Iran and Turkey

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- Relations between Iran and Turkey have long been defined by mutual suspicion and competition, despite a 312-mile border that has remained unchanged since 1639.

- Close allies during the monarchy, relations soured after the 1979 revolution. Ankara felt threatened by Tehran's ambitions to change the regional order. Iran in turn perceived Turkey as a close ally of the West and therefore potentially hostile.

- Adding to tensions, Tehran and Ankara have diametrically opposed worldviews: Turkey is a constitutionally secular state where the military is the self-appointed guardian of secularism. Iran is a theocracy in which Islamic law rules and clerics play decisive roles, including control over the military.

- Yet the two governments have cooperated when necessary, especially on energy and Kurdish issues. Relations improved after the 2002 election of Turkey's Justice and Development Party, which has Islamist roots.

- The two countries have opposing positions on the Syrian civil war. Iran supports Bashar al Assad's regime while Turkey seeks its removal. Yet they have managed their relationship with little acrimony despite this major difference.

Overview

In many ways, Turkey and Iran are mirror images of each other. They share geography, culture, religion and a long history of conflict and cooperation. They both straddle multiple geopolitical regions. Between the two, they span two continents and border five of the world's most volatile regions—the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans, Central Asia and the South Asian subcontinent. They are both descendants of empires with hegemonic histories that occasionally pitted them against each other. In the 16th century, Persia converted to Shiite Islam in part to distinguish itself from the Sunni caliphate of the Ottoman Empire. Both countries today are also profoundly insecure about real and imaginary enemies at home and abroad. As inheritors of great civilizations, they both feel their importance has been largely unappreciated.

Yet the two countries also symbolize two opposite poles in the Islamic world. For the first two decades after Iran's 1979 revolution, Turkey behaved as a status quo power. Its enduring secular Kemalist ideology was named for the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who turned Turkey toward the West. Ankara changed little in

its alliance commitments or political structures dating back to the Cold War. In contrast, Iran became a leading agitator for change. It persistently pushed its ambitious Islamic ideology directly and through a new network of surrogates. Tehran also wanted Muslim countries to form their own bloc independent of either East or West. So each viewed the other as a menace.

The 2002 victory of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) changed Turkey dramatically—and led to role reversal between Ankara and Tehran. As it shed its inward economic and political policies, Turkey emerged as a local superpower ruled by a party willing to muscle its way into the Middle East and beyond. Turkey is also fully integrated into the global economic system while Iran has found itself quite isolated due to international sanctions related to its nuclear program. Iran faces the prospect of a slow reintegration into the global economy as the nuclear deal brokered in July 2015 is implemented.

Three phases

Relations between Ankara and Tehran have gone through three broad phases:

Phase 1: Post-revolution

The Iranian Revolution shocked the international system and, along with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, increased Turkey's importance to the West. Turkey's strategic value was especially enhanced because the United States lost its early warning stations in Iran to monitor Soviet missile tests.

Turkey quickly recognized Tehran's new regime and did not participate in U.S. sanctions imposed after the hostage crisis. A Turkish junta assumed power in a September 12, 1980 military coup and had no time to formulate a new policy on Iran when Iraq invaded Iran 10 days later. Turkey, which bordered both countries, remained neutral during the eight-year conflict. But the war provided an important boost to the Turkish economy, which had undergone one of its worst crises to date. Both countries relied on Turkey for basic goods. By 1983, Turkish exports to Iran constituted 19 percent of all Turkey's exports, surpassing Germany, which was then Turkey's leading trading partner. As the war petered out, so did Turkish exports, although they remained higher than in the late 1970s.

Phase 2: The 1990s

Iranian-Turkish relations became more confrontational after the Iran-Iraq war ended, in part because of ideological differences. Each viewed the other through the narrow prism of their secular-religious divide. The Turks were particularly suspicious of Iranian support for fundamentalist movements in Turkey. The Iranian ambassador to

Ankara was declared persona non grata after he criticized the Ankara's ban on Muslim women wearing headscarves in universities and government offices, and even participated in demonstrations against the ban. Ankara was also bitter about Iranian aid to insurgents in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which operated bases deep in Iranian territory. In 1991, Turkey detained an Iranian-flagged vessel on suspicion of carrying weapons destined for the PKK.

Iran harbored parallel suspicions of the Turks. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini once quipped that secular Kemalism was worse than communism. The Turkish regime, he charged, held on to power largely through the power of bayonets. Echoing Turkey's concerns, Tehran specifically complained that Ankara was not doing enough to control Iranian dissidents operating on Turkish soil. Iran was also suspicious of Turkish interference in its own province of Azerbaijan, as well as in the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. The Azeri populations in both have close linguistic ties to Turkey.

But Iran focused more on Turkey as an external threat. As a member of NATO, Turkey brought the world's mightiest military alliance to their common border. After the Soviet Union's collapse, the West also turned to Turkey to counter Iranian influence in the newly independent Central Asian states that had been part of Moscow's empire. They also differed seriously on Iraq, despite agreement about containing Kurdish ambitions in Iraq. Turkey wanted Saddam Hussein to cooperate with the international community to end economic sanctions. Ankara also wanted Baghdad to reestablish control over all Iraqi territory. But after its eight-year war with Iraq, Iran wanted the Baghdad regime weakened and hamstrung by stringent U.N. sanctions.

Phase 3: Erdogan and the AKP

The AKP, which had Islamist roots, took a different approach to the Middle East under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, elected in 2003. Anxious to develop new trade opportunities and become the leading actor in regional politics, Ankara developed a policy based on "zero-problems" with its neighbors, including Iran. Even deep sectarian differences—Turkey is overwhelming Sunni, Iran is largely Shiite—were not obstacles to improving relations. Ankara's new vision of the Middle East seemed less antagonistic to Iran and Iranian allies, demonstrated by frequent visits by both Turkish and Iranian heads of state.

The Turks provided Iran with important support at its most vulnerable time. Ankara was one of the first governments, along with Russia and Venezuela, to offer unqualified support for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the disputed June 2009 elections. The Turkish government was also silent when the Iranian regime violently suppressed Green Movement protesters to regain political control.

Iran also slowly shifted its stance, particularly on the sensitive Kurdish question. After years of tolerating PKK activities in Iran, Tehran gradually began to prevent the movement's access to its territory. Tehran's policy shift emerged after a PKK affiliate, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), successfully attacked Iranian security forces. In response, Iran launched artillery strikes against both the PKK and PJAK in their hideouts in northern Iraq's remote Qandil mountains. Iran's new policy was a way to begin intelligence cooperation and ingratiate itself with Turkey; it was also a way to embarrass the United States, which occupied Iraq at the time but had been reluctant to militarily act against the PKK.

In December 2012, Erdogan revealed that the government had begun negotiations with jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. As part of the peace process, Turkey allowed Kurdish politicians to visit Ocalan and allowed the use of the Kurdish language in court. The PKK in turn freed Turkish prisoners. In 2013, Ocalan issued a public letter calling for a ceasefire, disarmament and withdrawal from Turkish territory. PKK members started to withdraw from Turkey in mid-2013.

The peace process began to unravel due to disagreements over Ankara's response to the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS. Turkey did not move to help the Kurds fighting ISIS in Kobane, just over the Syrian border. Kurds protested Ankara's inaction in large numbers across Turkey in October 2014 resulting in dozens of deaths. Later, Turkish warplanes bombed PKK positions and Turkish soldiers were killed by unknown attackers in the south-east. In July 2015, the PKK said the ceasefire had "lost its meaning" following Turkish army airstrikes on PKK camps in northern Iraq. The peace process was effectively on hold. By 2015, Iran had ceased playing an active role on the PKK issue. But both Tehran and Ankara remained opposed to the PKK.

Nuclear diplomacy

Turkey's changed approach has been most apparent on Iran's nuclear controversy. The Turks have historically been ambivalent about Tehran's program. In 2010 President Abdullah Gül expressed misgivings about the Islamic Republic's ultimate objectives. At the same time, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly vouched for Tehran's peaceful intentions on nuclear energy at a time the international community and Turkey's allies expressed growing alarm about the dangers of Iran developing a nuclear weapon. Erdogan repeatedly argued that Iran's program was not the real problem and instead tried to make Israel the issue, to the annoyance of the United States. This would prove to be an important psychological boost to Tehran since the central issue was its lack of compliance with international safeguards and rules.

In May 2010, Turkey and Brazil negotiated an agreement with Iran to ship 1,200 kg of low enriched uranium to Turkey for safekeeping. In exchange, the Iranians would receive fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor, which produces isotopes for medical

use. This was part of Ankara's strategy to burnish its diplomatic credentials internationally and establish itself as a major actor capable of resolving some of the world's most difficult problems. The deal was heralded in Turkey. But it was rejected by the United States and Europeans because it represented a watered down version of their own proposal, which Iran had walked away from eight months earlier. In the first deal, 1,200 kg represented some 80 percent of Iranian stocks. But Tehran had produced so much more low enriched uranium in the intervening months that 1,200 kg was closer to 50 percent when Iran accepted the Turkey-Brazil package.

The new diplomacy played out just as the U.N. Security Council was about to vote to impose new sanctions on Iran. The deal was widely interpreted as an attempt to derail sanctions and give Tehran more breathing room. Turkey argued that sanctions were counterproductive; it said persuasion was more effective than punitive measures in getting Tehran to change its behavior. (Turkey also believed it they would suffer disproportionately from sanctions on Iran.) The United Nations went ahead with the vote on new sanctions. Turkey, which had one of the 15 Security Council seats, voted against the resolution. Turkey's decision to side with Iran at the expense of its traditional Western allies caused a major crisis of confidence with the United States.

Turkey did not have a place at the negotiating table during the next rounds of diplomacy. It, however, hosted talks between Iran and the world's six major powers — Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States —in 2011 and 2012. Talks did not progress under President Ahmadinejad

Negotiations between Iran and the so-called P5+1 powers were reinvigorated following the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani and his appointment of Mohammad Javad Zarif as foreign minister. An interim agreement was brokered in November 2013. Turkish officials welcomed it, but said that it fell short of the 2010 agreement that Turkey and Brazil negotiated. "When we look at the positions [of the] P5+1 right now, Iran is still below the line we were able to bring in 2010, but we hope it will come to that line," said Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Turkish officials also welcomed the final deal reached on July 14, 2015. Cavusoglu said the deal was a positive development for Turkey, but he also urged Iran to revise its regional policies. Iran "should play a positive and constructive role. It should abandon sectarian politics and give importance to political dialogue for solutions," he said the day the deal was announced. Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek said it was "great news" for the Turkish economy and bilateral trade.

Factoids

- Iran accounts for 20 percent of Turkey's gas imports. But the Iranians have not been reliable partners. Twice in 2010, for example, cold weather forced Iran to

indefinitely suspend deliveries, which led the Turks to look for alternative supplies.

- Trade between Turkey and Iran totaled $10 billion in 2008. Iran exported $8.2 billion in goods, mostly hydrocarbons. Turkey exported $2 billion. In 2009, Iranian exports to Turkey declined precipitously to $3.4 billion, although Turkish exports remained stable. Turkey's exports to Iran represent no more than 2 percent of its total exports. By 2014, the volume of trade between Turkey and Iran had climbed to $13.7 billion.

- Turkey has the largest Kurdish population, estimated to be up to 18 percent of the population or 14.7 million. Iran has the second largest population, estimated at around 8 million.

- Turkey is one of the few countries Iranians can travel to without a visa.

- Iran and Turkey are members of the Economic Cooperation Organization, a 10-nation alliance created in 1985, with members stretching from Turkey through Central and South Asia. Tehran and Ankara are also members of the Developing-8, an association of mid-income Muslim nations created by the Turks in the 1990s.

Balance of power

Turkey and Iran have emerged as the two rival models for much of the Islamic world. They represent disparate ways of blending Islam and democracy. Turkey has engaged in gradual evolutionary change. The AKP's Sunni Islamist roots notwithstanding, Turkey has generally adhered to secularism. Its foreign policy has become increasingly multi-faceted. It is already a member of the world's most powerful military alliance, NATO, and is a candidate to join the European Union. It is a rising mid-level power. And its economic reforms have made it the 18th largest economy in the world.

In contrast, Iran's political transformation was fraught with turmoil throughout its first three decades. Its foreign policy long defied both East and West. Its closest allies were often militias rather than governments. Vast oil resources produced wealth, but international sanctions made it increasingly difficult to develop. By 2010, its failure to compromise with the international community led to growing isolation. Escalating sanctions in 2012 crippled Iran's economy. But after Iran and the world's six major powers reached a nuclear deal in 2015, Iran was poised to benefit from significant sanctions relief.

Relations between the two are also uneven. Turkey's AKP government, with its boundless self-confidence, has been an enigma to Iran. The Turks stood up to their own

allies to extend Iran an economic lifeline and support Tehran's nuclear program. Yet Turkey's growing regional ambitions challenged Tehran's alliances. The Iranians had the upper hand in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, for example, but the Turks were challenging them in all three countries.

In 2011, Turkey agreed to allow a NATO missile defense system radar to be stationed on its territory. Ankara initially threatened to block the agreement if Iran was explicitly named as a threat to NATO countries. But a compromise was struck. As much as Turkey did not want to antagonize Iran, it could not sacrifice alliance preferences for Iran. Ankara may have felt the need to at least show opposition to the plan for Iran's sake.

The Arab Spring – and the outbreak of Syria's conflict in particular – began to complicate Turkey's "zero problems" policy with its neighbors. In the 2000s, Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar al Assad were on good terms. But their relationship soured after Turkey and Iran supported diametrically opposed groups in Syria after 2011. Iran backed Assad, while Turkey sided with the largely Sunni opposition groups.

As the civil war evolved, Turkey was accused of supporting Sunni extremist militias. Pro-AKP newspapers expressed concern about Iran's reach in Syria. Erdogan accused of Iran of trying to dominate the region. "Iran has to change its view. It has to withdraw any forces, whatever it has in Yemen, as well as Syria and Iraq and respect their territorial integrity," he said in March 2015 interview with France 24.

Despite being on opposite sides in the Syrian conflict, both Iran and Turkey opposed Syrian Kurdish gains. They had an implicit common interest in preventing Syrian Kurds from getting stronger, due to the potential demonstration effect on their own Kurds.

Trendlines

- Turkey's principal concern is the stability of the Iranian regime. President Ahmadinejad's erratic behavior irritated Ankara, but the AKP government was not sufficiently offended to disrupt its bourgeoning ties with Tehran. Turkey welcomed Ahmadinejad's replacement, Hassan Rouhani, when he came to office in 2013.

- Yet the current Turkish government—despite its sympathies and expectations of greater trade opportunities—is not an ally of Iran. It sees itself in a long-run competition with Iran for influence.

- The Arab Spring tumult has made Turkish foreign policy more sectarian. Turkey has been willing to associate itself with Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia and

Qatar to the detriment of Iran's regional allies, whether in Iraq or Syria.

- Turkey, nonetheless, may try to take advantage of sanctions relief as the nuclear deal with Iran is implemented. Turkish businesses will may try to make greater inroads into Iran. But Iran will likely continue to suspect Turkey of acting as a surrogate for Western interests.

- The biggest challenge facing Iran and Turkey is the fate of Bashar al Assad. If Assad were to fall to Turkey-backed Sunni opposition groups, it could have major implications for Turkey's relationship with Iran.

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