

# TURKEY AND IRAN: THE BEST OF FRENEMIES

*Inheriting a legacy of imperial competition, the Turkey-Iran rivalry today manifests itself through the contest for leadership of the Arab Middle East, and Muslim hearts and minds more generally. The authors contend that Turkey and Iran's relationship transcends the boundaries of amity or enmity that traditionally define actors in the modern Middle East state system. Rather, Ankara and Tehran have been able to successfully compartmentalize elements of their rivalry while strengthening bilateral ties and expanding areas of economic cooperation. The authors posit that the present-day Turko-Iranian relationship falls in the category of neither friend nor enemy, but rather that of "frenemy."*

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**F**or centuries, the Ottomans and Persians led rival empires that fought for control of the Middle East. Today, the Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran are the successor states to that millennium-old rivalry. At cross-purposes in numerous regional theaters of conflict, Turkey and Iran continue to embody the competitive spirit found in the empires that preceded them, and in their current quest for leadership of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, these two neighbors have also shown the willingness and ability to compartmentalize their rivalry to prevent any overt conflict, carefully carving out spheres for collaboration.

Today, the Turko-Persian relationship does not fall into the strict categories of enmity or amity. Rather, it strikes a balance between the extremes, allowing bonds to often bend but never break. Thus, the nuance of their relationship is best captured by the term “frenemy.” In the nation-state context, frenemy connotes a multi-dimensional and fluid association, rather than a fixed one. While seemingly a paradoxical concept, frenemies are able to straddle the grey area between adversity and alliance, and can concurrently castigate and embrace one another. The ties between Tehran and Ankara are amongst the best markers of this tendency.

### *Competition*

As the two non-Arab powers of the Muslim Middle East, Turkey and Iran offer rival visions for the region’s order. These viewpoints are first and foremost informed by the biographies of the men at the helm of each state, but more broadly by the political experiences of each country in the post-colonial era.

Thus, no understanding of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can be complete without an appreciation of the country’s turbulent emergence from the post-World War I Treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne, its subsequent independence and proclamation as a Republic, ascension into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), numerous coups d’états, long flirtation with political Islam, and its quest to join the European Union (EU). Similarly, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei is but one player in Iran’s larger and longer duel with modernity – one that included two pro-Western modernizing monarchs, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the subsequent 444-day hostage crisis, an eight-year war with Iraq, and its present drive for nuclear-weapons capacity.

The competition between Tehran and Ankara is primarily ideological, intensified by Turkey’s renewed quest for primacy in the Muslim world. Increasingly, both

countries exercise influence over key conflicts in the Middle East, seeking consultation on local matters and wider recognition as a regional power. In today's Middle East, both the Islamist-leaning Erdoğan and the Islamist revolutionary Ayatollah Khamenei retain the same formula to propel themselves towards regional primacy: championing the Palestinian cause, touting Islamic ecumenicalism to unite a region beset by sectarianism, and highlighting their respective political ideology as a model for the region. At first glance, these may appear to be shared goals, but rather they constitute the domain for competition between the two powers.

The essence of Ankara's revived interest in the Middle East lies in the worldview of Turkey's ruling AKP, and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in particular.<sup>1</sup> For 11 years prior to becoming premier in 2014, Davutoğlu shaped Turkey's foreign agenda, first as then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser and later as foreign minister. Much like Iran's revolutionaries, Davutoğlu too desires a new regional order: one that would maintain the modern notion of a nation-state, but in which nationalism would play second fiddle to the region's shared culture and history. According to that model, Turkey would fall into place as the Middle East's natural leader, thereby continuing the righteous legacy of the Ottoman Caliphate. Not only would this scenario realize the pan-Islamic aspirations of the AKP, it would help overcome the nation's decades-long sense of humiliation stemmed by its failed efforts to join the EU and fully integrate with the West.<sup>2</sup>

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### *Champions of Palestine*

Politically, this aspiration was best exhibited by Erdoğan's increasingly vocal defense of the Palestinian cause. At the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan jostled with Israeli President Shimon Peres over Gaza, eventually storming off the stage and vowing to never return. Giving him a standing ovation was the Chairman of the Arab League. The symbolism was not lost on Turkish audiences either, some of whom welcomed Erdoğan

<sup>1</sup> Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy objectives are laid out in his popular 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik* [Strategic Depth].

<sup>2</sup> Former Turkish President Turgut Özal, a role model for Erdoğan, had a similar approach in the 1980s and sought to cultivate (mostly economic) ties with Middle Eastern nations.

back home with a new epithet: “Conqueror of Davos.”<sup>3</sup> To date, Iran’s lexicon of protecting the “oppressed” has been appropriated by the AKP. Under Erdoğan, Turkey receives regular praise from groups like Hamas (which incidentally retains members in Turkish territory).<sup>4</sup>

Ankara’s support for the Palestinians, its protest against Israel in the international arena, and its political and financial support to Hamas could paradoxically unnerve the one state that has consistently armed, backed, and underwritten terror against Israel: the Islamic Republic of Iran. While revolutionary Iran no doubt welcomes Turkish ire toward Israel, behind closed doors, Tehran may increasingly see it as an encroachment on its own revolutionary position in Middle East politics. In February 1979, Iran symbolically chose Yasser Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman, to be the first foreign dignitary to visit the country after its revolution. The revolution inspired the rise of militant groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and over the decades Tehran has cultivated its relationship with Hamas, further obtaining an active role in the Palestinian conflict and affording itself spoiler potential.

Despite the animus against Israel that animates much of the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary elite, the regime also strategically uses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by cloaking it in the language of Islamist revolution and resistance. Conveniently, the conflict has been Tehran’s on-ramp into issues that stimulate Arab publics, expediently masking Iran’s ethno-sectarian – namely, Persian and Shiite – distinctness.

### *Liberators of the Arab Street*

In fact, since 1979, Iran has cultivated the Arab “street,” and at times gambled on a (largely unfounded) presumption that its revolution was popular in the Arab heartland. During the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, after expelling Iraqi forces from Iranian territory by mid-1982, such sentiments guided Iranian planners toward an invasion of Iraq aimed at decapitating Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime.<sup>5</sup> But Iran underestimated the nationalism of Iraqi Shiites, and the action merely extended the war by a costly six years. Fast-forward to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings against Western-aligned authoritarian governments: Iranian revolutionaries saw the local rebellions as derivatives

3 Soon after Erdoğan’s return from Davos, the then-Ankara bureau chief for the Turkish daily *Sabah* exclaimed that the fiasco would elevate Erdoğan to be “a hero in the Muslim world.” See: Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “Erdoğan’s Davos Outburst Is Nothing New,” *Forbes*, 30 January 2009, [http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/erdogan-turkey-davos-opinions-contributors\\_0130\\_asli\\_aydintasbas.html](http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/erdogan-turkey-davos-opinions-contributors_0130_asli_aydintasbas.html)

4 The reported head of Hamas’s military wing, Saleh al-Arouri, resides in Turkey. For more information about his connection to Turkey and Hamas, see: Shlomi Eldar [Translated by Sandy Bloom], “Turkey’s Hamas ‘Bureau,’” *Al Monitor*, 1 December 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2014/12/saleh-al-arouri-khaled-meshaal-hamas-leadership-turkey-gaza.html#>

5 See, for example, the role of Ayatollah Montazeri, in: “Jang be Dastour-e Amrika Naboud” [The War Was Not by America’s Order], *Tabnak*, 14 September 2008, <http://goo.gl/lpvLIY>

of their own movement decades prior. In the Islamic Republic's political lexicon, the protests were dubbed an "Islamic awakening."<sup>6</sup> To foreign policy hands in Tehran, they were proof that Iran's anti-Western and revolutionary example had borne fruit.

Ankara, meanwhile, had formed its own interpretation of the uprisings: the Arab demand for electoral democracy was inspired by the example they had set in Turkey. For the Islamist-rooted AKP, its own election victory in a militantly secular state a decade earlier had been nothing less than a revolution – and unlike in Iran, one that beat the game by playing by its rules. In the following decade, the AKP successfully elevated an economically devastated Turkey into

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a G20 country, and more importantly, proved it possible to reconcile democratic governance with Islamic values. The liberal West's love affair with a mildly Islamist party that upheld Turkey's modern tradition further encouraged Ankara to support Islamist parties in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria. The ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and the continued rule of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria have become the biggest failures of this experiment.

### *The Shortcomings of Ecumenicalism*

Turkey and Iran retain distinct incentives to sweep their ethno-linguistic and sectarian compositions under the rug and champion ecumenicalism when seeking to influence the hearts and minds of the Arab Middle East. Adding to those incentives is their shared affinity for pan-Islamism – seeking to unite the region's faithful under one banner. In the Iranian case, the Supreme Leader regularly berates the enemy (read: the West) for seeking to cleave the Islamic world in two. In an address from 2012, Khamenei thundered: “We must try not to let the enemy foment discord among us. There must be a sense of brotherhood among us (...) The goal is Islam.”<sup>7</sup> He has since refined that message, and in a sermon from 2014, proclaimed: “Anyone who fuels the Shiite-Sunni conflict is helping the United States, the Zionist regime, and the evil United Kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

6 This includes references to it by Iran's Supreme Leader: Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, “Bayanat dar Didar Masouloun Nezam va Mihmanan Konferans Vahdat-e Eslami” [Comments upon Visiting Officials of the System and Guests of the Islamic Unity Conference], speech given on 19 January 2014, Iran, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=25056>

7 Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, “Supreme Leader's Speech to Participants of “Islamic Awakening and Youth Conference” speech given on 30 January 2012, Tehran, [http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1580&Itemid=16](http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1580&Itemid=16)

8 Quoted in: Ali Afshari, “Khamenei Preaches Shiite-Sunni Unity Against Islamic State, U.S.,” *Al Monitor*, 22 October 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/iran-khamenei-sunni-shiite-ghadeer.html>

*“Increasingly, both [Iran and Turkey] exercise influence over key conflicts in the Middle East, seeking consultation on local matters and wider recognition as a regional power.”*

Erdoğan, for his part, has not been far behind. Speaking to reporters on 7 April, he lamented, “Iraq is a place for which we shed bloody tears (...) Neither the Shiite concern me nor the Sunni. What concerns me is the Muslim.”<sup>9</sup> But even this rhetoric becomes muddled when Ankara and Tehran fail to live up to their own expectations. For all of Erdoğan’s ecumenicalism, he has consistently favored Sunni “resistance” movements, as during the Arab Spring.<sup>10</sup> Erdoğan has also pinned the region’s most deadly recent conflicts – Iraq, Syria, and Yemen – on Iran’s sectarian approach to the Middle East. Meanwhile, Khamenei may relish his own epithet as “the guardian of the world’s Muslims,” but in practice, Iran’s allies act in a strongly sectarian manner – as evidenced by the actions of Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria – meeting extremism with extremism and violence with violence.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Rejecting vs. Gaming the System***

The manner in which each state’s political ideology fits into the broader international system is also significant. Turkey’s increasingly assertive foreign policy exemplifies how a modern Muslim country with democratic elections can garner the respect of the international community, even if it has elected an Islamist-rooted government. For decades, Turkey has striven to become part of the EU, with the AKP continuing that trajectory. Moreover, it has been a NATO member since 1952. As such, Turkey is fully entitled to the rights and privileges of that security umbrella. Indeed, the US underwrites Turkish security by retaining tactical nuclear weapons at the İncirlik air base on Turkish soil.<sup>12</sup>

Such a globally-integrated position stands in stark contrast to that of Iran, which has increasingly been excised from the international community over its illicit drive for a nuclear weapon. The US Treasury Department has designated Iran’s banking sector

9 “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Beni ne Şii, ne Sünni ilgilendirir,” [President Erdoğan: Neither the Shiite Concern Me, Nor the Sunni], *Yeni Akit*, 7 April 2015, <http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-beni-ne-sii-ne-sunni-ilgilendirir-60768.html>

10 This is also seen domestically through Erdoğan’s favoritism towards Sunnis over Alevis.

11 This is one of Khamenei’s frequently appearing epithets, designed to extol his value to the rest of the Muslim world. For an example of an outlet using it to refer to Khamenei, see: “Sukhanan-e Rahbar Mo’azzam Enqelab Marhami bar Zakhm-e Mellat-e Bahrain Boud,” [The Statements by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution was a [like] a Balm Upon the Wound of the Nation of Bahrain], *Rasa News*, 4 February 2012, <http://rasanews.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=122462>

12 As reported in: Mustafa Kibaroglu, “Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey,” *Arms Control Today*, 4 June 2010, [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010\\_06/Kibaroglu](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_06/Kibaroglu)

as “a jurisdiction of ‘primary money laundering concern,’” in need of substantial reform.<sup>13</sup> What’s more, Iran’s economy lags under international sanctions and a legacy of government mismanagement, and pales in comparison to its Turkish neighbor.

At the foreign policy level, the Islamic Republic of Iran is fundamentally a revolutionary state, working to upend the balance of power it believes is arrayed against it in the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East. Iran’s message gains traction not when the region is afforded relative stability and prosperity, but when it is in the throes of tumult and instability. Populations who feel downtrodden are far more susceptible to narratives of injustice and oppression during periods of want or war.

Accordingly, Iran and Turkey bring different assets to bear on the Middle East. Turkey’s status as a member of NATO and the G20, along with its (somewhat diminished) drive to join the EU highlight the benefits of remaining in the orbit of Western nations. Iran believes that its strengths – unrelenting revolutionary ideology, growing unconventional and asymmetric military capabilities, and drive for self-sufficiency in the face of pressure – highlight the benefits of perseverance (having some of the world’s largest natural gas and crude oil reserves does not hurt either). At present, both models are vying for the sympathies of Middle Eastern publics, but the simple difference is that to further their respective interests, Turkey uses the prevailing international order, while Iran rejects it.

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### ***Caught in the Middle: Syria and Iraq***

At the operational level, Ankara and Tehran remain on opposing sides of numerous Middle Eastern fault lines. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Syria, where previously confined bilateral competition has run into a zero-sum conundrum. As Turkey has called for Assad to step down, Iran has stepped up its support to the Assad regime. Meanwhile, Turkey has continued to insist that its shift in policy towards Syria was not a shortcoming of its stated “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it has emphasized the brutality of the Assad regime, po-

<sup>13</sup> The U.S. Treasury Department made this assessment in 2011 as part of a press release containing the names of persons and entities targeted pursuant to various Executive Orders. See: “Fact Sheet: New Sanctions on Iran,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 21 November 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1367.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> See Foreign Ministry Website: “Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors,” *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa>



sitioning itself closely with the Syrian street, which it assessed would soon take power. Concurrently, Iranian officials fear that the demise of Assad would be the first of many dominoes to fall against its allies and proxies in the region, culminating in the fall of the Islamic Republic itself.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, any threat to Assad would be an existential threat to Tehran.

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Turkey’s full-court press for Assad’s ouster in Syria did not go unnoticed in neighboring Iraq. In 2012, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a close ally of Iran, reportedly likened Turkey to “a hostile state.”<sup>16</sup> But as the Syrian war endured, the conflict’s brutality has only been exacerbated by the rise of groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has occu-

piated large swaths of territory between Syria and Iraq. To combat the rise of ISIL in Iraq, Iranian-backed Shiite militias have come to the fore, as have members of Iran’s Quds Force, the elite extra-territorial unit of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>17</sup> The Commander of the Quds-Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, has played a major role in coordinating the operations of Shiite militias in Iraq, whereas Turkey is slated to train Sunni forces.

### *A War of Words*

To make matters worse, as airstrikes commenced against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, Erdoğan cast his lot with the Saudi-led coalition in favor of the operation. In a press conference on 26 March 2015, he went so far as to blast Iran’s “annoying” efforts to “dominate” the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> In a separate interview the same day, he took the critique a step further, adding that Tehran only wanted to get rid of ISIL to fill its place.

Iran was quick to issue a rejoinder. The next day, Tehran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif accused Erdoğan of causing “irreparable damages” to

15 This example was posited by Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former Commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who now advises the Supreme Leader. See: “Nofouz-e Iran ta Marz-hay Rezhim-e Sehyounesti,” [The Influence of Iran up to the Borders of the Zionist Regime], *IRINN*, 6 February 2014, <http://goo.gl/Qf6HJx>

16 As cited in: Burak Bekdil, “Is the Turco-Iranian Friendship Real?,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2014, <http://www.meforum.org/3768/turkey-iran-friendship>

17 Note the death of such senior members as Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi. For accounts pertaining to his death in Iraq, see: Bill Roggio, “Islamic State Kills Qods Force General in Central Iraq,” *The Long War Journal*, 28 December 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/islamic\\_state\\_kills.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/islamic_state_kills.php)

18 See: Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Can’t Tolerate Iran Bid to Dominate Middle East,” *Reuters*, 26 March 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/26/us-yemen-security-turkey-idUSKBN0MM2N820150326>



the region.<sup>19</sup> Iran's Parliament also chimed in, with 65 of its members writing to President Hassan Rouhani to demand an apology from the Turkish leader. More notable figures had called for a cancellation of Erdoğan's then-impending visit, and Iran's Foreign Ministry called Turkey's chargé d'affaires for a demarche and an explanation.

Despite the war of words, Erdoğan not only scored a meeting with Khamenei, but was even able to push back on high Iranian natural-gas prices during the visit.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Iran's *Ettela'at* newspaper got the last laugh. In an 8 April front-page story, beside pictures of Khamenei and Rouhani meeting with Erdoğan, it quoted the supreme leader as saying "Some Islamic governments commit treason."<sup>21</sup>

### *Dependence and Cooperation*

The trip underscored the strength of the bilateral relationship, which remains built upon economic expediency above all. While ongoing regional disputes have produced reciprocal incendiary rhetoric, those disputes are unlikely to shatter bilateral ties. Ankara may be quick to dismiss diplomatic relations with other Middle Eastern partners – such as Egypt or Syria – when it finds their policies at odds with its own. But Turkey is highly dependent on Iran for its energy imports and cannot afford to sacrifice the relationship.<sup>22</sup> It was no coincidence that on 31 March 2015, when Turkey faced its largest blackout in over a decade, many Turks pointed their fingers to Tehran – even accusing their neighbor of a cyber-attack as revenge for Erdoğan's latest outburst on Yemen.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, even as the longstanding dispute over gas prices escalates, Turkey continues to purchase Iranian gas.<sup>24</sup>

In-fact, the dependence is mutual: Turkey needs Iranian oil as much as Iran needs the Turkish market. A reported 90 percent of all Iranian gas is exported to Turkey

19 Babak Dehghanpisheh and Sam Wilkin, "Iran Accuses Turkish Leader Erdogan of Fomenting Regional Strife," *Reuters*, 27 March 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/27/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-iran-idUSKBN0MN1N220150327> It is worth noting that Erdoğan managed to balance his previous comments about Iran's role in the Middle East and his trip to Tehran by meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef al-Saud prior to departing Turkey.

21 See title in: "Barkhi Hokumat-hay Eslami Khiyanat Mi-konand," [Some Islamic Government's Commit Treason," *Ettela'at*, 8 April 2015, <http://goo.gl/uoN0kX>

22 For their part, many Iranians do not want to sacrifice the relationship either, even when taking into account what divides Turkey and Iran. Along a similar vein, Mir-Mahmoud Mousavi, the former Director General for West Asia of Iran's Foreign Ministry presciently warned that Tehran and Ankara "must not allow this competition to progress beyond a [certain] point and become enmity." Quoted in: "Tahlil-e Mir-Mahmoud Mousavi az Olaviyat-hay Siasat-e Khareji-e Iran dar Mantaqeh," [The Analysis of Mir-Mahmoud Mousavi of Iran's Foreign Policy Priorities in the Region] *ILNA*, 21 April 2015, <http://goo.gl/t9pg95>

23 See the reference from the unnamed Turkish government official: Merve Aydoğan, "Iran Allegedly Behind Nationwide Power Outage," *Daily Sabah*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/04/28/iran-allegedly-behind-nationwide-power-outage>

24 It is worth noting that the gas pricing issue had gone to the International Court of Arbitration due to complaints filed by Turkey. For proposals and gas diplomacy in the aftermath of the verdict, see: Mehdi Sepahvand, "Turkey Rejects Iran's Proposal to Double Gas Import," *Trend*, 15 April 2015, <http://en.trend.az/business/energy/2384322.html>

alone.<sup>25</sup> To date, Turkey remains one of the six countries (alongside Taiwan, China, India, South Korea, and Japan) that receive national security waivers from the United States to continue their purchases of Iranian crude oil.<sup>26</sup>

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Ankara and Tehran’s mutual ability to set aside their regional competition from their broader, enduring economic relationship further underscores the value of their ties. Even at the apex of the US-led sanctions regime in 2012 and 2013, Turkey facilitated a “gas-for-gold” exchange, which provided Iran approximately 13 billion dollars in Turkish gold as payment for natural gas.<sup>27</sup> Due to the low value of its lira, Turkey opted to purchase gold with its own currency and also send the payments in gold, in

turn inflating the export figures for an emerging market with a large current account deficit. For Iran, gold meant the ability to purchase foreign currency – namely euros and dollars – for its long-deprived banking sector.

### *Money Trumps All*

For nearly the last four years, the crisis in Syria has erected an invisible fence between Turkey and Iran. Yet, with the exception of the March 2015 squabble over Yemen, diplomatic relations have only improved. During Erdoğan’s January 2014 trip to the Islamic Republic, the former Turkish prime minister had equated Iran to his “second home,” and adopted a preferential trade agreement. Rouhani’s subsequent official June 2014 trip to Ankara further helped to signal a strong desire for rapprochement. The visit was successful, with 10 cooperation agreements inked.

When Iran and the P5+1 international negotiators announced a nuclear framework agreement on 2 April, Turkey – in spite of public castigation of the Islamic Republic just days earlier – applauded the deal. Indeed, Turkey has long argued that Iran’s nuclear program has been peaceful. Turkey even partnered with Brazil in 2010 to

25 As reported in: Evrim Ergin, “UPDATE 3- Turkey to Keep Buying Iran’s Gas Despite Sanctions,” *Reuters*, 3 December 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/03/turkey-iran-gas-idUSL5E8N3GAT20121203>

26 This determination for a waiver is made based on specific criterion proving “significant reduction” in purchases of Iran’s crude oil. As noted in Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Sanctions,” *Congressional Research Service*, 21 April 2015, p. 22, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>

27 As reported in: Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, “Turkey’s Gold Rush,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 December 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/26/irans-turkish-gold-rush/#sthash.gukDBhir.dJKBFFbD.dpbs>

resurrect the 2009 fuel-swap deal between Iran and the West.<sup>28</sup> Today, as the prospect for sanctions relief through a final accord inches closer and Iran eyes trade partners, Ankara is at or near the top of the list. The two sides aim to push their trade relationship to 30 billion dollars by the end of this year, roughly doubling their current figure.<sup>29</sup>

Seen from Ankara, a nuclear deal removing Iran from a web of energy sanctions could also pave the way for Turkey to become a regional energy hub by connecting Iranian natural gas to EU countries. As a non-energy producing country, Turkey is blessed with a variety of neighbors and allies that supply fuel. All the more convenient is its location between centers of energy supply and demand, making its territory one of the most efficient transfer routes for oil and gas. The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) is the most realistic of these “pipe dreams,” but presently lacks the necessary supply to become an alternative for Europe to Russian gas. Iran’s role in TANAP, in the hypothetical absence of sanctions, would be designed to overcome exactly this challenge.

The cooperation extends into areas of covert assistance as well. Reports emerged in 2013 that Erdoğan had divulged to Tehran the identities of several Iranians allegedly operating on Israel’s behalf inside the Islamic Republic the year prior. While it remains unclear whether it was the aforementioned energy dependence, prevailing economic expediency, or shared animus towards Israel that compelled Turkey to aid Iran’s counterintelligence efforts, the incident illustrates that despite compartmentalized competition, as long as Turkey and Iran harbor greater enmity towards Israel than each other, avenues for cooperation will remain available.

### *The Gray Area*

Yet neither this covert cooperation nor long-standing overt economic engagement has ever fully transformed into a full-fledged alliance for the two aspiring powers. Structural factors like political orientation, longstanding alliances, and a host of identity-related issues prevent Turkey and Iran from becoming entirely reliant on each other. And while the last century saw Mustafa Kemal Atatürk suspend Turkey’s centuries-long struggle for regional primacy to focus on nation-building at home, the days of Kemalist isolationism are now long gone. For the Islamic Republic’s

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28 While Brazil and Turkey succeeded in getting Iran on board, the proposal was later rejected by the U.S., France and Britain. For reasons, see: “US, Russia and France Dismiss Brazil-Turkey-Brokered Iran Deal,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 9 June 2010, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=us-russia-and-france-dismiss-brazil-turkey-brokered-iran-deal-2010-06-09>

29 As noted in: “Differences Remain Between Turkey, Iran as Erdogan Visits Tehran,” *Today’s Zaman*, 7 April 2015, [http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy\\_differences-remain-between-turkey-iran-as-erdogan-visits-tehran\\_377323.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_differences-remain-between-turkey-iran-as-erdogan-visits-tehran_377323.html)

part, the ascendance of a religious Turkish government may be welcomed, but one with a post-Kemalist neo-Ottoman imperial agenda is certainly not.

Nevertheless, commerce and diplomacy continues unabated. Thus, the crises in Yemen, Iraq, or even Syria have not been enough to rupture ties between Ankara and Tehran. But neither has Turkey's permissive stance towards Tehran's nuclear diplomacy earned Ankara a place in the hearts of Iran's hardliners. The big picture contends that under a revolutionary regime, Iran can never enjoy a total confluence of interests in a Western-aligned Republic of Turkey – even one led by an Islamist-rooted government. This dynamic should be the principal guide in understanding how these two Middle Eastern actors vie for influence. Accordingly, the foreseeable future holds that Turkey and Iran are likely to retain the relationship they have had for years: neither best friends nor enemies but merely the best of “frenemies.”