

How Turkey Views the Iran-Israel Confrontation

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Brief Analysis

Despite long opposing Tehran’s nuclear ambitions, Ankara has a strong national security interest in avoiding moves that result in either direct Turkish hostilities with Iran or the collapse of the Islamic Republic.

On June 22, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry issued a rather [muted response](https://x.com/MFATurkiye/status/1936748160413524006) (<https://x.com/MFATurkiye/status/1936748160413524006>) to the U.S. bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities. In contrast to its [often-harsh statements](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-pressing-us-rethink-kurdish-alliance-syria-2024-11-11/#:~:text=,as%20telling%20the%20Milliyet%20newspaper) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-pressing-us-rethink-kurdish-alliance-syria-2024-11-11/#:~:text=,as%20telling%20the%20Milliyet%20newspaper>) condemning U.S. policy in the Middle East over the past decade, Ankara simply expressed “deep concern” over the strikes while constructively noting that it “stands ready to fulfill its responsibilities and contribute positively.”

This shift in tone is at least partly attributable to the strong chemistry between President Trump and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But how much does it reflect Ankara’s real views—not just of the twelve-day war between Iran and Israel, but also of Turkey’s long-term interests regarding both countries? And how should Washington manage differences between U.S. and Turkish policy on these matters?

How Turkey Views Iran and Israel

The key to assessing Ankara’s approach here is to remember that it is nonbinary—although Turkey has undergone periods of open hostility or rivalry with Iran over the centuries, it has also experienced deep tensions with Israel for more than a decade now. As such, it does not currently favor either country. In the context of the latest war, this means that Ankara is fine with Iran’s nuclear wings being clipped but simultaneously alarmed to witness Israel’s overwhelming military superiority—and worried about the potential consequences if the Islamic Republic begins to collapse under the pressure.

Turkey vs. Iran. When the Ottoman and Persian Empires became neighbors in the fifteenth century, they soon began pushing against each other for control of what is now eastern Turkey and western Iran. After a series of long,

inconclusive wars eventually bankrupted their treasuries—the pre-modern version of mutually assured destruction—they settled on power parity in the mid-seventeenth century and agreed to avoid future wars at any cost. Indeed, they have eschewed major conflict for three centuries now. With the exception of smaller wars across Ottoman-controlled Iraq in the nineteenth century and minor land swaps, the Iran-Turkey border has been among the most stable in the Middle East, hewing quite close to its original 1639 contours.

In the Erdogan era, Iran and Turkey fought a long proxy conflict in Syria, with Tehran supporting the Assad regime and Ankara backing the rebels. Yet this did not change their broader strategic thinking—they still viewed each other as equally powerful and, hence, avoided direct hostilities.

Considering this historic balance, the idea of Iran becoming a nuclear power is anathema to Turkey. If Tehran gained that edge, it would effectively end the three-century power parity with its nonnuclear rival. Ankara has therefore generally supported measures aiming to prevent this outcome, despite taking opportunistic, counterproductive steps at times (e.g., allowing its banks to [violate nuclear sanctions \(https://www.reuters.com/legal/turkish-bank-tells-us-supreme-court-it-should-be-immune-iran-sanctions-charges-2025-05-07/\)](https://www.reuters.com/legal/turkish-bank-tells-us-supreme-court-it-should-be-immune-iran-sanctions-charges-2025-05-07/) against Iran in order to raise cash). Yet recent trends in Israeli-Turkish relations (see below) also make Ankara almost certain to oppose one of the strongest preventive measures—massive Israeli military intervention against Iran’s nuclear program.

Turkey vs. Israel. Turkey was the first—and for decades only—Muslim-majority state to recognize Israel, granting it diplomatic recognition in 1949. Turkey’s Kemalist-era secularism and Israel’s policy of cultivating regional partners beyond its immediate circle of neighbors both played a role in this dynamic, producing deep security, intelligence, military, and economic ties by the end of the twentieth century.

Yet their relations have taken a nosedive in the Erdogan era of non-Western-centric Turkish foreign policy. In 2006, Erdogan stoked tensions by hosting a delegation from the terrorist group Hamas. Ties collapsed completely during the 2010 flotilla incident, when Israeli forces boarded a Turkish ship attempting to bypass their blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, killing eight Turkish citizens and one U.S.-Turkish dual national. The long tenure of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu only accelerated this freefall—the strong, mutual dislike between him and Erdogan made it all but impossible for the two countries to reset their ties in any lasting fashion. Meanwhile, Israel established contacts with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group led by an offshoot of Turkey’s domestic nemesis, the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—a move intended in part as a response to Ankara’s ties with Hamas.

The events of the past two years have further muddied the bilateral picture. Last December, Turkey abetted the fall of Damascus to rebel groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, another designated terrorist group. This power move irked Israeli policymakers, with some concluding that a rising Turkey had become their new regional competitor. Yet policymakers in Ankara increasingly feel the same about the military might that Israel has flexed since October 2023, from destroying Hamas and Hezbollah’s leadership and infrastructure to decapitating Iran’s senior military ranks and completely dominating the country’s airspace.

Assuaging Turkey’s Real Security Concerns

Although Ankara will oppose any further Israeli military targeting of Iran for the reasons discussed above, it is still quite likely to support U.S. nonmilitary measures aimed at ending Tehran’s nuclear ambitions once and for all, including further sanctions, dialogue, and economic pressure. If President Trump sticks to the diplomatic path and presses Israel to do the same, he will find an ally in Ankara.

But Washington should also acknowledge that there are potential limits to how far Erdogan is willing to go even if the parties avoid further military action. Turkey has credible security concerns about the very real prospect of the

Iranian regime teetering or collapsing under the weight of international pressure:

Refugee flows. Turkey already hosts nearly four million refugees, mostly from Syria and other unstable countries, so it is well aware that military escalation with Iran could generate more refugee flows. Although most of Iran's main population centers are hundreds of miles from the Turkish border, many citizens who have fled the Islamic Republic over the decades have nevertheless chosen Turkey as their preferred haven, largely because of its close and easy connections to eventual destinations in Europe and the United States.

Power vacuum and rump PKK. Ankara is deeply worried that anti-Turkey elements would exploit a weakened or collapsed regime in Iran to plan cross-border attacks on Turkey, similar to how nonstate actors like the Islamic State and PKK exploited past power vacuums in Iraq and Syria to kill Turks. This is an especially significant concern amid Ankara's [ongoing disarmament talks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests) with the PKK. The Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK)—the PKK's Iranian Kurdish offshoot—has not yet heeded PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's February call to disarm. If Iran descends into instability, PJAK could emerge as the latest PKK regional offshoot to undermine Turkish security using another state's territory.

Making the Most of Trump and Erdogan's Chemistry

Because Ankara generally abhors Middle East instability, it will likely support diplomatic steps to prevent Iran from reestablishing a nuclear weapons capability while opposing military steps that could greatly erode the state's authority or topple the regime entirely. In this regard, the Trump administration can expect Turkey to implement deeper economic sanctions, commit to avoiding questionable bank activities or other moves that enable Iranian sanctions busting, and help with the diplomatic track once U.S.-Iran talks resume. The sweet spot here would be the United States adding the full set of Iranian issues to its bilateral strategic dialogue with Turkey, assuring Ankara that the goal is not to collapse the regime but rather to pressure it into permanently giving up its nuclear ambitions—an outcome that Turkish officials support.

The personal chemistry between the two presidents is the game-changing factor that could enable such a strategic alignment. Erdogan is deeply grateful to Trump for [suspending sanctions against Syria \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-syria-sanctions-syria-breakdown-part-seven\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-syria-sanctions-syria-breakdown-part-seven), which could help stabilize Turkey's long border with its southern neighbor. In addition, Trump's policy decisions and stated views on regime change more or less mesh with Erdogan's red line on avoiding Iranian state collapse. The Turkish leader is therefore likely to align more robustly with the Trump administration's diplomatic plans for Iran.

Again, though, Ankara is highly unlikely to support—let alone join—further U.S. military action against Iran. The Islamic Republic has never been weaker, and follow-on strikes [could push it to the breaking point \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-republic-starting-crack-signs-watch\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-republic-starting-crack-signs-watch). In that scenario, Turkey could miss the moment to secure its interests or even fall completely out of line with U.S. policy toward Iran. Similar risks would emerge if Israel renews its air war. In either eventuality, Washington should rely on direct communication between the two presidents to prevent tensions from escalating into a full-blown bilateral crisis. The Trump administration should also consider furthering its efforts to build Israeli-Turkish confidence more broadly by bringing the two parties together for more talks on [another recent source \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-1\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/between-israel-and-turkey-implications-new-syria-part-1) of bilateral tension: their cross-border activities in southern and northern Syria, respectively.

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