

A NEW ERA IN TURKISH-IRANIAN RELATIONS?

Hakkı Uygur



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Art design&Layout: Jawad Abazeed
Printed in Turkey

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Abstract: Turkish-Iranian relations have been propelled by their own dynamics along certain lines of stability, particularly over the last century. Among important turning points in their relations were the regime changes in both countries in the 1920s, their common approaches to the Soviet threat in the Cold War era, and the 1979 Iranian revolution. The two nations gave different responses to the regional security crisis that began after September 11 and gained in intensity after the Arab Spring; in particular the Syrian crisis opened up the way for one of the most tense periods of bilateral relations experienced between the two countries. However, the Syrian crisis nearing an end and other arenas of crisis such as the Gulf and Jerusalem coming onto the agenda likely signifies a reduction in tensions in the relationship between Ankara and Tehran.



Introduction

The Turkish-Iranian relationship can be considered one of the most consistent and predictable sets of relations in the Middle East region. The shahs and ayatollahs of Iran have carried on a relationship with Turkey defined by its own unique characteristics regardless of which political party is in power there. The two countries share important commonalities in the roles of two of the region's main non-Arab actors, as well as both not having experienced direct colonization. Even if relations sour from time to time, the fact that the governments of the two states want continuity despite all the crises that they have undergone, plus different factors such as the deep historical, cultural and economic ties they share, have played a role in there being no breakoff in ties. Of course, this situation does not mean that these relations have not seen their own ups and downs.

The History of Turkish-Iranian Relations

Relations between the two countries, who have experienced many internal and external issues in parallel in the modern era, entered a new era with the proclamation of the republic in Turkey in 1923, the same year that Reza Pahlavi, who would announce that he had become Shah in 1925, became Iranian prime minister. The two neighbors both had modernizing efforts at the heart of their domestic policies and attempts to retain their existing borders and to guarantee their security at the forefront of their foreign policies.

The institutionalization of relations, particularly in the realm of security, would occur in particular in the post-World War II environment. The threat from the Soviet Union felt both by Iran,¹ which was the first victim of the Cold War, and by Turkey forced these countries to swiftly take positions on the U.S. side. While Turkey became a

NATO member at this time, Iran sought to guarantee its security through organizations in relationships with the west such as the Baghdad Pact and CENTO. In addition, there have been various claims aired that Israel, Turkey and Iran had created secret security cooperation mechanisms. In this period, the two countries were not only worried about the Soviet threat but also the rise of Nasserism in the Arab world.²

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The 1979 Iranian Revolution was a turning point in this century of relations. While the revolution's anti-western character led Iran to withdraw from CENTO, its Islamic ideology saw Turkey's secular democracy as totally "other" and relations quickly chilled. However, Iran's fast descent into internal strife and later war following the revolution prevented relations with Turkey degrading too far. Turkey's policy of active neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War had a big role in this. In particular, economic relations improved continually thanks to the efforts of Turgut Özal. While the "February 28 coup", in which the Turkish military gradually forced out an elected Islamist government in 1997, led to crises, relations with Iran generally remained positive.

Relations with Iran in the AK Party Era

The AK Party came to power in Turkey in 2002, at a sensitive time in terms of regional developments. The Bush administration had used September 11 as an excuse to occupy Afghanistan, while the days were being counted down to an attack on Iraq. On the other hand, Iran was a principle target for threatening language from neocons as one of the main actors in the "axis of evil".



Even if the AK Party was unable to prevent the occupation with the Platform for Iraqi Neighbors, which it had devised, it at least openly demonstrated a strategy of combating crises. After the occupation of Iraq, this view that regional powers should have an effective initiative for cooperative measures in solving regional crises was not long-lived, especially as conflicts of interest emerged between Iran and its Arab neighbors.

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The disillusionment and anti-Iranian sentiment felt by the vast majority of Arab countries in the wake of the occupation of Iraq did not find much expression in Turkey.³ In this period, Turkey attempted to build up close relations with all groups in Iraq while openly rejecting the exclusivist narratives that were developing on the basis of sectarian identity. In contrast to relations between Turkey and Iran, those between Saudi Arabia and Iran quickly broke down after the occupation of Iraq, and the cooperation mechanisms that Rafsanjani and Khatami had expended intense effort on did not last long. In fact, the two leaders made a series of visits to Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, and in turn Saudi King Abdullah visited Tehran for the 1999 Organization of Islamic Conference summit held there. In particular, the fruits of Khatami's efforts extended as far as an agreement for military co-operation during his 2001 Riyadh visit.⁴ The breakdown in relations at this point was both affected by the occupation of Iraq, and of the anti-Saudi attitudes of the Revolutionary Guards, which were a rising power in Iranian domestic policy. In particular, Ahmedinejad's time in office from 2005, the simultaneous

increase in Iran's influence in Iraq, and the replacement in the same year of Iraqi prime minister Ayad Allawi, who had good relations with the west, with Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who was accused of being under Iranian influence all increased tensions. But Turkey retained the same essential position on Iraq at this time.

In this period, Turkey had in general adopted a policy it called "zero problems with the neighbors", and established close relations with all its neighbors, overseeing an important increase in commercial relations with Syria and Iraq while paying attention to further developing its existing relations with Iran. Turkey at this time emphasized regularly the necessity for regional cooperation and integration and that Iran needed to be a part of these efforts.⁵ It also chose a constructive and conciliatory road on the issue of Iran's nuclear activities, which had begun to come onto the agenda of international society, being insistent at every opportunity that this issue needed to be solved through diplomatic negotiations. Around this time, Turkey hosted a large number of nuclear talks between Iran and the west.⁶ In 2010, Turkey and Brazil even attempted to mediate in order to solve the issue through peaceful means, but the opposition of the U.S. administration left this attempt in vain.

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When looking at the efforts to which Turkey and Iran went at this time to avoid tensions over Iraq, it is worth touching on the role of the two countries' similar attitudes to their Kurdish issues. Both countries continually emphasized their opposition to northern Iraq declaring its independence from the



federal structure and the importance of Iraq maintaining its territorial integrity. In essence, while talking about Turkish-Iranian relations, we must keep in mind the central role played by the two countries' recent co-operation over the Kurdish issue. In particular, in we consider how difficult it was for Iraq and Syria to regain their territorial integrity, we should not be surprised at the close co-operation of Ankara and Tehran over this issue.

The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations

When the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011, very few people could have foreseen that this might become an issue that would lead to serious tensions and discord between Turkey and Iran. Turkey saw the uprisings as democratic people's movements and greeted them with great enthusiasm, while Iran, which had still not entirely got over the effects of similar events in 2009, approached this wave of demonstrations with caution—first of all in February arresting the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who had announced that they would demonstrate in solidarity with the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt.⁷ The pair have remained under house arrest ever since.⁸

The overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011 at around the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution was a great source of satisfaction to Iranian administration, and in September an international conference on the “Islamic Awakening” was organized in Tehran under the leadership of Ali Akbar Velayati

In practice, Iran have taken every possible precaution to prevent the demonstrations spreading internally, but in rhetoric, given most of the uprisings occurred in countries where pro-western elites were in charge,

it claimed that these uprisings were an “Islamic awakening” and that the peoples of the region had been influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁹ In particular, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011 at around the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution was a great source of satisfaction to Iranian administration, and in September an international conference on the “Islamic Awakening” was organized in Tehran under the leadership of Ali Akbar Velayati.¹⁰

The Syrian Crisis and its Effects on Turkish-Iranian Relations

The Arab Spring only began to represent a serious problem between Tehran and Ankara when events spilled over to Syria. Iran was acutely aware of Syria's important place in the politics of the region and the defining role that Damascus had played in the 2006 Israel–Hizbullah conflict, leaving it in a serious dilemma.¹¹ On one hand, the Baath regime in Damascus was far from democracy and human rights, and Iran knew well its repressive attitudes, while on the other, it was thought that a radical change of administration in Syria might destroy the mechanisms it called the “axis of resistance”, which it had been investing in for around 30 years and was finally beginning to see the fruits of. Iran at first gave its support bashfully and indirectly, but as events intensified it increased this support considerably.¹² Once it was certain that the Obama administration would not intervene in the crisis, it increased its political support for the regime to the highest levels, announcing that Bashar Assad himself was a “red line” for the country and beginning to increase its military presence inside Syria.¹³

Turkey's reading of the Arab Spring in particular and its Syrian dimension in particular were very different. Turkish decision-makers, who compared these events to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, believed that no power would



be able to prevent the wave of change and democracy in the region and placed itself fully in the ranks of the opposition, putting its decade of developing good relations with the Syrian administration at risk and soon ending up as a party to the crisis itself.

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In the first days of the demonstrations turning into armed uprisings, the Syrian regime went through very difficult times, but its hand began to strengthen in February 2013 in particular when Hizbullah began sending militants into the Syrian arena. In addition, the coup in July against the young democratic system in Egypt, which had been seen as the biggest victory of the Arab Spring, left the countries opposing the Syrian regime divided themselves and played a role in reducing the effectiveness of the opposition. Moreover, the most fundamental turning point in the Syrian civil war came when Russia entered the war in September 2015 thanks to Iran's intensive diplomatic efforts. Turkey strongly criticized Russia for this move, but an event that did much more than Turkey's anti-Russian statements to damage Turkish-Russian relations was the downing of a Russian warplane that had violated Turkey's borders by Turkish jets in November.¹⁴

The Syrian crisis had now, with Russia actively beginning to participate on the ground, evolved to a point where Turkey, which had begun to have serious differences of opinion with the U.S., was increasingly being

damaged by the Syrian conflict. At this time, the emergence of the ISIS organization in Syria and its success in winning territory from other oppositional forces allowed the regime, Russia and Iran to rebrand the Syrian crisis as a conflict between terror organizations and the legitimate Syrian government, which harmed Turkey's image in the international press. Meanwhile, Turkey was deeply affected by intensive campaigns of terror within its borders, especially in 2015 and 2016.

Another issue directly affecting Turkey's national security that has emerged as a result of the Syrian war are the gains in power and effectiveness by the PKK terror group in Syria throughout the crisis. The organization in particular began a large-scale propaganda campaign during the ISIS attacks on Kobani, and its Syrian arm, the PYD, has begun gaining more territory every day with the support of western countries, primarily the U.S., and succeeded in taking over a large section at the otherside of Turkey's border. The PYD, which in the early days of the crisis had been supported by Iran and the regime in order to limit Turkey's influence, later moved more towards a pro-U.S. and pro-western line. After the Russian jet was downed, they also began to get serious amounts of support from Russia, a situation which continues to this day.

Turkey's priority in the Syrian crisis thus being shifted from regime change in Damascus to protecting its own borders can in some sense be interpreted as plans by Iran and the regime to keep Turkey busy finally bearing fruit. The complete capture of Aleppo by the regime at the end of 2016 thanks to intensive Russian air attacks on the opposition led Turkey to undertake a major revision of its strategies regarding Syria and to begin to emphasize the Astana talks with Russia and Iran. Over the same days, Turkey, presumably with Russian agreement, carried out its al-Bab operation with the aim of preventing



the PYD from completely closing off Turkey's borders and creating a land link from Afrin to Kobane. The threat of an operation for Manbij in the early days was not brought about due to a U.S. veto.

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July 15 Coup Attempt

Another important issue that affected all Turkey's international relations, including those with Russia and Iran, was the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, whose complexities will be better understood in the long term. Following a bloody coup attempt carried out by members of the Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETÖ) who had infiltrated the army, Ankara was enraged and disillusioned by Turkey's traditional western allies' protective attitudes towards the coup plotters and their difficulties in even wishing the government well. Increasingly, Turkish authorities and public opinion began expressing the opinion that the Egyptian coup, the Gezi demonstrations and the July 15 coup attempt had all been supported by the same regional and international circles.

Beginning with Turkey's apology to Russia immediately before the start of the coup attempt, the process of repairing relations gained momentum and Turkey announced that despite all the objections of the U.S., talks on purchasing the S-400 strategic Russian air defense systems had reached the final stages.¹⁵ The new conjuncture emerging in Turkey in which the country began searching for alternatives for its traditional allies was doubtless related particularly to

the disappointment felt with the Obama administration in its second term. However, even if sensational acts of terror ended in Turkey with the end of Obama's term of office and the election of Trump, the two countries continued to have differences of opinion over Syria. Turkey's wish to be included in the Raqqa operation to be carried out against ISIS was rejected by the Trump administration, and in the Trump era it became clear that the military wing, which had begun to gain more influence over Washington's policies in the region, saw working with the YPG as more effective and cheaper from the perspective of U.S. interests. On the other hand, the refusal of the new administration to surrender the leader of the coup plotters to Turkey shows that it will be difficult for Washington-Ankara relations to reach an ideal level in the short term.

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The fast improvement seen in Turkish-Russian relations in this era was not experienced in relations with Iran. On the contrary, the Turkish administration stated on countless times from the highest levels that Iran was following an expansionist and sectarian policy in the region, claiming that this politics it termed "Persian expansionism" was increasing the instability in the region.¹⁶ The lack of a response from a corresponding level from Iran the last few times President Erdoğan has repeated these accusations may be evaluated as a sign that the Iranians are trying to keep their relations with Turkey good and to keep Turkey from openly



opposing it in the unclear present conditions in which the Trump administration is calling for regime change in Iran.

The Qatar Crisis and the Future of Turkish-Iranian Relations

New U.S. President Donald Trump taking his first overseas visit to Saudi Arabia and Israel and making anti-Iranian statements during his visits have been taken as the strongest evidence that the U.S. will approach the Iran issue differently during his term. Previous president Obama's policies, which gave Tehran the green light to interfere through sending fighters to the region in exchange for limiting its nuclear activities, had been a great disappointment, especially to Riyadh and Tel Aviv, while both Trump's anti-Iranian opinions voiced during his election campaign and the messages he gave and the capitals he chose for his first visits indicated that there had been a change in wind direction on Iran. In particular, the open threats to Iran in statements by Saudi authorities were seen as a rhetorical reflection of the attempts by Saudi Arabia, Israel and the U.S. to begin active co-operation.

When we look at this from Turkey's perspective, it may be claimed that Ankara, which has been uncomfortable with Iran's regional policies in recent times, will not be put off by the limiting of Tehran's activities. However, although in recent years the fundamental reason for the tensions between Turkey and Iran has been the Syrian crisis, this has not been the sole reason. Both Iran's use of loyal militants in Iraq and demobilization of other groups in the country to increase its influence and its good relationship with the PYD, which is also engaged in trying to change the demographics of parts of Iraq and Syria, have been issues that have caused upsets in Turkey. While in general, Turkey calls for regional integration and a freedom of relations that transcends borders, Tehran's encouragement of the creation of ideological and sectarian

camp and in addition the messages from Tehran that economic relations with Turkey will decrease in the period after economic sanctions are lifted have garnered high-level responses from Ankara.

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The first serious regional crisis in the wake of Trump's visit was not centered on Iran: instead, unexpected by many, it was based on the axis of the small but influential Gulf country of Qatar. When we look at the accusations made about Doha, targeted by Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Muhammed bin Selman and Muhammed bin Zeyd, the degree to which they match the inspirations of Turkey's regional policies is clear to see.

This unexpected outburst by Saudi Arabia has left Turkey in a difficult situation. On the one hand, Turkey cannot directly take an anti-Riyadh position because it is aware of Saudi Arabia's important position in the Arab and Islamic worlds and the importance of its economic relations with the country, but on the other, it has made it clear that it will see any intervention against Qatar as an attack on itself by establishing an airbridge to break the siege of Qatar and speeding up the process of approving the deployment of soldiers to the Turkish base in Doha. Moreover, Turkey is carrying out an active policy of diplomacy with both sides and third parties in order to do everything it can to prevent the crisis growing further.



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Before Iran had even recovered from the shock of the announcement of the siege of Qatar, the serious terror attacks of symbolic importance which took place in Tehran demonstrated the many dimensions and capacity for expansion of the tensions in the region. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who had come to Turkey to talk about the Qatar crisis, had to add the attacks claimed by ISIS that had taken place in his own country onto the agenda. Iran identified Saudi Arabia as principally responsible for both crises, and many of its officials stated that Saudi was behind the attacks in Tehran, increasing the sentiment that the two crises were linked to one another. In particular, Trump's message about the attacks including the line "states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote", together with his tweets during the Qatar crisis, mean that these claims are not quite so easily discarded.

Those who remember how Saddam Hussein in the past brought destruction to the region through a feeling he would win easy victories over both Iran and Kuwait, will be aware that it is not entirely impossible for the entire region to be dragged into a wholesale war by ambitious and unproven administrations under the influence of manipulation from outside

The fears of both Turkey and Iran over this axis that has newly begun to form in the region have actually coincided. The fundamental difference between them is the way and level in which they have voiced these

fears. Just as on the topic of a referendum in northern Iraq, Iran has used its voice from the highest level in a threatening way, including a willingness to use practical threats, such as cutting off the water supply to northern Iraq if needed, Turkey prefers to use a more nuanced and diplomatic language.¹⁷ But in the final analysis, the inability to foresee future threats to the region and the amateurism displayed by its main actors form a potential serious danger to the entire region. Those who remember how Saddam Hussein in the past brought destruction to the region through a feeling he would win easy victories over both Iran and Kuwait, will be aware that it is not entirely impossible for the entire region to be dragged into a wholesale war by ambitious and unproven administrations under the influence of manipulation from outside.

Conclusion

What has allowed for co-operation on fundamental issues affecting Turkish-Iranian relations in the modern era have been factors such as the following: a common understanding that neither side in the Syrian crisis can possibly reach a "total victory" at this point; their determination on the issue of Mesut Barzani's independence referendum in northern Iraq; the stream of statements from American authorities on the need for regime change in Iran, and maybe more important than any of these, the importance of figures such as Sisi, Netanyahu, Muhammed bin Selman and Muhammed bin Zeyd in Trump's planned Middle East policies. As a consequence of these factors, the dose of tension in Turkish-Iranian relations that we have seen over past years may well drop in the times ahead of us.

Finally, however these two local actors, which both want to establish supremacy in the region, differ in their viewpoints, they will both be affected by a superpower from outside the region, one that prioritizes Israel's security without concern for sectarian or



ideological nuances and one that is following a strategy leveled against political Islam and its local democratic organizations. Although U.S.'s internal discussions regarding Trump's legitimacy and challenges the existing system poses to Trump administration create obstacles to realization of this design for the Middle East, all types of means—whether mercenary Kurdish groups, terror organizations like ISIS or coup attempts—are actively being used against local actors who are predicted to show resistance to this vision.



Endnotes

1- The Soviet Union's reluctance to leave Iranian soil it had occupied during the war is seen as one of the first sparks of the Cold War. Malcom Byrne, 'Iran and the United States in the Cold War' The Journal of Gilder Lehrman Institute, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/age-reagan/essays/iran-and-united-states-cold-war>

2- Paul Salem, Orta Doğu'nun Doğusunda İş birliği Te-sisi (Carnegie Press, 2010) p.10

3- Gulf Countries, and most of all Saudi Arabia, believe that Iraq's Sunni Arab identity has been destroyed forever, that the country has been wrapped up in a Shia identity and that the power balance against Iran has been seriously damaged. Turkey however responded in a more mature way to Shiites gaining a share of power in a country where they were the majority.

4- Fahad M. Alsultan, Pedram Saeid The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s: Between conflict and accomodation, (Routledge, 2016) p.17 Dönemin İran Savunma Bakanı Ali Şamhani'nin Ri-yaz ziyareti. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle-east/725419.stm>

5- For Abdullah Gül's words on the role of Iran on the issue of regional integration, see: <http://www.abdulahgul.gen.tr/sayfa/ziyaretler/eco>

6- Following the "5+1" nuclear talks held in Istanbul in January 2011 and April 2012, they were moved to western capitals due to the damage the Syrian crisis had done to bilateral relations. See: Pınar Arıkan Sinkaya, İran ile P5+1 Ülkeleri Arasında Yeniden Başlayan Nükleer Müzakereler, ORSAM, <http://www.orsam.org.tr/index.php/Content/Analiz/2889?s=orsam%7Cturkish>

7- The "Green Movement" was a movement led by former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi, who did not recognize the 2009 presidential election results in Iran. They claimed the runoff election results had been tampered with and called on the people to protest. It was not at the height of demonstrations, which were attended by millions of people and stopped everyday life, especially in Tehran, that they were arrested, but in connection with the Arab Spring after participation had fallen, by those fearing that those uprisings might be reflected in the country.

8- President Rouhani has not succeeded in having the two leaders released despite all his electoral pledges to that effect.

9- For Khamanei's "Islamic Awakening" and views on its effects in Iran, see: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-article?id=21374>

10- Participation at the conference, under general secretary Velayati, Khamanei's foreign policy advisor, remained low and was mainly made up of Islamic groups that were known for their connections to Iran. The conference, in some sense, had the quality of being a response to the increasing influence of Turkey in the first period of the process. Even if the so-called "permanent secretary" has not held any further international activities, the website has remained in service: <http://islamic-awakening.ir/>

11- During the violent conflicts between Israel and Hiz-bullah, which had continued for about a month, Bashar Assad had provided Syrian army arms to Hizbullah and through its logistical support played an extremely important role in helping Hizbullah to continue fighting.

12- At first, Iran's Syria policy did not attract sufficient domestic support, and criticism of the policy was not limited to reformists. Writings claiming that Iran should not oppose the Syrian people could even come out on the foreign policy website of former ambassador Sadegh Kharazi. see: [irdiplomacy April 31, 2011](http://irdiplomacy.com/2011/04/31/)

13- That Bashar Assad was himself a "red line" was first expressed by Hassan Nasrallah during discussions with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bog-danov. Later, this argument was repeated by various high-ranking officials including Ali Akbar Velayati. See: [mehrnews January 2014](http://mehrnews.com/2011/01/)

14- <http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/rus-savas-ucagi-siniri-ihlal-etti-turk-f-16lar-dusurdu, mP74HrTmEe3c-c8qXBlqrA>

15- <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/rusya-ve-turkiye-den-s-400-ekonomi-2462094/>

16- <http://www.timeturk.com/erdogan-pers-milliyet-ciliginin-onunu-kesmeliyiz/haber-487924>

17- Both the words of Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi on visiting Khamanei that a referendum in Iraq would be unacceptable and those of Iranian Chief of Staff Bagheri, who warned Erbil that, together with threats from Tehran-linked al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces, the possibility of combat with Iran in the event of a referendum was not entirely off the table. Although Turkey's position on the referendum is similar, it has used noticeably more diplomatic language.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hakkı Uygur He received his BA and MA degree in Iran. Following his giving lectures on Iran and Persian language in the Istanbul-based Foundation for Sciences and Arts (BİSAV) in between 2005-2010, he worked as the Director of Administrative Affairs and Protocols in Tehran-based The Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC) between 2010 and 2014. He completed his PhD in 2015 at Tehran University. Uygur has been holding the Vice-Director position of Ankara-based Center for Iranian Studies since March 2016.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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