

“Regional aspirations and limits of power-Turkish-Iranian relations in the New Middle East”,  
**Etudes Helleniques - Hellenic Studies**, La Turquie en mutation - Turkey is changing, CENTRE  
FOR HELLENIC STUDIES AND REASEARCH CANADA, UNIVERSITY OF CRETE  
and UNIVERSITY OF THE AEGEAN, Volume: 20/1  
Catalogue Code: M557248  
ISBN: 0824-8621  
First edition, Spring 2012

## **Regional Aspirations and Limits of Power-Turkish-Iranian Relations in the New Middle East**

S. Gülден Ayman (Associate Professor of International Relations, Marmara University, Faculty of Political Sciences)

### *ABSTRACT*

This article aims at highlighting the relationship between security problems and regional aspirations of Turkey and Iran with a special emphasis given to the accelerated competition between the two neighbors after the two developments: The US decision to withdraw from Iraq and the Arab Spring. The leading questions of the article are as follows: What are the fundamental factors that drive Iran and Turkey to lead the region? How both parties approach the current state of the Middle East? What type of power bases they have? What type of strategies adopted by both countries? What is the nature of their relations with the US? How regional and external actors affect Turkish-Iranian competition? Analyzing the Turkish-Iranian case the article shows that one of the most important factors that motivate states to seek hegemony is the perceived security needs that are thought to be fulfilled mainly through enhancement of power capabilities. It underlines the fact that what differentiates Turkish quest to lead the region from Iran’s aspirations is not the need of security but under what kind of conditions it is thought to be fulfilled.

### **Defining the Concept of Hegemony**

In Greek, hegemony (*hēgemonia*) refers to authority which itself comes from hegemon (*hēgemōn*) meaning leader, ruler. It is often used in the sense of domination of one power or state within a league, confederation, etc., or of one social class over others. In modern times there is no common definition of the term. The debate around hegemony revolves around two separate through related meanings: dominance and leadership.<sup>1</sup> In the first sense hegemony refers to the “dominance of one state over others.”<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Gilpin describes

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Haugaard and Howard H. Lentner eds., *Hegemony and Power, Consensus And Coercion in Contemporary Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006) pp.90, 107.-108.

<sup>2</sup> For similar definitions see, Stefan Brem and Kendall W. Stiles, *Cooperating without America : Theories and Case Studies of Non-Hegemonic Regimes* (London, New York : Routledge, 2009), pp.2-3 and Robert W. Cox, “Structural Issues of Global Governance: Implications for Europe”, in Stephen Hill (ed.) *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 259-289, p.264.

hegemonic system as one manifesting “an unequivocal hierarchy of power and an unchallenged dominant or hegemonic power”.<sup>3</sup>

## **Power Resources**

Broadly speaking hegemony entails a preponderance of material capabilities and the willingness to use them. It should also be noted that domination in the modern sense does not require territorial annexation. Economic and military superiority of a given state often viewed as a prerequisite for constructing hegemony.<sup>4</sup> Capability to dominate is measured both by the aggregate resources possessed by a hegemon across a wide range of capabilities, and also by the degree of concentration of these resources in terms of their international distribution. Most of the contemporary authors focus primarily on economic capabilities. For example according to Keohane, military capabilities cannot meaningfully be applied to resolving economic crises, and too much of a military budget undermines long-term economic growth. Therefore he argues that:

“Hegemonic powers must have control over raw materials, control over sources of capital, control over markets, and competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods.”<sup>5</sup>

Gilpin also argues that hegemonic states should have control over raw materials, sources of capital, markets and acquire competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods. He considers hegemony as leadership in an international environment in which the hegemon supplies public goods, such as a secure status quo, free trade, and a stable monetary backbone in exchange for revenue and deference. Gilpin points out that American hegemony has fostered free trade and freedom of capital movements, supplied the key reserve currency, and managed the international monetary system. He states that the system works because:

“While bringing benefits to themselves... the policies of the hegemonic powers were also beneficial to those other states that desired to and could take advantage of the international political and economic status quo”.<sup>6</sup>

## **Hegemony as a Relation**

Hegemony is also viewed as a relation entailing political and ideological leadership. Hegemony does not rest alone coercive power; it requires consent<sup>7</sup>, active willing and engagement of the subordinated units that would be obtained through gaining legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, hegemony involves the success of the dominant powers in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that it is accepted by the subordinate states as 'common sense'. As underlined by Gramsci:

“The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'” and “The 'normal' exercise of hegemony ... is characterized by the combination of

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War”, in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, R. Rotberg and T. Rabb, (eds.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 15-39, p.16.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, “The Legitimation of Hegemonic Power”, in David P. Rapkin (ed.) *World Leadership and Hegemony* (Boulder, Col., London: Lynne Rienner), pp. 49-69, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.32.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 144-145.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Rogers, *Gramsci's Political Thought An Introduction* (London:Lawrance and Wishart, 1982), p.21.

<sup>8</sup> John G. Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, “The Legitimation of Hegemonic Power” in David P. Rapkin (ed.): *World Leadership and Hegemony* (Boulder, Col. & London: Lynne Rienner) pp. 49-69, p.51.

force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent.”<sup>9</sup>

When measured in terms of its outcomes rather than capabilities hegemony as one type of order requires the powerful state to create rules and institutions in inter-state relations.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, a hegemonic power is defined as one that is ‘powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so.’<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that hegemony denotes a goal besides being an end. In this regard making a clear distinction between regional order and strategy of the aspiring state because not all states are willing to build an order could succeed to do so.

### **Regional Hegemony**

The definition of regional hegemony more or less shares the same traits as world hegemony. Regional hegemons are seen as states possess power sufficient to dominate subordinate states system. As in the world hegemony material power factors and ideational factors interact in the exercise of regional hegemony.<sup>12</sup> However, the power base of a regional hegemon is also a matter of the given states relations with the global actors. Interference of external actors can either empower or destroy regional hegemonic projects.

### **Fundamental Motives**

Hegemony is not only a matter of capabilities launching such a project requires willingness. The drives behind hegemonic aspirations often involve a complex mixture of domestic and international factors. The case of Iran shows us that one of the most important factors that motivate states to seek hegemony is the perceived security needs that are thought to be fulfilled mainly through enhancement of power capabilities. What differentiates Turkish quest to lead the region is not the need of security but under what kind of conditions it is thought to be fulfilled.

### **Identity and Foreign Policy Roles**

As Ilya Prizel argues, perceptions of identity are of importance as a psychological frame of national identity, of a nation-state’s place in the world, its friends and enemies, its interests and aspirations. William Wallace goes much more further to assert that, foreign policy is

---

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971) p.57.

<sup>10</sup> In contrast with this view Steve Brooks and Bill Wohlforth argue that effective leadership in international institutions, and the quest for legitimacy, are all grounded in material preponderance. See, Steve Brooks and Bill Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton 2008) ; “Reshaping the World Order”, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2009), pp.49-63.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, ( Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1989), p.234; Patrick Karl O’Brien, “The Pax Britannica and American Hegemony: Precedent, Antecedent or just another History?”, in *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, O’Brien & Armand Clesse (eds.) (Aldershot & Burlington Clesse 2002), pp.3-64, p.3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Sean Burges developed the concept of ‘consensual hegemony’ in which “the process of dialogue and interaction causes subordinate parties to appropriate and absorb the substance and requisites of the hegemony as their own. See, Sean Burges, “Consensual Hegemony: Theorizing the Practice of Brazilian Foreign Policy”, *International Relations*, Vol.22, No. 1, March, pp. 65-84, p.65.

about national identity itself, about the core elements of sovereignty it seeks to defend, the values it stands for and seeks to promote abroad.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to bridge perceptions of identity with foreign policy orientations by focusing on role conceptions that are defined as “the policy makers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, rules and actions suitable to their state and of the functions”.<sup>14</sup> Role conceptions suggest how norms and values become operationalized in terms of verbal statements about expected foreign policy behavior offering a ‘road-map’ that foreign policy makers rely on to simplify and facilitate understanding of complex reality.<sup>15</sup>

### **Security Needs and Regional Aspirations of Iran**

The definition of the foreign policy identity of a state and the roles associated to it do not occur in a vacuum. They are closely related with a certain interpretation of history, lessons driven from it and the power resources acquired. It is possible to approach to the construction of identities focusing on the chosen glories and chosen traumas.<sup>16</sup>

Regional ambitions of Iran are not something new. Historically, Iran was an empire until the 19th century. The direct and indirect interference of the Great Powers in Iranian affairs in the 19th and 20th centuries provoked Iranian quest to become a regional power. History gave Iranian people both a sense of national grandeur and victimization that are mutually reinforcing. Excessive admiration of self hides a vulnerable psychology marked with self-preoccupation while victimization leads to unconscious deficits in self-esteem that necessitates the satisfaction of security needs boosting power aspirations.

As Gahramanpour noted the treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkomanchay (1828) between Iran and Russia, and the Treaty of Herat (1857) between Iran and Great Britain, are all perceived as attempts to break up the territorial unity of Iran and weaken its geopolitical importance. In the public memory of Iran modern history begins with losing territory in wars against Russia in the 19th century. According to the prevalent perception, the greatness of Iran challenges external powers’ interests that lead to attempts to weaken the country and divide into pieces. Since this danger is always present, Iran has to empower itself in order to counter foreign dominance and realize its identity. It is largely believed that when Iran is secure from foreign interference it would naturally become a regional power and when it is powerful it can assure its security in a better way.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia and Ukraine*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.2; William Wallace, “Foreign Policy and National Identity in the United Kingdom”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 1 Jan., 1991, pp. 65-80, p.65.

<sup>14</sup> Karl J. Holsti, *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, in S. Walker (ed.), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy; Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> For the role of ‘chosen glories’ and ‘chosen traumas’ in identity construction see Vamik D. Volkan “Trans-generational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-group Identity”, *Group Analysis*, No.34, 2001, s: 79-97; Vamik D. Volkan, “Large- Group Identity: Border Psychology and Related Societal Processes”, Keynote address at the *German Psychoanalytic Association annual meeting*, May 10, 2002, in Leipzig, Germany.

<sup>17</sup> Rahman Ghahremanpour, “Iran Looking the West: Identity, Rationality and Iranian Foreign Policy” in *Iran and the West, Regional Interests and Global Controversies*, Rouzbeh Parsi and John Rydqvist (eds.) Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI) Special Report, March 2011, pp. 39-54.

In line with these thoughts Mohammad Reza Shah wanted to restore revive ancient Iran and make it the fifth greatest power in the world. One of his declared policies of Mohammad Reza Shah was to transform Iran into a regional power in the Persian Gulf that led to accelerated efforts to acquire modern and sophisticated weapons technologies. These efforts also included the development of a nuclear power program, which was initiated in the 1960s. Iranian aspirations became a reality to a large extent in the early 1970s in the context of the two-pillar policy of US President Nixon that supported Tehran's ambitions since the shah provided a bulwark against both communist and radical Arab nationalism. During the final years of the old regime, Iran was a rising power in the region thanks to its oil revenues, and, of course, western technological and political support.

However due his close relations with Washington, Shah was also accused of being a puppet of the United States that played a critical role in fomenting the 1979 revolution in Iran. As a result of 1952 coup d'état against Prime Minister Mussadiq, and Washington's overwhelming support for Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1960s and 1970s the role of the West was also regarded as a negative. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution anti-imperialism became a founding element of the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in the foreign policy arena this was manifested in the emphasis on the doctrine of exporting the revolution which was adopted in 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

During its war with Iraq, the Western Powers' indifference to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 and to the usage of chemical weapons against Iranian people deepened the trauma and the feeling of isolation. Iran's experience of an existential struggle for survival and strengthened the drive of the Islamic regime to embark upon a series of military projects initiated during the hostilities and find ways to secure its interests in the international arena to break its isolation.

### **Discourse and Practice**

Iranian foreign policy discourses are grounded on cultural values and confrontation with hegemonic tendencies of great powers. As underlined by Dehshiri and Majidi Islam forms the dominant ideological discourse of Iranian foreign policy:

“Iran rejected alignment with both the East and the West. Instead, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Article 11, exhorts the government to achieve unity with other Islamic countries to establish an Islamic world order founded on solidarity.”<sup>19</sup>

In international affairs Iran has not accepted the status quo and advocated a ‘value based’ approach in shaping its policies. In this regard Iran could be defined as a “mission oriented” state to set goals compatible with Islamic precepts to attain ethical objectives of social justice; confronting hegemony; making efforts to realize a ‘just order’ in international relations.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic Republic's stance against the current world order and its demands to realize a ‘just

---

<sup>18</sup> Mohammed Reza Dehshiri and Mohammed Reza Majidi, “Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A Holistic Approach”, *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XXI, No.1-2, Winter-Spring 2008-2009, pp.101-114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Manouchehr Mohammadi, “The Sources of Power in Islamic Republic of Iran”, *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XX, No. 2., Spring 2007, pp. 1-7.

one materialized in the regional context through its non-recognition of Israel, support given to Hamas to establish a state in Gaza Strip and to free Jerusalem.

However this does not mean that Iran rejects cooperating with non-Muslim states. In fact many Iranians share the image of their country as a crossroads for different civilizations believing that ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in Iran is the heritage of cultural interchange with other civilizations and an imperial state. In fact the former President of Iran, Mohammed Hatemi heavily invested in the dialogue among civilizations. He established the International Institute of Interreligious and Civilizational Dialogue in 2006 and visited the U.S. to promote his ideas on the improvement of interreligious and civilizational dialogue.

Tehran attempted to expand its horizon beyond its borders not only by advocating a liberation ideology based on Islam it focused on external efforts as well. As Edmund Herzig explains, Tehran tried to develop its ties with neighbors and with other nearby and Muslim states, and with possible alternative major power centers (USSR then Russia, China, Europe, India). One of the constant themes of Iranian statements on regionalism has been self-reliance among regional states and the exclusion of extra-regional powers (meaning the United States). In this vein, Iran insisted on the formation of a new regional structure for the Persian Gulf states to replace the GCC and use all possible international settings to exclude the US. However, Iranian efforts proved ineffective. While Gulf states were seeking compliance with the extra-regional hegemon as an effective way to maximize their security in relation to regional powers including Iran other neighboring states like Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia were keen on developing and strengthening their strategic ties with the US. Iran also sought to use regional and inter-national organizations that were not susceptible to western domination—for example, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)—for the same purpose.

Iran's relations that developed with the USSR from the mid-1980s became critically important for its arms acquisitions. After Rafsanjani's Moscow visit in 1989 long-term economic and trade agreements worth of US\$15 billion were also signed.<sup>21</sup> The dissolution of Soviet Empire that marked the end of the bipolar world order not only presented the Islamic Republic with special difficulties, that are shared with only a select few other states identified by Washington as 'rogues', dangerous proliferators, sponsors of terrorism and points on 'the axis of evil' but also offered some possibilities to Tehran to create spheres of influence. While Tehran's commitment to promote the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary vanguard state declined its aspiration to expand its influence beyond its borders, in Central Asia and Caucasus increased. That was also the goal of Turkey therefore led to a competition between the two neighbors at a time when several new regional initiatives were launched. Iran's regional projects-ECO, the proposed Caspian Sea Cooperation Organization and the Association of Persian- Language Speakers were partly responses to the Turkish-sponsored Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Turkic Summits. However this competition ceased by early 1993, after both parties realized the fact that neither could be a "model" for the new republics and they could better seek cooperation to share the common benefits rather than continue to compete. That hardly meant that Iran enjoyed cooperating fully with Turkey. Iranian policy towards Turkey also included the trilateral cooperation among Iran, Armenia and Greece that driven by a geopolitical rationale and the support given to PKK. No matter whether they compete for regional influence or not Iran evaluated Turkey as a potential threat to its regime because of its democracy and more

---

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia, *International Affairs, Regionalism and the Changing International Order in Central Eurasia*, Vol.80, No.3, , May 2004, pp.503-517.

importantly due its close ties with the US therefore employed non-conventional and asymmetric strategies to curb its power.

In spite of the fact that Iran's strategic predicament is not shared by any of its regional neighbors, its state-led trade promotion and infrastructure projects the functional approach well received by the regional states giving it the character of development integration. Iran which was in search for markets for non-oil exports, for partners in energy development, for help in integrating into the global economic system, easily found partners in the Persian Gulf with the GCC countries, for the construction of roads, railways, pipelines and power grids to link its infrastructure with that of the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia and, Afghanistan, for programs to remove trade barriers in all directions and for environmental protection in the Caspian Sea. Such areas of functional cooperation constitute the core of the activities of the Economic Cooperation Organization, the only multilateral regional organization of any significance of which Iran is a member.<sup>22</sup>

Especially during Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran has also pursued a coordinated diplomatic, economic, and military strategy to expand its influence in Latin America and Africa to create anti-American blocs in those regions and increasing global power projections. These efforts are focused on countries like Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia that represent an important anti-hegemonic pattern of politics in world affairs.<sup>23</sup>

### **Iraq's Occupation and Iran**

Iran opposed the American invasion and subsequent occupation. Despite the fact that it regards Saddam regime as a brutal one thus deserved to be overthrown it was fearful to see a pro-American regime established in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> From Tehran's point of view, Iran is a "status-quo country,"<sup>25</sup> which seeks to contain the threats posed against it. According to this perception the US's military forces in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Turkey, Central Asia, and Afghanistan already surround Iran on all sides.<sup>26</sup> The Iranian leadership worries that if the tensions with the U.S remain high, an Iraqi state, which becomes a strong ally of the US, would elevate the threat level against the Iranian Islamic regime.

Ironically, Iran's two biggest enemies — the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were toppled from power by the US. Moreover, the US failures both in Afghanistan and in Iraq showed Tehran the weakness of the US despite its superpower status. The window of opportunities that were presented as a consequence of the US' failures in Afghanistan and in Iraq expressed by Ahmadinejad with the following words:

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* More on the development of ECO see, Elaheh Koolae, Hormoz Davarpanah, *The Economic Cooperation (ECO) Achievements and Prospects*, (Tehran: University of Tehran, 2010),p.18-40.

<sup>23</sup> To understand Iran's charm to these countries, see, Susanne Gratius and Henner Fürtig, "Iran and Venezuela: Bilateral Alliance and Global Power Projections", *Fride, Comment*, April 2009, on line at [www.fride.org/download/COM\\_Iran\\_Venezuela2\\_ENG\\_abril09.pdf](http://www.fride.org/download/COM_Iran_Venezuela2_ENG_abril09.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Invasion Iraq", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XV, No.4, Winter 2008, pp.47-58.

<sup>25</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran's Transformation from Revolutionary to Status Quo Power in the Persian Gulf", on line at [www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/MohsenMilaniFinal.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/MohsenMilaniFinal.pdf) -

<sup>26</sup> See, Fariborz Mokhtari, "No One Will Scratch My Back: Iranian Security Perceptions in Historical Context", *Middle East Journal*, Vol.59, No. 2, (Spring 2005), pp. 209-229.

“The political power of the occupiers is collapsing rapidly. Soon, we will see a huge power vacuum in the region. Of course, we are prepared to fill the gap, with the help of neighbors and regional friends like Saudi Arabia, and with the help of the Iraqi nation.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Main Pillars of Iran’s Iraq Policy**

Tehran aspires to see a stable Iraq. However, what is more important is whether the government in Iraq would be an ally or an enemy of Iran. In order to resist to the US and assure its role in shaping the future of Iraq it pursued a multi-dimensional approach to create a sphere of influence.

Iran has supported its Iraqi allies in their ongoing de-Ba’athification efforts and the fragmented and unregulated nature of Iraqi politics has allowed Iran to provide campaign financing, media support and mediation to Iraqi political lists. While one important aspect of Iran's policy in Iraq is the support given to Iraqi Shiite factions, another important aspect of its policy encompasses Iran’s ties with Iraqi Kurds.

Iran has been materially assisting and influencing major Shiite Muslim factions in Iraq, most of which have ideological, political, and religious ties to Tehran. It is important to recall that the ISCI’s (The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) leaders, including Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer Al Hakim, had spent their years of exile in Iran and built strong ties to Iranian leaders. “Badr Brigades” which was recruited, trained, and armed by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps burrowed into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), particularly the National Police unit of the Iraqi police force during the same period and since 2007, the militia has become integrated into Iraq’s political process and security forces. Developing close relations with Sadr’s faction that won 30 total seats in the 2006-2010 parliaments and built an estimated 60,000-person “Mahdi Army” (Jaysh al-Mahdi) after Saddam’s fall, was also regarded as an asset by the Iranian leadership. Mahdi Army militiamen and Badr fighters in and outside the Iraqi Security Forces were alleged to commit sectarian killings of Sunnis, which accelerated after the February 2006 bombing of the Al Askari Mosque in Samarra.<sup>28</sup>

Iran’s influence in Iraq is not limited to its ties with the Shiites but includes its multi-faceted relations established with Iraqi Kurds. Many of Iraq’s current leaders were in exile in Iran or materially supported by Iran during Saddam’s rule, today accept Iran as an influential actor in Iraq. Parallel with the inception of the Islamic revolution in Tehran, close ties had been established between Iran and Iraqi Kurds, mainly due to their mutual Baathist enemy, Saddam Hussein. Iraqi Kurds, who were fighting persecution and a nationalist legacy of their own in Iraq, played a key role in the conflict between Iran and Iraq by siding with Iran. In 1992 the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) were created after the US imposed no-fly zone in Iraqi Kurdistan had allowed the Kurds to develop their own governing institutions. Iraqi Kurds enjoyed good relations with Iran that offered them its political and economic support during the period between 1991 and 2003. While the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) struggled for supremacy in Iraqi Kurdistan, the support taken from Iran and Turkey gained critical importance in their search for power and influence. In the post-Saddam era the existing relationships between Iran and the Kurdish leaders was fostered and strengthened. Iran was the first country to open a consulate in the region. In 2005, Iran extended Iraq a \$1 billion

---

<sup>27</sup>“Ahmedinejad offers to fill power vacuum in Iraq”, *USA Today*, online at [www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-08-28-iran-nuclear\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-08-28-iran-nuclear_N.htm) - 52k -

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Iran-Iraq Relations”, *Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports*, August 13, 2010.



credit line some of which is being used to build roads in the Kurdish north and a new airport near Najaf, a key entry point for the Iranian pilgrims.<sup>29</sup>

Iran seeks to expand its trade and establish economic dependencies in Iraq's economy. Iran's economic initiatives are strengthened by the diplomatic and military agreements between Iran and Iraq. Two countries have developed a free trade zone around Basra, which buys electricity from Iran. Maliki's visit to Iran in September 2006 resulted in signing agreements on cross border immigration, intelligence sharing, and commerce. In March 2008 Ahmadinejad visited Iraq, a first since the 1979 Islamic revolution. During this visit Iran announced that it will extend a \$1 billion in credits for Iranian exports to Iraq, and the two sides signed seven agreements for cooperation in the areas of insurance, customs treatment, industry, education, environmental protection, and transportation. They also agreed to renovate water and land border posts. Iraq's eastern provinces rely on Iranian provision of vital civilian fuel products, such as cooking gas, heating oil, and vehicle fuels, as well as Iranian support to the Iraqi electricity grid.<sup>30</sup>

In the security field we see that during Maliki's visit to Iran in August 8-9, 2007, while Iraq declared its intention to expel the 3,400 members of the Iranian opposition group People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, Iran pledged to curb aid to Shiite militias. Other defense agreements to cooperate on mine clearance and searches for missing Iran-Iraq war soldiers were signed in the course of Maliki's visit to Iran in June 2008.<sup>31</sup>

However, Iranian influence in Iraq is not without limits. The limits to Iran's influence were evident when Iran failed to derail the forging of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement that authorized the U.S. military presence beyond December 31, 2008. Yet Iranian leaders' criticisms seem to have contributed to the insistence of Iraqi leaders on substantial U.S. concessions to a final draft agreement. The U.S. agreement to an Iraqi demanded to set a timetable (end of 2011) for a full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq diminished Iranian opposition but Tehran continued to warn Maliki that the United States cannot be trusted to implement its pledges under the pact. However, it should also be mentioned that not all Iraqi citizens accept the growing Iranian weight in Iraq as a positive development for their country. Still, Iran is keen on influencing senior Iraqi political leaders. To this end it offers humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people to help pro-Iranian leaders justify their relationships with Tehran. In fact, the most pro-Iranian factions got poor results in the January 31, 2009 provincial elections and again in the March 7, 2010 national elections. But the winner, former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's bloc was unable to form a government. Hence, both Iran and the U.S backed the formation of a new government headed by Nouri Al-Maliki. However, while the U.S. had hoped the prime minister would form a government in partnership with Allawi, Iran brokered an alliance between Maliki and the movement led by the powerful Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr. These developments confirmed Iran's continued role as a major powerbroker in Iraqi affairs since all political blocs consulted with Iran to try to gain its support for their inclusion in or dominance of any new government.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security" in *Surging out of Iraq*, Steven J. Costel (ed.) (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008), p.172.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Dagher, "Ahmadinejad's Iraq visit bolsters Iran's influence", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 March 2008, [www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle.../2008/.../p01s04-wome.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle.../2008/.../p01s04-wome.html)

<sup>31</sup> Katzman, "Iran-Iraq Relations"...*op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Martin Chulov, "Iran Backs Maliki for Second Term as Iraqi PM", *The Guardian*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/18/iran-iraq-maliki-ahmadinejad-sadr>

## **Turkey's Self-Perception and the Middle East**

In Turkish identity construction while the War of Independence that resulted in formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 emerged as a chosen glory, the regression of Turkish society under the Ottoman Empire and the European intervention in domestic Ottoman affairs in support of different ethnic and religious minorities constituted a chosen trauma. According to the lesson derived from history in the 1920s it is necessary not to trust any state but rely its own strength. However the attitudes of the Republic vis-à-vis foreign powers were not only motivated by suspicion but with a great admiration of Western modernity as well. Thus, instead of preaching revenge, the enemies' ideals were pushed as a solution for Turkish people's progression. Considerable attention and energy were devoted to become a Westernized country that was equated to a civilized world. This understanding paved the way towards Turkey's membership to NATO and its aspiration to become a member of the EU while Turkey's relations with the Muslim Middle East especially with the Arabs were largely kept limited to security considerations. For a long time the Turkish foreign policy elite tended not to believe that Turkey was able to change or control the course of events in the Middle East. Non-involvement was a product of the fears to get drawn into the regions problems. This attitude was also related to the perceived historical sensitivities of Arab nations related to Turkey's Ottoman past. Turkish elite also regarded Turkey's involvement to the region a challenge to the countries that compete for regional leadership as well as Western allies' policies. Turkey's power status and its approach with regard to Western countries constituted the most important ingredients of its attitude towards the Middle East. Moreover it was advised not to create an impression to the outside world that Turkey supports the autocratic regimes that could be changed in the near future. It was also believed that 'Turkey has to maintain a balance between her relations with Israel and the Arab countries. Naturally these thoughts hardly included a 'leadership' role. Believing that Turkey has neither enough resources nor any support Turkish elite advocated that Turkey should concentrate on its domestic problems and consider exerting its power only if Turkey were faced with visible threats. In other words, the only area in which Turkey's immediate involvement might be expected was that of security.<sup>33</sup>

## **Turkish Response to Iraq's Occupation**

While Turkey's hopes to become a member of the European Union (EU) disappeared Turkey's perception of security risks were multiplied with the War in Iraq. As Iran has found itself encircled with American troops and bases with the American invasion of Iraq following Afghanistan, Turkey that refused to allow US troops to transit into Iraq from its soil, felt abandoned by the US in front of the growing relations between the US and Iraqi Kurdish groups. Sectarian violence in Iraq and growing Kurdish separatism that could spill over, urged Turkey to focus more on the Middle East in an effort to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state and contribute to peace and stability in Turkey's neighborhood. Faced with the overwhelming power of the US in its neighborhood Turkey expanded its economic and diplomatic and military ties with Iran and focus on the regional relations in order to avoid potential acts of United States that may undermine its interests. What distinguished Turkey's behavior from Iran which openly opposed to American policies was its employment of "soft balancing" instruments that are defined as actions that do not directly challenge US military preponderance, but do delay, complicate, and increase the costs of using American power. As

---

<sup>33</sup> S.Gulden Ayman, "Turkish Perceptions Regarding the Middle East and the War in Iraq" in *Turkish Foreign and Security Policy, Its Environs in Eurasia and the Middle East*, Antonio Marquina and Mustafa Aydin (eds.) (UNISCI, TEPAV, Madrid, Marcial Pons), pp.185-205.

argued by Pape the most important advantage of such efforts policy is to prevent undesired actions and policies of the US via a combination of economic, diplomatic, and institutional methods while living enough room to collaborate with it as long as it is beneficial.<sup>34</sup>

### **Accelerated Cooperation between Turkey and Iran**

It is in this atmosphere of mutual security concerns the two countries called for Muslim countries acting together to solve the Iraq crisis peacefully and came together under the Turkish initiative to hold regional meetings with the participation of foreign ministers of regional countries to find a solution to Iraq crisis before and after the war.

Following mutual official visits Turkey and Iran decided to carry out joint efforts against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) an offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization that also included sharing intelligence and coordinating military operations. Between Turkey and Iran the first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on security cooperation was signed on July 29, 2004.<sup>35</sup> This agreement was reinforced on April 17, 2008, by a new MOU which foresaw the broadening and deepening of security cooperation framework between the two countries. Furthermore during Ahmadinejad's visit in August 2008, the two countries' presidents signed five memorandums of understanding on security cooperation, combating organized crime, economic cooperation, and education.<sup>36</sup> Over the past years, Turkey and Iran have gradually increased their cooperation in economic and energy fields, deepening their relationship through growing trade and bilateral investment. Despite the economic sanctions wanted by the United States and the UN – intended to halt international investment in Iran's energy sector – Turkey considered the possibility of building a pipeline that would deliver Iranian gas across Turkey to Europe (Nabucco Project). In 2009, Iran and Turkey also signed a memorandum of understanding concerning cooperation on air, land, and sea transportation as part of an effort to raise the two countries' bilateral trade. Turkey aimed at increasing trade exchange with Iran from \$10,6 billion to \$30 billion.<sup>37</sup>

### **Different Priorities in Iraq**

However Ankara and Tehran differed with respect to their priorities in Iraq. While Turkey attached utmost importance to maintain the territorial unity of Iraq, and to have a strong and stable government in Baghdad that would restrain Kurdish dreams of independence, Tehran's major concern has been its relationship with the United States that is perceived as an existential threat.

From the Iranian standpoint, Turkey may not be perceived as a fully reliable partner because of its institutional ties with the US, whereas, US-Iran conflict limited Turkey's desire to extend the relations to all fields. The two countries' differences were visible during Iraq's parliamentary elections. While Tehran threw its weight behind a Shiite bloc led by Maliki

---

<sup>34</sup> Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States", *International Security*, Volume 30, No. 1, Summer 2005, pp. 7-45 and S. Gül den Ayman, "Bir Güvenlik Sorunsalı Olarak Türk-Amerikan İlişkilerinde Irak Çıkamaz" in *Irak Çıkamaz: Türkiye Açısından Temel Parametreler*, S. Gulden Ayman (ed.) (İstanbul: Bigart, 2008), pp.51-85.

<sup>35</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "Turkey and Iran Expected to Boost Security Cooperation", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 14, 2008, 5, 70, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=33547](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=33547).

<sup>36</sup> Nasuhi Güngör, "Ahmedinejad's Visit to Turkey", *SETA Policy Brief*, No. 23, September 2008, [www.setav.org/Ups/dosya/7428.pdf](http://www.setav.org/Ups/dosya/7428.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> "Iran Trade Woes Internal, says Turkish President Abdullah Gul", *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 14, 2011.

Turkey backed the secular Iraqiyya alliance of Allawi, which narrowly won the most votes due to its emphasis on the “Iraqi identity” rather than any religious or ethnic identity.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, Ankara’s remedy to Tehran’s rising influence in Iraq has not led to anything that could be thought within the context of traditional balance of power politics through defensive alliances. Turkey’s new Iraq policy which started to become visible beginning in 2006 avoids intimidating Iran. Ankara has not assumed an antagonistic stance against Iran. Moreover, Iran seems to have inspired Turkey to launch multi-dimensional efforts to develop cooperative relationships with different segments of Iraqi society. Following the Iranian example Turkey also started to establish dialogue with all the religious and ethnic groups in Iraq in addition to its efforts to integrate Turkmens and Sunni Arabs into the Iraqi political processes. It opened consulates in Mosul, Erbil, and most notably Basra; established a high-level strategic cooperation council jointly with the Iraqi government; and signed a military cooperation accord with Baghdad as well as deals on energy cooperation and water sharing. Trade between the two countries amounted to about \$6 billion in 2010, almost double what it was in 2008. Turkish companies became the top investors in hotels, real estate, industry and energy in the northern Kurdish region, and increasingly in the Shi’ite south where Iranian influence had been almost unchallenged.<sup>39</sup>

### **Redefinition of Turkey’s Identity**

While War in Iraq required Turkey to focus its attention on the Middle East more than ever Justice and Development Party’s coming to power in 2002 created a favorable environment for Turkey’s re-definition of its place in the world and the roles it aspires to assume.

Ankara displayed an assertive foreign policy and willingness to pursue an independent stance encouraged by increased self-confidence due to its growing economic power leading it to become the 15th largest economy in the world, and the 7th in Europe, which consequently elevated it to be a member of G-20 Group.<sup>40</sup>

Turkey that has long been indirectly mirroring Western values to its surrounding regions by constituting an ‘example’ was not only ready to reflect the Islamic civilizations’ values and Muslim concerns to West but also eager to be accepted as a role model.

As Erdogan claimed Turkey has believed to have one face to the West and one to the East’. The new understanding of the bridge role explained by the Turkish Minister for EU affairs and Chief negotiator Egemen Bagis with these words:

“Turkey is the most Western country in the orient and the most oriental country in the West... We were the bridge between the West and the Orient for centuries but we attached more importance to West. However in order to have a strong bridge which really provides the connection between civilizations through communication, transportation and dialogue, it should have strong piers on both sides. In no where in the world a bridge, the piers on one side which are weak can be called a sound one.”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Furkan Torlak, “Allawi’s Regional Tour and Turkey”, *World Bulletin*, May 29, 2010, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/index.php?aType=haber&ArticleID=59210>

<sup>39</sup> “Turkey to Deepen Trade ties with Iraq”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 6, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Bulent Aras, *Davutoqflu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy*, SETA Policy Brief, 32, May 2009.

<sup>41</sup> “Turkey is the most Western Country in the Orient and the most Oriental Country in the West”, *Anadolu Ajansi*, March 23, 2009, <http://egemenbagis.com/en/822>

Turkey was believed to have its own capacity of setting its own position. For Ankara it was not a matter of changing Turkey's pro-Western orientations. According to the Prime Minister, Turkey cannot designate its foreign policy in line with someone else's directives but on its own".<sup>42</sup>

Still it is important to note that not all elements of Turkish foreign policy discourse were in harmony with each other. In fact a hidden controversy exists between the advocated 'bridge role' and the negative connotations associated with the role of Western countries in the Middle East.

The negative image of the West was instrumentalized by the Turkish leaders whenever they feel that Western powers try to impede Ankara's influence in the Middle East. However these references were not made openly. For example while commonalities between Turks and Arabs were mentioned besides cultural affinities the stress was also put into the fact that they have fought wars against the same enemies.<sup>43</sup>

### **Convergences of Discourse between Turkey and Iran**

Similar to Iran Turkey's has also acquired a critical approach to international order. Turkish leaders have been asserting that United States could no longer shape global politics on its own, and should begin sharing power with other countries. For example, Turkish President Abdullah Gul asserted that

"I don't think you can control the entire world from one centre. There are big nations. There are huge populations. There is unbelievable economic development in some parts of the world. So what we have to do is, instead of unilateral actions, act all together, make common decisions and have consultations with the world. A new world order, if I can say it, should emerge."<sup>44</sup>

Like Iranian leaders Turkish leaders also put emphasis on moral and ethical concerns.<sup>45</sup> According to Ankara's view when Turkey assumes a role in the remaking of the global order, it is expected to distinguish itself from other powers by emphasizing moral and ethical concerns. In Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan words:

"We considered the pain of the people of Iraq, of the Afghan people and Pakistan as the pain of ourselves. When any organ of a body feels pain, the whole body feels pain. Likewise, when children in Gaza were massacred, we felt their pain as if our own children went through a massacre. Jerusalem's problem is our problem. Gaza's problem is our problem. We defend justice for all regardless of their language, religion or skin color".<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> "Turkey's PM in Syria defends "independent" foreign policy", *World Bulletin*, December 23, 2009, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/index.php?aType=haberArchive&ArticleID=51712>.

<sup>43</sup> Turkish Premier Delivers a Speech at Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum, *Turkishpress.com*, October 6, 2010, [www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=352749](http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=352749).

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "US Must Share Power in New World Order, says Turkey's Controversial President", *The Guardian*, August 16, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Address by H.E. Ahmet Davutoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, at the Opening of the *Conference of Ambassadors*, January 3, 2011, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayinhmet-davutoglu\\_nun-3\\_-buyukelciler-konferansi\\_nun-acilisinda-yaptigi-konusma\\_-03-ocak-2011.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayinhmet-davutoglu_nun-3_-buyukelciler-konferansi_nun-acilisinda-yaptigi-konusma_-03-ocak-2011.tr.mfa).

<sup>46</sup> "Erdogan: Stronger Turk-Arab ties needed for stability", *TrDefense*, January 11, 2011, <http://www.trdefence.com/2011/01/11/erdogan-stronger-turk-arab-ties-needed-for-stability/>.

Furthermore, the 'Alliance of Civilizations' Initiative that is co-chaired Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan like the 'Dialogue of Civilizations' proposed by Hatemi aimed at reversing the environment that created the rise of Islamophobia in the West after 9/11 and overcoming the anger against USA and its allies especially after the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu used underline the need to design a "just" and "inclusive" global order that is not perceived separated from the question on how to reform and restructure regional orders. In his view, Turkish state as the 'successor state of the Ottoman Empire that has responsibilities toward neighboring regions' should be 'among the countries that will lay the foundations of this order'.<sup>47</sup> In this vein, again similar to Iran, Turkey's efforts to be active in international organizations like the non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council as well as in many international and European institutions have been regarded as important assets.

In dealing with regional order and responding to several regional questions, four principles that often highlighted: First the need to secure Turkey's neighborhood. Accordingly Turkey is expected to re-engage all neighboring areas and look at neighboring regions through a common security perspective. Secondly, to contribute to the solution of regional problems employing all diplomatic means. Thirdly, to establish economic interdependencies in surrounding regions that is considered as the best instrument of peace. And fourthly, to create conditions for multi-cultural, multi-sectarian coexistence that is perceived as a prerequisite to establish peace.<sup>48</sup>

Expressed by a desire to reproduce the historical integration of the region Turkey set the goal of achieving maximum cooperation and minimum problems with its neighbors within the context of its 'zero problems policy'. The efforts launched by Turkey included growing number of high-level visits and cooperation pacts being signed on a variety of issues ranging from culture to security, In fact, lifting visa obligations facilitating the flow of people across borders and expanding communication constituted the most important parts of Turkish policy.

Like Iran Turkey also aspired promote soft power elements in its foreign policy<sup>49</sup> but contrary to Iran it found more favorable environment for its initiatives to mediate conflicts which also included attempts to de-escalate the nuclear crisis between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the West and the United States.<sup>50</sup> In spite of the fact that Iran's regime was not recognized by the US within the context of a Turkish initiative; Iraq's Neighbors Meetings American and Iranian envoys came together several times.<sup>51</sup> Ankara has not only maintained that Iran's nuclear program is of a peaceful nature, it also criticized the international community for its 'double standards' ignoring Israel's purported nuclear arsenal.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> "New FM Davutoglu to Build Order-Instituting Role for Turkey", *Today's Zaman*, May 4, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkish Vision of Regional and Global Order: Theoretical Background and Practical Implications", *Political Reflection*, Vol.1, No.2, 2010, pp. 36-51.

<sup>49</sup> "Turkish FM Envisions Turkey As 'Wise Country' ", *Anatolian Agency*, January 3, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> S. Gulden Ayman, "An Analysis of Turkish Mediation in the Middle East Turmoil", *Dış Politika/Foreign Policy*, Vol. XXXVII, No.3-4, pp.7-24.

<sup>51</sup> "Baghdad Conference Opens Window for Direct US-Iran Talks", *Associated Press*, March 11, 2007; "US, Iran Trade Accusations", *Associated Press*, March 11, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> 'Erdogan calls for just stance on Iran over nuclear program', *Today's Zaman*, January 14, 2010.

With the Tehran Declaration<sup>53</sup> Turkey together with Brazil actively involved in finding a solution to nuclear crisis too. According to the Declaration, Iran agreed to deposit 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium in Turkey in exchange for receiving 120 kg (264 pounds) of 20% enriched uranium to fuel the reactor used for medical purposes from the Vienna Group (United States, Russia, France, and the IAEA) within one year. The Declaration was rejected based on the belief that Iran possesses in excess of 2,000 kg of uranium thus would still have enough resources to produce a bomb after the deposit in Turkey.

Again similar to Iran the Palestinian issue became critically important for Turkish policy towards the Middle East. Erdogan gained much prestige at home and in the Middle East as a result of his personal stance against Israel's actions. Ankara's criticism of the atrocities against Gaza and cancellation of Israel's participation in an annual NATO military exercise in October 2009 praised by Iran and created a bridge between the two neighbors.

Yet though it is argued that the two countries' roles complete each other on the Palestinian issue it has become an issue of competition as well since both target the same public – the 'Arab and Islamic street' offering different political models to shape and spearhead change in the region especially after the start of Arab upheavals.

### **Turkey-Iran Relations in the post-US invasion era**

Turkish-Iranian relations have entered into a new era following the two developments: the US withdrawal from Iraq and the Arab uprisings. Both developments led to the emergence of new areas where the balance of power between the two countries is perceived to be reset.

In the post-US invasion era, Ankara has lobbied intensively to establish a representative government in the Iraqi capital that would have reflected all colors in Iraqi society. The al-Iraqiya bloc, a loose cross-sectarian alignment led by Iyad Allawi, was claimed to be set up at Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's residence in the Turkish capital. The effort eventually failed when Iran pushed hard for the pro-Iranian Shiite-only bloc led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki despite strong Turkish protests delivered at confidential meetings. According to Turkish government's arguments Iran that has aggressively worked for Maliki's State of Law coalition aimed to establish Iraq as a buffer zone against Western and Sunni Arab encroachment. However this did not automatically lead to an observable worsening of the two countries relations.

The environment that fostered multi-faceted cooperation attempts between Turkey and Iran started to replace by an accelerated competition over Iraq's future as soon as the Americans left the country on Dec. 18, 2010. According to Turkish perception, in an effort to consolidate his power by striking his Sunni rivals Maliki accused Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi of running death squads and started to dismantle the Al-Iraqiya bloc, using power, position, employment and money, eroding Turkish influence.

### **Arab Uprisings**

---

<sup>53</sup> For the text of Tehran Declaration (May 17, 2010) see, "The Iran-Brazil-Turkey Deal", *The Guardian*, [www.guardian.co.uk/.../iran-brazil-turkey-...](http://www.guardian.co.uk/.../iran-brazil-turkey-...)

Justice and Development Part (JDP) government has long been asserting the need to initiate reforms in Islamic countries about the governance of their societies.<sup>54</sup> However pursuing a policy that rejected democracy imposition, Ankara it never dealt with the regime problem in the region directly. Moreover in its attempts to restore the ‘historical integrity’ of the Middle East Turkish government has sought to maintain a very delicate balance between its vision of democracy and its interests, which dictate cooperation with the authoritarian regimes in the region. As a matter of fact, despite JDP’s stress on democracy and freedom, Erdogan was among the first to congratulate Ahmadinejad for his victory in the unfair presidential elections held in 2009.

### **Libya as the Turning Point**

Libyan case brought into the fore the differences of interest between Turkey and some European countries, especially with France. Erdogan waited Russia and China to stop the developments happening in Libya while openly opposing NATO intervention by making statements that though indirectly referred to the West’s image as colonial powers.

Turkey’s position was reflected by Erdogan who argued that a military intervention to Libya would be both useless and dangerous with the following words:

"I would like to underline one crucial thing: Turkey will never be a side that would point a weapon on the Libyan people. Our relations with Libya are not driven by hunger for oil or mere interests."<sup>55</sup>

Turkey’s determination to follow an independent stance as well as its capabilities has undergone a serious test by the rapid course of events. In spite of Ankara’s endeavors to strengthen its relation with the regional states through building institutional ties these efforts remained only in the field of Arab League and Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) that are not ready to play comprehensive roles to assure security and stability in the region. Soon after the French air attacks on Libyan ground forces Turkey changed its position in a way to assist to the implementation of the arms embargo.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover the Libyan case constituted a turning point in Turkey’s discourse and its strategic behavior concerning the Middle East paving the way to a sharp departure from the principle of non-interference to other countries domestic affairs advocating a regime change. Yet, Turkish assertiveness to guide the transformations in the Middle East leaves out Gulf monarchies due to strategic reasons and Iran because of Ankara’s cautious policies not to provoke its neighbor furthermore.

While Ankara assumed a determined stance not to loose any opportunity to lead the developments in other countries setting to carve itself a primary role in shaping the Middle East it tended to prioritize its relations with the US more then any other time. In this vein, it would be incomplete not to draw attention to the linkage between Turkey’s concerns in Iraq and the situation in Syria. In fact what encourages Ankara is the belief that Turkey could

---

<sup>54</sup> “Turkish FM Stresses Need for Reform in Islamic World”, *Turkish Weekly*, May 2, 2005, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/9331/turkish-fm-stresses-need-for-reform-in-islamic-world.html>

<sup>55</sup> “Turkish Premier Rejects NATO Helm for Libya”, *Anatolian Agency*, March 23, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> “Turkey Will Make Largest Contribution to NATO Mission”, *Anatolian Agency*, March 28, 2011, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey-will-make-largest-contribution-to-nato-mission-to-enforce-arms-embargo-off.html>.



negotiate its needs with the US in a more equitable basis because Turkey's actions would influence the direction of the developments in the region in a manner either to harm or to protect the US interests in the Middle East.

### **Turkish-Iranian Competition for Role-Modeling**

While Iran was quick to proclaim that the Arab Spring was part of the 'Islamic revival' and overlooked no opportunity to describe the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain as an extension of the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution, Ankara was eager to become a 'role model' successfully combining Islam and democracy while ushering in significant economic developments.

### **Opposing Positions**

The Arab uprisings in general accelerated the competition between Turkey and Iran, but what strained their relations the most has been the clashes in Syria that grow in intensity and scope.

Iran and Turkey have major stakes in Syria. For its part, Turkey is mainly concerned with the Syrian situation because it shares the longest border with Syria. Turkey's major concern about Syria is watching the country disintegrate. The risk that Turkey would like to avoid in Syria is a massive wave of refugees. Turkey would not like to see an increase in Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) activity along the border, the emergence of an independent Kurdish state, the reappearance of the Turkish-Syrian disputes over Hatay province or the sharing of water resources. For Iran the possible fall of the Assad regime would increase Iran's isolation and cut direct links between Tehran and its Hezbollah ally in Lebanon.

According to the worst scenario if the bloodshed cannot be stopped at once, Syria may also be dragged into a more comprehensive civil war, in which the country may be divided along sectarian lines and the clashes may spread to the entire region.

Ankara and Tehran failed to adopt an agreement and pursue a common approach to the crisis. Ankara made all its plans in accordance with the expectation that Assad's regime would be thrown in a short time. In order to avoid possible competition of power and interest between Turkey and Western powers like the one that happened in Libya Ankara acted pre-emptively. However this did not happen because of Russian and Chinese vetoes and Ankara faced with a situation in which Assad's hold on power could mean a near-total loss of its investment in Syria.

Ankara and Tehran have preferred to follow different prescriptions to deal with the situation in Syria. While Iran continues to aid to Syria, despite the ongoing oppression, Ankara hosted the establishment of an opposition group, the Syrian National Council (SNC), and provides logistical support to the rebel Syrian Free Army which has a camp on the Turkish side of the border. Moreover, although it was initially reluctant to take severe measures against Damascus, Ankara is also planning to impose a new set of sanctions while preparing to intervene militarily to establish a safe haven in northern Syria for refugees and Syrian military defectors. The risks of such a decision are so high. Some experts even argue that if Turkey conducts a military operation against Syria, it has to risk a collective war against Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon at the same time. This atmosphere explains, for instance, why Turkey wanted the NATO anti-ballistic missile radar to be deployed in Turkey and why the head of

Iran's Revolutionary Guard's air division threatened that Iran will target these installations if its nuclear program is attacked by the United States and/or Israel.

So far neither Tehran nor Ankara is publicly assaulting the other, but both governments have deep concerns and suspicions of each other. Iranian criticism of Turkey emanates from the religious establishment and the conservative press, while the Iranian leadership is currently refraining from joining in, but several objections posed to Ankara's behavior that are expressed in statements published in the state-sponsored media. Iran accuses Turkey of collaborating with Western efforts to overthrow the Syrian regime<sup>57</sup> blames Turkey for exploiting regional developments to further its own interests by promoting "liberal Islam" and for their attempts aimed at reviving the Ottoman Empire.<sup>58</sup>

Ankara that seems disappointed by Tehran's preference of Bagdad for the next round of nuclear talks<sup>59</sup> is still careful not to incite Tehran with harsh statements but poses criticism to Maliki who is believed to collaborate with Tehran in pursuing a sectarian approach in domestic affairs and continued to support the Syrian regime.

In a very clear reference to an arrest order for al-Hashemi Erdogan expressed Ankara's reactions in speech delivered on Jan. 24, 2012, to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) parliamentary group with these words:

"Mr. Maliki should know this: If you engage in a violent process amid a sectarian conflict in Iraq, it will not be possible for us to keep silent about that."<sup>60</sup>

While Erdogan accuses Maliki of stoking tensions between Iraq's Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds with "self- central ways", Maliki complains about Ankara's interference in Iraqi internal affairs" arguing that if "Turkey insists on continuing such policies will harm Turkey interests and a will make it a hostile state for all."<sup>61</sup>

Interestingly according to some analysis, Turkey has set things in motion to build up a contingency plan in the face of the increasing likelihood that the country may be divided along sectarian lines. This includes creating a united front, consisting of Sunni Arabs and Kurds, against the Shiite majority that is in deep contrast with the Turkish foreign policy that aimed at preserving the territorial integrity of neighboring Iraq and maintain its social fabric, be it ethnic or religious.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the fact that a majority Shiite government backed by Kurds favored by Maliki the question of Kurdish support remains highly debatable because of the increased frictions

---

<sup>57</sup> Bulent Kenes, "Turkey Between two Heinous Propaganda Campaigns", *Todays Zaman*, April 19, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Muhammad Saqafi, "Liberal Interpretation of Islam and Dual Foreign Policy of Erdogan's Government to Preserve National Interests", *Islamic Revolution Document Center*, <http://www.irdc.ir/en/content/15475/print.aspx>

<sup>59</sup> "Iraq Says Next Iran Nuclear Talks to be in Bagdat", *Todays Zaman*, April 11, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> "Turkish PM Lashes out at Iraqi Counterpart, Denies Meddling", *Arab News.com*, April 23, 2012, <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article615589.ece>

<sup>61</sup> "Iraq: Turkey is Becoming Hostile State", *Todays Zaman*, April, 20, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Abdullah Bozkurt, "Turkey Prepares for Partition of Iraq", *Todays Zaman*, March 26, 2012.

between Iraq's central government and the KRG over the sharing of oil revenues and future status of Kirkuk.

On the other hand, the Turkish chances to broker an alliance between Sunni-Arabs and Kurds require at the minimum the PKK problem and the dispute over oil-rich Kirkuk province, whose population is a volatile mix of Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen to be solved. Ankara perceives itself more powerful the ever as long as KRG seemed to be threatened by the Maliki government. Convergences of interest between Ankara and KRG are much clearer in the economic field than in the political area. Barzani needs an outlet to the outside world for trade especially Kurdistan's oil exports whereas Turkey can make huge profits out of it. The business links between the two sides today accounts for more than half of Turkey's US\$12 billion trade with Iraq. What Ankara expects from Barzani is his assistance in Ankara's efforts to crack down the Kurdish insurgency in eastern Turkey, led by the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which operates out of sanctuaries in northern Iraq.<sup>63</sup>

Two questions come to the fore: Is this the sincere political aim of Barzani? Even if that is so could he assure that Kurds would have no aspirations for an independent state after the dissolution of Iraq? Turkish Peace and Democracy Party co-leader Selahattin Demirtas's following words show that the developments -at least by Turkey's own Kurds are not read in line with this approach.

“If Iraq is separated into three, it means the borders will be redrawn. A Kurdistan in Syria may be official. For the moment, there is already a Kurdistan state within Iran. As a result, from Hatay to Iğdır, Turkey's entire south border will officially be with Kurdistan. Then, Turkey should put its thinking cap on and say, ‘I must urgently make peace with my own Kurds.’”<sup>64</sup>

### **Fundamental Divergences**

In spite all the similarities in their foreign policy discourse and the roles they intend to assume there are fundamental differences between Turkey and Iran as long as the US-Iran rivalry continues. No matter how much criticism posed to the global system and demands made for a just order by the Turkish leaders Turkey unlike Iran has no intention of breaking with the system, in fact on the contrary promotes market economy praises virtues of neo-liberalism, privatization and integration with Western capitalism. Turkey is an important ally of the US having institutional ties with the West. Though the need for regional states to determine the fate of the Middle East is an argument which is often stressed by Ankara in practice Turkey's efforts to facilitate solutions never excluded the participation of the US.

As opposed to Turkey Iran backs countries and organizations that resist the US and Israel and acquired prestige in the region as a result of Hezbollah-Lebanon victory preventing US's strategic plans. Besides it is interesting to note that despite tensions between Turkey and Israel since a deadly attack on a Gaza-bound aid ship in 2010, the trade volume continued to rise on the sale of military and other goods. Turkey is currently Israel's biggest trade partner in the region and its second-biggest in the world, following the United States.<sup>65</sup> According to some

---

<sup>63</sup> M K Bhadrakumar, “US, Turkey and Iraqi Kurds join hands”, *Asia Times*, April 24, 2012, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/ND24Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/ND24Ak01.html)

<sup>64</sup> Nese Duzel, “Selahattin Demirtas: Türkiye'nin Sınırı Kurdistan Olacak”, *Taraf*, April 10, 2012

<sup>65</sup> “Business as Usual between Turkey and Israel”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 30, 2011.

experts given the new environment in the Middle East, Israel appears to be thinking of restoring ties with Turkey.<sup>66</sup>

### **Impacts of Turkish-Iranian Tensions**

The tensions in Turkish-Iranian relations have a negative impact on the two countries cooperation against counterinsurgency cooperation. In August 2011 Iranian security forces reportedly captured a senior wanted PKK leader, Murat Karayilan but soon after deliberately let Karayilan go possibly to use against Ankara. Iran's subsequent rejection in September of Turkish calls to conduct joint operations against the PKK in the Qandil Mountains deepened those suspicions.<sup>67</sup>

The strained relations negatively affect the growing trade and economic relations between the Turkey and Iran too. Confirming the realist paradigm that 'a nation would not risk having food, arms or other resources cut off by a rival', Turkey started to seek ways to decrease its dependency to Iran especially in the area of oil and gas. Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Taner Yildiz declared that there are plans to purchase oil from Libya in an attempt to reduce its dependence on Iranian oil by 20 percent. Turkey imports around 200,000 barrels per day of oil from Iran, representing 30 percent of its total imports and more than 7 percent of Iran's oil exports. Tupras is Turkey's main oil importer that has an annual purchase contract of 9 million tons. It is argued that the expected outcome would help Turkey to bypass sanctions imposed by US and would also contribute to the normalization of Libya increasing the trade volume with this country bilaterally. However Turkey's talks with Saudi Arabia on spot oil purchases and longer term contacts and its plan to increase the number of countries oil bought from and the routes used challenged these arguments. Turkey's maneuver in oil purchase raises question marks over the country's natural gas deal with Iran too. Some Turkish energy experts are uncomfortable about the prospects of this decision. According to their arguments whether or not Iran would seek revenge on Turkey because of the oil issue Turkey's decision to reduce purchase of oil from Iran might have an impact on natural gas and electricity as well.<sup>68</sup> The trade volume between Turkey and Iran was \$16 billion in 2011, most of which was from Iranian natural gas and oil proceeds. According to Turkish Energy Ministry Turkey paid Iran \$423 for every 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas, the most expensive price Turkey pays to any country. Turkish attempts to bargain for cheaper natural gas prices so far proved unsuccessful.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "How the Arab Spring Warmed US-Turkish Relations", *The Washington Institute*, January 31, 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/opedsPDFs/4f280b51ad0cb.pdf>. For a contrary view that argue that "the Turkey-Israel alliance is finished, at least for the lifetime of the Turkish government under the AKP" see Barry Rubin, "Turkish-Israeli Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Spring", *Gloria Center*, <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/04/turkish-israeli-relations-in-the-shadow-of-the-arab-spring/>

<sup>67</sup> Emrullah Uslu, "How Kurdish PKK Militants Are Exploiting the Crisis in Syria to Achieve Regional Autonomy", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.10, No. 7, April 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39235&cHash=3ccc90aba609f654ddd5102286620319](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39235&cHash=3ccc90aba609f654ddd5102286620319)

<sup>68</sup> "Turkey to Reduce Reliance on Iran oil by 20 pct through Libya Imports", *Today's Zaman*, March 30, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Gamze Gul, "Turkey Faces Struggle to Negotiate Iran Gas Price Reduction", *Today's Zaman*, March 27, 2012.

Another issue that raises Turkey's concerns is Iranian authorities' maltreatment of Turkish truckers carrying goods to be sold in various Caucasian, Central Asian and Middle Eastern markets. Turkish companies complain about Iran which is a common transit country for Turkish transporters whose final destinations are Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries due to the unfair treatment and excessive bureaucratic procedures applied to Turkish truckers at border gates that undermine Turkey's competitiveness in the entire region.<sup>70</sup>

There are also some signs for Turkey's possible change of approach on the nuclear issue. So far, neither Prime Minister Erdogan nor President Gul have publicly addressed the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran for Turkey's own regional power ambitions or the regional balance of power. Nor have they spoken about the potential threat it might pose to Turkey. However following the deterioration of Turkish-Iranian relations Ankara's security concerns about a nuclear-armed Iran and about the impact that it would have on the regional balance of power became more loudly spoken. According to Haluk Özdalga who is a JDP Ankara deputy:

“If Iran does go nuclear, the US will most likely offer its nuclear protection umbrella to a number of countries in the region, including Turkey. For Ankara to accept such an offer would be reasonable only if it doesn't relinquish its own nuclear option. Otherwise Turkey could be, as circumstances develop, a strategic hostage to the US in the Middle East. Turkey has a legitimate right to consider all future possibilities... European Union membership would certainly reduce Turkey's risks, and largely eliminate the nuclear option. The opposite scenario in which Turkey's EU membership prospects die and Iran builds up a nuclear arsenal, would pose a troublesome situation. In that case, to avoid getting stuck in a bottleneck of heightened risks, Turkey would need to seriously consider developing its own nuclear capability”.<sup>71</sup>

This thought seemed to be shared by an important portion of Turkish society as well. According to a recent survey carried out by the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), more than half of Turks support the option of Turkey's obtaining nuclear arms in case of a possible threat from a nuclear-missile armed Iran, while 35 percent believe that Turkey should not develop nuclear weapons.<sup>72</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

So far neither Turkey nor Iran seems to be able to acquire a preponderance of power in the Middle East that succeeded in building institutions to regulate regional affairs. It does not seem that anything like that could also happen in the near future because of major powers opposed interests, the mutual balancing acts of Turkey and Iran and the complicated but not harmonious interests of regional states that motivate them to align with external powers as well as with Turkey and Iran. But their stakes are in great danger and both states' actions have the power to change the course of developments whereas the risks of becoming enemies would risk their existential interests.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ali Aslan Kılıç, “Iran Obstructs Turkish Trucks' Passage at Border Gates-Interview with Ruhi Engin Özmen, President of the Istanbul-based International Road Transport Union (UND)”, *Today's Zaman*, March 25, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Haluk Ozdalga, *Today's Zaman*, January 29, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> “Nükleer Silahlanmaya Şartlı Destek”, *EDAM*, 2012, <http://edam.org.tr/document/Edam2012Anket1.pdf>