

# Turkey and Iran Geopolitical Approaches in the Middle East

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## Key Points

- Turkey and Iran each have agendas, and both project power regionally with ambitions towards sovereignty and control.
- Turkey and Iran are constantly coordinating strategies throughout the Middle East as they collaborate on various issues.
- The current strength of Turkey and Iran economic relations offsets some of the tensions over their geopolitical differences.
- Economic relations between Turkey and Iran have undergone a significant expansion in the last decade.
- The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq has created a power vacuum and shifts the regional balance of power.
- Turkey and Iran have some convergent interests regarding the Kurds.
- The differences between the US and Turkey on the Iranian nuclear issue are primarily over tactics, not strategic goals.

## Introduction

Historically, Turkish-Iranian relations were characterized as a mix of both cooperation and competition. Each of the two has its own agenda and regionally projects power with ambitions towards sovereignty and control. The worsening of the Middle East's regional situation has provided an opportunity for the two countries' aspirations to expand. Repercussions regarding civil unrest and the disintegration of many AOR countries continue with the increase in terrorism, the spread of armed militias in the face of governments. The growth in militia loyalties to other countries such as Turkey and Iran leads to prolonged conflicts in the region. The level of cooperation between the two countries, however, should not be overstated. Turkey and Iran have historically been rivals rather than close partners. While they may share particular economic and security interests, their interests are at odds in many Middle East areas. The political identities and ideologies of the two countries are radically different.<sup>1</sup> The political and ideological rivalry between Turkey and Iran has intensified as a result of the Arab Spring. The fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have undermined

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<sup>1</sup> Meghdad Ebrahimzadeh Shermeh, "Middle East Places in Iran and Turkey Foreign Policy," International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research, October-December 2016, <https://researchpublish.com/upload/book/Middle%20East%20Places%20in%20Iran%20and%20Turkey-4046.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2021).

the Middle East's political order. Turkey and Iran both have sought to exploit the emerging "new order" in the region to achieve their respective interests in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

## Analysis

Iran and Turkey are constantly coordinating strategies throughout the Middle East as they collaborate on various issues. The strengthening of coordination between them is due to economic and geopolitical reasons. Iran is the leading supplier of oil and natural gas to Turkey through a joint pipeline.<sup>3</sup> The two countries both have issues regarding the Kurds in the region, and seek to thwart attempts to establish a Kurdish state.<sup>4</sup> Their cooperation grew out of mutual opposition to the US role in Syria, and the desire to reduce the US role in the region generally, allowing the opportunity to expand their ambitions. They have other common interests linked to their hostility towards Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The sudden convergence of geopolitical and security interests between Iran and Turkey, and Iran's closeness, in particular, comes as a result of Iran's growing economic pressures due to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. On the other hand, Iran seeks to secure trade with Turkey and reduce its regional isolation. The two countries still compete as rivals, despite what they may share in terms of specific economic and security interests. Their interests conflict in several areas in the Middle East, and unless there is a direct confrontation between them, they may push to employ other agents to confront and implement their strategy.

## Economic

The current strength of Turkey and Iran economic relations offsets some of the tensions over their geopolitical differences. Economic relations between Turkey and Iran have undergone a significant expansion in the last decade. Trade rose from about \$1 B in 2000 to \$10 B in 2010. The two sides have plans to triple the volume of trade to \$30 B in the future. Energy has been an essential driver of the expansion of economic ties between Ankara and Tehran. Iran is also the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, behind Russia. Iran provides close to 40% of Turkey's imports for crude oil.<sup>5</sup>

However, Turkey's energy ties to Iran have been a serious irritant in US-Turkish relations. In November 2008, Ankara concluded an agreement with Iran regarding the export of Iranian gas to Europe and the joint exploitation of Iran's gas reserves. Turkey agreed to invest \$5.5 B in the South Pars field in Iran to produce 20–35 B cubic meters of gas annually. Ankara was to receive operation rights from three offshore gas fields in South Pars. However, the US strongly objected to the deal, and under US pressure, Turkey shelved the agreement.

Non-energy trade between Iran and Turkey is also substantial. In addition to oil and gas, Iran exports industrial products to Turkey. According to Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, Turkey is the fifth most significant destination for Iran's non-oil exports. Turkey, in return, exports up to \$3 B in goods to Iran, including agricultural

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<sup>2</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader, "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East," Rand.org, 2013, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND\\_RR258.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND_RR258.sum.pdf) (accessed April 13, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Omid Shokri Kaleshar, "Energy Factor in Iran-Turkey Relations," JSTOR.org, 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90006269?seq=1> (accessed April 20, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Max Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict," Center for American Progress. August 12, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/08/12/473508/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/> (accessed April 20, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Ceylan Ozbudak, "As Iran and the U.S. talk, Turkey's stock rises again," *Alarabiya News*, May 20, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2013/11/30/As-Iran-and-the-U-S-talk-Turkey-benefits-again> (accessed April 13, 2021).

products, automobiles, and machine parts. Turkish companies have also made substantial investments in nonenergy sectors of the Iranian economy, including real estate.<sup>6</sup>

Although Iran-to-Turkey flow of goods have grown significantly, Iran's closed economy poses significant difficulties for Turkish exporters. These problems include high tariffs on consumer goods, frequent changes in tariff rates, delays in import permits, overpriced fuel during transport, and prolonged delays at customs gates. These obstacles have caused many exporters to curtail business with Iran and seek more hospitable markets for their products.

Such limitations do not necessarily mean that Iranian-Turkish export ties will drop. Both countries will continue economic cooperation despite challenges posed by US interests and policy. However, Iranian-Turkish ties will face considerable challenges in the future. Given these obstacles, many Turkish businessmen are likely to limit their risks and look for investment and trade opportunities where the economic climate is more attractive and predictable.

Over the longer term, Turkey's relative economic success may give it an advantage over Iran in the Middle East and beyond. Iran may become too dependent on Turkey, especially as it faces increased isolation over its nuclear program. Iranian leaders do not appear to be worried about any potential imbalance in Iran's economic relationship with Turkey. Turkey's active policy of expanding its regional influence directly contradicts Iranian objectives in the Middle East.

### **The Syrian Crisis**

The most important factor contributing to the growing strains in relations has been Turkey's support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Turkey increased its criticism of Assad's policies and strengthened ties to the Syrian opposition, allowing it to organize and hold meetings on Turkish soil.<sup>7</sup> The growing tensions between Turkey and the Assad regime have created deep anxiety in Tehran. Assad's regime is Iran's closest ally in the Middle East as the partnership between the two countries dates to the beginning of Iran's revolution. Although ideologically and religiously different, Syria and Iran have shared many geopolitical interests, from opposing Saddam Hussein's Iraq, to resisting Israeli and US influence and power in the Middle East. Both countries are patrons of Hezbollah, Lebanon's most powerful political and paramilitary actor. Syria and Iran also share concerns about Turkey's ambitions and policies in the Middle East.

Assad's fall from power would endanger Iran's ties to Hezbollah. The Islamic Republic relies on Syria as a conduit of weapons and funds to its Shia ally. Turkey's interdiction of Iranian arms shipments to Syria is particularly worrisome for the Iranian regime because Assad's downfall could hinder Iranian arms supplies to Hezbollah. The toppling of the Syrian regime could also lead to increased internal instability in Iran. If the Syrian political system can be changed through popular demonstrations, Iranians may believe that sustained mass public demonstrations and even active violence could achieve similar results in their own country.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader, "Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East," Rand.org, 2013, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND\\_RR258.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND_RR258.sum.pdf) (accessed April 13, 2021).<sup>8</sup> Meghdad Ebrahimzadeh Shermeh, "Middle East Places in Iran and Turkey Foreign Policy," International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research, October-December 2016, <https://researchpublish.com/upload/book/Middle%20East%20Places%20in%20Iran%20and%20Turkey-4046.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2021).

### The Iraqi Issue

Iraq has also become a field of growing competition between Turkey and Iran. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq has created a power vacuum and could eventually shift the regional balance of power, especially if Iraq backs Iranian policies toward KSA and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Iraq's foreign policies are currently more aligned with Iran than any other regional country. Iraq has expressed support for the Assad regime and has allowed Iran to use Iraqi territory and airspace to ship weapons to the Syrian regime. Iraq also remains antagonistic toward Iran's archfoe: KSA. Iran views Iraq as a critical ally to the realization of its national security ambitions. From the Iranian perspective, it is vital Iraq remain a weak, friendly, and pliant state that supports Iranian national security interests. Religious factors also influence Iranian policy. Two of Shia Islam's holiest sites are located in Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq. Iran's Shia theocracy would like to ensure that Iraq and its clerical establishment do not emerge as a threat to Iran's concept of religious rule or 'velayat-e faghih' (rule of the supreme jurist).<sup>8</sup> Turkey is an obstacle to Iran's ability to achieve its political ambitions in Iraq. Ankara has a strong interest in the emergence of a politically stable, independent, and economically prosperous Iraq aligned with Turkish interests. It does not want Iraq to become an Iranian client state. However, Turkey lacks Iran's close ties to key Shia political actors and parties, such as The Islamic Dawa Party and the Sadrist block.<sup>8</sup> It also does not have an active intelligence and paramilitary presence like Iran. However, Turkey has established strong economic and political ties to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Iran also maintains close political and economic relations with the KRG with trade at about \$12 B in 2020. However, Iran's relations with the KRG are not as close as those of Turkey and have been marred by periodic tensions. Iranian officials have accused the KRG of facilitating Kurdistan Free Life Party attacks on Iranian territory.

Political competition between Turkey and Iran in Iraq has intensified in the last several years. The two countries backed opposing political blocs during Iraq's previous parliamentary elections, with Iran supporting Shia parties and Turkey backing the secular and Al-Iraqiya coalition. But while many Iraqis view Iranian policies as sectarian, Turkey has tried to portray itself in a nonsectarian light.

### The Kurdish Issue

Turkey and Iran have some convergent interests on the Kurdish issue. Both countries have significant Kurdish minorities on their soil and do not want to see an independent Kurdish state's emergence. Iran has fought a lowlevel insurgency by the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But recent tensions over Syria have made cooperation on the Kurdish issue more complicated. The Kurds are one of the biggest winners of the unrest in Syria. As Assad's hold on power has weakened, the Kurds in Syria have begun to press for local autonomy. They want a status similar to the one the Kurds in Iraq enjoy—in effect, de facto independence while legally remaining part of Syria. If the Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds succeed in gaining local autonomy, pressure for the Turkish Kurds to be granted similar rights is bound to grow, exacerbating Turkey's internal divisions. Many 'Kemalists' see Kurdish calls for autonomy as the first step down the slippery slope leading to the Turkish national state's territorial dismantlement, and are likely to strongly oppose granting the Kurds local autonomy. Shared interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state has led the two countries to share intelligence regarding the PKK and, on occasion, to coordinate attempts to combat PKK and PJK attacks. Turkey and Iran intensified cooperation to protect their borders, and increase intelligence coordination and other activities against the PKK.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Al Monitor*, "Biden's diplomatic triage in Turkey," August 28, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/08/biden-diplomatic-triage-turkey-syria-policy-iran.html> (accessed April 13, 2021).

For Iran, the prospect of a possible end to the PKK insurgency raises difficulties. Iran has no interest in seeing an end to the PKK insurgency because this would deprive Iran of an essential means of putting pressure on Turkey. Thus, the Islamic Republic may support die-hard splinter groups in Turkey and Syria to keep the PKK insurgency alive and maintain pressure on Turkey.

### **The Arabian Gulf Issue**

Turkey is exploiting the strategic changes taking place within the Gulf states, to include normalizing relations with Israel and reconciliation with Qatar, to increase its presence in the Gulf and engage in it as an influential regional actor. Although the four countries (KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) have set thirteen conditions to end the Qatar boycott, with one of them related to the cessation of the Turkish military presence in Qatar. It seems that within the framework of the Al-Ula January 2021 summit, this matter has been ceded, perhaps because such presence does not constitute a perceived threat. Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait did not object to it and there were statements by senior officials in some Gulf countries regarding the importance and necessity of Turkey's relations.<sup>10</sup> Turkey is now talking about an advanced relationship with the Gulf states and a multi-level strategic partnership that could amount to a kind of alliance that balances the Israeli presence. Turkey is a party to the equation of the strategic balance in the Gulf. And it benefits from that in the context of its dealings, whether with Iran, Israel, or the US.

This recent Turkish move coincides with the movement that began when the Biden US administration (which gave contradictory messages to several Gulf countries) waved some sanctions, and proposed a different policy for dealing with Iran. On the sidelines of that movement, observations indicate that Turkey has started to make a more positive move in the Gulf region. Turkey wanted to invest in the climate of openness that followed the reconciliation and present itself first to countries that have positive lines of communication with it.

### **The Palestinian Issue**

The Palestinian issue provides an area of rivalry between Turkey and Iran. Iran views its opposition to Israel as enhancing its popularity in the Arab world. But Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's strong support for the Palestinians has stolen Iran's thunder and has been an essential factor contributing to the deterioration of Ankara's relations with Israel. Perhaps the issue of US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will be Turkey's next point of to mobilize popular support at home and in the region.

### **Nuclear Issue**

The Iranian nuclear program is one of the most sensitive and controversial issues in Turkish-Iranian relations. The outcome of Iran's atomic drive will have significant implications not only for bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran, but also for the two countries' relations with their neighbors, allies, and adversaries. A nuclear Iran could significantly affect the regional military balance in the Middle East and could force Turkey to rethink aspects of its military posture.

Iran's nuclear program is primarily motivated by a sense of fear and vulnerability. The 2001 US defeat of the Taliban and 2003 invasion into Iraq demonstrated America's far superior conventional military capabilities. Iran's relatively

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<sup>10</sup> Aya Batrawy and Amr Nabil, "Gulf Arab leaders sign declaration to ease rift with Qatar," *AP News*, January 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/bahrain-qatar-iran-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates-8f18052ac759900cfb20b19f89baf369> (accessed April 24, 2021).

antiquated military would be no match for US forces in a conventional conflict. Hence, Iran sees a nuclear weapon capability as a deterrent against US military threats. Regional rivalries with Israel and KSA also influence Iranian nuclear policy. The Islamic Republic has traditionally viewed Israel as an ideological yet distant enemy. Iranian nuclear weapons could also offset KSA's growing military capabilities, especially in light of the massive US arms sales to the kingdom.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are also driven by a desire to be seen as a great power by Muslims worldwide. Iranian leaders may believe that a nuclear Iran may be viewed as an advanced nation, on par with Western countries. After all, much of the Arab world depends on the US for its military and technological needs. From Iran's viewpoint, it is the only Muslim nation in the Middle East that has developed self-sufficient scientific and military capabilities.

External and internal factors will shape Iran's ultimate standing in the world. The external factors are Iran's threat perceptions and the state of its rivalries with the US, Israel, and KSA. Internal characteristics, including Iran's domestic politics, will also play a significant role in shaping the Islamic Republic's nuclear decisions.

Iran's nuclear program is a crucial concern in Ankara, especially within the Turkish military. Turkey does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Ankara does not think there is a significant danger that Iran would launch a premeditated nuclear attack on Turkey. Ankara fears that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could unleash a highly destabilizing regional nuclear arms race and prompt other states in the region, particularly Egypt and KSA, to try to acquire a nuclear arsenal of their own. Such a development would have far-reaching implications for Turkish security and force Ankara to rethink its strategic options, including developing its nuclear capability.

Publicly, Turkey has downplayed Iran's nuclear program's dangers, stressing that Iran has the right to develop a peaceful program. This low-key approach has put it at odds with the US and its key NATO allies, which have been more vocal in their concerns regarding the dangers of Iran's nuclear policy. However, the differences between the US and Turkey on the Iranian nuclear issue are primarily over tactics, not strategic goals. Both countries want to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. They differ, however, on how best to achieve that goal.<sup>11</sup>

In principle, Turkey opposes sanctions against Iran, although it has grudgingly carried out UN-imposed sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Its opposition is heavily influenced by its bitter experience with sanctions during the 1990–1991 Gulf War. Iraq was one of Turkey's most important trading partners, and Turkey suffered substantial economic losses due to its support of sanctions against Iraq. Turkish officials argue that quiet diplomacy is likely to have more effect in moderating Iranian behavior in the long run than overt efforts to isolate or punish the regime.

However, as the Middle East's security environment has deteriorated, Turkish public attitudes toward Iran and Turkey's acquisition of nuclear weapons have hardened. A growing number of Turks now think Turkey should consider a nuclear option if Iran acquires one. This does not mean that Turkey is likely to go nuclear. At least for now, arguments against Turkey acquiring nuclear weapons are strong. The argument against acquiring nuclear capabilities is Turkey is a firm supporter of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and decision to develop nuclear weapons would require Turkey to withdraw from it. Also, any attempt to acquire nuclear weapons would put

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Emerson, "There is a growth alternative to cutting company taxes," Australian Financial Review, June 6, 2016, <https://www.afr.com/opinion/craig-emerson-there-is-a-growth-alternative-to-cutting-company-taxes-20160606-gpchgq> (accessed April 13, 2021).

Turkey on a collision course with its NATO allies, particularly the US, and negatively affect Ankara's aspirations to join the EU. Thus, the political costs of openly seeking to acquire a nuclear capability would be very high.

Ultimately, Turkey's reaction to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will depend heavily on the strength and vitality of Turkey's ties to the US and the Turkish perception of the credibility of the US commitment to Turkish security. If US-Turkish security ties seriously deteriorate, support for Turkey developing its nuclear capability could grow. A closely related factor is Turkish perceptions of NATO's security guarantee (Article V of the NATO treaty). If Ankara feels confident that it can rely on NATO's security guarantee, Turkey would be less likely to consider developing a nuclear option. Thus, keeping Turkey firmly anchored in NATO remains essential.

### **Conclusion**

The sudden convergence of geopolitical and security interests between Iran and Turkey, and Iran's closeness in particular, comes as a result of Iran's growing economic pressures due to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. Thus, Iran seeks to secure trade with Turkey and reduce its regional isolation. Nevertheless, the two countries still compete as rivals despite what they may share in terms of specific economic and security interests.

However, the degree of cooperation between the two countries should not be exaggerated. Turkey and Iran have historically been rivals rather than close partners. While they may share specific economic and security interests, their interests are at odds in many Middle East areas. The two states have fundamentally different political identities and ideologies. Given its dependence on Iranian energy, especially natural gas, Turkey has a substantial stake in preventing Iran's relations from deteriorating too severely and not taking actions that could give Tehran an excuse to step up support for the PKK. US officials should thus not expect Ankara automatically to fall in line with all US policy initiatives directed against Iran. Ankara will seek to retain a degree of flexibility regarding its policy toward Iran and will be hesitant to support some US initiatives if they are seen to be in conflict with broader Turkish national interests.

### **Recommendations for US/USCENTCOM**

- With Turkey militarily engaged in Syria and Iraq, CENTCOM should use this intervention to reduce Iranian influence in the region.
- Ensure Turkey it can still rely on NATO's security guarantee.
- Exploit the good relationship between Turkey and Iran to find a suitable ground to enter into nuclear negotiations.