

## TURKISH – IRANIAN RELATIONS: A REALITY CHECK

*Governments on both sides of the Atlantic have been struggling to find an appropriate response to the tide of events following the recent elections in Iran. Turkey's neutral approach and its decision not to mingle in Iran's internal affairs have led to renewed interest in the nature of Turkish-Iranian relations and in the question, what position Turkey actually takes on important issues such as the Iranian nuclear program. This article seeks to illuminate the different facets of the economic, political and cultural dimensions of Turkish-Iranian relations and to uncover the underlying strategic issues that ultimately drive Turkish foreign policy considerations with regard to Iran.*

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**W**arren Buffett once said that “wide diversification is only required when investors do not understand what they are doing.” In the realm of foreign policy and state-actors, however, this argument may hold far less truth than in the financial world. Arguably, priorities can be set and choices should even be made, as long as the necessity of carefully managing expectations and relations in all directions is sufficiently taken into account.

This realization has paved the way for Turkey’s shift towards a more diversified, multi-dimensional foreign policy agenda, which at the same time also serves as an indicator for changed perceptions and adjusted priorities within the political establishment. Regional stability clearly has become of paramount importance to Turkish foreign policy and the country has sought to reduce conflict intensity across the board. Turkey’s self-ascribed role in the region could be summarized as “zero problems, but a hundred percent influence”. Avoiding and resolving conflicts in the immediate neighborhood has thus to be seen under the premise of maximizing Turkey’s influence in the region. Turkey’s “zero problems” approach towards its neighbors has naturally had profound implications for its relations with Iran. Improvements in the relations between Iran and Turkey can be attributed to changes within Turkey and its strategic outlook, but also to changes within Iran and to an at times perhaps coincidental alignment of national interests.

### ***Turkey’s Position on the Recent Elections in Iran***

Commenting on the recent controversies over presidential elections in Iran, Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that these were Iran’s internal affairs. As the main architect of the “zero-problems policy”, which Turkey has adopted as one of its primary foreign policy pillars; this response does not come entirely as a surprise. In comparison to statements issued by the EU, its various member states and the U.S., he seemed far less inclined to openly criticize the leadership in Tehran, with which Turkey has established rather close relations.<sup>1</sup> Unlike statements by Western governments, he did not specifically condemn the violence and repressive measures taken by the Iranian government against the protesters. This extremely cautious approach could be attributed to the fact that Turkey recognizes the fluidity and uncertainty within Iran and wants to sustain

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<sup>1</sup> Barçın Yinanç, “Turkey opts for Ahmadinejad,” *Hürriyet*, <http://arama.hurriyet.com.tr/arsivnews.aspx?id= 11881212>, 17 June 2009.

its friendly neighborly relations, regardless of who will ultimately be in charge in Teheran.<sup>2</sup> It thus becomes evident that Turkey is in fact predominantly concerned with sustaining regional stability, which causes it to view the status-quo favorably, as any regime change inherently carries the possibility for disruption of the short-term regional equilibrium.

Perhaps, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's silence also reflected a more thorough understanding of the complex political undercurrents and fluidity within the Iranian establishment, the nature of the protest and its chances of success, compared to observers on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, he emphasized that Iran was an important neighbor of Turkey, important for the stability of the region and that the Turkish government wanted to continue the deep-rooted relations with its neighboring country Iran.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly are the sources of these allegedly deeply rooted relations? What does this say about the nature of Turkish-Iranian relations? Certainly, the economic dimension, as the least common denominator, has served as a starting point for closer cooperation, but has, in recent years, been complemented by an emphasis on cultural links and closer political ties, which is expressed in an increasing number of high-level visits.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the level of interaction between these two neighboring countries has incrementally increased and relations have become more multi-faceted.

### ***The Economic Dimension: The Foundation of Closer Cooperation***

With regard to economic cooperation, relations between the two countries have, over time, expanded in size and scope. In a memorandum of understanding, Turkey, Iran and Iraq recently agreed to link their national power grids to one another and to Syria.<sup>5</sup> This would constitute a major step towards increased energy cooperation in the region. Turkey seems determined to become an energy hub, thus satisfying its own growing energy demand, capitalizing on transportation fees and at the same time enhancing its bargaining position with the EU that in turn seeks to diversify its energy supply and transportation routes in light

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu: "Turkey Doesn't Want Chaos in the Middle East," *Spiegel Online*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,631848,00.html>, 24 November 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Turkey Says Controversies over Iran Elections are Iran's Internal Affairs", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/81087/turkey-says-controversies-over-iran-elections-are-iran-39-s-internal-affairs.html>, 24 November 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Emrullah Uslu, "Turkey-Iran Relations: A Trade Partnership or a Gateway for Iran to Escape International Sanctions?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, Issue 41.

<sup>5</sup> "Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria to Link Their Power Networks", *Zawya.com*, <http://www.zawya.com/story.cfm/sidZAW-YA20090529071700/>, 29 May 2009.

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of the ongoing energy conflict between Russia and the Ukraine. Gaining access to Iranian oil and natural gas resources would ensure Turkey's role as a key to European energy security and at the same time make Turkey more independent from Russia, which is the main source of its own natural gas supply. If the South Eastern Corridor is to become reality and a real alternative to Russian natural gas supply for the EU, the planned Nabucco pipeline that is a main pillar of the EU's energy diversification strategy will need to be supplied by sources other than solely Azerbaijan, which highlights the need for natural gas from either Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan or other Central Asian countries.

Considering the difficulties in accessing Turkmenistan's reserves, the potentially unstable situation and the rampant underinvestment in Iraq, Iran seems like an alternative that has to be considered in the long run, especially in light of the fact that the country disposes of the largest overall reserves in the region. However, it has to be kept in mind, that years of inadequate investment in Iran's upstream activities and subsidized oil and gas prices have taken a toll on Iran's export capabilities and that the country is at the moment barely exporting any natural gas at all.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the poor relations between Armenia on the one side and Azerbaijan and Turkey on the other prevent access to Azerbaijan through Armenia. This leaves Georgia as the only territory, apart from Iran, through which Turkey could tap into the natural resources of Azerbaijan and Central Asia and bypass Russia. However, the conflict between Russia and Georgia last year has clearly exposed the long-term vulnerability of this transit route and highlighted Turkey's own need for diversified supplies and transportation routes, if it is to become a major energy hub in the region. Also for another reason, Iran seems to be the obvious gateway for Turkey, through which it could access the natural resources of Central Asia: it could do so without the need for a pipeline through the Caspian Sea, which would add another layer of uncertainty to the equation, as there are still maritime border conflicts and as it would drive up transportation costs. It has to be kept in mind, however, that both countries, Iran and Turkey, run considerable risk of antagonizing Russia in the bid for access to Central Asian natural resources, which neither of them can afford at this point. Iran, to a certain degree, depends on Russian nuclear technology and the implicit support of Russia in the UN Security Council regarding the conflict about its nuclear program, while Turkey depends on Russia as its biggest trade partner and main source of natural gas.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Freifeld, "Nabucco: Pipeline Politics and the U.S.- Turkey Strategic Partnership", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, (Winter 2008-9)

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Iran and Turkey have set the ambitious target of 20 billion dollars in annual trade by 2011, while the annual value of trade between the two countries was ten billion dollars in 2008 (rising from only one billion dollars in 2000). In comparison to that, Turkey's trade volume with its biggest trade partner Russia amounted to 38 billion dollars in 2008. Iran exports some eight billion dollars of goods, predominantly consisting of oil and gas products, to Turkey and imports nearly two billion dollars worth of products per year.<sup>7</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Iran has clearly become an important trade partner for Turkey and business ventures between these two countries offer tremendous possibilities for growth. In light of continued low demand for Turkish products in Europe and strained relations to the EU, the recovery following the economic and financial crisis may prompt Turkey to put even more emphasis on diversifying its regional trade ties, especially as the recent crisis has clearly exposed the need for proper risk management at all levels of the economy and also on a macro level.

### ***The Political Dimension: Turkey's Diversification Strategy***

Apart from a mere economic perspective, diversification is also the key component in Turkish efforts to hedge against the risk of a rejection of its bid to join the European Union. It has increasingly become disenfranchised by the perceived deception strategy on part of the EU<sup>8</sup>, which has, in combination with a change in government, prompted an overhaul in the way priorities of Turkish foreign policy are communicated. This does not necessarily imply that these priorities have fundamentally changed. The relations to Europe and the U.S. certainly remain the top foreign policy priority for Turkey. However, their relative weight may have declined, as relations with Russia, Iran and Arab states have gained in importance. This goes hand in hand with a more nuanced foreign policy approach. Forging closer ties with its neighbors will enable Turkey to assume a position as major regional power. Particularly, fortifying its good relations with Iran will ultimately increase its foreign policy profile. The U.S. and the EU may wish that Turkey took a tougher stand on the nuclear issue, but Turkey clearly sees no benefit in doing so at this point. Therefore, Turkey's desire to maintain these close relations stems in part from the consideration that they could eventually be useful as a bargaining chip for Turkey *vis-à-vis* the EU and the U.S.,

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<sup>7</sup> "Bank Mellat Initiates Iran-Turkey Trade in National Currency," *Tehran Times*, [http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=196749](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=196749), 15 June 2009, Patrick Seale, "A New Middle East Alliance Emerges", *Middle East Online*, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=32526>, 5 June 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Jürgen Schlamp, Daniel Steinvorth and Bernhard Zand, "Turkey Bets on Regional Influence as EU Hopes Fade," *Der Spiegel*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,628575,00.html>, 4 June 2009.

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especially in case direct talks between Iran and the U.S. do not materialize or end in a cul-de-sac. It should be kept in mind, however, that diversification should not undermine the continuity of foreign policy and Turkey has to be careful that the term does not become associated with a lack of focus and inconsistency.

The feeling of rejection by Europe also causes Turkey to view Iran's situation of international isolation more sympathetically. It associates the Iranian experience with memories of a time when European powers were plotting against Turkey. Both countries have been played and betrayed by Western powers before, which is still omnipresent in their respective historical memory and at times impacts on certain foreign policy decisions. In the case of Turkey, this feeling of betrayal mostly stems from the time prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the events post-WWI, which peaked in the Treaty of Sèvres and the subsequent Turkish War of Independence. Until today, the fear of an international conspiracy against Turkey is still widespread within the Turkish society.<sup>9</sup> In Iran, memories of long-lasting Western meddling in Iran and support for the Shah regime are still vivid and the perceived antagonism of the U.S. and Europe *vis-à-vis* the Islamic revolution is prevalent within the administration and the public.

### *Overcoming a Period of Distress*

The persistence of the myth that since the Treaty of Kasr-ı Şirin in 1639, Turkey and Iran have never fought a war and never had to resettle their mutual border, contributes to the favorable attitudes towards one another.<sup>10</sup> Turkey and Iran have recently signed several memoranda of understanding (MoU), concerning topics ranging from security, maritime cooperation<sup>11</sup>, transportation, to developing closer media ties. It should be kept in mind, that this foreign policy tool is designed to primarily articulate intent while it is not legally binding. However, it is a clear sign of improving relations that had been under endured stress in the period following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, when the Islamic Republic of Iran aggressively pursued the goal of exporting its revolution to other predominantly Muslim countries. Iran has allegedly supported the PKK operations in Southeastern Turkey until the late 1990s, as well as lending operational

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<sup>9</sup> Beril Dedeoğlu, "A Survey on 'Prestigious School Elites'", *Today's Zaman*, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=177904>, 13 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Soner Çağaptay and Duden Yeğenoğlu, "The Myth of 1639 and Kasri Sirin", *The Washington Institute*, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=930>, 18 May 2006.

<sup>11</sup> John C.K. Daly, "Analysis: Iran and Turkey deepen Maritime Ties", *UPI.com*, [http://www.upi.com/Energy\\_Resources/2008/09/18/Analysis-Iran-and-Turkey-deepen-maritime-ties/UPI-83701221762975/2/](http://www.upi.com/Energy_Resources/2008/09/18/Analysis-Iran-and-Turkey-deepen-maritime-ties/UPI-83701221762975/2/), 18 September 2008.

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and logistical support to other terrorist cells operating within Turkish borders, which Turkey has perceived as a clear threat to its national sovereignty and cohesion. This weighed heavily on bilateral relations. However, since the ideological enthusiasm somewhat abated and the country adopted a foreign policy that at least partly returned to a rational consideration of national interests, Iran itself has grown increasingly concerned about its territorial integrity, which has certainly played a role in Iran's decision to withdraw support for the PKK and cooperate with Turkey on that issue. It has started to combat Kurdish separatism in recent years and despite the fact that Iranian Kurds are perhaps less separatist in their outlook and identify more strongly with the state than their Turkish counterparts, they still demand cultural autonomy to a degree that is unacceptable to a government, which has operated under the impression of nationalism and has prohibited Muslim minorities from officially sustaining cultural traditions that are based on a language other than Farsi. Moreover, there is a large Azeri minority within Iran that Teheran is taking into consideration when defining its policies towards Turkey, as Iran is wary of rising pan-Turkism within the region. It fears that Turkey could instigate this ethnic minority in case of prolonged support for the PKK on the part of Iran.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it seems to be a *quid pro quo* approach that for now causes neither of the countries to mingle in the other's internal affairs.

### ***The Cultural Dimension: Emphasizing Cultural Affinity and Exchange***

Recent efforts to establish close ties between Turkey and Iran have included attempts to deepen cultural exchange and emphasize the countries' common cultural heritage. At a conference, the president of the Turkish Historical Society (TTK), Ali Birinci, claimed that politics had divided the peoples of Iran and Turkey throughout history and suggested that arts, travel, literature and science could unite them.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the International Year of the Persian Sufi poet Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi in 2007 that was announced by UNESCO offered Iran and Turkey a good pretense to detach its relationship from purely economic or strategic considerations and engage in several joint activities in commemorating the poet.<sup>14</sup> Turkey is also the only country Iranians can travel to without obtaining a visa, which further adds to the favorable perception of Turkey in Iran that gener-

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<sup>12</sup> Abbas Djavadi, "Iraq, Turkey, Iran Vulnerable to Ethnic Conflict", *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2009/01/mil-090128-rferl02.htm>, 28 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup> "Ankara Hosts Symposium on Ties with Iran", *Today's Zaman*, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=176985>, 2 June 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Soudabeh Sadigh, "Iran-Turkey to Cooperate in Holding Rumi Int'l Conf.", *Cultural Heritage News Agency*, <http://www.chnpres.com/news/?section=2&id=7038>, 14 March 2007.

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ally feels fairly isolated.<sup>15</sup> Due to these unrestricted travel provisions, around one million Iranians visit Turkey annually, which provides for individual contacts between the local populations and creates a climate of affinity. Additionally, Turkey is a destination of choice for many Iranian students, which creates another layer of cultural interaction.

Another contributing factor to cultural affinity is the fact that Turkish private TV channels are highly popular in Iran.<sup>16</sup> A memorandum of understanding between the two countries about increased media cooperation is designed to further enhance the impact of shared TV programs and media on society.<sup>17</sup> The year 2009 has been designated as “Iran-Turkey Culture Year”.<sup>18</sup> Various conferences are being held that concentrate on several aspects of Turkey-Iran relations. At the “6th Symposium on Turkey-Iran Relations” in June 2009, which was organized by the TTK and the Iranian Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, Iran’s ambassador to Ankara, Bahman Hüseyinpur, said that Turkey and Iran were both strong regional players with their own goals and targets and that both parties shared several short and long-term interests.<sup>19</sup> This emphasizes the existence of two proud and very distinct cultures and identities and seems to be a fairly accurate assessment of the relationship between the two countries.

### *Differences in National Identities*

Iran’s national identity is largely anchored in pride in the country’s historic cultural achievements, the preponderance of Farsi as the language of sophisticated Persian culture and Shia Islam as the dominant religion, paired with a sense of moral and ideological superiority following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Turkish identity as promoted by its secular political and military elites for the past decades suggested Turkish nationalism and an identity based on a dominant Turkish culture, a rather narrowly defined cultural homogeneity and a modern state that is closely tied to the civilized Western world. It has clearly tried

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<sup>15</sup> Borzou Daragahi and Ramin Mostaghim, “Visit raises speculation over Turkish mediated U.S.-Iran talks”, *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/10/world/fg-iran-turkey10>, 10 March 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ayhan Şimsek, “Turks Mull Iran Election Crisis”, *SETimes.com*, [http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2009/06/16/feature-01](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2009/06/16/feature-01), 16 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> “Iran and Turkey Agree to Closer Media Ties”, *Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union*, [http://www.abu.org.my/public/dsp\\_page.cfm?articleid=3987&urlsectionid=715&specialsection=ART\\_FULL&pageid=247&PSID=2807](http://www.abu.org.my/public/dsp_page.cfm?articleid=3987&urlsectionid=715&specialsection=ART_FULL&pageid=247&PSID=2807), 13 October 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Emrullah Uslu, “Turkey-Iran Relations: A Trade Partnership or a Gateway for Iran to Escape International Sanctions?” *The Jamestown Foundation*, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=34653&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=080be0deba](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34653&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=080be0deba), 3 March 2009.

<sup>19</sup> “Ankara Hosts Symposium on Ties with Iran”, *Today’s Zaman*, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=176985>, 2 June 2009.

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to disconnect the identity of the new Turkish Republic from the old traditions of the Ottoman Empire. With the AKP taking power, however, this concept of “Turkishness” has been complemented and even partly replaced by a more inclusive understanding of identity, anchored in Turkey’s Muslim tradition and based more explicitly upon Turkey’s Ottoman heritage.

The modernization project of Ataturk was detrimental to the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran and consequently each country was wary of any influence that the other state might exert over its local population. While Iran was afraid that the secular, western-oriented Turkish system would cause Iranians to demand similar concessions in Iran, the Turkish government was concerned with a destabilization of its secular foundation by religiously motivated segments of society that regarded Iran as a role model. They seemed to be natural adversaries with diverging worldviews that went beyond simple political rivalry. The shift in Turkish identity, as portrayed by the current administration, has somewhat eased these tensions, as it embraces the shared Muslim identity of both countries, which is further emphasized by a weakened government in Iran that does not specifically want to export its revolution anymore, but in light of internal and external pressures is rather keen on sustaining its current power base within the country itself.

### ***A New Leadership Role for Turkey in the Muslim World?***

At the same time, Turkish foreign policy in some ways strives for a leadership role within the Muslim world; a position that could in the past never be achieved by the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its self-ascribed moral leadership of the Muslim world. Although the gap between Shia and Sunni Islam prevails, Iran is to some extent supportive of Turkey’s aspirations since it has always been wary of Arab dominance in the Muslim world. Turkey has achieved a more prominent role due to its policy of de-escalation, its attempts to serve as a mediator in a number of regional conflicts and its willingness to bridge the gap to the Western world, as opposed to the Iranian approach that has traditionally been more patronizing and provocative. The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East has in any case helped to further improve relations with Iran. Turkey has certainly increased its clout with the public and officials in several Islamic countries as a consequence of the strongly voiced support for the Palestinian cause. This has helped Turkey to distance itself from the image of merely

acting as proxy of the U.S. and EU foreign policy interests in the region. Iran, in turn, is trying to break out of its international isolation and embraces any notion of publicly displaying the good relations with Ankara.

Despite the fact that it may have been a solely domestically motivated move, Erdoğan's diplomatic faux-pas at the World Economic Forum in Davos has yielded him compliments by the leadership in Teheran. The traditionally good Turkish-Israeli relations are detrimental to the antagonism that characterizes Iranian-Israeli relations and now may have experienced a small dent in the aftermath of this event.<sup>20</sup> Cleric circles within the Iranian government indulge in rhetoric praising the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran on Turkey's strong stand on the Palestinian issue. The Palestinian cause, however, has, despite contrary public statements, in reality been a very low priority for both countries. Still, the fact remains that the government under Prime Minister Erdoğan supports Muslim solidarity for Turkey, in an unprecedented way (perhaps with the exception of the government under Prime Minister Erbakan) and has in some aspects reconfigured Turkish foreign policy to accommodate this goal within the framework of regional policies.

Turkey seems wary, however, to fully embrace the leadership in Teheran and as a consequence, relations have been somewhat ambivalent. This has been highlighted by the fact that on the one hand Ahmadinejad's first visit to Turkey did not take place until August 2008, after already having been in office since 2005, which does not exactly point towards a deep desire to develop an unnecessarily close friendship with the current regime on the part of Turkey.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan were among the first to congratulate Ahmadinejad to his reelection in June 2009,<sup>22</sup> which may be interpreted as a mere courtesy call, but is more likely to be an indicator for the ongoing positive trend in Turkish-Iranian relations.

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<sup>20</sup> Özgül Erdemli Mutlu, "Prime Minister Risks Turkey's Role as the Region's Honest Broker", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, (Winter 2008-9).

<sup>21</sup> Arif Keskin, "Iran-Turkey Relations: Balance, Rivalry and Mutual Dependence", *Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi*, <http://www.asam.org.tr/tr/yazigoster.asp?ID=2546&kat2=2>, 3 September 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Barçın Yınanç, "Turkey opts for Ahmadinejad", *Hürriyet*, <http://arama.hurriyet.com.tr/arsivnews.aspx?id=11881212>, 17 June 2009.

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## *Turkey's Position on Iran's Nuclear Program*

Turkey's response to Iran's nuclear program has been remarkably passive and has only in recent weeks become more proactive and publicly recognized. Although its fortunes are tied so closely to the Western powers, the government in Ankara still seems keen on presenting itself along the lines of "constructive impartiality" in this conflict. This could on the one hand be attributed to the fact that despite having a stake in regional stability that would be put at risk by an Iranian nuclear weapons program, Ankara does not dispose of any unique capabilities or leverage that would justify visible exposure. On the other hand, Turkey's capability may precisely consist of keeping an open channel of communication between both sides and act as an intermediary that has earned the trust of all parties involved. Also, open and one-sided support of U.S. policies in the region has historically not paid off for Turkey. It did not benefit from its loyalty in the Second Gulf War. On the contrary, the no-fly zone in Northern Iraq after the war rather provided a safe haven for the PKK, which is still in the collective memory in Turkey and would inhibit support of any military action against the Iranian nuclear program. U.S.-led interventions in Iraq have in the eyes of Turkey only increased regional instability and created mayhem close to Turkey's borders.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, it could precisely be active involvement and choosing sides on the part of Turkey that will ultimately reflect negatively onto regional stability. Turkey never had to respond to nuclear threats directly. Despite its recent attempts to develop a more independent foreign policy approach, NATO's security guarantees and the country's close ties to the transatlantic security establishment still form the foundation of Turkey's security policy. Throughout the Cold War, affiliation with NATO provided nuclear deterrence and the "nuclear level" was the domain of the superpowers that Turkey did not and could not meddle in. With the U.S. and the EU having already so clearly expressed their desire to make the Iranian nuclear program a top priority, Turkey has nothing to gain from becoming too actively involved, apart from enhancing its position as a regional power broker. There is recognition in Ankara, however, that despite personal empathy between leading figures in the governments of Turkey and Iran, the country may not be up to this task and that the stakes in this conflict are simply too high for Ankara to manage. Also, the transatlantic powers themselves could recognize the usefulness of Turkey's impartiality as a potential asset in reviving the negotiation process at some point and averting a stalemate.

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<sup>23</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, Iss. 4, (July-August 2007), p.103.

Turkey certainly has an interest in ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons. This has to be seen from the perspective that it could jeopardize the regional equilibrium and may reduce Turkey's leeway within the region. However, these are long-term considerations and until Iran has not actually acquired nuclear capabilities or is not really close to doing so, it may be beneficial for Turkey to remain impartial, or even on the sideline of this conflict. It would have little to gain and a lot to lose by becoming more actively involved in this affair. Turkey works under the assumption that is reflected in a famous quote by Mark Twain that "it is easier to stay out than to get out" and will thus remain in the position of a quiet facilitator and take a back seat in resolving the crisis. It is most likely going to publicly demand a greater role in the negotiations, but in reality seems to be fairly content with the current set-up. Turkey does not run the risk of having to impose tough measures on Iran, in case it refuses to renounce its nuclear program, which would clearly strain relations with the neighbor. Also, this would most likely not resonate well with the Turkish population, especially with the AKP's core constituency, as it could be perceived as affront against Muslim brothers.

Furthermore, a failure to deliver acceptable results to the international community would put a dent into Turkey's ambitions to play a more pronounced role in the first tier of players in the regional if not international arena. By retaining a low profile, Turkey can continue to develop its relationship with Iran and at the same time count on the fact that other powers have an even higher stake in this issue. This, admittedly partly involuntary, "free-rider" mentality may also be fueled by considerations that inaction on Turkey's part will require even greater attention and involvement of the U.S. and its European allies in Turkey's immediate neighborhood, which is clearly in Turkey's interest.

### ***Balancing American and European Interests***

For Turkey, dealing with Iran's nuclear program is also an act of balance between slightly diverging interests between the EU and the U.S. The recent alignment between European and American approaches to this problem has undoubtedly made it easier for Turkey to navigate transatlantic waters, as it also clearly emphasizes negotiations over confrontation in dealing with Iran. President Obama's more inclusive approach towards America's allies has certainly eased tensions

in transatlantic relations, but the administration's renewed commitment to multilateralism also entails greater expectations from America's allies, including Turkey.<sup>24</sup> While both, the U.S. and the EU, are primarily concerned with the prospect of Iran acquiring WMD and eventually envision a regime change that will liberate the people of Iran from its current theocratic government, Europe has more existing business ties with Iran and is particularly interested in gaining access to Iran's natural resources in the long run.<sup>25</sup> Good relations between Turkey and Iran mean that these two countries can already establish an infrastructure that will in the future constitute the basis for oil and natural gas transit to Europe. Even though this reduces the leverage that can be exerted through sanctions, the loophole works for Europe in the right direction.

Moreover, the EU needs to prove that its model of applying soft power within a multilateral framework can resolve the conflict and that it can produce sufficient clout to exert influence in this part of the world. A failure to do so may actually increase Turkey's position in the EU accession talks, as it would validate geopolitical and foreign policy arguments, emphasizing that Turkey's accession would enhance the EU's foreign policy posture and would once again put them into the center of attention in this process. Given its particular geopolitical interest and its proximity, Turkey will certainly be a keen observer of the developments within Iran's political system and will be among the best informed actors on the international scene. It could thus provide important intelligence and insights to the U.S. and Europe, without explicitly having to become involved in the conflict on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. It remains to be seen, whether Turkey will actually manage to restrain its ambitions to its own advantage and will remain on the sideline, or if it will become entangled in the confrontation with presumably adverse consequences to its national interests.

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<sup>24</sup> William Park, "Obama, Turkey and the Middle East: Troubles Ahead", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, (Winter 2008-9).

<sup>25</sup> <http://capital.trend.az/?show=news&newsid=1268373&catid=500&subcatid=382&lang=EN>, 12 August 2009.

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