

Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Iranian Nuclear Programme: In Search of a New Middle East Order after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract: *Turkey's role in the Iranian nuclear dossier is often portrayed as that of a 'facilitator' and 'mediator' in scholarly analyses. NATO member Turkey was seen as a potential bridge-builder between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 'Western camp' of negotiators. During prime minister Erdoğan's first legislature, however, Ankara's and Washington's foreign policy outlooks and strategic priorities started to diverge in the course of Turkey's new regional engagement in what has been theorized as a 'Middle-Easternization' of Turkish foreign policy. It is Turkey's location as a geostrategic hub in a politically instable region that informed Turkey's 'Zero problems with neighbors' policy and foreign minister Davutoğlu's advocacy for a 'Strategic Depth' in Turkey's foreign and regional policies. Ankara emphasizes its need to uphold sound relations with its neighbors and publicly stresses an unwillingness to go along with Western pressure on Iran, and insists on the principle of non-interference and Iran's right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. All the same, Turkish-Iranian relations are undergoing a deterioration in the wake of the Syrian civil war at the time of writing, with both sides supporting diametrically opposite causes and factions. Turkish-Iranian fundamentally differing conceptions of regional order will also impact upon Turkey's leverage power to defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis. This paper therefore adds a timely contribution to our understanding of a multifaceted and nuanced Turkish foreign policy toward Iran that can be a critical complement to 'Western' diplomatic initiatives in the search for new paradigms for a new Middle East order.*

Keywords: Arab Spring, Turkish foreign Policy; Turkish-Iranian relations; Iran's nuclear programme; Middle East regional order

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Introduction

When the hitherto covert Iranian nuclear programme was uncovered in 2002, Turkey reacted with moderation and did not join the harsh condemnation on the part of Western governments. Ankara was cautious not to depart from pre-conceived assumptions about Iranian intentions and suspect a military dimension of Iran's nuclear programme. In its public diplomacy, Turkey repeatedly emphasized Iran's legitimate right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as a member of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). At the same time, Turkey urged Tehran to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and comply with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. While Ankara appears more lenient toward Iran than the Western negotiation partners in the P5+1 format,¹ it has become clear that a nuclear armed neighbour Iran with its detrimental implications for the regional security architecture cannot be in Turkey's interest. Being critical of international sanctions on Iran, Turkey has always stressed the need to find a political solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Turkey has credibility in Tehran due to traditionally good bilateral relations, especially as from prime minister Erdoğan's AKP victory and ensuing foreign policy re-orientations. Turkey also has credibility in 'the West' due to its commitment to Western security cultures as epitomized by its NATO membership, traditionally good American-Turkish relations and EU accession talks. While Ankara's position has therefore often been characterized as that of a conflict mediator, Turkey's leverage power in Tehran is undergoing significant shifts in the wake of what has been called the 'Arab Spring' and, all the more, diametrically opposite conceptions and interests of regional order in the context of the Syrian civil war. Especially the latter might constitute a turning point for Ankara's ability to defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis.

An understanding of contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations as well as of Turkey's position in the Iranian nuclear file, however, necessitates a historical understanding of not only power transitions in Central Asia and the Middle East, but of shifts that have taken place in Turkey's foreign policy outlooks in the late 20th century, and, more importantly, in the first decade of the 21st century. The first section of this article will thus outline the Turkish foreign policy re-orientations that took place following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the implications thereof for Turkish-Iranian relations. This will be followed by a second section analyzing the evolution of Turkish-Iranian relations with the coming to power of prime minister Erdoğan in 2002, the same year that the Iranian nuclear programme was uncovered. The third section will look at how Turkey positioned itself toward the latter. The fourth section will set Turkey's Iran policy and Turkish foreign policy toward the Iranian nuclear programme into a wider regional context. The final section will address the major implications that both the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war have on Turkish-Iranian relations. It will be shown how especially disagreements over the Syrian civil war and the future of the regional order impact on Turkey's position in the Iranian nuclear file and Ankara's ability to defuse the nuclear crisis.

The research method encompasses content analysis of policy documents, policy briefs and the scholarly literature. This research is equally informed by semi-structured elite interviews with experts and decision-makers on the basis of non-attribution.

Turkish foreign policy re-orientation and Turkish-Iranian relations through the lens of geopolitical pragmatism after the end of the Cold War

Geographic proximity always forced Turkey to cooperate with Iran economically, despite diverging political and ideological outlooks especially since the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. The latter let Iran, now an Islamic theocracy with the constitutionally enshrined aim to 'export' its revolution, be vehemently opposed to the secular Kemalist model that Turkey represented. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lifting of Soviet anti-religious suppression and the ensuing rise of Turkic nationalism in Azerbaijan and other Central Asian republics as well as the prospect of a boost to

Turkey's cultural, political and economic influence directly clashed with the Iranian claim to religious-ideological influence in the wider region and propelled speculations about a 'new Great Game' between Turkey and Iran taking place in Central Asia over competing spheres of influence in the power vacuum that the implosion of the Soviet Union had left behind.

Common membership in regional organisations, however, provided a pragmatic bond of cooperation on issues of regional and neighbourly concern. At the same time, both states had their own interests and commitments that saw their respective diplomacy partially oppose one another. That way, the Caspian Sea Cooperation Council was founded on the initiative of Iran and included all Caspian littoral states, thus excluding Turkey.² On the Turkish side, its commitment to the NATO security structure, e.g., already meant a filter of security political perception that entailed a certain conception of Turkish diplomacy in Central Asia that ran contrary to Iranian conceptions of political cooperation in the region. While Turkish prime minister Süleyman Demirel stressed the Central Asian republics' historic link with Turkey during his state visits,³ Iran did its bid to do the same.

All the same, the end of the Cold War constituted a watershed for Turkey's strategic foreign policy: With the freezing of the world into two diametrically opposed ideological blocs with their respective proxy alignments coming to an end, Turkey's NATO membership did not automatically entail an unquestioned politico-ideological commitment to US security perceptions anymore. The unfolding of a multipolar world with the consequent possibility of regional instability that a shielding superpower would not necessarily seek to prevent any longer let Turkey forge new ties with Russia and Iran and start to de-emphasize its strategic foreign policy dependence on NATO in what Günter Seufert describes as "the downfall of the foreign policy consensus and security paradigm cultivated by the former state elite".⁴ This also meant a new impetus for a reinvigoration of Turkey's Islamic roots and the growing emergence of alternative ideological outlooks to Kemalism in the 1990s.⁵ Famously, Ahmet Davutoğlu's book *Strategic Depth: Turkish Foreign Policy*⁶ was deemed a pioneering work for a new thinking in foreign policy after the end of the Cold War that advocated a reversion to and a greater emphasis on Turkey's role and influence in its region and subsequently a shift away from Turkey's hitherto unabated foreign policy leaning on the West. In what has been referred to as 'neo-Ottomanism,' segments of Turkish society, especially the religious communities but also the corporatist-conservative milieu based in Ankara and Istanbul began to emphasize Turkey's imperial legacy as a Muslim bastion against cultural domination by Europe, and the West, by extension.⁷

It goes without saying that such foreign policy re-orientations of a new regional assertiveness that meant a rapprochement with Muslim countries were received positively in Teheran. Iran's perceptions of Turkish politics and ideological rivalry to the Turkish secular model experienced an even more important shift when on 28 June 1996, an Islamist party was elected to head the Turkish government. Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Welfare Party, became Turkey's prime minister, and announced his aspiration to usher in a re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy. Iranian president Rafsanjani congratulated him on his victory and invited him to Tehran, an invitation that Erbakan accepted when he tellingly travelled to Tehran for his first official state visit to sign a natural gas deal with Iran worth \$20 billion.⁸ The US administration reacted swiftly to this apparent shift in Turkish foreign policy and sent a delegation to Ankara to exert pressure on the Turkish government to cancel this contract, an attempt that Erbakan assertively let come to nothing. "The United States ceased to urge Central Asian republics to follow the model of Turkey. For here was secular, pro-Western Turkey, where the democratic process had catapulted an Islamist party as the senior partner in a coalition government".⁹ At the initiative of prime minister Erbakan, the group of the Developing Eight (D8) was founded on 15 June 1997, as a forum grouping together Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey, which constituted a Muslim alternative to the US-dominated system of international economic governance.¹⁰

With Erbakan shifting Turkish foreign policy by giving it an explicitly more Muslim direction (and thereby also not shying away from Iran as a closer partner), the generals, still a powerful backbone of the Turkish state structure, had a watchful eye on his policies while at the same time pursuing their very own regional policy of forging closer military ties with Israel.¹¹ The eventual resignation of Erbakan as prime minister on 18 June 1997 and the appointment of Mesut Yılmaz (leader of the Motherland party) by then-president Demirel ended Erbakan's foreign policy initiatives. In January 1998, his Welfare Party was even shut down by a decision of the Constitutional Court.¹²

Turkish-Iranian relations under the AKP government

Another Islamic party returned to government just five years later, when the Justice and Development party (AKP) under the chairmanship of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a sweeping majority of seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections. Abdullah Gül became prime minister, to be replaced by Erdoğan in 2003, with Gül becoming foreign minister. "The 2002 parliamentary poll caused a political earthquake," Dilip Hiro writes, "It consigned the traditional political class, corrupt and inept to the core, to the dustbin of history. It ended half a century of messy coalition governments and empowered an untainted, reformist party with Islamist roots".¹³

While Erdoğan pushed forward Turkey's objective of EU membership after Turkey had been granted 'candidate status' on the 1999 Helsinki summit and after formal accession negotiations had been started in 2004, Ankara's foreign policy focus had to balance Turkey's focus on regional engagement with its leaning towards Europe. In his effort to integrate Turkey into the EU, Erdoğan pursued a secularist reform agenda with the aim to harmonize Turkish laws with the EU's accession criteria (as laid out in the Copenhagen criteria), even though this partially meant the renunciation of the AKP's Islamist party agenda.

As the EU, however, started to show signs of what has been coined an 'enlargement fatigue' and as the impression hardened that the EU accession talks were dragging with political pretexts at the order of the day, Ankara's hitherto unabated striving for EU membership began to shift as well. Becoming increasingly wary of Brussels' seeming unwillingness for Turkey's accession in the near future, Turkey's foreign policy priorities began to partially shift away from Europe and started putting a greater emphasis on its neighbouring regions again. This included, i.a., Syria and Iran. Önis & Yılmaz remind us that Turkey's foreign policy shift as from the mid-term of the first AKP government may not be over-interpreted as a categorical turn away from Turkey's former European orientation toward a Eurasian focus in what they coin a policy of soft Euro-Asianism: "'Soft Euro-Asianism' in this context does not refer simply to a shift of foreign policy orientation in a direction focusing more on former Soviet space and the Middle East. Rather, it means that foreign policy activism is pursued with respect to all neighbouring regions but with no firm EU axis as was previously the case".¹⁴

With a creeping EU skepticism in Turkish elite discourse and Turkey's stronger regional engagement as epitomized by its desire for a 'zero problems with neighbors' policy,¹⁵ Turkish and Iranian foreign policy interests started to partially converge all the more in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, an aggression that both countries decisively opposed. Strikingly for the American administration, the Turkish Grand Assembly voted against a resolution on 1 March 2003 that would have given green light to the deployment of US troops on Turkish soil for their operations in Iraq.¹⁶

Relations to Iran under Erdoğan further normalized to such an extent that Iran's petroleum minister Kazem Vaziri-Hamaneh and Turkish energy minister Hilmi Güler signed a memorandum of understanding on the transport of Iranian and Turkmen gas to Europe through Turkey that also included the development of the Iranian South Pars gas field by Turkey.¹⁷ This happened shortly

before the Turkish parliamentary elections of 22 July 2007, in which Erdoğan's AKP was confirmed once again as the ruling party, an electoral success that Iran welcomed.

Clearly by now, Turkey and Iran had developed good-neighbourly relations, a tendency arguably fuelled by the AKP's electoral success. Over-interpreting the AKP's foreign policy shifts in line with a 'grand strategy' of Muslim re-awakening and detect an inevitable improvement of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, would be a misguided distortion. Ömer Taspınar warns of the common fallacy of equating a Turkish foreign policy divergence from the West in the AKP era with "the idea of an Islamic revival".¹⁸ Even though such a perception may hold some truth, Turkish Iran policy could not but be motivated by geopolitical pragmatism as well, as will be discussed further below. It is fair to say, however, that Turkish-Iranian relations had improved as from the AKP's electoral success in 2002. Tellingly, Erdoğan was one of the first foreign heads of government to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his much-disputed re-election in June 2009 and, in the same breath, accused the West of unfair treatment of Iran concerning its nuclear programme. It will be the subject of the next section to analyze Turkey's stance toward Iran on precisely this point as from the discovery of the Iranian nuclear programme in 2002. It will be seen to what extent the Iranian nuclear programme has affected Turkish foreign policy toward Iran both from a regional and from a global power perspective.

Turkey's foreign policy towards Iran following the revelation of the latter's nuclear programme in 2002

Turkey signed the NPT in 1969 and ratified it in 1980. Turkey also ratified the NPT's Additional Protocol in 2000 and is also a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Ankara was thus always a steadfast supporter of international nuclear non-proliferation efforts. But with the revelation of the Iranian nuclear programme in 2002, Turkey has been very cautious not to join the Western pressure on Iran. This was to be explained by Turkey seeking to establish good relations with its neighbours, including Syria, Iraq and Iran in the course of a general foreign policy shift more toward a stronger regional commitment ('zero problems with neighbors' policy) as outlined above. The insistence on the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, together with the affirmation of Iran's right to nuclear power for peaceful purposes was one of the main foreign policy lines implicit in Turkey's position on the Iranian nuclear programme.

NATO member Turkey's position of sitting on the fence between its neighbour Iran on the one hand and the Western negotiators on the other gave it a potential to play the role of a conflict mediator. This facilitator-role was illustrated by the fact that negotiations and talks between the EU3 and their Iranian counterparts, and between the extended format of P5+1 and Iran, took place in Turkey on several occasions. Talks between the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani and EU High Representative Javier Solana in April 2007 in Ankara and P5+1 negotiations at the political directors-level in Istanbul on several occasions, the latest having taken place in April 2012, were a case in point for the perception of Turkey as a neutral host and venue for negotiations.¹⁹ In fact, observers of the nuclear talks have pointed out that on the sidelines of the negotiations in Istanbul, Turkish diplomats have not merely confined themselves to acting as a host, but have actively mediated between the parties in an attempt to broker approximations of policy positions.²⁰

At the same time, Turkish officials have repeatedly stressed their discontent with unhelpful pressure on Iran for the latter's noncompliance with the IAEA and UNSC stipulations. In October 2009, Erdoğan underlined Iran's right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and criticized Western one-sided pressure on Teheran for suspected illicit nuclear activities and the fact that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons was dealt with as a political taboo at the same time. One month later, Turkey abstained from condemning Iran in the IAEA Board of Governors.²¹

Murat Mercan, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, summarizes Turkey's Iran policy as follows: "We advocate diplomatic and economic engagement of Iran rather than isolationist policies as a more effective way to address the challenges that we are facing in the region. We will continue to encourage all our counterparts to take a conciliatory approach in order to better tackle the problems in the Middle East. [...] Any interference from the outside world will have a boomerang effect and will be counter-productive. Therefore, the international community should refrain from any attempt to interfere in Iran to the detriment of the social and political fiber of Iran".²²

With the aim to propose a diplomatic initiative to ease tensions, Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu signed the Tehran declaration in May 2010, together with his Brazilian and Iranian counterparts, a declaration that specified the transport of 1200 kg of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) from Iran to Turkish soil, an idea that, in its details, was similar to an earlier proposal by the Vienna group in 2009, but conveyed a conception of non-Western power constellations in the search for a solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Iran hailed the establishment of a new world order, aligning itself with the South American regional leader Brazil and Turkey, an influential regional actor in the Near East.²³ Against the background of this declaration, Turkey voted against UN Security Council Resolution 1929 on June 9, 2010. The Turkish vote against this latest round of international sanctions was to be read as a frustrated reaction to the impatience of Western powers only a month after the Turkish-Brazilian diplomatic initiative, as was also formulated explicitly in Erdoğan's letter to the leaders of 26 countries before the adoption of the resolution in the Security Council.²⁴ As NATO-member Turkey had never voted against the American position since 1952, this constituted a watershed in American-Turkish relations at the same time and opened up renewed debates about Turkey's position in the Iranian nuclear dossier.²⁵ Turkey's motivation for the 2010 Tehran declaration arguably was a mixture of its insistence on a resolution of the nuclear conflict through dialogue and engagement, geostrategic maneuvering in line with a newly-discovered regional policy and a pragmatic attempt to engage Iran in order to reduce tensions. The latter reading is thus very much in line with the perception of Turkey's role in the Iranian nuclear dossier as being that of a 'facilitator'. A further motivation and one that is underlying Turkey's Iran policy in general was the need not to disturb regional trade relations through heightened tensions surrounding the Iran case.

Foreign minister Davutoğlu publicly stated that Turkey was against sanctions with a view to concerns over possible constraints on regional trade such a new sanctions regime might entail.²⁶ It has even been speculated that Turkey might offset the effect of sanctions on Iran by promoting, or at least upholding, trade relations with Iran. When Dubai started imposing restrictions on transit goods destined for Iran, the Turkish foreign economic relations board announced its willingness to step in and provide Turkish ports for those shipments.²⁷ The gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Turkey, passing through Iran, is another case in point for economic interdependence that necessitates political arrangements.²⁸ Raphaëli interestingly writes in this regard: "Turkey will watch Russia and China to determine how far it can go in ignoring U.S. unilateral sanctions".²⁹ It is this aversion to Western pressure out of an understanding of its regional dimension that will be addressed in the following section.

Turkey's Iran policy in the context of its wider regional policy

When Iran's clandestine nuclear programme was uncovered in 2002, Turkey was undergoing a process of foreign policy reorientation, with Erdoğan's AKP having come to power in the same year. Ankara and Washington started to have differing foreign policy outlooks and strategic priorities, while Ankara and Tehran started to align with each other more closely in the course of Turkey's new regional and non-Western engagement. Turkey's intricate and instable neighborhood naturally forces geopolitical imperatives on any Turkish foreign policy. Already out of geographic givens, Turkey is

in need of a foreign policy that takes into consideration the Greek-Turkish troubled relations, the presence of the Armenians to the North, of the Iranians and the Iraqis to the East, the issue of the unresolved Kurdish question, transnational confessional politics as well as the complex relations to Syria. Turkey must take into account its geographical location as a geostrategic hub and therefore aim to act as a stabilizing factor toward all sides.

Regional power dynamics in the Near and Middle East also have to be understood against the background of the triangle of power poles between Iran, Turkey and Israel.³⁰ While still by the start of the 2000s, political analysts traditionally have contrasted two opposing geopolitical axes shaping the course of events in the Middle East, the US, Israel, and Turkey on the one side; Russia, Iran and Armenia on the other,³¹ shifting relations and alignments in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century (second half of the first AKP legislature) have been reflected in a shifting Turkish foreign policy.

Turkey, traditionally entertaining good relations to Israel, became more critical of Israeli foreign policy and the Israeli settlement policy. Turkish officials started to publicly criticize Israel in harsh terms.³² Traditionally good relations to Israel did not prevent the AKP leadership from receiving Hamas leader-in-exile Khaled Meshal in February 2005,³³ a unilateral and inconsiderate decision that sent a foreign policy signal detrimental to Turkey's "'soft power' facilitator role".³⁴ And after the Gaza flotilla incident in June 2010, in which Israeli forces had killed nine Turkish citizens during a raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla, Turkish-Israeli relations had reached their lowest point in decades.³⁵ Turkish criticism of and alienation from the US and Israel went hand in hand with a warming of relations with US-defiant countries like Iran. In this, Turkey had to strike a balance between pursuing its assertive new foreign policy with its claim to being a regional leader and still being bound to formal alliance structures and Western security cultures through, i.a., its NATO membership, which was more and more being called into question now that the Cold War was over. In 2010, the Turkish Security Council approved of the removal of Iran and Syria from the list of countries posing a security threat to Turkey and instead explicitly named Israel as a destabilizing force that could potentially trigger a regional arms race.³⁶ Military officials and politicians openly raised the question whether Turkey should withdraw from NATO and should rather engage in other regional organizations.³⁷

Adding to the impression of NATO being a Cold War relict in search for a new mission, Turkish security and military circles had experienced a loss of confidence in NATO's security guarantees, when the alliance had failed to respond to Turkey's request to deploy the Rapid Reaction Force in Turkey against Iraq following the latter's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. And when in 2003 Turkey had asked the alliance to invoke Art. 4 of the NATO charter in order to discuss possible member states' measures in the context of the looming second Gulf War, NATO members once more let Turkey's request fizzle out unanswered.³⁸ It is the combination of episodes of frustration with NATO, coupled with a self-confident foreign policy, that Taspinar calls a version of 'Turkish Gaullism' in reference to the French decision to leave the NATO military structure under Charles de Gaulle.³⁹ With a view to the impact of Turkey's NATO policies on relations to Iran, one could observe an improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations with a deteriorating NATO-Turkey relation, and vice versa.

The 'Missile Defense' episode of 2011 introduced another such irritant into Turkish-Iranian relations. Presented as a missile defense shield with a missile-defense radar to be stationed in Kurecik, Turkey, the US introduced its new strategic missile defense plans as being directed against potential missile attacks coming from Iran. These plans triggered a phase of irritation between Turkey and Iran, as the Iranians were concerned that its neighbour Turkey agreed to the deployment of the radar on its soil.⁴⁰ Paradoxically, this move was preceded by the Turkish reluctance to specifically name Iran as a threat in the drafting of NATO's new strategic concept of 2010.

Next to such regional ramifications of global level security architecture considerations and alliance structures, Ankara's strategic foreign policy calculus toward Iran has always been informed by the need to address transnational politico-ethnic questions affecting both countries: That way, the 'Kurdish question' has always loomed large in Turkish-Iranian relations. Following the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, what Ankara feared was a general boost for Islamic groups, a 'spill-over' effect throughout the region and, as a consequence, a stronger power basis for the PKK. Turkey had no interest in seeing an Iranian meddling in Turkey's religious politics through Iranian support for Islamist groupings both inside Turkey and in neighbouring states such as Iraq. In fact, Iranian logistical support for the PKK in Northern Iraq and along the Turkish-Iranian border and in Iran was often brought forward as a Turkish allegation against Iran and proved to be a major annoyance to Ankara in bilateral relations. Especially after PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan's expulsion from Syria and ensuing arrest by Turkish authorities, Turkey started suspecting Iran more than Syria of providing sanctuary for PKK fighters. At the same time, Iran feared that Turkey could play the 'Azeri card' and stir up separatist sentiments in the Iranian Northern provinces with a strong Azeri population.⁴¹

However, throughout the 1990s, Turkey managed to pragmatically work together with Iran on these and other issues of common concern in what Robert Olson describes as a pragmatic need to "cooperate with a regional competitor against the geostrategic policies of its superpower ally".⁴² In spite of partially diverging geostrategic perceptions, Turkey and Iran needed to find a joint *modus operandi* already out of the geographical location of neighbours with all ensuing intricate economic complications involved as concerns energy and trade relations. "Ankara wanted the trans-state Kurdish question and its own Kurdish question neither to affect its geopolitical and geostrategic relationship with Iran nor to jeopardize its access to energy sources".⁴³ Turkey and Iran cooperate in a number of regional organizations (the Islamic Conference Organization, G-20, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the D-8). Also, Turkey and Iran are tied together through substantial trade relations. Turkey is importing around 20 percent of its gas and around 50 percent of its oil from Iran,⁴⁴ which remains an issue of permanent contention in Turkish-American relations with a view to unilateral US Iran sanctions.⁴⁵ "[...] our neighbor Iran", Murat Mercan puts it, "holds a prominent place among our Eurasian partners".⁴⁶ Thus, despite contentions over trans-regional religious politics and Islamist domestic policies as described above, Turkey and Iran realized the need for political pragmatism simply out of geopolitical interdependence. The next section will outline the ramifications of major regional political tectonic shifts, the 'Arab Spring' and the Syrian civil war, on Turkish-Iranian relations and Ankara's ability to defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis.

The impact of the Arab spring and the Syrian civil war on Turkish-Iranian relations

The turmoil in the Arab world starting from 2011 that has come to be coined the 'Arab spring' was seen by Turkey as a chance to "advance Turkey's unification with the Middle East"⁴⁷ and promote its role as a regional influential power house and an inevitable inter-regional hub. Turkey under prime minister Erdoğan and foreign minister Davutoğlu was propagating a "vision of a country which no longer depends on Europe, whose future lies in its neighbouring and broader vicinity and as whose natural epicentre it is universally acknowledged".⁴⁸ Although the regional implications of the societal and political transitions in Arab countries introduced a momentum of instability, Ankara viewed the Arab Spring as a "long overdue correction toward more accountable, and hence sustainable and effective governance", as Öner Taspınar writes.⁴⁹ In this transition, Turkey might have hoped that it was looked upon as a role model that attracts followers rather than the theocratic model of Iran.

All the same, with a foreign policy discourse increasingly more critical of the US and of Israel and implicitly more Islamic at the same time, Turkey arguably conveyed a political claim of regional influence that ties it closer to the Islamic republic of Iran both out of geographic proximity and culturalist interpretations of non-Western conceptions of international relations. Turkey's

reluctance to use international sanctions to pressure Iran over its lack of transparency and cooperation with the IAEA and the UNSC can therefore also be explained by a basic discontent with underlying international power constellations and the view that international institutions such as the Security Council “reflect asymmetries in the distribution of power in the international system”, as Santos formulates.⁵⁰ It is this conception that brings the Turkish position occasionally closer to China’s and Russia’s with regard to a joint hesitant approach to the use of sanctions on Iran and with regard to a shared conviction of the foreign policy principle of ‘non-interference’.

With the Syrian civil war erupting over the political survival of the Bashar Assad regime, however, Turkish-Iranian relations have undergone a significant turn for the worse. While Iran remains one of Assad’s latest steadfast allies in the region, Turkey has positioned itself increasingly more outspokenly against any future prospects of Assad holding power in Syria. After an initial Turkish support for Assad, Ankara has officially called the Assad regime an illegitimate one, with Erdoğan even calling on Assad to step down.⁵¹ With the violence showing signs of potentially transgressing borders and ‘spilling-over’ onto Turkish soil after violent incidents and rocket assaults on the Syrian-Turkish border, Turkey has called for NATO assurances in protecting its borders. In this vein, Article 4 of the NATO Charter has been invoked in early October 2012, leading to the deployment of Patriot missiles in February 2013.⁵² As emphasized by the NATO parties involved, this was meant to be an important sign of Alliance solidarity for Turkey and a clear signal to Assad that any spill-over of the conflict onto Turkish soil will trigger a NATO reaction. Turkish public diplomacy over the Syrian civil war has become very vocal and illustrative of the Turkish sensitivity to the geopolitical instability on its borders.⁵³ Iran, however, is openly supporting the Assad regime and does not want to see the fall of this important regional ally that constitutes a bridge between the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah in South Lebanon. While Russia is supporting Syria with weapons deliveries, Iran is financing and training Syrian army fighters.

With Turkish-Iranian relations deteriorating at a staggering pace over the Syrian civil war, Turkey does not hold the ‘facilitating’ and ‘mediating’ capabilities in the Iranian nuclear file anymore that it was said to possess hitherto. At the time of writing, the role of ‘mediator’ is showing signs of being handed over from Turkey to Russia, as confirmed by diplomatic circles and observers of the nuclear talks.⁵⁴ Naturally, Turkey’s power to defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis and its ability to mediate between the P5+1 parties and Iran is being lost in the wake of power shifts in the region that make Iran and Turkey oppose each other with fundamentally differing perceptions of regional order. Iran’s unwillingness to hold the latest nuclear negotiations in Istanbul is a case in point. While expert level talks still took place in Istanbul in March 2013, it remains to be seen how Turkey’s influence in the Iranian nuclear file plays out in the search for future political solutions. The frustration expressed by all negotiating parties about the lack of an approximation of positions following the latest talks in Almaty in April 2013⁵⁵ once more testifies how third country mediation might be critical in any dispute settlement. The regional implications of the Iranian nuclear issue will once again force Turkey to think in pragmatic geostrategic terms. Too much is at stake not only for bilateral Turkish-Iranian relations but for the regional security architecture at large.

Conclusion

A nuclear armed Iran is not in the interest of Turkey, as it would challenge Turkey’s own regional power position and possibly trigger Turkey’s own nuclearization in a potential wider arms race in the Middle East. Out of a realization of this geopolitical imperative, Turkey has underlined the importance of Iranian collaboration with the IAEA and the necessity of Iran complying with its obligations under the NPT and work toward a political solution of the Iranian nuclear conflict. Turkey today, however, is far from being an irrevocable Western ally due to its embeddedness in Western alliance and security cultures. Its foreign policy is multi-directional, if not first and foremost directed toward

promoting its role as a regional leader. Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Ankara emphasized its need to uphold good relations to its neighbors and its Eurasian partners and stressed its good bilateral relations with Teheran. This includes an unwillingness to go along with Western pressure on Iran, an insistence on the principle of non-interference and of the Turkish perception of Iran as a friend and a repeated reiteration of Iran's right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Turkish criticism of international sanctions was also to be explained by substantial Turkish-Iranian trade relations and primarily, Turkey's dependence on oil and gas imports from Iran. Likewise, Turkey's Iran policy has to be understood against the background of a plethora of intricate transnational policy issues touching bilateral relations such as the 'Kurdish question,' energy politics, the role of Islam in both societies or Turkey's NATO membership and ensuing implications for neighbourly relations, as the Missile Defense episode has shown.

It was this mixture of a Turkish commitment to Western alliance structures and security policies with a pragmatic understanding of the geopolitical imperative to uphold good-neighbourly relations to Iran that motivated Turkey's Iran policy. This position also was the reason for perceptions of Turkey being a 'facilitator' and conflict mediator. P5+1 nuclear talks with Iran in Istanbul were a case in point for an understanding of Turkey's role as both a neutral host and a facilitator for constructive dialogue. With the parliamentary victory of the AKP and the coming into office of prime minister Erdoğan, Washington and Ankara seemed to be moving further apart in their security political assessments. While Ankara and Tehran grew closer ties, fuelled by an implicitly more regionally oriented Turkish foreign policy shift as epitomized by foreign minister Davutoğlu's concepts of 'Strategic Depth' and 'zero problems with neighbours.' And even though the political eruptions that have come to be known as the 'Arab Spring' might have thrown up again the delicate question of regional attraction for the Turkish secular model versus the Iranian theocratic model of socio-political governance, the power transitions in the region have been viewed by Ankara as a long overdue corrective to a regional order that essentially had been crafted and sustained by the West. It is a basic common understanding between Iran and Turkey of the need for a more autonomous, US-independent Middle East order that lies at the basis of their pragmatic cooperation on a bilateral and a regional level. The May 2010 Turkish-Brazilian diplomatic initiative to defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis was an intriguing precedent of a non-Western attempt to ease tensions. Not only did this episode stand indicative of Turkey's insistence on the need to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis through political dialogue and diplomacy, it also might have heralded the emergence of future non-Western security cultures toward Iran.

As concerns Iranian and Turkish conceptions of order in the Syrian civil war, however, Ankara and Tehran have maneuvered themselves into two diametrically opposite positions. While Turkey has openly called on Assad to step down, Iran remains his last steadfast ally. As the Syrian civil war has already long evolved into a proxy issue for the future of the Middle East regional order, such disagreements naturally impact on Turkey's ability to play the constructive and neutral conflict mediator in the Iranian nuclear crisis that it was previously ascribed to. By no means should Ankara see this as an inevitable process, however. The Iranian nuclear stand-off arguably is one of the most pressing regional and international security challenges that require coordination and negotiation efforts through all diplomatic channels possible. The regional implications of deteriorating Turkish-Iranian relations cannot be overstated.

Notes

¹The five permanent UNSC members plus Germany.

- ² Cf. D. Hiro, *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran* (Overlook, 2009), <http://books.google.ch/books?id=ZBfv-BSbwJcC>, 96.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ⁴ Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-Image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, SWP Research Paper (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. German Institute for International and Security Affairs, September 2012), 6.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁶ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu [Strategic Depth: Turkish Foreign Policy]* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 11f.
- ⁸ Dilip Hiro, *Inside Central Asia: a Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran* (New York: Overlook Press, 2011), 104. Another motivation likely was the fathoming of a Turkish-Iranian approximation of their policies toward 'the Kurdish question'. Iranian support to the PKK, e.g., was of major concern to the Turkish government, see Peter Scholl-Latour, *Allahs Schatten über Atatürk: die Türkei in der Zerreißprobe : Zwischen Kurdistan und Kosovo* (Berlin: Siedler, 1999). Another motivation likely was the fathoming of a Turkish-Iranian approximation of their policies toward 'the Kurdish question'. Iranian support to the PKK, e.g., was of major concern to the Turkish government.
- ⁹ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, 103.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-Image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, 14; Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria," *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 2012): 130, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2012.706519.
- ¹¹ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, 108; Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-Image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, 7.
- ¹² Mustafa Kibaroglu and Boris Caglar, "Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 15 (2008): 62.
- ¹³ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, 116.
- ¹⁴ Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey During the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2009): 13, doi:10.1080/14683840802648562.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹⁶ Kibaroglu and Caglar, "Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey.", 62.
- ¹⁷ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, 389.
- ¹⁸ Taşpınar, "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria.", 127.
- ¹⁹ Öniş and Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism.", 19.
- ²⁰ Author's conversation with anonymous foreign ministry official, Berlin, 4 February 2013.
- ²¹ Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-Image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, 26.
- ²² Murat Mercan, "Turkish Foreign Policy and Iran," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 8 (2009): 18–19.
- ²³ Cf. Ayelet Savyon, *The Iran-Turkey-Brazil Nuclear Agreement: In the Iranian Perception, a New World Order Led by Iran*, Inquiry & Analysis Series Report (Middle East Media Research Institute, May 17, 2010).
- ²⁴ Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis a Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=1076116>, 382.
- ²⁵ Hiro, *Inside Central Asia*, 426.
- ²⁶ Nimrod Raphaeli, *Turkey Throws Iran a Safety Net*, Inquiry & Analysis Series Report (Middle East Media Research Institute, August 3, 2010).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Robert W. Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979-2004: Revolution, Ideology, War, Coups, and Geopolitics* (Costa Mesa, Calif: Mazda Publishers, 2004), 90.
- ²⁹ Nimrod Raphaeli, *Turkey Throws Iran a Safety Net*, 7.
- ³⁰ Cf. also Scholl-Latour, *Allahs Schatten über Atatürk*; Öniş and Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism.", 17.
- ³¹ Öniş and Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism", 289; Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979-2004*, 115.

³²Kibaroglu and Caglar, “Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey”, 63; “Israel a Burden on Its Allies, Turkish President Gül Says,” *Today’s Zaman*, November 23, 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-263676-israel-a-burden-on-its-allies-turkish-president-gul-says.html>.

³³Kibaroglu and Caglar, “Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey.”

³⁴Öniş and Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism.”, 19.

³⁵Ian Black, “High Stakes for Turkey and Israel in Gaza Flotilla Row,” *The Guardian*, July 9, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/09/turkey-israel-gaza-flotilla-row>.

³⁶Meris Lutz, “Turkey: Ankara Adds Israel to List of Strategic Security Threat,” *Free Republic*, November 1, 2010, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/2619192/posts>.

³⁷Kibaroglu and Caglar, “Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey.”, 68.

³⁸Ian O Lesser, et al., *Turkey, Iran, and Nuclear Risks. In Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College (SSI), 2005), 93.

³⁹Taşpınar, “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria.”, 133.

⁴⁰Aylin Gürzel, “Turkey’s Role in Defusing the Iranian Nuclear Issue,” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 2012): 141–152, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2012.706576, 148.

⁴¹Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations, 1979-2004*, 11, 21, 48.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁴U.S. Energy Information Administration. Analysis Briefs: Turkey. “Turkey.” Analysis Briefs February 1, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2013. <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Turkey/turkey.pdf>.

⁴⁵In fact, in March 2012, Turkey announced for the first time a planned reduction of oil imports from Iran by 20 percent and conclude contracts with Libya and Saudi-Arabia to make up for the resulting shortage. This was perceived as a remarkable development in Turkey’s approach to unilateral US sanctions- Ankara had previously always stated that it saw itself bound by UN sanctions only (cf. Habertürk 2012).

⁴⁶Mercan, “Turkish Foreign Policy and Iran.”, 17.

⁴⁷Oytun Orhan, “Arap Baharı Ve Türkiye [Turkey and the Arab Spring],” *Çerçeve*, 2011, 26.

⁴⁸Günter Seufert, *Foreign Policy and Self-Image: The Societal Basis of Strategy Shifts in Turkey*, 25.

⁴⁹Taşpınar, “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria.”, 136.

⁵⁰Diego Santos Vieira de Jesus, “Building Trust and Flexibility: A Brazilian View of the Fuel Swap with Iran,” *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (April 2011): 61–75, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2011.562112, 36f..

⁵¹Taşpınar, “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria.”, 137.

⁵²Piotr Zalewski, “Patriot Missiles Arrive in Turkey: How They Affect the Syria Equation,” *Time World*, February 1, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/02/01/patriot-missiles-arrive-in-turkey-how-they-affect-the-syria-equation/>.

⁵³Adding to the intricate geostrategic implications, Turkish animosity toward the Assad regime is fuelled by the confessional proximity of the Syrian Alawites with the Turkish minority sect of Alevis. Both these groups had suffered from discrimination under Ottoman rule (cf. Scholl-Latour 2001: 169).

⁵⁴Author’s conversation with anonymous diplomat, Moscow, 18 April 2013.

⁵⁵JustynaPawlak and YeganehTorbati, “Powers and Iran fail to end nuclear deadlock in Almaty.” Reuters. April 6, 2013. Accessed April 20, 2013. "<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/06/us-iran-nuclear-idUSBRE93317H20130406>.