

TURKISH-IRANIAN RACE FOR HEGEMONY IN THE LIGHT OF THE ARAB SPRING¹

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Turkish-Iranian relations have been all the time full of contradictions, nuances and shared interests. However, since the Treaty of Erzurum in 1847 between the Ottoman Empire and Qajjar Persia, hostilities have ceased for more than one and a half centuries. During the Cold War era the two countries had been side with the same anti-Soviet camp, though their antagonism for regional hegemony, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s was apparent. The oil wealth of Iran and Shah's plans for a formidable military were sources of Turkish suspicion and caution in this country's relations with Iran.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the post-Cold War era created new areas of antagonism between the two countries. First, an ideological-political race for becoming the model for the rest of the Islamic world. For the United States and their western allies Turkey was the model of a secular, western-like, imperfect though "working" democracy which could have been a point of emulation for the Arab and Islamic states. Iran, on the other hand, tried to "export" its revolutionary brand posing an existential threat to the monarchies and autocracies in the region.

There were four main fields of antagonism or/and shared interests between Iran and Turkey in the post-Cold War era. First, the issue of Kurdish insurgence in both countries and most importantly in Turkey. PKK activity started in the 1980s but took new dimensions after the Gulf War and the creation of a Kurdish sanctuary in the N. Iraq. Despite their common interest in suppressing separatist groups in Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan, Turkey many times doubted that Iran did not fulfill its share in combating Kurdish separatism and what is more, Turks suspected that Tehran had sheltered PKK leadership. Second, the Central Asia and Caucasus new states, which became the focus of both countries' political and economic expansion. Third, their role in the re-shaping of the Middle East. With the Peace Process in full spin, Turkey preferred an alliance with Israel and moderate Arab states; Jordan is a case in point. In a regional landscape where free trade and investments would be prevailing, Turkey could play a pivotal role. Turkish policy makers thought that such an alliance would also put more pressure on Syria, which in the early 1990s used PKK as a trump card in its relations with Turkey and their dispute

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over water resources. Iran on the other hand choose to foster its already stable alliance with Syria and the Lebanese Shi'a Hizbullah organisation and tried to build a "resistance front" with Sunni Islamo-nationalists such as the Hamas and PIJ. Last but not least, the new field of energy and energy transfer. In 1996 Turkey and Iran signed a long term 23 billion USD, gas purchase and gas pipeline construction scheme. It is interesting to note that though the deal was signed by pro-Islamic Erbakan's government, it was actually an initiative of Tansu Ciller' government.

The US occupation of Iraq and the collapse of the Peace Process created a different landscape for Turkish-Iranian relations. The American invasion in Iraq shattered the geostrategic balance in the region and produced a power vacuum to be filled by two main non-Arab states, Turkey and Iran. For the first time there were no Arab states among the leading powers of the region, namely Turkey, Iran and Israel. Saudi Arabia, though rich and influential among the conservative pious Sunni Muslims in the region, is far from becoming a regional hegemonic power lacking military strength and being in a long transition from the old to a younger royal generation. Mesopotamia, ab antiquo the geostrategic heart of the Middle East, was left without a ruler. Iran and Turkey ought to fill this vacuum.

Turkey formed the strategy of zero-problems with its neighbouring countries and tried to foster its bilateral economic relations with the region. However, Turkey's profile as hegemonic power was traumatised both in the case of Syria-Israel proximity talks and most importantly with the Mavi Marmara incident. In the first case, Israel has not informed Ankara about operation Cast Lead against Gaza and this led the peace mediation of Erdogan to an embarrassing failure. In the second, the Israeli deadly, though operationally unnecessary, raid on the Turkish ship was a blow to Turkey's image among its Middle Eastern friends. Had it not reacted, its policy would resemble the toothless anti-Israeli rhetoric of various past Arab regimes. Moreover, the antagonism with Israel and Cyprus over the Noble drilling gives Turkey an opportunity to assert herself as regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Iran, on the other hand, found an opportunity to assert its role as the protector of all Shi'a communities and to a certain extend its control over Iraq after centuries of Sunni domination. At the same time, the Iranian regime and particularly the conservative cohabitation of Khamenei-Ahmadinejad were feeling all the more besieged and threatened with a regime-change American-Israeli assault. As a result, a speeding-up of the Iran's nuclear program created serious concerns that the Iran would go nuclear as an ultimate deterrent. In the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict Iran continued its policy of consolidating the "resistance front" by cementing its relations with Hizbullah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Hence there are now one old and two new fields of Turkish-Iranian concern. The old one is that of the Kurdish issue and the new ones the race for the Arab hearts and minds and the Iranian nuclear program. Starting from the Kurdish issue, Turkey and Iran are co-operating in thwarting respectively PKK and PJAK. Co-ordination in battling insurgents, particularly in Kandil Mountain in Northern Iraq, led the Turkish Security Council to remove Iran from its list of countries presenting a major threat to Turkish security. However, mutual suspicion did not disappear. A joint operation against PKK was ruled out by Iran. Moreover, information that Iran has not co-operated properly with Turkish Intelligence in seizing one of PKK's leaders, Mustafa Karayilan, resulting in his escape, placed serious doubts about Iran's sincerity. Nonetheless, Iraqi Kurdistan is becoming a region of a peculiar Turkish-Iranian "condominium". Both Iran and Turkey have an interest in spoiling any prospect for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan.

According to Bayram Sinkaya, from ORSAM Institute, although the Iranian nuclear program has been one of the top issues on the international agenda since the mid-1990s, Turkey remained indifferent towards the issue for a long time. Until 2005, Iranian nuclear program has been rarely addressed in the Turkish-Iranian relations. Turkish officials recognized Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear technology and advocated solution of the issue by diplomatic means. As it was becoming evident that Iran was heading towards a stand-off with the IAEA and the USA, Turkey undertook bold diplomatic initiatives in order to resolve the matter. The initiatives in 2007-2008 were followed, in 2010, by a bolder one, now in co-operation with Brazil in a global context. The failure of all these initiatives placed Turkey between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand Turkey did not wish to follow severe sanctions against Iran. Turkey imports around 10 billions cm of Iranian gas every year, a third of the country's annual consumption, helping to balance energy dependency on Russia. Overall Turkish-Iranian trade reached 10 billion USD in 2010 and it approached 15 billion in 2011. On the other hand, Erdogan and AKP could not afford to disagree with US on all matters in the region. Furthermore they could not alienate Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE, which are militant against Iranian nuclear program. GCC FDI flows into Turkey reached 6.5 billions in the period 2004-2011 and some 500 Turkish companies are operating in UAE alone. Thus they accepted to install US radars in their soil within the framework of the NATO missile defense shield, causing a drawback in Ankara's relations with Tehran.

The Arab Spring altered all the more the position of the two states in the region. AKP government thought that it got the momentum to influence the rise of a new middle-class stratum of pious Muslims that may lead to the formation of credible, moderate political Islam compatible with regional stability. As a result, Turkey would once again present itself as the role model for the ascending political order in the Middle East.

Erdogan's statement during his visit in Egypt, underlining the importance of secularism in government affairs, is a clear indication of his plan to "export" the Turkish model as opposed to the theocratic Iranian one. The emergence of Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliate parties as the dominant political powers gave the impression that AKP could play a leading role in the region. Coinciding almost with Erdogan's visit to the "revolutionary" countries Iran hosted the first "International Conference on Islamic Awakening," which indicated the Turkey-Iran ideological-political rivalry in the region. However, we should not forget that particularly the Egyptian political elites, be it Islamic or secular would never surrender what they perceived as righteous Egyptian hegemony on the Arab Order to the Turks or to Iranians.

The political upheaval in Syria produced rather confusing signals from both countries. They initially both supported President Bashar al-Asad asking for broad reforms in the socio-political system of the Alawite/Baath rule. When the uprising became bloody and the regime chose to resort to the massacre of the unarmed demonstrators in order to suppress the opposition, Erdogan took distances. He preferred to support the opposition seeking to change the regime and imposed sanctions on Damascus. Iran, on the other hand, saw in the loss of the Alawite/Baath regime a serious blow in its geopolitical axis in the region. Syria was the lifeline of Hizbullah and an outpost of Iranian presence in the Mediterranean and the Levant, along the front-line of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iranian intelligence has allegedly been deeply involved in the suppression of the opposition and, according to press information, forces of the Iraqi Shia militia of Moqtada al-Sadr has been transferred by the Iranians to Syria in order to help the Syrian regime's military and paramilitary forces. Turkish-Iranian relations were tested when, in March 2011, two Iranian cargo planes flying over Turkish aerospace were forced to land because they were allegedly carrying military equipment to Syria. Moreover, Turkey's position is of paramount importance regarding the course of the Syrian uprising. No decision for sheltering refugees, arming the rebels or, most importantly, international military intervention can be taken without Turkish consent.

Another aspect of the Arab Spring and particularly of the Syrian uprising is the decision of Hamas to distance itself from the Assad regime and to search for a new basis perhaps temporarily in Qatar but most probably in Amman. Such a move would affect not only the operational strategy of the organisation but would also lead it to redefine its regional alliances. As Benedetta Berti, a Research Associate at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University, points out "the Arab Spring has not only represented an ideological challenge to the 'old' Hamas, but also a rather pragmatic one: with the ongoing turmoil raging in Syria and the potential demise of the Assad regime, it makes perfect sense for the group to look elsewhere for new strategic allies. In addition, Hamas' refusal to strongly back Assad in the course of the protests has weakened the group's relations with both Syria as well as Iran, opening a true

window of opportunity for Hamas to partially redefine its regional alliances by moving away from the 'Axis of Resistance' and its discourse, repositioning itself closer to the rising Sunni camp". After the Marmara incident and the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations, its close ties with the Gulf and its membership in NATO, AKP's Turkey is in an advantageous position to establish itself at the centre of this camp and influence the Palestinian position in the Arab-Israeli conflict at the expense of the Iranian backed "Resistance Camp".

Nevertheless the ultimate challenge for Turkish-Iranian relations would be an American-Israeli assault on Iran and its nuclear installations. Then the Turkish political elite, Islamic or secular, politician or military, might have to decide whether to break with the USA and perhaps its Western alliances or to endanger the Erzurum Treaty for the first time in nearly 200 years.