

# PRAGMATISM AND RIVALRY: THE NATURE OF TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS

*This article examines the recent developments in Turkey-Iran relations. Over the last decade there has been an obvious rapprochement between the two countries. Ideological rivalry gave way to pragmatism, especially obvious in economic cooperation. However, the Arab Spring and particularly the civil war in Syria led to a deterioration of the relations between Turkey and Iran and revealed the fragility of this relationship, especially in terms of security and rival visions for the region. Iran's newly elected moderate President Hassan Rouhani has already demonstrated that Iran is willing to cooperate with the West on several issues. For now it seems like Iran is switching from the hard line foreign policy of the Ahmadinejad era to a more cooperative stance, which most likely will affect Turkey-Iran relations in a positive way.*

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**I**n 1514 the Ottoman Army, led by Selim I, beat the Safavids in the battle of Çaldiran.<sup>1</sup> The 500th anniversary of this crucial battle will take place next year. The Ottoman Empire was a Sunni-Muslim power in the Middle East, while Shiite Islam was the Safavids' state religion. For a long time both empires competed over influence in the region until they became the "cue-ball" of the rising imperial powers of Europe. The Ottomans and the Safavids are history; but their legacy has been revived in recent years and presently plays a role in Turkish-Iranian relations.

### *From Ideological Enmity to Pragmatism*

During the first 70 years of the 20th century, this ideological rift between Turkey and Iran perished. Both countries were similar to each other in terms of domestic and foreign policy fields. Although an overwhelming part of Turkey and Iran's populations are Muslim, Islam played only a minor role within politics in both countries. Regarding foreign policy, Turkey and Iran were crucial partners of the West through their partnerships in NATO and the CENTO respectively.

However, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 led to a change of perception on both sides. An ideological rivalry based on contrary state perceptions –rather than religious affiliations– influenced the relations between Turkey and Iran throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of the Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khomeini's radical Islamic rhetoric presented an ideological challenge to laicist Turkey and vice versa. Iran's support for radical Islamic groups, like the Turkish branch of Hezbollah,<sup>2</sup> was interpreted in Turkey as an attempt by Iran to export its Islamic revolution. Today one can argue that Ayatollah Khomeini did not achieve this aim. According to Ervand Abrahamian, an Iranian-Armenian scholar based in the United States, "the nationalistic language, together with the use of exclusively Shiite symbols and imagery, helps explain why Khomeinists have had limited success in exporting their revolution."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Turkey's staunch secularism and its handling of radical and political Islam led to criticism from the Iranian side. For Khomeini, secularism or laicism were "Western perversions"<sup>4</sup> and not compatible with a Muslim society. Turkey's relations with the West and in this case especially with the United States and Israel were another point that drew criticism from post-revolutionary Iran.

1 J. R. Walsh, "Çaldiran," in *IE²*, Vol.2 (1965), pp. 7-8; Michael J. McCaffrey, "Çaldiran," in *Elr*. Vol.4 (1990), pp. 656-8.

2 Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, "Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.17, No.3 (Fall 2010), p.110.

3 Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 1993), p. 15.

4 Abrahamian (1993), p. 35.

Furthermore, Iran accused Turkey of harboring Iranian opposition groups such as the Mujahedeen-e Khalq Organization.<sup>5</sup> It is a matter of fact that in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran many opposition groups were temporally based in Turkey. The majority, though, used Turkey only as a transit country.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Iranian attitude towards Turkey in the ultimate aftermath of the revolution can be described as pragmatic. The main reason for this was Iran's war with Iraq. Throughout the war, Iran was not able to use the Persian Gulf to channel its urgent needs. Therefore, it was dependent on Turkey's ports in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Iran bought Turkish goods and received technical assistance from Turkey, in return for mainly oil and gas, which was urgent for Turkey's then crumbling economy.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Iran did not perceive Turkey as an ultimate danger during this time and had a serious interest in keeping Turkey neutral regarding the war.

Mahmood Sariolghalam, lecturer at the department for International Relations at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, claimed in an interview with the author that Turkey benefited during the war and that this was basically the foundation for deeper economic cooperation between the two countries later on.<sup>8</sup>

*“Tehran’s biggest problem was the fact that most of the newly independent Muslim states of the post-Soviet area were ruled by secular and autocratic rulers who were suspicious of the Islamic Republic...”*

### ***Geopolitical Rivalry and the Domestic Impact on Turkey-Iran Relations in the 1990s***

The end of the Cold War led to tensions between Turkey and Iran. Both were competing regionally for the leadership among the newly independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Because of its geographic location, Iran had an advantage in approaching the countries of the post-Soviet space. Rather than exporting the revolution, Iran presented itself as an economic opportunity for its gas and oil rich

5 Bayram Sinkaya, “Turkey-Iran Relations in the 1990s and the Role of Ideology,” *Perceptions*, Vol.10, No.1 (Spring 2005), p. 9.

6 Up to 1.5 Million Iranians entered and stayed in Turkey until the end of the 1980s. See: Şebnem Köşer Akçapar, “Re-Thinking Migrants’ Networks and Social Capital: A Case Study of Iranians in Turkey,” *International Migration*, Vol.48, No.2 (2010), p. 164.

7 Özcan and Özdamar (2010), p. 106; Sinkaya (2005), p. 2.

8 Interview with Mahmud Sariolghalam, 27 October 2013.

Central Asian neighbors to expand energy trade.<sup>9</sup> Turkey however was propagating the “Turkish Model” and as Özcan and Özdemir explain, Turkey was “emphasizing ethnic Turkic ties, secularism, integration into Western economic and political institutions, and increased trade and cultural ties.”<sup>10</sup>

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Although Turkey was not able to neutralize Russian and Iranian influence in the post-Soviet space, it was able to build up excellent relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus, and with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. Iran was able to strengthen its relations with Tajikistan and Armenia. Tehran’s biggest problem was the fact that most of the newly independent Muslim states of the post-Soviet area were ruled by secular and autocratic rulers who were

suspicious of the Islamic Republic and remembered all too well that the Iranians had previously supported radical Islamic groups in neighboring Muslim countries in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Although both countries were able to establish economic ties with some of the newly independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, neither Turkey nor Iran could compete with Russia’s influence in these regions.

Another matter of conflict regarding Turkish-Iranian relations was Iran’s financial and logistic support to various Islamic terrorist groups within Turkey. The killing of several popular Turkish secularists, such as the prominent journalist and writer Uğur Mumcu, caused widespread public protest in Turkey and further damaged Tehran’s image among Turkey’s secular elite.<sup>12</sup> The Turkish authorities claimed that the suspects of these killings had been trained and supported by Iran.<sup>13</sup>

Iran’s support for the Kurdish separatist group Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) constituted an even greater challenge for Turkey. Throughout the late 1980s and the

9 Özcan and Özdamar (2010), p. 107.

10 Özcan and Özdamar (2010), p. 107.

11 F. Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader, “Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East,” *RAND* (2013), p. 17.

12 Daphne McCurdy, “Turkish-Iranian Relations: When Opposites Attract,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.2 (Summer 2008), p. 97.

13 In an article in the Turkish daily *Zaman*, Bülent Korucu refers to Hanefi Avcı, the former police chief of Istanbul, who claimed in his book that Iran killed Mumcu and that the Turkish Police Forces conducted several successful operations against Iran sponsored radical Islamic organizations in the early 1990s. See: “Devletin beklediği cinayet: Uğur Mumcu,” *Zaman*, 27 November 2012.

1990s, Turkish officials accused Iran of actively providing logistic support and being a safe-haven for the PKK.<sup>14</sup> Although Iran denied these accusations, it is widely known that Iran viewed Turkey's Kurdish issue as its "Achilles' heel" and actively used the PKK as an instrument to weaken Turkey.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between Turkey and Iran throughout the 1980s and 1990s was therefore based on mutual distrust and rivalry.

The relations had culminated in the mutual withdrawal of the Turkish and Iranian ambassadors in 1997. Iran's ambassador in Ankara, Mohammed-Reza Bagheri said in a speech he held in Sincan, a small city close to Ankara, "that those who sign agreements with the United States and Israel will, sooner or later, be penalized."<sup>16</sup> When Turkey banished Bagheri after his controversial speech, Iran reacted by expelling Turkey's ambassador.<sup>17</sup> Although the Iraq-Iran war in the ultimate aftermath of the Islamic revolution had forced Iran to cooperate with Turkey and implement a more pragmatic foreign policy, in the post-war period until the late 1990s, the ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the two countries had increased.

With Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the radical tones from Tehran ceased and the support for radical Islamic groups in Turkey decreased.<sup>18</sup> But still, the conservative and radical segments within the political establishment of Iran remained suspicious of Turkey. Core institutions like the Turkish military and the judiciary were still perceived as Kemalist and anti-Islamic. Especially the Turkish military's links to the U.S., Israel, and NATO became a matter of concern for Iran. For instance, the Revolutionary Guards and the religious conservative elite of Iran perceived Turkey's alignment with the aforementioned actors as a "new U.S. strategy to contain Iran."<sup>19</sup> But the "cool-headed" and pragmatic approach of moderate politicians and decision-makers on both sides prevented a further deterioration of bilateral relations in the late 1990s.

### *The Great Rapprochement*

After the rise of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, relations between Turkey and Iran improved. Simultaneously, Iran's relatively liberal president Mohammad Khatami attempted to implement non-ideological foreign

14 Özcan and Özdamar (2010), p. 108.

15 According to Daphne McCurdy Iran allowed around 1,200 PKK militants to settle in Iran in the 1990s. See: McCurdy (2008), p. 97.

16 Bülent Aras, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Iran: Ideology and Foreign Policy in Flux," *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol.18, No.1 (2001), p. 107.

17 Özcan and Özdamar (2010), p. 110.

18 According to Bayram Sinkaya the Hezbollah complained about the decrease of support from Tehran after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. See: Sinkaya (2005), p. 4.

19 Sinkaya (2005), p. 8.

policy approaches, better known as “Dialogue among Civilizations” and “*Détente* with neighbors”.<sup>20</sup> While the Iranian side decreased its revolutionary rhetoric, in Turkey pragmatists with a background in political Islam replaced the laicist elite.

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The AKP’s new foreign policy approach, widely known as “zero problems with neighbors”, contributed to the improvement of Turkey’s image in Iran. Even radical conservative elements like the Revolutionary Guards stopped perceiving Turkey as an instrument of the West that is isolating Iran in the region. Moreover, they considered the rise of the conservative AKP “as part of the

broader Islamic awakening in the Muslim world that was prompted by the Islamic revolution.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that Turkey acted more independently from its Western allies regarding its neighborhood policies in the Middle East was interpreted as yet another sincere move to stabilize and improve relations with Iran. In other words, Turkey’s image in Iran changed from being the “prolonged arm” of the West in the region, to a country with a “sincere” and independent foreign policy.

This change in perception opened the way for deeper cooperation in terms of security and economy. For instance, when Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Iran in 2004, Iran agreed on labeling the PKK as a terrorist organization.<sup>22</sup> This was a significant step that further strengthened relations between the two countries. An important reason for Iran’s change of policy towards Turkey was the fact that Tehran itself was confronted with a separatist Kurdish movement, known as the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), which led to joint security operations. As a result of the 2004 memorandum, military operations against the PKK and PJAK were coordinated, and the exchange of intelligence on the militants’ movements was agreed.

Turkey’s increasing energy demands was the main reason for intensification of economic cooperation between Turkey and Iran. Turkey imports 10 billion cubic meters of gas a year and up to five million tons of crude oil from Iran.<sup>23</sup> That makes Iran Turkey’s second biggest gas supplier after Russia.<sup>24</sup> Annual trade between Turkey and

20 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Iran’s Politics and Regional Relations: Post-Détente,” *Perceptions*, Vol.12, No.1 (Spring 2007), p. 32.

21 Bayram Sinkaya, “Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No.2 (2012), p. 140.

22 Stephen Larabee, “Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.86, No.4 (July/August 2007), p. 107.

23 “Turkey Eyes More Iran Gas, ‘Can’t Cut off Oil’,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 18 October 2013.

24 “Turkish Minister: No Plan to Cut Iran Oil Import,” *Fars News Agency*, 18 October 2013.

Iran grew from 1.05 billion dollars in 2000 to 21.89 billion dollars in 2012.<sup>25</sup> However it is Iran which is primarily benefiting from the increasing trade volume with Turkey in the last 12 years. According to Gareth Jenkins, “the balance of trade between Iran and Turkey is weighted in Iran’s favor by a margin of almost four to one.”<sup>26</sup> The imbalance regarding the trade volume is based on the fact that Iran is mainly exporting hydrocarbons to Turkey. Another reason is the relatively high price Turkey is paying for the Iranian gas. While Turkey paid 330 dollars for a cubic meter of Azerbaijani gas and 400 dollars for Russian gas, it paid 505 dollars for each cubic meter for Iranian gas in 2012.<sup>27</sup> The initial agreement to this end was concluded by Turkey’s former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in 1996.<sup>28</sup>

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Erbakan agreed to pay a relatively high price for Iranian gas and “to a ‘take-or-pay’ provision which committed Turkey to paying for a minimum of 87 percent of the annual contracted volume regardless of how much it actually consumed.”<sup>29</sup> This in return makes the gas trade with Turkey highly lucrative for Iran. Turkey is also the only country which imports significant volumes of Iranian gas through the Tabriz-Ankara pipeline.<sup>30</sup>

The increasing trade volume between Turkey and Iran and the fact that the trade balance is in favor of Iran renders Turkey an important partner for Iran in the region. Although there have been some complaints from the Turkish side concerning the relatively high gas price, it is likely that Turkey will keep on purchasing Iranian gas because of its rapidly increasing gas demand.

Another clear indicator for the rapprochement between Turkey and Iran is the so-called “Nuclear fuel-swap deal” which was concluded by Turkey, Iran, and Brazil

25 “İran İslam Cumhuriyeti’ne İlişkin Temel Bilgiler,” [General information on the Islamic Republic of Iran], *T.C. Ekonomi Bakanlığı*, [Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Turkey], 21 October 2013, <http://www.ekonomi.gov.tr/upload/C74985FF-D8D3-8566-4520E92CB063EEF8/Iran-son.pdf>

26 Gareth H. Jenkins, “Occasional Allies, Enduring Rivals: Turkey’s Relations with Iran,” *Silk Road Paper* (May 2012), p. 54.

27 “Turkey Eyes Solution as Iran Insists on ‘Unfair Gas Price,’” *Today’s Zaman*, 5 February 2012.

28 Elin Kinnander, “The Turkish-Iranian Gas Relationship: Politically Successful, Commercially Problematic,” *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, NG 38 (January 2010), p. 7.

29 Jenkins (2012), p. 54.

30 David Ramin Jalilvand, “Iran’s Gas Exports: Can Past Failure become Future Success?,” *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, NG 78 (June 2013), p. 4.

in 2010. It foresaw the shipment of 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium from Iran to Turkey in return for the fuel for a research reactor.<sup>31</sup> The United States, however, dismissed the deal and new sanctions were determined by the United Nations. For Turkey-Iran relations, this agreement was yet another significant step towards deeper cooperation. Turkey tried to act as a broker between Iran and the United Nations. The fact that Iran chose Turkey to find a solution for its ongoing dispute with the West about its nuclear program was a sign of trust. Therefore the nuclear fuel-swap deal can be seen as the peak of Turkish-Iranian relations in recent years.

### ***The Arab Spring: Return of a Bitter Rivalry?***

Although Turkey and Iran were cooperating in their security and economic policies, their different foreign policy approaches reappeared with the Arab Spring. While Turkey promoted itself as a role model for the new emerging democracies in North Africa and the Middle East, Iran perceived the Arab Spring as a long overdue “Islamic awakening” in the Muslim world. Bülent Aras critically remarks that the Iranian regime’s claim of an Islamic awakening “is an attempt to play to a domestic audience and preserve their hold on power.”<sup>32</sup> On the one hand Tehran sided with the “oppressed masses”<sup>33</sup> in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and in particular in Bahrain, which has a predominantly Shiite population. On the other hand, Tehran relentlessly supported the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad and labeled the uprising in Syria as a “Western plot” to destabilize the region. Iran’s support for Assad is mainly based on geopolitical reasons, such as Syria’s geographical adjacency to Lebanon and in particular to Tehran’s proxy there, the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis is of crucial importance for Iran’s foreign policy in the region and, as Murhaf Jouejaty, a lecturer at the National Defense University in Washington, claims, “the fall of the regime would be a tremendous strategic loss for Tehran.”<sup>34</sup> Another crucial point is the religious proximity between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and Tehran. The Syrian regime is of Alawite origin, which is considered as a branch of Shiism.<sup>35</sup> Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Shiism played a major role in Iran’s foreign policy doctrine.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Turkey and Iran developed contradictory positions regarding the uprising in Syria.<sup>37</sup>

31 “Iran Signs Nuclear Fuel-Swap Deal with Turkey,” *BBC News*, 17 May 2010.

32 Bülent Aras, “Turkey and Iran: Facing the Challenge of the Arab Spring,” *The German Marshall Fund* (19 February 2013), p. 3.

33 “Mostazafin” or “oppressed masses” is a term Ayatollah Khomeini often used in his pre- and post-revolutionary speeches to depict the angry poor or the “exploited” people. See: Abrahamian (1993), p. 27.

34 “Iran’s Plan B in post-Assad Syria to Create Alawite State,” *Today’s Zaman*, 1 April 2013.

35 “The ‘secretive sect’ in Charge of Syria,” *BBC News*, 17 May 2012.

36 Kayhan Barzegar, “The Shia Factor in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” *Center for Strategic Research*, November 2008, <http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtid=07&&depid=74&semid=1421>

37 Iran’s Ambassador to Damascus, Sayed Ahmed al Mousavi claimed that the protests were driven by “foreign enemies” of the Syrian state. Furthermore he accused the protesters of being “foreign agents” who were taking their marching orders from “enemies [of Syria] and from Zionists” to fight against the Syrian state which stood in opposition to U.S. and Israeli strategic plans for the region. See: Ali Husain Bakir, “The Syrian Revolution within the Turkish-Iranian Matrix: Current predicament and prospects,” *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (February 2012), p. 2.

The confrontation proved similar to the one that both countries experienced over Central Asia and the Caucasus in the early 1990s. But the Arab Spring emerged as a far bigger challenge to their respective roles in the region and their relations with each other. Especially Syria has turned into a battleground for Turkey and Iran, where both are fiercely defending their geopolitical goals. Turkey supported the protests from the beginning and urged the Syrian regime to implement reforms rather than using violence against the protesters. The escalation of the protests and Turkey's backing of the various Syrian opposition groups, among them Al Qaeda affiliated groups like Al Nusra,<sup>38</sup> had a highly negative impact on Turkey's relations with Iran. Iran defamed the Syrian opposition as "terrorist groups" and blamed Turkey for assisting and providing them with intelligence and arms.<sup>39</sup> Another matter of concern in Syria is the religious-sectarian aspect of the conflict. Turkey extended strong assistance to Sunni oppositional groups, while Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah worked closely with the regime in Damascus by supplying it with arms and intelligence, as well as actual assistance in combat against the rebels.

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The importance of Syria for Iran is vital and automatically reflects on its relations with Turkey. Some analysts, such as Gökhan Bacık, associate professor of political science at Zirve University, think that the “Syrian case has almost become a Turkey-Iran proxy war.”<sup>40</sup> Others, like journalist Mahir Zeynalov, describe the rift between Turkey and Iran over Syria as an “undeclared warfare” between both nations.<sup>41</sup> It was not only Turkey's Syria policy that caused unease in Tehran; Turkey's hostile stance towards the Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki is being perceived in Iran as pro-Sunni and therefore sectarian.<sup>42</sup>

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38 Semih İdiz, “Turkey’s Syria Policy In Shambles over Support For Jihadists,” *Al-Monitor*, 23 July 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/turkey-syria-policy-support-jihadists.html>

39 Idrees Mohammed, “Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria,” *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.10, No.2-3 (Summer-Fall 2011), p. 94.

40 Gökhan Bacık, “The Turkey-Iran Proxy War,” *Today’s Zaman*, 12 August 2012.

41 Mahir Zeynalov, “Undeclared Warfare Between Turkey and Iran,” *Al-Arabiya*, 25 August 2013,

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2013/08/25/Undeclared-warfare-between-Iran-and-Turkey.html>

42 “Maliki Accused Turkey of Interfering in the Domestic Affairs of its Neighbors and Stoking Sectarianism,” See: Henri J. Barkey, “Turkey-Iraq Relations Deteriorate with Accusations of Sectarianism,” *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/contents/articles/opinion/2012/al-monitor/turkey-iraq-ties-sour-brover-syr.html>

Despite the fact that Hassan Rouhani, the newly elected President of the Islamic Republic, demonstrates more pragmatism and is perceived by the West as more cooperative than his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Syria will remain a battleground for Turkey and Iran. Karim Sadjadpour, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, sees Turkey and Iran “on the two polar opposite sides of the spectrum; in many ways it’s a zero-sum game. That will continue to affect the relations.”<sup>43</sup>

### ***Future Prospects Regarding Turkey-Iran Relations***

As argued above, the Arab Spring, and in particular the civil war in Syria have been major blows for Turkish-Iranian relations. The geopolitical goals of the respective countries are not only contradictory but also unlikely to change. Iran’s support for the Assad regime will constitute an obstacle for rapprochement with Turkey.

Meanwhile, President Hassan Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have pointed out that Iran is willing to cooperate on a range of issues with the West, including the question of the nuclear program and Syria.<sup>44</sup> Turkey, which is a key Western ally in the region recently tried to present itself “as a bridge between the West and Iran on Syria, as Turkey has done on the Iranian nuclear issue.”<sup>45</sup>

In a recent interview with *Al-Monitor*, Iran’s ambassador to Ankara, Ali Reza Bikdeli admitted that there are “differences” between Turkey and Iran regarding Syria but “that both countries are in full agreement in general terms to end the bloodshed and terrorism in the country, but they differ in their tactical approaches to the issue.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore he claimed that the only way to achieve a solution would be at the negotiating table. According to Bikdeli, in the case of Syria, cooperation between Turkey and Iran is crucial: “We won’t be happy seeing Turkey get hurt in Syria. Turkey should also not feel happy when we get hurt in Syria, because if one gets hurt the other will inevitably get hurt, too. We are two countries where our destinies are tied together.”<sup>47</sup>

The ambassador’s remarks reflect the current nature of Turkish-Iranian relations. Although there are differences, there is also the opportunity to cooperate in order to prevent a further deterioration of bilateral relations. Tehran is aware of Turkey’s role in the region and its importance for Iran. Both countries share common security

43 “Turkish Leadership Felt Betrayed by Iran, Expert Argues,” *Today’s Zaman*, 9 September 2013.

44 “Rouhani says will present ‘true face of Iran’ at UN,” *Reuters*, 23 September 2013.

45 “Turkey and Iran Signal a Softening of Differences Over Syria,” *The New York Times*, 1 November 2013.

46 Tülin Daloğlu, “Iran and Turkey Have Differences on Syria, But not a Crisis,” *Al-Monitor*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iran-turkey-syria-policy-differences.html>

47 Daloğlu (2013).

concerns, such as Kurdish insurgency, and have proven to be able to cooperate on difficult issues like Iran's nuclear program. Economic ties between Turkey and Iran are also an important reason for both countries to seek a "cool-headed" approach. Taking these points into account, it is very likely that both countries will continue cooperating further on a range of issues. The recent visit of Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Turkey is a clear sign that the new government in Tehran is already now putting much more effort into stabilizing the relations, which were increasingly strained under the Ahmadinejad government. Regarding the war in Syria Zarif and Davutoğlu claimed that "the tragedy there [Syria] should come to an end with the help of neighboring countries."<sup>48</sup>

*“Especially Syria has turned into a battleground for Turkey and Iran, where both are fiercely defending their geopolitical goals.”*

Turkey's leadership, on the other side, also realized that inflexibility concerning foreign policy is not to its advantage. Ankara noticed that it will not serve its long-term foreign policy goals to alienate Iran. Turkey's President Abdullah Gül made an important statement in which he claimed that it is not possible to find a solution in Syria by sidelining Iran.<sup>49</sup> Especially the appointment of Javad Zarif as Foreign Minister caused a positive resonance in Turkey.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore Gül and Rouhani met at the United Nations General Assembly in September to discuss deeper cooperation in the region in order to resolve conflicts, with the civil war in Syria being one of the main topics.<sup>51</sup> The countries' foreign ministers also met during the United Nations General Assembly to discuss similar topics.

Both countries yet again seem to realize that cooperation will be to their advantage in the long run. Bilgehan Alagöz, lecturer at the Institute for Middle Eastern Studies of Marmara University, claimed in an interview with the author that both economic and security concerns are deeply influencing Turkey-Iran relations. Furthermore, she stated that Turkey and Iran are competing on several accounts in the region but because of common economic and security interests, they are forced to stay close to each other.<sup>52</sup>

48 "Turkey and Iran Signal a Softening of Differences Over Syria," *The New York Times*, 1 November 2013.

49 Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "Gul: No Solution on Syria By Sidelining Iran," *Al-Monitor*, 24 September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/09/turkey-president-gul-iran-syria-egypt.html>

50 Gül claimed that among Rouhani's appointments for his cabinet, Zarif is the "most important one [...].," Aydıntaşbaş (2013).

51 "Turkish President Gül Meets with Iranian Counterpart Rouhani," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 September 2013.

52 Interview with Bilgehan Alagöz, 25 October 2013.

On the one hand it seems probable that Ankara and Tehran will further act pragmatically to achieve their goals. In this case especially economic cooperation proved to be a crucial point that became a stabilizing factor in Turkey-Iran relations. Iran's new government is also an important factor that could change Iran's perception of Turkey. On the other hand there will be areas in which competition and rivalry will prevail. Turkey's new foreign policy, which particularly in recent years focused on supporting Sunni governments and groups in the Middle East, is perceived as a challenge for Tehran's "Shiite worldview". Especially the case of Syria but also Iraq proved, how contradictory the respective foreign policy approaches of Turkey and Iran are. Throughout history Turkish-Iranian relations were marked by an ongoing rivalry. Though it did not erupt in violent clashes. Moreover a sense of pragmatism was ubiquitous. Although it is impossible to predict the future of Turkey-Iran relations, it is likely that this pattern of rivalry and pragmatism will prevail.