



The Cold War Between Turkey and Iran

By Can Kasapoglu

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With American clout in the Middle East on the decline, the historic power struggle between Turkey and Iran has intensified, each attempting to fill the vacuum in the region by expanding its influence. Syria and Iraq have become the battlefields between Turkey and Iran. In Syria, a proxy war is underway, with Iran supplying weapons to its Alawite client and Turkey actively arming the opposition. In Iraq, Turkey and Iran vie for political influence along Sunni-Shiite fault lines. In neither arena is Turkey seen as the regional leader it aspires to be.

NEO-OTTOMANS VS. PERSIANS ON A MIDDLE EAST CHESSBOARD

The US withdrawal from Iraq, and its corresponding decline in regional influence, has left a power vacuum in the Middle East. Two historic rivals, Turkey and Iran, have stepped into the fray; each hoping to extend its influence at the expense of the other. With Syria and Iraq serving as the battlefields, the lines of battle have been drawn mostly along Sunni-Shiite sectarian divisions.

In Syria, where the Sunni majority is struggling to overthrow the Alawite Assad regime, Turkish-Iranian differences can have dire consequences for Arab lives. A proxy war has effectively developed, with the Iranians supplying weapons to their Alawite clients and Turkey actively arming the opposition.

The victims of the recent massacre in Houla, who numbered more than 100, half of whom were children, served as pawns in the regional game between the ancient rivals. Tehran sided with the Assad regime in claiming that the murders were perpetrated by terrorists and foreign forces. Whereas Ankara demanded that Syria withdraw its diplomats from Turkey within 72 hours. The Turkish foreign ministry also threatened to take further "measures" if such crimes against humanity continued in Syria.

In contrast with the Syrian scenes of carnage, the Turkish-Iranian showdown in Iraq includes less bloodshed and more political maneuvering. Ankara and Tehran each has its favored political groups and personalities. The pro-Iran Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the pro-Turkish Sunni Vice President Tarek Hashimi each serves as a respective "man in Baghdad."

Under pressure from the Iran-aligned Maliki, an arrest warrant was issued for Hashimi on charges of running death squads against Iraqi Shiites. Interpol subsequently issued its own arrest warrant for Hashimi. However, the erstwhile vice prime minister has found refuge in Turkey, and Ankara has made clear that it is not about to hand over its man in Baghdad.

Clearly, a Cold War has developed between Turkey and Iran in the Middle East. While so far tensions have remained relatively stable, there is a real possibility of things heating up.

SYRIA: THE PROXY WAR

In Syria, the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad is coming under increasing pressure from an expanding insurgency. Ankara has offered sanction and armed and moral support to the opposition.

Turkey's Hatay province has become the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army, while the Friends of Syria, which is critical of Assad held a meeting in Istanbul on April 1, 2012.

Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, has told the Turkish Parliament that Damascus has the blood of innocents on its hands, and that Turkey "would not offer its hand to such a regime unless it cleans itself up."

In contrast, Iran continues to support the Baathist regime politically and militarily. Iran even acknowledges that its Quds Forces, the arm of the Revolutionary Guards tasked with overseas operations, has conducted operations in Syria. Ismail Gha'ani, the deputy head of the Quds force, has claimed that, "Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the physical and non- physical presence of the Islamic republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented."

There is also reason to believe that Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, has played a supportive role in the bloody crackdown.

Syria has become the test field of Ankara's and Tehran's proxy war capabilities. Iran is much more experienced in waging proxy wars in a wide array of areas, ranging from Afghanistan to Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian radical Muslims. However, as atrocities similar to the Houla massacre continue to mount, there is increasing risk that the low intensity conflict could provoke a military intervention.

The scenario of an intervention would be a game changer. Currently, Iran can leverage its superior experience in proxy warfare. However, Turkey holds the advantage with regard to conventional warfare capacity. Thus, Iran can have the upper hand as long as the Syrian crisis does not force a military intervention by the West and/or Turkey.

IRAQ: THE POLITICAL CONTEST

Ever since the American departure from Iraq, Turkey and Iran have each tried to use their weight to affect the political makeup of the country and extend their influence. The competition first surfaced in the parliamentary elections of 2010 when Ankara supported the relatively secular and Sunni dominated Iraqiya party, which included Hashimi's Renewal List. Tehran on the other hand, stood behind the State of Law Coalition, which included Maliki's Islamic Da'awa Party, and other Shiite Islamist groups which gathered under the National Iraqi Alliance bloc.

Although the Sunni Iraqiya garnered two seats more than the State of Law Coalition in the elections, Maliki managed to keep his position as prime minister by consolidating his power with the more radical, pro-Iran Shiite groups of the National Iraqi Alliance, including the Sadrist and Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council. Maliki has gradually seized greater personal control over the country by simultaneously retaining multiple critical posts, such as acting interior minister, defense minister and national security affairs minister.

It was under these circumstances that the pro-Ankara Vice President Hashimi was forced to flee the country. Hashimi first took refuge with the regional government of Northern Iraq, and then travelled to the Sunni Gulf states before settling in Turkey.

In Iraq, the regional Sunni-Shiite fault lines are clearly visible. Baghdad has aligned itself with Iran in support of the Alawite regime in Syria. It has blocked an attempt by the Arab League to adopt a harsh resolution against Assad's crackdown.

The formation of a Shiite bloc has corresponded with a Turkish-Iraqi divergence, which peaked in April 2012, when Maliki labeled Turkey "a hostile state." This statement was made in response to Prime Minister Erdogan's accusation against the Maliki administration of fomenting sectarian tensions in Iraq.

Ankara responded to the Shiite bloc by deepening its ties with Sunnis and with Kurds in northern Iraq, in addition to hosting Tarek Hashimi in Istanbul.

Turkish-Iraqi, and sectarian, tensions have simmered to the point that they have been manifest on the street. On May 19 there were anti-Turkey demonstrations and a burning of the Turkish flag in Basra, a Shiite province. These acts infuriated the Turkish public.

TURKISH REGIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Adherents of the Turkish foreign policy doctrine, the so-called Davutoglu Doctrine, wish to see Turkey as the rising star of the region; as the leader of a regional “spring.” Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu has declared that, “Turkey will lead the change in the Middle East as its master and servant.”

However, in Syria and Iraq the “Arab Spring” has turned into the sectarian winter of the Islamic world, with Turkey as a problematic protagonist, not a leader. Early on, Davutoglu promoted a “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy, which aimed to enhance Turkey’s power in the historical Ottoman territories and promote integration for making national borders meaningless –all in an attempt to restore Turkish (Ottoman) regional hegemony. Yet Turkey’s involvement in Shiite-Sunni conflicts renders this doctrine an unattainable utopia. None of the local players see Turkey as the regional leader it aspires to be.

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