



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~
THE RISE AND (FUTURE) FALL OF A TURKISH-IRANIAN AXIS

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Middle East Media Monitor is a new FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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The continuing rise of Turkey and Iran at the expense of the Arab states is troubling to the West. This is particularly the case because the parallel rise to power has been expressed in a warming of relations between these two states—a sharp contrast to the mutual suspicion that characterized the bilateral relationship in the past. These trends have also been interpreted in the West as a turn eastward in Turkish foreign policy, and Turkey is no longer seen as the dependable ally it used to be during the Cold War.

The current thawing of the relations between Turkey and Iran has been articulated in different ways. In public statements, the Turks and the Iranians have stressed the longstanding peaceful nature of their shared border. For example, the Iranian ambassador to Turkey, in a public speech, stated that "400-year peace and stability on the Iranian-Turkish Borders, indicates positive and progressive relations in the fields of political, economic and cultural arena between two countries."¹ Indeed, neither state has any territorial claim against the other. Trade relations have been greatly expanded, leading the two states to consider signing a free-trade agreement. Finally, Iran has allowed Turkish mediation on the nuclear issue and is cooperating, more than ever, in their fight against the Kurdish separatists.

However, despite the present cooperation, there remains great potential for dispute between Iran and Turkey, and there exists the possibility of long-term competition for regional dominance developing. Over time, certainly if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon capability, Ankara is less likely to strengthen its cooperation with Tehran and existing differences between the two countries will rise to the surface. In fact, the basic interests of Ankara and Tehran—in some if not most issues—collide, which could lead to disagreements, and in the long run even conflict, between these two non-Arab powers in the Middle East.

NUCLEAR CONCERNS

Progress in the Iranian nuclear program may have negative implications on Turkish–Iranian relations. The Turks have stated repeatedly that they oppose nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East. Western reactions to Iranian nuclear development have already presented Turkey with a number of dilemmas, including forcing the Turks to decide whether to vote for or against further UN sanctions against Iran. Likewise, the advance of the Iranian nuclear program translates, in some respects, to a failure of Turkey's mediation efforts.

¹ "Turkish–Iranian Relations and Recent Development in the Region," *Turkish Weekly*, February 22, 2010, www.turkishweekly.net/article/342/turkish-iranian-relations-and-recent-development-in-the-region.html See also, "Erdoğan Emphasizes 400-Years of Friendship with Iran," *TRT-world.com*, September 17, 2010, www.trtturkmenca.com/trtworl/en/newsDetail.aspx?HaberKodu=7bb760dd-5c8b-4e8f-abfa-a6f6eb88fc07

IRAQ

The future of Iraq, in light of the imminent withdrawal of U.S. forces, may also create problems between Turkey and Iran. While neither country wishes to see Iraq disintegrate, they each have their own preferences for how the future Iraqi state should take shape. While Iran would benefit from having a weak state on its border that maintains Shiite political dominance and is virtually cut off from Western influence, Turkey would prefer for Iraq to be ruled by a broad-based coalition with adequate Sunni minority representation. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Iraq in March 2011, in which he made historic excursions to the Kurdish regions and to Shiite holy sites, clearly demonstrated Turkey's active interest in Iraq's future. During his visit, Erdoğan declared that "Iraq is a brotherly nation...For years we have felt in our hearts the ordeals and pain, and we have been following the developments since then with admiration."²

SYRIA

Competing interests might also arise concerning developments in Syria. While both Iran and Turkey would like to see Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule continue, they want this outcome for different reasons. Turkey, as part of its "Zero Problems (with its neighbors) Policy," has worked in recent years to improve relations with Syria, based in part on strong economic incentives. Turkey is also concerned with the potential spillover effect that an intra-state conflict involving the 1.4 million Kurds in Syria might have on its own Kurdish population. In light of the wave of protest in Syria, Erdoğan advised al-Assad to "answer the people's calls with a reformist, positive approach" and explained that "We have a border of 800 kilometers [with Syria] and we have family relations. We cannot remain silent."³ Iran, on the other hand, has built its relations with Syria on resisting Israel and its efforts to strengthen Hezbollah as a proxy against the "Zionist entity." Accordingly, it has no desire to see major changes in Syrian policies.

LEBANON

Turkey is also trying to increase its influence in Lebanon, which could be understood as being at the expense of Iranian influence there. In November 2010, Erdoğan visited Lebanon—a visit that attracted extensive media coverage—shortly following Ahmadinejad's own visit to the country. During his visit, Erdoğan, in an effort to be seen as Lebanon's champion, criticized Israel harshly and even threatened to respond should Israel have the audacity to attack Lebanon. "We will not be silent and we will support justice by all means available to us," declared Erdoğan.⁴ Turkey has also tried, thus far to no avail, to mediate between the various factions vying for control of Lebanon. In this vein, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has met both with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and with Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah. Conversely, Iran continues to staunchly support only Hezbollah, which is one of the main sources of instability within Lebanon.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkey still supports a settlement while Iran does not accept the legitimacy of Israel's existence. Iran, by supporting terror groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, is trying its best to prevent the two sides from reaching an agreement. In contrast, the dealings between Turkey and Hamas do not necessarily stem from a desire to strengthen the organization's control over the Gaza Strip, but rather from Turkey's belief that promoting negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians means treating Hamas as a legitimate actor. Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, speaking at a joint press conference with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in May 2010 stated, "When Turkey talked [with Hamas], it faced threats but it emerged that Turkey was right. You cannot achieve peace by excluding people."⁵

ARAB GULF STATES

Another source of friction between Iran and Turkey may result from Ankara's efforts towards closer relations with the Arab Gulf states. These states fear Iran and seek to prevent it from attaining nuclear capabilities. As such, a growing strategic partnership between Turkey and the Gulf states may help in balancing Iran's power in the Gulf. In line with these efforts, Turkey's status in the Gulf was made official in 2008 when a security memorandum of understanding was signed. In this document, Turkey was the first state to be recognized as a strategic partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Differences in

² "Erdoğan Given a Hero's Welcome in Streets of Arbil, Najaf," *Today's Zaman*, March 30, 2011

www.todayszaman.com/news-239553-erdogan-given-heros-welcome-in-streets-of-arbil-najaf.html

³ "Turkey's Erdoğan Urges Syria to go ahead with Reforms," *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, March 28, 2011

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-head-of-intelligence-visited-syria-2011-03-28

⁴ "In Lebanon's Beirut, Shift of Turkey's Axis is Welcomed," *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, November 25, 2010

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey-will-not-remain-silent-if-israel-attacks-lebanon-2010-11-25

⁵ "Turkey, Russia find Common Ground on Iran, Hamas Role," *Today's Zaman*, May 13, 2010 www.todayszaman.com/news-210093-102-turkey-russia-find-common-ground-on-iran-hamas-role.html

the Turkish and Iranian stances towards the Gulf states were made apparent during the recent upheavals in Bahrain. When Saudi forces entered Bahrain to stabilize the situation at the Bahraini royal family's request, Iran decried Saudi actions, labeling them an "invasion."⁶ Alternatively, Turkey held high-level meetings with all the relevant parties, attempting to prevent a spillover of local grievances into a regional conflict along the Sunni-Shiite divide.⁷

LIBYA

The two states also differ in their approach to the Libya situation. While at first, Turkey strongly rejected military intervention, it has since been taking part in NATO efforts. These initiatives are in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, adopted on March 17, 2011, authorizing the use of all means short of occupation to protect Libyan citizens. Iran, on the other hand, has called the NATO intervention "a big stupidity" and predicted "that the NATO-US invasion would throw them to the depth of an abyss..."⁸ Turkey cannot be pleased with such statements. Not only do they condemn Turkey's actions, as a NATO member, but they also highlight a reversal of Turkish policies toward Libya.

LEADERSHIP OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

An additional area of friction between the two countries may be over leadership of the Muslim world. In a poll conducted in Muslim countries shortly after Gaza flotilla incident, Erdoğan was elected the most popular leader, earning the support of 20 percent of the respondents.⁹ The editor of the daily *al-Quds al-Arabi* who, after the flotilla event criticized the impotence of Arab regimes vis-à-vis Israel, praised the Turkish Prime Minister saying, he was "more Arab than the Arabs."¹⁰ The fact that Turkey's critical stance towards Israel is exercised for the most part rhetorically and by means of "soft power," yet puts pressure on Israel, implies that this may be a better route than the violent path promoted by Iran. In addition, it has been suggested that the "Turkish model," in terms of its domestic character, might be appropriate for Arab countries experiencing revolution. This model becomes especially relevant when considering the Iranian alternative, which views recent events as an opportunity to improve its regional standing. Indeed, the current uprisings have been described by Iran as "...part of the fruits of the Iranian nation's resistance."¹¹

CONCLUSION

Despite the major changes in Turkish foreign policy in recent years, Turkey remains a partner of the West. With its potential role in mediating diverse issues, Turkey could still be helpful on several fronts: Iraq, where it has played a major role in the handling of the Kurdish issue and in protecting the Sunni minority against discrimination; Afghanistan and Libya, where Turkey, as a NATO member, can continue its involvement in line with American and coalition aims; and even the Iranian nuclear issue, where it shares the basic interest with the West to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state.

The United States should continue to involve Turkey actively in forming its policies towards the Middle East. Frequent consultations should take place, as in the recent relatively successful example regarding developments in Egypt and in Libya. Turkey's so-called "shift to the East," if it occurred at all, is neither fixed nor inevitable. Hence, it can still be influenced, and it is vital that the West, led by the United States, not give Turkey a cold shoulder. Recommending that the West engage more with Turkey is not motivated by a fear of a strong Turkish-Iranian axis—for as we have shown, this alliance can be seen as both temporary and limited—but because of Turkey's increased strength as a regional actor. Its growing influence on regional players can serve not only to promote certain U.S. policies but also to add legitimacy to what might otherwise seem as Western, "outside" interference.

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⁶ "Cleric Lambasts Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain," *Fars News Agency*, April 2, 2011

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001134080>

⁷ "Ankara Moves to Broker Libya Deal," *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, April 4, 2011

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkeys-libya-cease-fire-diplomacy--2011-04-04

⁸ "Ahmadinejad Deplores NATO Militaristic Approach in Libya," *Fars News Agency*, April 5, 2011

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001160654>

⁹ Shibley Telhami, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll," *Brookings Institute*, August 5, 2010

www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf slide no. 66.

¹⁰ "Attitude of the Arab World to Turkey after the Flotilla," *MEMRI*, June 19, 2010 [www.memri.org/il/cgi-](http://www.memri.org/il/cgi-webxay/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&dbid=articles&act=show3&dataid=2425)

[webxay/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&dbid=articles&act=show3&dataid=2425](http://www.memri.org/il/cgi-webxay/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=107345_memri&dbid=articles&act=show3&dataid=2425)

¹¹ "Leader: Region to Experience More Developments in the Future," *Fars News Agency*, April 3, 2011

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9001141125>