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Iranian–Turkish Relations in a Changing Middle East

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Abstract

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring and, above all, the intensification of the Syrian crisis with Ankara starting to engage in a political confrontation with Assad's Syria, Tehran tried to exploit its historic strategic alliance with Damascus in a search for projecting its influence abroad. As Turkey has been facing more and more hardships and experiencing political isolation, Iran seemed to be more comfortable with its external environment, benefiting from a convergence of interests with Russia. However, the advent of ISIS created further disarray in the region, presenting opportunities for countries to cooperate especially for Erdogan's new Turkey which was still focused on fighting Kurds.

Keywords: Iran, Turkey, Middle East, Syria, ISIS, Kurdish issue, Russia, Erdogan, Khamenei

Introduction

It was only eight years ago when Turkey managed to sign a joint declaration with Iran (and Brazil) to solve the nuclear issue (May 2010). This agreement on the transfer of nuclear fuel was then dropped because of Western pressure. However, the international community was given a jolt as Turkey succeeded in emerging as a power broker in Middle Eastern affairs and the Davutoglu doctrine based on "zero problems with neighbours" seemed to have reached its peak. While its relations with Israel were starting to sour, Turkey was in a honeymoon relationship with Syria – having created a visa-free regime for the movement of citizens – launched political and economic relations with Barzani's KRG (still current at the moment), emerged as a champion for the Palestinian cause after the Mavi Marmara incident, and was the only Muslim country to be able to create a stable dialogue with Iran. Iran itself, having experienced what King Abdullah of Jordan, as a warning to his Arab neighbours, dubbed "the Shiite crescent" in the Middle East, was facing increasing international isolation due to sanctions.

However, after the outbreak of the Arab Spring and, above all, the intensification of the Syrian crisis, things drastically changed. Existing relations came under severe strain. The IR deck of cards had been completely reshuffled. While Ankara started to engage in political confrontation with Assad's Syria, Tehran tried to exploit its historic strategic alliance with Damascus in order to project its influence abroad and recreate the myth of the Shiite crescent. As Turkey has been facing more and more hardships, Iran seems to be more comfortable with its external environment, benefiting from a convergence of interests with Russia. Nevertheless, the advent of ISIS created further disarray in the region, presenting both opportunities and constraints for cooperation, especially for Erdogan's Turkey. The historic nuclear deal between Iran and the international community, reached in July 2015, put Turkey under further pressure, as Ankara launched military strikes against the Kurds.

This paper aims to assess the current state of relations between Turkey and Iran, taking into account the Kurdish issue and the ISIS threat against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Syria.

Historical Background

The emergence of the ISIS threat appears to have created a convergence of interests in Turkish and Iranian foreign policies. Both Ankara and Tehran are interested in preserving their geopolitical positions as well as their political influence in the region and the security of energy routes – which were under threat from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate. Indeed, the ongoing war in Syria has shown that

the two regional powers have significantly different and opposing goals to the extent that they have embraced competing strategies and formed opposing alliances throughout the region. If in an economic perspective, Iranian–Turkish relations remain stable, the political-military arena has seen the two countries adopt differing strategies. Iran has been seeking Russian cooperation as both countries benefit from a simultaneous convergence of interests. On the other hand, Turkey has slowly been attempting a rapprochement with Israel. Iran has been supporting the Shiite-power-based elite ruling in Baghdad while Turkey has preferred tightening its relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil (KRG). Finally, Iran has been focusing on the ISIS threat almost from the onset, as Turkey appeared willing to confront the PKK's military challenge in south-eastern Anatolia.

Historically speaking, Turkish–Iranian relations have been characterized by a bitter political rivalry in their approach to Middle Eastern issues, mainly due to cultural and ideological differences as well as competing ambitions in the Middle East. Long before the establishment of their respective current regimes, the Middle East witnessed competition between an Ottoman-Sunni empire based in Istanbul (1453–1923), and the Shiite empire under the Safavids (1501–1736) as well as the Qajar dynasty (1791–1925). Deep religious differences as well as competition for power in the Middle East were inherited by subsequent regimes during the 20th century.

The last decades have a seen a greater level of cooperation in the energy sector alongside the ongoing ideological-political rivalry. The march towards integration in international markets encouraged by Turgut Özal (Turkish Prime Minister between 1983 and 1989 and then President of the Republic till his death in 1993) contributed to increasing economic cooperation between Ankara and Tehran, especially during the Eighties when Iran was engaged in the Iran–Iraq War and required significant imports (Özcan and Özdamar 105–106). Both countries benefited from the opportunities created by the international conjuncture.

The Nineties represented a turning point in defining alliances in the Middle East. The dissolution of the USSR gave Turkey a new impetus to strengthen relations with countries from the former "Soviet empire," due to cultural and linguistic affinities. The ominous threat the USSR had posed to Turkey throughout the Cold war finally disappeared and a number of opportunities opened up for Ankara (Robins; Hale). Turkey had a great opportunity to boost economic cooperation in the energy sector, taking advantage of the oil reserves in the Caspian and Black seas in order to emerge as an important hub for oil and gas supplies shipped to Europe (Bacik; Bilgin; Winrow). After the military intervention against Iraq in January 1991, the United States (US) promoted a new line of foreign policy to cope with Middle Eastern issues, based on the concept of "dual containment," aimed at containing both Iran and Iraq. The cornerstone of this approach was the encouragement of an alliance between Turkey and Israel; under the auspices of Washington, Ankara

and Tel Aviv secured a military pact in 1996 (Benjio). With this international development, Iran began to suffer from its imposed isolation. To overcome this situation, Iranian leaders tried to reach out to Russia. The main problem after the eight-year war against Iraq was the country's reconstruction and the relaunch of its economic recovery. The Rafsanjani administration (1989–1997) received a positive response from Russia in the shape of the Yeltsin Presidency's 1993 adoption of a new foreign policy concept based on a multidimensional philosophy with the assumption that Moscow would prioritize its own economic and security interests through a more pragmatic approach (Aras and Ozbay 50). This was exemplified in 1996 with the refurbishment of a 1970 abandoned German project for the construction of a nuclear reactor in Bushehr. So while in the Nineties the US tried to fill the new power vacuum in the Middle East caused by the dissolution of the USSR, Russia and Iran found converging interests in counter balancing Washington's hegemony.

The 2000s were characterized by some important events, both at the international and state level, which again reshuffled the deck in the Middle East. It was not because of the ideological affinity between the AK Parti and the theocratic regime in Iran that economic cooperation has continued to flourish throughout the last decade and up to today. Indeed, one has to highlight the huge difference between a party claiming Islamic roots within a republican state that has secular institutions where minimal democratic and pluralistic conditions are met, and a regime that has been founded on a religious framework where there is no room for freedom and pluralism. The main driving force of Turkish economic expansionism abroad was the Anatolian bourgeoisie, the religious-oriented middle class that formed the grassroots of the AKP and had said it had encouraged Turkey's openness to international markets (Yavuz). What was more in rhetoric than in practice was that under the AKP's rule, Turkey had exploited Islamic solidarity in order to reach out to Middle Eastern markets and peoples, especially with regards to relations with Iran.[1] In reality, Turkey was really interested in becoming an energy hub for the transportation of hydrocarbons from the Middle East to Europe, and finding an accommodation with Iran was a strategic tool in this regard. Pragmatic considerations, rather than ideological ones, dominated Turkish policymakers' calculations from 2002 to 2011, before the Arab Spring; it is under these circumstances that Turkish–Iranian entente against the PKK and the PJAK (an offshoot of a Kurdish terrorist group operating in Iran) has to be understood (Karacasulu and Askar Karakir 117).

Analyzed through a political-security lens, with their peak in 2011, relations between Ankara and Tehran soured in the same year against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis which was beginning to morph into a civil war. In the previous

1 Large segments of the Turkish society harbour feelings of skepticism towards the Iranian establishment.

decade, the Kurdish issue itself was key to Tehran's policy change towards Ankara: the insurgency campaign of PJAK prompted Iran to approach Turkey and to accept the PKK as a terrorist organization as well (Ehteshami and Elik 653–654). Actually, despite continuing good diplomatic relations up to the onset of the Arab Spring, Iranian officials have generally been skeptical and apprehensive of Turkey's growing influence in Middle Eastern affairs over the past decade. Turkey's increased engagement in the region included its activism in the Palestinian issue, its deepening relationship with Hamas, a pragmatic approach towards Israel, a softening in the role of ideology in favour of authentic diplomatic tools in nurturing Israeli-Syrian détente – the "shuttle diplomacy" that Turkey undertook in the second half of 2008 (Ehteshami and Elik 655).

The Current Political-Military Dimension in Turkish–Iranian Relations: The Case of the War in Syria from the Kurdish Issue to the ISIS Threat

At the onset of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Turkish officials' attitude was to exhort Assad to adopt internal reforms in order to assuage rioters' dissatisfaction with his regime. The "reform package" announced by Assad in April received Iranian backing. Even Turkish officials, such as the Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) were often sent as envoys to Damascus in order to lobby Assad to introduce reforms (Barkey, *Turkey's Syria Predicament*, 117). However, Assad was not eager to accommodate the opposition instead cracking down on the demonstrations, exacerbating an already dangerous situation that soon threatened to spill over Turkish borders. It was at this time, around six months after the beginning of the revolts, that Turkey's foreign policy approach towards the Syrian upheaval drastically changed. While Iran unconditionally supported the Assad regime, Turkey began to host meetings of the Syrian opposition on its soil, including the Syrian National Council as well as the leaders of the Free Syrian Army in exile, who established their headquarters in Istanbul (Barkey, *Turkey's Syria Predicament*, 117; Sevi 2; Sinkaya 152). Reciprocal accusations were thrown at each other in an incipient and renewed political rivalry for control of competing groups in an inflamed Syria. The pragmatic and pacific approach initially adopted by Turkish officials was justified on the basis of very good relations Ankara and Damascus had been building during the previous ten years. In the Nineties, the two countries were at odds with regards to the Kurdish question and to the bloody campaign of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However, once Ocalan was captured, Turkey and Syria developed a deeper political and economic relationship. Toward

the end of the past decade, Turkish–Syrian relations substantially improved, comprising a framework envisaging the approval of a free-visa mechanism for their respective citizens, the creation of a free-trade area and the preparation of frequent high-level official meetings. Such an improvement of relations with the Assad regime was the cornerstone of Ahmet Davutoglu's long pursued "zero problem policy with neighbours." Apart from its relations with Israel souring, after the Mavi Marmara incident occurred on May 31, 2010, Turkey's external influence was at high; Erdogan, Davutoglu and the AK Parti could benefit from a real supportive regional context in which to chase their strategic goals.

Throughout the course of its modern history, Turkey has always adopted an official stance towards Kurds, based on the notion of "Turkishness" (Cagaptay; Hale and Ozbudun). Kurds were denied basic rights such as speaking their own language, having Kurdish names, or even calling themselves Kurds. This attitude emerged as a natural consequence of the "Sevres syndrome," resulting from the arrangements of post-World War I and had to do with both the safety of boundaries and the integrity of the national identity. The denial of Kurdish identity is best exemplified by the notion of "mountain Turks," an idiomatic expression under which they are also known. However, from the time the AK Parti came to power, Erdogan and his governments started to embrace a new worldview envisaging the prospect to finally include Kurds within Turkish society and the state. This attitude was represented a break with the past. While the CHP espoused the official ideology of Republican Kemalism, which was based on a very restrictive notion of national identity (sacrificing whatever ethnicity or alternative national group within the cadre of Turkishness), the AK Parti found it useful to include Kurds within the framework of their common Muslim identity with Turks (Yavuz and Özcan, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Justice and Development Party* and *Turkish Democracy and the Kurdish Question*; Gunter; Müce-Göcek). The strategy of integrating the Kurds, which was supposed to culminate in the recognition of a number of fundamental rights for the Kurds, was not wholly possible until 2007. This was when the AK Parti was reconfirmed as the ruling political force, while Abdullah Gul's election as President overtly challenged the power of the military (the guardian of Kemalist principles). However, it must be underlined that the inclusion of Kurds, as part of the implementation of Davutoglu's principle of "zero problems with neighbours," was conceived as a pivotal moment of the AK Party's strategy to start its accession process to the European Union. The limitation of the power of the military within a civilian framework was also a fundamental principle of Davutoglu.

As the Syrian situation worsened because of Assad's unwillingness to carry out political reforms in his country, and his crackdown on protesters, Turkish officials decided to cut diplomatic ties with Damascus. From their point of view, there are three main problems that the Syrian civil war has produced: a) a humanitarian crisis potentially affecting Turkish security, likely resulting in a huge refugee influx;

b) a dangerous situation of political and societal disarray near the Syrian-Turkish border that might be exploited by terrorist groups, such as the Turkish PKK and the Syrian YPG (PYD's official militia); c) Kurdish groups' quest for autonomy, or even independence that could bring about more chaos in the territory. Nevertheless, key factors such as the inability to intervene directly and to declare a no-fly zone on the Syrian skies, as well as the threat from Syrian Kurds gathered under the umbrella of the PYD (the main Kurdish Syrian party which was thought to be aligned with the PKK) prompted Erdogan to officially declare the end of the peace-process with the Kurds and to use an 'iron fist' approach after a terrorist attack was carried out in Suruc on 20 July 2015.

One of the main hindrances to stifle Turkey's leeway in managing the Syrian question was its faltering relations with Washington. US officials were unwilling to be involved in another war in the Middle East, having in mind the negative outcomes America had been experiencing after its double engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq for over fourteen years. Ankara had pushed Washington to be involved in Syria several times, and to receive the necessary support for establishing a no-fly zone along the Syrian–Turkish border. It became clearer and clearer to Turkish officials that their US partners had different and indeed conflicting interests in Syria. While Turkey was intent on stifling a well-organized Kurdish movement, the US' main goal was to contain the threat from the Islamic caliphate; and to do so, Washington exploited the Kurdish forces on the ground – the People's Protection Units (YPG) *in primis* – an action that increased Turkish anger and frustration (Peerzada). The event that probably helped to consolidate cooperation between the YPG and the US was the American decision to back the Syrian Kurdish militia during ISIS' siege of Kobane in October 2014. Turkey started to be very much concerned with the ongoing cooperation between the YPG and the US, and the possibility of establishing an independent Kurdish entity from the ashes of the Syrian turmoil. When ISIS was at 'the gates' of Mosul, Turkish officials did not seriously take into account such a threat, underestimating the will of ISIS fighters to besiege the Iraqi city. By the time Islamic jihadists took over the consulate in Mosul on June 11, 2014 – capturing 49 individuals as hostages – it was too late (Johnston). When a Western coalition was set up at the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, Turkey did not agree. Its attitude towards the Islamic State remained ambiguous at least until the summer of 2015.

Empirical proof that the Kurdish population is considerably divided[2] is evident (Larrabee 68; van Wilgenburg), and reflected in the Kurdish forces involved in the war against the Islamic State. Notwithstanding this split among competing political forces within the Kurdish Diaspora – a key factor that prevents

2 Official statistics are not that precise in estimating the real extent of the Kurdish people – the largest one to be without a state – but many agree on roughly 30 million individuals spread within the territory of four states, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

the attainment of concrete military goals on the ground – Turkey's main strategy to damage Kurdish forces was not to be directly involved in the international coalition against the Islamic caliphate. This is far from saying that Ankara militarily cooperated with ISIS (besides some speculation concerning the smuggling of oil barrels between Turkey and the Caliphate).[3] However, Turkey made all the necessary efforts to hinder Kurdish forces on the ground by not overtly opposing the ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq. To not completely alienate the US, in July 2015 Turkey allowed the use of the strategic Incirlik air-base in order to help Washington carry out strikes against the Islamic State, even if most Turkish air-strikes were directed to the PKK and not to ISIS itself.

When the AK Parti returned to power in 2007, after winning a majority of 46% in the Parliament, and Abdullah Gul was finally elected President of the Turkish Republic, Erdogan could better pursue his design to shape state institutions to his vision. First of all, the curbing of military power in domestic politics, both to consolidate the government's power base at home and to better meet the necessary political criteria to obtain admission into the EU. Secondly, it entailed managing the Kurdish issue in a total different manner to the past. Herein lie the main reasons that boosted the then Prime Minister Erdogan both to launch what is known as the Kurdish opening (officially started in 2009) and to establish strong and sound relations with Massoud Barzani's KRG. Improving relations with the KRG has been beneficial in two ways for Turkey: a) to loosen dependence from Iranian and Russian flows of energy, that would put Ankara at the mercy of Tehran and Moscow at times of tense relations; to appease Kurds' desire for independence that would be unacceptable for both Ankara and Baghdad (Morelli and Pischedda).

Tension between Iran and Turkey increased after Ankara decided to host the deployment of a US radar system on its soil within the framework of the NATO missile defence shield program in September 2011. This move alarmed Iranian officials as they thought it was set up to contain Iran and was aimed at striking infrastructure related to its ongoing nuclear program. In fact, in spite of official statements by Turkish policymakers aimed at dialling down tensions, the fact that the system was installed in Latakia, some 200 km away from the Iranian border, confirmed to Iranians that their fears were not unfounded. Even for this reason,

3 There's a large amount of sources on the web supporting the thesis of oil smuggling between Turkey and ISIS through Syrian and Iraqi routes. ISIS, it is claimed, engaged in smuggling oil, trafficking drugs and selling antiquities in order to self-finance its own terrorist activities. President Erdogan has been accused by both the opposition in his country and from abroad, especially Russia. In December 2015, he said he would resign if activities of oil smuggling, in which he or members of his government were implicated, were proven. See, for example, http://theiranproject.com/blog/tag/turkey-daesh-oil-trade/ (accessed: March 29, 2017). Henry Barkey (*Turkey's Syria Predicament*) reports some references proving illegal oil smuggling, involving even the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH, the same which led the flotilla at the time of the Mavi Marmara incident, 31 May 2010).

Tehran has been looking at Ankara's moves in the Middle East with great suspicion, considering Turkey is always more an actor engaged in promoting foreign interests and acting as a Western surrogate in the Middle East. However, the Kurdish issue had brought Turkey and Iran together after 2004, with Tehran having decided to proscribe the PKK as a terrorist organization, in response to the spread of violence perpetrated by the Party of the Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), a PKK offshoot operating on Iranian soil (Ehteshami and Elik 653–654). Although Ankara and Tehran still had differences in attaching importance to the Kurdish question (with the former viewing it as the greatest threat to its national security), the issue itself has shown that a high degree of cooperation in their bilateral security relations is possible.

One of the two prominent issues Iran and Turkey had to cope with from the outset of the Syrian uprising in 2011 was the resurgence of *jihadist* activities perpetrated by what remained of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), then re-named ISI (Islamic State of Iraq). AQI was established in Iraq after the collapse of the Saddam regime in 2003 by a Jordanian terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Although he officially swore allegiance to the core of the Al-Qaeda organization sheltered in the Hindu Kush, along the Afghan-Pakistani border, his group in Iraq often operated beyond the official decrees issued by Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden. The opposition groups in Iraq were very heterogeneous and extended from Sunni Arabs to Sunni jihadists, from criminal bands to insurgent groups from the majority Shi'ite community. The Shi'ite population in Iraq makes up the majority of between 60 to 65% of the inhabitants. Al-Zarkawi's approach against the US invasion in Iraq was influenced by a prominent scholar during his detention in prison. Among his terrorist activities, he used to hit not only US but also Shi'ite targets, especially exploiting the deep ethnic and religious divides that spanned Iraq. Shi'ites were selected among his priority targets because of the widespread belief among Sunni fundamentalists that the Shi'a represents a deviation from the original faith (Holbrook; Kavalek).

The Iranian leadership has always considered Sunni *jihadist* terrorism as one of the most serious threats that the country faced. The overthrow of two geographically adjacent regimes namely the one of Saddam in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan put Iran in a situation of encirclement. In less than a couple of years, Tehran found itself jeopardized by two threats, US troops and Sunni *jihadists* ready to cross over the Iranian border to spread disarray. In response to the deteriorating situation ensuing from the Syrian quagmire, Iranian leaders exploited Shi'ite connections to build an alliance with as many Shi'ite organizations as possible throughout the Middle East. Because of this action, King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 had formerly referred to the projection of Iranian influence abroad as a "Shia crescent" in the region (Barzegar 87). However, even if religion is an important driver in shaping Iranian posture in Middle Eastern affairs, material factors – such as geopolitics,

economics and security – have historically been of paramount importance. The fear of encirclement, a sort of paranoia for the integrity of its borders, which is to say a constant perception of a need for survival, stems from the times of the Safavid Empire (Ramazani). This is more evident today with regards to the outcome of the more than five year-long Syrian civil war. Its strategy to defend itself is deeply rooted in the exploitation of Shiite connections in the Middle East with the Lebanese movement of Hezbollah, the Syrian regime under the al-Assad dynasty and the post-Saddam Iraqi regime.

The strategic importance of the Iranian-Syrian axis has already been "put under the microscope" (Hinnebush and Ehteshami). Tehran-Damascus ties have been forged over the course of past decades, by exploiting religious commonalities with the Assad family (who belong to the Alawites, a branch of Shia). Syrian territory was of vital importance to Tehran's geopolitics to the extent that it could take advantage of its territorial proximity with Lebanon where Hezbollah, an Iranian offshoot set up early in the Eighties, operates against the state of Israel.

From the Iranian leadership's point of view, one of the scenarios to be avoided is the Islamic State's territorial expansion to the extent that the al-Baghdadi caliphate would create a barrier between Tehran and Damascus. A second threat would be the dissolution of Iraq and the resulting flow of refugees that could cross over the Iranian border. In this scenario, Iran would face the potential restart of a Kurdish uprising for independence. Iran has always backed a unified Iraq under a centralized regime. For this reason, Tehran has been giving Baghdad all the necessary aid to protect the Haider al-Abadi's[4] regime from ISIS by training and funding Iraqi militias and providing weapons; furthermore, Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani (chief of the al-Quds brigade of the IRGC) was recalled from Syria on June 2014, which coincided with the ISIS conquest of Mosul (Akbarzadeh 45–46). All these operations have been possible inside a framework of tacit coordination with the US against a backdrop of long-standing efforts to overcome the nuclear issue, culminating in a deal signed in Vienna on July 2015. This does not mean that immediately after the signature of this historic accord (poised to gradually lift sanctions that were crippling the Iranian economy), Tehran and Washington were ready to define themselves as "friends." The ancient foes remain exactly the same – and the Leader Khamenei wants to keep the United States as an enemy – although there is now room for more cooperation than in the past, even to confront the common military threat coming from ISIS. Furthermore, the Kurdish issue, however relevant, was not as important as the jihadist one, since Tehran has always perceived Saudi Arabia's hidden *longa manus* of exploiting Sunni-Shia rivalries in the region, and aware of the renowned Sunni fundamentalist hatred nurtured by jihadists operating in Iraq – as the military

4 He succeeded Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in August 2014.

activities against Shia perpetrated by Jordanian Abu Mus'ab al-Zarkawi, above all, very well showed (Barkey, *Turkish-Iranian Competition after the Arab Spring*; Karmon; Kavalek).

Since the onset of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2011, Turkish and Iranian goals have seemed to be diverging. The good level of cooperation achieved just a few months before (May 2010) with the attainment of a nuclear agreement in cooperation with Brazil – later abandoned – was something that belonged to the past. New priorities were opening a new round of rivalry between the two countries. Long before the ISIS threat started to be a priority for the international community, the main concern for the Turkish leadership was to avoid the destabilization of the Assad regime which could foster a Kurdish insurgence. Indeed, from the beginning of the Arab Spring, the real issue at stake in Turkey–Iran ties was about political influence through which to champion a model to export abroad. While Erdogan, through illustrating the economic performances that Ankara had achieved over the previous decade, tried to sell to Arab constituencies Turkey's "successful" experiment of merging Islam and democracy, Khamenei overtly spoke about an Islamic awakening, depicting the Arab revolutions as a successful result of exporting the Islamic Republic's principles abroad (Mohammed).

Sources of tensions in Iran-Turkey relations also stemmed from the evolving situation in Iraq and from the Shiite upheaval in Yemen against the legitimate government led by Abd Rabbih Mansur Hadi last year. A sectarian conflict between the Shiite Huthi, backed by Iran, and loyalist forces sponsored by Saudi Arabia and an international coalition pushed Yemen into a civil war in 2015. President Erdogan lashed out at Iran, warning Tehran to withdraw both from Iraq and from Yemen, stating Turkey may consider providing logistical support to Saudi Arabia and Sunni forces if requested: "Iran and the terrorist groups must withdraw." He went on to say: "the aim of Iran is to increase its influence in Iraq. Iran is trying to chase Daesh from the region only to take its place" (*Turkey supports Saudi mission in Yemen, says Iran must withdraw*). Such fierce rhetoric against Iran merely shows Turkey's uncertainties and hardships in facing the evolving situation in the Middle East, from whose affairs it feels both isolated and negatively affected; indeed, Turkish policymakers know full well they need Iran for strengthening economic cooperation and overcoming hurdles in managing Middle Eastern affairs.

In this regional scenario, a major role is assigned to Russia. While Ankara and Moscow were at loggerheads after the downing of a Russian military jet on November 24, 2015, for crossing over Turkish airspace, Iran has been working with Russia over the past twenty years, building a strong economic relationship; by now, the two have found a convergence of interests in supporting Assad's fight against jihadists and terrorist activities from opposition groups in Syria. This has led to tactical military cooperation in Syria, deepening links based on energy and trade relations and going beyond the strategically relevant issue of the S-300 missile defence

system that Russia delivered to Iran. The two countries in fact have claimed to have experimented in a joint operation of bombing Syrian territories inhabited by terrorists (Milani).

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this work is to take a snapshot of the evolution of Turkish–Iranian relations through the years and to assess how this kind of relationship could be defined. By describing it as a strategic relation, it lacks the suitable features of a typical strategic alliance, just like, for example, the Iran-Syria alliance (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch).

The most important impediment limiting the formation of a strategic is their regional power status. In addition to this, identity has proved to be more a hindrance than a catalyst for improving ties. While Turkey is a Sunni country, Iran espouses Shia, the minority branch of Islam. Historically, this has led to disputes over the hegemony on the religious message to deliver to Middle Eastern groups and movements, in competition with at least one other regional power, Saudi-Arabia. The Palestinian cause is an enlightening example – partly because of the incident of the Mavi Marmara in 2010 and thanks to improving relations in the nuclear field: through projecting their respective influences in the Palestinian territories – Iran providing Hamas with weapons, financing and training, while Turkey supplying it with aid and political support in order to let Hamas legitimately stay within the political arena (ICG 11) – each of them tried to champion the "cause of causes" within the Islamic World.

Secondly, while Turkey has tried to emerge as an unparalleled and successful model of "Islamic democracy" at least by the end of the previous decade, Iran has continued to export the Islamic revolution abroad. Khamenei himself often states that the Islamic Revolution did not finish in the Eighties but still operates as a pivotal principle in Iran's foreign policy.

Thirdly, from a strategic point of view, the Syrian crisis has placed the two countries on opposing sides. Even if, at the beginning, it has yielded similar interests concerning the emergence of the Islamic caliphate, different views came to light at a later stage concerning which actors to support in the midst of the Syrian quagmire.

Iran's rising power, combined with its converging interests with Russia in Syria, along with strong economic ties with both, has worried Turkish policymakers over the past few years. Turkey and Russia have clashed over competing priorities in Syria and disrupted diplomatic ties after the former downed the latter's jet in November 2015. Finding themselves politically isolated from Middle Eastern affairs as a consequence of the overt failure of Davutoglu's early foreign policy principles,

Turkish policymakers have been recently forced to reconsider the situation. President Erdogan pledged in person to mend fences with both Israel and Russia. He and Israeli Prime Minister Benjiamin Netanyahu decided to follow Barack Obama's recommendations dating back to March 2013 to restore ties – when the US President highlighted the geopolitical importance between Ankara and Jerusalem – and recently signed a deal built on Turkey's purchasing of Israeli gas, exploiting large Israeli offshore reserves (*Israel and Turkey reach deal to restore relations*); Erdogan himself sent Vladimir Putin a letter, apologizing for downing a Russian jet, on November 24, 2015, asking him to undertake the necessary efforts to restore a "strategic" and "friendly" partnership (*Vladimir Putin Receives a Letter from President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan*).

Despite recurring claims by respective policymakers that bilateral relations are strategic and friendly, Turkey and Iran have experienced geopolitical competition for a large part of their history. A supportive regional environment unfolded after the US military campaign against jihadist terrorism, combined with a new foreign policy established by the AKP brought the two countries closer. This and a friendlier dialogue with some neighbours, as well as the need to overcome the hardships caused by an exacerbating regime of sanctions pulled the two countries together in order to find a solution to most of their own problems with the Middle East as well as the increasing US involvement in the region and beyond. Strengthening economic cooperation, while tightening energy relations in particular, provided them with a spirit of mutual trust, notwithstanding their historic political rivalry and the competition connected to projecting their respective influences and religious messages abroad.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) could boost their bilateral economic relations to a higher degree but it makes no sense if it is not beneficial to overcoming competition and to find an accommodation in the Syrian civil war. Neither Iran or Turkey can do much in solving one of the bloodiest recent conflicts and they probably need to work in a more cooperative way with the great powers, the European Union, Russia and the US above all. Recent moves by Turkey have seen a desire to re-emerge as a regional power whose importance in Middle Eastern affairs can be underpinned by restoring its prominence on the regional chessboard. If the great powers fail to achieve a grand bargain in Syria (and the ongoing situation is far from reaching this very outcome) it is likely that Iran–Turkey relations will continue to remain characterized by geopolitical rivalry in the near future. To ease Turkish–Iranian tensions over Syria, Erdogan should probably look for a political compromise with Putin, as suggested by a new political agenda established in Astana in January 2017. Turkey, Iran and Russia managed to arrange a tactical agreement under which Ankara accepted to turn a blind eye on Assad's stay in power (as intensely demanded by Tehran and Moscow) in change of having free rein on the Kurdish-populated region. In fact, in the light of the increasing

role of Russia in the Syrian theatre, and considering Moscow's strategic interests in the country, Turkey has played its card of temporarily dismissing its insistence of Assad's removal in exchange for (direct or indirect) support not only for its fight against Kurdish terrorism but also towards any Kurdish quest for more political autonomy in the region.

This was made possible under a new economic, energetic and military understanding with Russia so that Turkey directly engaged the Syrian quagmire with the Euphrates Shield Operation in August 2016 and the Olive Branch operation in Afrin in January 2018. Those were officially intended to fend off the islamic state threat but also to deal the Kurdish insurgency a final blow.

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