Syria that would mean long-term instability in that country.<sup>49</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

It seems unlikely that the Turkish-Iranian struggle over Iraq and Syria can be understood without taking into account the US factor. In fact, Iraq became an area of competition between Turkey and Iran because of the power vacuum created after the American invasion, and this competition was exacerbated after the withdrawal of American forces. In a similar manner the two countries had engaged in a competition to present themselves as models to the Central Asian Republics just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, now a country in their close neighborhood is the subject. Turkey and Iran have long been urged to respect each other because of their comparable power capabilities. In Iraq the same element led Ankara to redefine its approach and instruments in a way to match those of Iran, but with one big difference which has been the US advice and support given to Ankara-Arbil relations. The Arab Spring further elevated Turkey's self-confidence and convinced it to create a new order in its orbit. This psychology resulted in Ankara's bold and fast reactions in the Syrian crisis. However, Iran has a vital interest to preserve the Syrian regime. Turkey and Iran almost went into a proxy war over that country. The prolongation of the Syrian war transformed Turkey's perception of this country from a window of opportunity to a threat in multiple dimensions with the Kurdish problem being the most important. Turkey's preventive efforts to manage the problem created discomfort in Iran. Though there are signs indicating a growing threat perception between Turkey and Iran, for Ankara it would not be easy to spoil all its relations with Tehran, especially after having been frustrated with US policy in Iraq and its inaction in Syria. The dialogue environment that was recently created between Iran and the US could raise Ankara's willingness to repair its Syrian strategy through Iran. Today, just as in the past, the two countries' relations seem to be locked in issues related to the

Kurds. What they can do, rather than what they want, will determine their future as well as that of the region.

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