

Iran's High Strategic Value for Turkey

by [Firas Elias \(/experts/firas-elias\)](#)

Jul 16, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ayran-tshkl-qymt-astratyjyt-lya-ltrkya\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Firas Elias \(/experts/firas-elias\)](#)

Firas Elias is an expert in national security and Iranian studies.



Brief Analysis

In a time where the balance of the Middle East is in flux, regional leaders and the international community alike should be closely following the relationship between Turkey and Iran. While the relationship between Teheran and Ankara has historically been troubled, mutual interests have sprouted newfound cooperation between the two nations.

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution (<https://www.csmonitor.com/1982/0428/042848.html>), Turkey maintained diplomatic ties with Iran, although the relationship at times fell into a familiar series of ups and downs—reflective of the countries' long and complex histories. Recently, though, the trend has been veering more towards cooperation. This has been exhibited by Turkey's major efforts since 2006 to resolve tensions over Tehran's nuclear program, as well its **backing of the Iranian government (<http://ejpress.org/erdogans-first-visit-europe-since-failed-coup-accuses-us-israel-meddling-iran/>)** during the protests that shook Iran in December 2017.

Turkey also stood alongside Iran against tightening international sanctions, and recently took a decisive position against efforts to cut off Iranian energy exports. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu expressed outrage at U.S. sanctions on Iran, commenting that U.S. instructions "that we buy oil from any state other than Iran oversteps the mark." Çavuşoğlu's comment was received poorly by the United States, whose relations with Turkey have become increasingly tense after the **purchase (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48620087>)** of a Russian S-400 missile defense system.

Turkey's recent defense of Iran can be attributed to the fact that the state continues to see Iran as a useful vehicle for its regional objectives. Although Iran's positions on Iraq and Syria often conflict with Turkey's, Turkish decision-makers are convinced that cordial ties with Iran have other benefits and should not be abandoned. Ultimately, Iran's sectarian policies smashed open the region's doors to the influence of Turkey. Thus, Iranian policies have indirectly helped preserve Turkey's national interests and have allowed it to expand its political and economic power in the region.

When the AKP party came to power in 2002, it based much of its **political ideology (<http://internationalrelations.org/akp-party-turkey/>)** on Turkey's history, emphasizing centuries of rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid empires in the process. A new reality of increased relations between Turkey and Iran is based on aligned needs and should not be viewed as a complete departure from the countries' historically

hostile relations. With AKP's continual reference of Iran as the 'Safavids' and Iran continually showing Turkey as an antagonistic power, one cannot expect complete rapprochement between ancient enemies.

Yet the AKP currently appears to be making efforts to downplay their traditional focus on the past due to strategic necessity. Turkey now seems to view Iran as the last bastion against a rising Gulf presence and intermittent U.S. interventions, and the country seems to stand firm in its belief that Iran's presence must be supported in areas where the Republic has a foothold, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

Paradoxically, Iran's attempts to create a 'Shi'ite crescent' have also served Turkey well. While the two states have presented respective '[Shiite-revolutionary \(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution\)](https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution)' and '[Sufi-Islamic \(https://medium.com/re-visioning-religion/media-and-mysticism-erdo%C4%9Fan-and-g%C3%BClen-b7570f672362\)](https://medium.com/re-visioning-religion/media-and-mysticism-erdo%C4%9Fan-and-g%C3%BClen-b7570f672362)' political projects, Iran's sectarian behavior has alienated itself from the rest of the region and subsequently increased its domestic instability. These instabilities have allowed Turkey to increase influence in the region and to present itself as a political alternative, backing Islamic and Arab causes.

Iran's regional presence has also played a major role in preserving Turkey's national security. The Islamic Republic has helped to limit [Kurdish ambitions in Iraq \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-militia-leader-we-will-block-israeli-project-iraqi-kurdistan\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-militia-leader-we-will-block-israeli-project-iraqi-kurdistan) and Syria, pit Gulf powers against Qatar during a diplomatic crisis, and has extended financial support to Doha, a close ally of Ankara. Tehran has also assisted at times in aligning Russia's Middle East strategy with Turkey's, though this relationship continues to be fraught in some respects. Moreover, the recent rise in tensions between Iran and the United States may ironically push Ankara—a U.S. NATO ally—closer to Iran.

Another mutual interest lies within [Israeli espionage activities in Azerbaijan \(https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Azerbaijan-Israels-Secret-Muslim-Friend-431810\)](https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Azerbaijan-Israels-Secret-Muslim-Friend-431810), where a shared fear has allowed Turkey and Iran to join forces and utilize their ideological and national influence in Azerbaijan, with Azerbaijan's growing relationship with Israel founded upon their shared view of Iran as an existential threat. Azerbaijani territory has been a major launch pad for recent Israeli espionage attacks against Iranian targets. In response, Turkey has consistently attempted to [strengthen its economic and political ties with Baku \(http://eurasianet.org/turkey-and-azerbaijan-cement-relations-with-new-oil-refinery\)](http://eurasianet.org/turkey-and-azerbaijan-cement-relations-with-new-oil-refinery), while [Iran also attempts to counter Israeli intelligence there \(https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Azerbaijan-Israels-Secret-Muslim-Friend-431810\)](https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Azerbaijan-Israels-Secret-Muslim-Friend-431810). Turkey's historic military and security alliance with Azerbaijan have put it in a unique position with regards to sharing counter intelligence information with Iran.

Turkey has demonstrated that the survival of the Iranian regime is in their interest, and is acutely aware of the fact that if international pressures succeeded and a regime change were to occur in Iran, the new regime would likely be Western-aligned, strongly nationalist, and secular. The loss of an Islamist political regime, which has both intentionally and inadvertently bolstered Ankara's role in the region, would cause irreparable damage to Turkey's regional aspirations. Therefore, the preservation of the Islamic Republic is likely to remain a major strategic priority for Turkey.

Turkey's current approach illustrates how it will utilize Iran's circumstances in order to further its own objectives and will continue to foster these ties to its perceived advantage in response to domestic and regional challenges. ❖



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



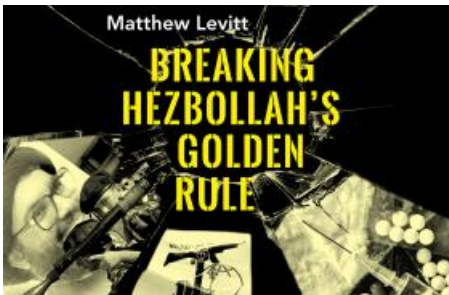
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)