

**THE FUTURE OF THE
IRANIAN-TURKISH
RELATIONSHIP: A
CONTAINED GEOPOLITICAL
RIVALRY OR A POSSIBLE
ESCALATION BETWEEN
ANKARA AND TEHRAN?**



MEHMET EMIN CENGİZ
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research.sharqforum.org

   SharqStrategic

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza
Floor:6 No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

Abstract: The Turkish-Iranian geopolitical rivalry has been growing increasingly tense as of late. Although the two countries have different political directions, priorities and conflicting interests, over the past decade, the two contained their rivalry and managed to have a working relationship thanks to the regional climate in the Middle East after Donald Trump's electoral victory in the US, coupled with the significant trade volume between the two that is primarily based on Turkey's purchase of expensive Iranian natural gas and crude oil for many years. Nevertheless, recently the trade volume between the two has been in decline, the areas that brought Turkey and Iran together since 2016 have been evaporating, and more importantly, since US President Joe Biden took office, Turkey has been mending ties with Iran's regional rivals ranging from Saudi Arabia to Israel. All these factors amplify the likelihood of a more overt rivalry between Tehran and Turkey that can manifest in different theatres from Syria and Iraq to the South Caucasus in the upcoming period.

Introduction

The long-standing geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Turkey is entering a phase of tension. Over the past decades, compartmentalization¹ of different issues has been the primary driver of the relationship between Tehran and Ankara. However, the tension between the two countries emanating from various theatres is likely to increase in the upcoming period as the number of areas of collaboration between the two declines. Ever since the start of the turbulent Arab Spring period, the Ankara-Tehran rivalry was best crystallized in the Syrian theatre following the outbreak of protests in the country in 2011. Iran, at the outset of the Arab Spring, positively approached the phenomenon of protest waves in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, capitalizing on the idea that it would lead to a positive relationship with the new rulers of these countries, namely political Islamists. Iranian officials also saw the street protests and uprisings as a blow that would end the dominance of "secular political schools" as well as the "Zionists and Americans."²

That being said, when the protest waves of the Arab Spring reached Syria, Iranian officials' stance turned upside down. Iran, since the beginning, viewed the Syrian crisis as an existential threat, contemplating that Tehran's security starts from Damascus. To this end, Iran became an essential part of the Syrian conflict through its proxies and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and steadily supported the Syrian regime forces. Despite Iranian efforts, the Syrian military opposition groups took control of large swathes of Syria in the early years of the war. When the Assad regime was on the verge of collapse, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds force, the external wing of the IRGC, flew to Moscow and allegedly convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin to join the war on Assad's side.³ The

EVER SINCE THE START OF THE TURBULENT ARAB SPRING PERIOD, THE ANKARA-TEHRAN RIVALRY WAS BEST CRYSTALLIZED IN THE SYRIAN THEATRE FOLLOWING THE OUTBREAK OF PROTESTS IN THE COUNTRY IN 2011

course of the war changed dramatically as Russia directly joined the war in September 2015. The Syrian opposition started losing ground in a short period as the ruthless Russian air support coupled with the ground support of Iranian-backed militias helped the Assad regime regain control of many areas it had previously lost to the opposition.

Turkey, on the other hand, saw the Arab Spring as a chance to increase its regional clout in the countries that faced turbulence. Syria was one of these theatres. In parallel to this objective, Turkey has been supporting the opposition groups fighting the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, in order to de-escalate tensions in the country in 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran launched the Astana process. This took a parallel process to the one already going on in Geneva and formed a watershed moment in the course of the war.

Meanwhile, the Astana process was an opportunity for the regime and Russia to restructure the war in their favor. The Bashar al-Assad regime benefitted from the process, as it and its allies later captured⁴ three of the four de-escalation zones specified in the Astana process under the pretext of fighting against terrorists/terrorism. Nonetheless, despite all odds, Turkey curbed its disagreements with Iran in the Syrian conflict to a large extent.

Evaporation of the Factors That Have Brought Ankara and Tehran Together

Donald Trump's victory in the presidential elections in the US in 2016, and his backing of the counter-revolution axis of the Arab Spring consisting of Egypt, UAE, and Saudi Arabia alongside Israel, coupled with the significant trade volume between Turkey and Iran, further brought Ankara and Tehran closer. Both countries seemed quite suspicious of a new regional order that was coming into existence with US backing at the time.⁵ In this setting, both parties acted suspiciously towards the US. Specifically, anti-US sentiments have intensified in the aftermath of the attempted coup in July 2016 in Turkey, where it is widely believed that the US was one of the parties behind the coup attempt.⁶ Meanwhile, the UAE was also accused of funding the sinister coup attempt.⁷ In this atmosphere, Turkey and Iran had common threat perceptions, and they viewed that they were being excluded from the emerging regional order that was premised on a closer collaboration between the anti-Arab Spring camp [and](#) Israel and backed by the US.⁸ This regional picture led to closer cooperation between Iran and Turkey.

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This period also led to the Eurasianist wing in Turkey having greater influence on Turkish foreign policy decisions. These decisions were reflected in multiple bids ranging from Turkey's procurement of the Russian-made S-400⁹ long-range air defense missile systems- which resulted in the US removing Turkey from the very prestigious F-35 program,¹⁰ and imposing Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions¹¹- to Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean through the Blue Homeland vision as well as closer cooperation with China. Turkey's assertive foreign policy also led to the country's exclusion from the EastMed Gas Forum.¹² Turkey's orientation to Eurasia ignited heated debates about Turkey's position within NATO in Western circles up until the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which put an end to questions on Turkey's role within NATO. On the contrary, Turkey has become a principal player in NATO's expansion, as observed in Finland and Sweden's bid to join the alliance.

In addition to the abovementioned points, the Qatar blockade contributed to closer cooperation between Iran and Turkey.¹³ Both countries were concerned they would receive a blow to their regional significance if Qatar conceded to the demands of the anti-Arab Spring bloc. In this regard, both supported Doha in the face of the pressure exerted on it by Riyadh, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi.¹⁴

Moreover, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's independence referendum in 2017¹⁵ similarly strengthened bi-lateral ties. Iran's population of Kurds is second only to Turkey, which has the largest population of Kurds in the Middle East.¹⁶ Thus, both parties fiercely opposed the independence referendum, which they viewed as an existential threat. While the KRI has long maintained strong relations with the US and Israel in particular, Israel was in fact the only country that openly supported the referendum at the time,¹⁷ something which only contributed to Tehran's fears. As a result, the KRI's independence referendum was suffocated. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq furthermore faced significant setbacks as it lost control of most of the disputed territories¹⁸ in clashes with the Iraqi forces supported by the pro-Iranian Al Hashd Al Shaabi militias.

Moreover, trade volume between Turkey and Iran has been very important in containing their rivalry over the past decades. Since 2018, both sides have reiterated their desire to

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increase their trade volume to 30 billion dollars.¹⁹ On the sidelines of President Erdoğan's last trip to Tehran on July 19, 2022, which took place within the framework of the Astana process, this intention was voiced once again.²⁰ Nevertheless, the trade volume between the two countries has been decreasing and the pandemic and US sanctions reimposed on Iran a year after Trump's arrival do not seem to be the pivotal causes.²¹ In 2017, the trade volume between Tehran and Ankara was over 10 billion dollars,²² yet this number decreased over the years. Lately, the trade volume has been around 7.5 billion dollars.²³

While Turkey is the biggest buyer of Iranian natural gas, Iran is the second biggest exporter of gas to Turkey after Russia.²⁴ Needless to say, Tehran does not want to lose this standing. However, Ankara seems to have a different calculus which will be disclosed in the parts below. All the aforementioned points led both sides to maintain a working relationship for quite a while. Despite diverging views on many issues, Tehran and Ankara compartmentalized their relationship and curbed their rivalry. Nevertheless, the geopolitical picture in the region has lately changed quite dramatically, and the areas that brought Tehran and Ankara together are evaporating.

Current Areas Which Drive a Wedge Between Tehran and Ankara

The bones of contention between Tehran and Ankara are on the rise. What is more, the geographical scope of their geopolitical rivalry has enlarged. In addition to Syria, today, Iraq and the South Caucasus have also been added to the areas of rivalry between the sides. The Second Nagorno Karabakh war that transpired in 2020 changed the dynamics in the area in Turkey's favor, increasing Tehran's fears. While Turkey tremendously aided Azerbaijan through its advanced drone technology so that the country could reclaim its territories, Iran tacitly sided with Armenia due to a number of reasons.²⁵ Foiling Turkey's increasing role in the region was one of the reasons. Yet, Azerbaijan emerged triumphant in the war, and Turkey extended its footprint in this area.

According to an expert on Iranian affairs who is based in France and talked to the author on condition of anonymity, the Second Nagorno Karabakh war has intensely aggravated Iran's fear of Turkish expansion, which is highly lambasted in the Iranian media.²⁶ Although even before the Karabakh war Iran was at odds with Turkey in other areas, such as in Iraq

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and Syria, the rhetoric of Iranian officials and media was not intensely hostile as they viewed themselves as victorious in these two arenas in their rivalry with Turkey. Nonetheless, in the Karabakh war, Turkey seems to be victorious, leading to a massive reaction from the Iranian side.²⁷ The likelihood of opening the Zangezur corridor in South Armenia, which has come to the fore against the backdrop of Turkey's political normalization with Armenia, has further increased Iran's discontentment. If the Zangezur corridor is opened, Turkey can reach the Turkic states of Central Asia through Azerbaijan and Russia. Namely, if this project materializes, Iran will receive a blow to its geopolitical position. Therefore, the Iranian side has constantly shown dissatisfaction with regard to the opening of the corridor. The latest example of Iranian discontent was evident in the statement of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, on the sidelines of his meeting with President Erdoğan in Tehran that Iran would oppose any attempt to block the Armenia-Iran border.²⁸

In the meantime, Turkey "seeks to improve its overall strength and global standing by transforming its soil into a central hub for energy transfer pipelines extending westwards toward Europe in order to achieve the strategic goal of creating a balance that moderates Iranian and Russian control over the supply of energy to Europe."²⁹ For this purpose, Turkey attaches importance to Azerbaijani natural gas. Azerbaijan has already delivered its first shipment of gas to Europe through the Southern Gas Corridor, which connects the Caspian Sea to Europe.³⁰ Even so, if realized, the Zangezur corridor, not in the short term but the long run, may serve Turkey's purpose of becoming a transit energy hub. This is not to mention Iran's own eagerness to become a natural gas provider to Europe, especially if the country reaches an agreement with the West regarding the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the sanctions imposed on Tehran are lifted. Thereby, Turkey's close cooperation with Azerbaijan directly conflicts with Iranian interests. The natural gas file is of fundamental significance for both sides as it can shape the trajectory of the Turkey-Iran relationship in the upcoming period.

As stated above, Iran is the second biggest exporter of natural gas to Turkey. Despite this reality, Iranian gas is pricey compared to gas imports from Russia, and Turkey's natural gas contract with Iran will expire in 2026.³¹ Yet, thus far "Ankara has dragged its feet on

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holding negotiations with Tehran about the possibility of renewing the 25-year-old contract.”³² Considering this picture, it is safe to assume that Turkey is highly likely to look for alternative sources of natural gas or try to do its utmost to force Tehran to make significant discounts on new gas imports in the coming years. In this vein, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s (KRI) natural gas comes into the framework. Both Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani³³ and KRI President Nechirvan Barzani³⁴ have shown their willingness regarding possible natural gas projects to Turkey. As can be assumed, Iran has fiercely opposed these developments and does not want Erbil to become an alternative gas hub for Turkey or Europe. Parallel to this, Erbil has been the target of Iran-backed militias on multiple occasions since 2021. What is worse, the IRGC targeted the property of Karim Barzanji,³⁵ the CEO of the KAR group who is believed to have been affiliated with the KRI’s gas projects,³⁶ with missiles. Although the IRGC stated that it hit a strategic center of ‘Zionists’ in Erbil, it is safe to assume that the strikes were a message to the KRI and Turkey concerning the possible natural gas exports.

Addedly, after Joe Biden took office in the US, regardless of its permanence, a de-escalation period between regional powers started in the region. Turkey has also been capitalizing on this period and mending ties with different countries that are at odds with Iran ranging from Saudi Arabia³⁷ to Israel.³⁸ Turkey’s improving ties with Israel are especially significant to note. The parties have for some time been cooperating at the intelligence level and have foiled some Iranian attempts to kidnap Israeli tourists.³⁹ The Israeli side welcomed this cooperation and thanked the Turkish authorities.⁴⁰ In this manner, both sides have announced they were going to elevate their relations to the ambassadorial level.⁴¹ It is also worth noting that, over the past year, President Erdoğan postponed his Iran visit several times before finally going to Tehran on July 19. Some have evaluated this as a deliberate move, stating that Ankara may have postponed the Tehran visit until Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Selman and Israeli President Herzog visited Ankara⁴² to send a message to Tehran.

This does not mean that Turkey will join the probable anti-Iran bloc, consisting of the Gulf States, Israel, and backed by the US, if the JCPOA negotiations fail, given the fact that Turkey does not have the same threat perception from Iran as the Gulf States. The de-escalation

process in the region also marked the end of the Qatar blockade, erasing one extra factor that brought Tehran and Ankara together. Likewise, the KRI referendum threat was also eradicated as the KRI does not currently pose a serious threat either to Turkey or to Iran.

Lastly, Turkey's growing relationship with the Turkic world is also of concern to Iran. Turkey has been trying to develop its relationship with the Turkic states of Central Asia through the Organization of Turkic States.⁴³ Azerbaijan has a special place in this. In late 2020, President Erdoğan recited an Azeri poem⁴⁴ in Baku, which referred to the division of Azerbaijan between Russia and Iran, which led to an outcry in Iran due to the millions of Azeris residing in the country. Iranian officials heavily criticized⁴⁵ Turkey, with Turkey in turn condemning the Iranian side's accusations.⁴⁶ Turkey's growing relationship with the Turkic states of Central Asia in general, and with Azerbaijan in particular, will continue to be a worrying sign for Tehran.

Possible Areas of Escalation: Iraq and Syria

Iraq and Syria currently appear as two main theatres of a possible escalation between Turkey and Iran. In Iraq, Turkey has been conducting military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and enlarging its presence in the KRI. It is well-known that the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq are extremely uncomfortable with Turkey's growing footprint in the country. This was reflected in the strikes against Turkey's military base in Bashiqa, Mosul, which

Iranian-allied Shiite militias have targeted on more than one occasion.⁴⁷ Moreover, the PKK-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) in Sinjar has been closely cooperating with the Iranian-aligned Hashd Al Shaabi. In the face of the PKK security threats in the area, Turkey conducted multiple drone attacks and consistently announced the likelihood of initiating a military assault on the group. In response, the Iranian-backed groups intensified their threats against Ankara. Qais Al-Ghazali, the leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, went to the extent to state that the "Turkish deployment in Iraq would be more threatening than a continued US presence, adding that if Ankara intervenes in Sinjar, the group would pick up arms."⁴⁸ On top of these developments, the KRI's natural gas issue further complicated the Tehran-Ankara equation in Iraq. Besides, Turkey had played on the Sunni political figures of the country before and after the elections that took place in October 2021. Khamis al-Khanjar and Mohamed Al-Halbousi, two leaders of the Iraqi Sunni camp, visited Turkey before⁴⁹ and, after⁵⁰ the elections, meeting with President Erdoğan.

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On the other hand, Iran has been backing the Iran-aligned Coordination Framework which hindered Moqtada Sadr-Kurdistan Democratic Party, and Sunnis' government formation bid.⁵¹ Moreover, the Zakho attack, for which Turkey was blamed and in which 9 Arab Shiite lost their lives, and more than 20 people were wounded,⁵² also gave Tehran another opportunity to play on negative feelings concerning the Turkish presence in Iraq. Turkey denied responsibility for the attack and blamed the PKK instead for the casualties.⁵³ That said, it is safe to assume that the Turkish military operations within the KRI territory feed a negative perception of Turkey at least in some Iraqi circles, given the fact that Turkey's ongoing military operations and its military presence are no longer assessed as being temporary. In the 1990s, Turkey would enter the KRI, establish military bases, conduct military operations against the PKK presence in spring and summer and then withdraw from the area due to winter conditions. As a result of such withdrawals, the PKK would find a chance to return to the area. However, ever since the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016, Turkey's security paradigm has shifted. Ankara has embraced the understanding of draining security threats at their source (namely outside the Turkish borders ever since 2016.) In this vein, Turkey's military bases on Iraqi soil are constantly growing, and Turkey does not seem to be withdrawing from the areas it launched operations in anytime soon. Nevertheless, the intensity of Turkey's military operations may decrease in Iraq for some time due to the public outcry and unprecedented reaction from Iraqi political figures.⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ Yet, a complete withdrawal from Iraqi territories is highly unlikely in the short term, especially at a time when the PKK threat is continuing, and Iraq is becoming a boiling pot between different Shiite political groups over the government formation process.

As for Syria, Turkey has long been bringing to the fore the possibility of initiating a new military assault West of the Euphrates River. Yet, Iran fiercely opposes this possible operation, especially as an operation against Tel Rif'at will bring the Turkey-supported Syrian National Army closer to the Shia towns of Nubl and Zahra which are of importance to Iran. Multiple Iranian actors have voiced Iran's rejection of a new Turkish military operation. The last example of this was observed in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's speech during President Erdoğan's visit to Tehran. Khamenei stated⁵⁶ that a new operation would only benefit terrorists, indicating ISIS and Turkey-backed groups. It is also worth mentioning that both Tehran and Ankara refer to different groups when using the terms terrorists/terrorism.

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Moreover, Iran deliberately does not refer to a specific group while discussing terrorism. The country has a very ambivalent/vague definition of terrorism, specifically when it comes to Syria. On the other hand, Turkey always names the YPG/PKK while referring to terrorism. In addition, Turkey consistently criticizes Russia and Iran, stating that “words alone are not enough” to fight terrorism,⁵⁷ and that action is needed. Bearing this in mind, if Turkey initiates a new military incursion into Syria, Iran is likely to respond to Turkey through its proxies in Syria. In fact, Turkey has already experienced this on Syrian soil. Turkey targeted Iran-backed militias in Afrin while they were trying to enter the city in 2018 in an attempt to hinder Operation Olive Branch.⁵⁸ During Operation Spring Shield against the Assad regime, some Hezbollah members were also targeted by Turkey in Idlib in 2020.⁵⁹ Such a scenario may well be repeated in the event that Turkey decides to initiate the long-spoken military assault.

Conclusion

Despite their geopolitical rivalry and different political priorities, both countries are likely to act in a balanced way in the future of their relationship. It is also likely for them to push for the continuation of the compartmentalization of different files. Nevertheless, the two parties are reaching the limits of the distinctive compartmentalization feature of their relationship as the factors that have once brought them together disappear, the areas of disagreement grow and geographically enlarge, and the trade volume between them decreases. In this respect, Syria and Iraq are increasingly becoming two theaters of an overt geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Ankara over the upcoming period.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mehmet Emin Cengiz is a Research Fellow at Al Sharq Strategic Research. He received his B.A. in the Sociology Department from Ege University in 2016. During his B.A. he attended the Erasmus+ Program and studied at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf as an international exchange student in Germany. Cengiz received his master's degree from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Middle East at Marmara University in 2020. His pieces regarding the Syrian war and non-state armed actors have appeared in national and international media outlets and think tanks. His research interests are: Syrian Conflict, Non-State Armed Actors, Turkish Foreign Policy, Volunteer Foreign Fighters, Regional Kurdish Politics, and Political Islam.