Turkey's Limited Role in the Iran War

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Brief Analysis

Power parity informs the view from Ankara, which has a strong interest in preventing Iran from going nuclear or alternatively falling into chaos—even as the war's outcome will be largely outside Turkish control.

On May 22, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to discuss issues including the Strait of Hormuz and regional wars. The only NATO ally bordering Iran, Turkey has painstakingly avoided getting involved in the U.S.-Iran conflict, which is about to enter its fourth month.

Despite Iran's launching of several missiles at Turkish territory in the initial weeks of the war, Ankara has adopted a neutral approach, not unlike other NATO allies, such as the United Kingdom, whose Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus were targeted by Iranian missiles. Instead of retaliating militarily, Turkey has joined Pakistan to find a political settlement to end the war. Deeper questions on the conflict relate to the drivers of Turkey's policy, including short- and long-term implications for ties with Washington and Ankara's overall Middle East posture.

A Historic Arrangement

Turkey's policies regarding Iran are informed first and foremost by geographic proximity and a deep-rooted historic power parity between the two nations. Current dynamics can be traced to the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, precursors to the current Turkish and Iranian states, which engaged in inconclusive and debilitating wars beginning in the late fifteenth century—and spanning 166 years—that nearly bankrupted both. The two empires settled on an early version of mutually assured destruction, signing a 1639 peace treaty to fix their borders and agreeing on an unwritten nonaggression pact to avoid major warfare. Later wars were fought, but the power parity held. Setting aside minor land swaps in the twentieth century, the Turkey-Iran border today is nearly identical to the border four hundred years ago.

Turkey and Operation Epic Fury

In the twenty-first century, Turkey-Iran power parity was visible during Syria's civil war, when Ankara and Tehran backed opposing sides but nevertheless avoided direct conflict. It was therefore notable when earlier this year Iran launched four missile attacks at Turkey's Adana province—which hosts a U.S. consulate—the Incirlik Air Base, and the Ceyhan oil terminal, from which Israel gets nearly 40 percent of its oil via a pipeline from Azerbaijan.

Tehran's goal might have been to compel Turkey and NATO to respond based on self-interest and persuade the United States to end the war. For its part, instead of escalating militarily, Ankara issued sharp public warnings, including one in which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan **emphasized (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/erdogan-we-have-delivered-warnings-to-iran-about-missile-fire/)** that Turkey would take all necessary measures to protect its territory "decisively and without hesitation." This strategy has worked to the extent that Iran has refrained from launching additional missile strikes against Turkey since March 30.

Ankara's Desired War Outcomes

Except for some liquefied natural gas imports from Qatar, Turkey is largely unaffected by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and unlikely to participate in a multinational mission to open the waterway, at least prior to a more permanent ceasefire. Yet even if Turkey will not take part in U.S. military action against Iran, it still seeks a middle ground between two objectives regarding its neighbor:

No nukes. Turkey does not want to see a nuclear Iran next door, given that such a development would undoubtedly end the four centuries of power parity between the two sides. An emboldened Iran would lose interest in navigating Ankara's security interests and alliances in the Middle East, such as those involving the Syrian government led by former members of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the government in northern Iraq led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Instead, a nuclear Iran would likely push back aggressively against Turkey's interests, while undercutting Ankara's regional influence. Accordingly, one endgame for Ankara would be to support talks to prevent Iran from getting the bomb.

No chaos. Even as Turkey wants to see Iran's nuclear wings clipped, it does not wish to see regime collapse to that end—or the state collapse its leadership believes would follow. Turkey's leaders greatly fear chaos in a Middle East neighbor, recalling the significant economic and political cost of civil wars in Iraq and Syria. A first consequence of chaos in Iran could be fresh refugee flows toward Turkish territory, evoking the millions of Syrian refugees who arrived post-2011, creating a burden that has harmed President Erdogan's domestic standing. While anti-refugee and anti-immigrant movements have grown in Turkey, the recent return of some refugees to Syria has helped Erdogan stabilize his position on this issue. Erdogan is facing a reelection challenge. The vote is currently scheduled for 2028, but the term-limited president may want to hold the election earlier to exploit a constitutional loophole and pursue one more term—and he recognizes the risks posed by a new inflow of refugees.

Erdogan is also wary that chaos in Iran will further undermine Turkey's fragile economic recovery following the 2018 crisis and ensuing instability—and with that his electoral prospects. The war has already cost the country in tourism and investment revenue, given its proximity to the conflict zone. Seeking to ease the economic fallout, the Turkish Ministry of Treasury and Finance has **sold (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-05-13/turkey-depleted-reserves-at-record-pace-in-march-over-iran-war)** record amounts of foreign currency. What is more, Turkey imports almost all its oil. Each dollar increase in the price of a gallon costs its economy around $500 million. Should Iran descend into chaos, the consequences for Turkey would be so immense that even President Erdogan—notwithstanding his incumbency advantages—would have a difficult time winning the next election.

Ankara's Security Concerns

The war has also added to Turkey's security fears regarding two other actors:

The PKK. Ankara is currently in talks to end a multi-decade war with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist group by both Turkey and the United States. The "terror-free Turkey" process, as the talks have been dubbed, aims to disarm the PKK and its Middle East affiliates in return for amnesty for the group's fighters and increased political representation for the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party. The faction has 7–10 percent support among the Turkish electorate, and its share of support to Erdogan, whose governing alliance is polling at around 40 percent, could help him win the next election.

Reports early in the war suggesting that Israel sought to arm the PKK's Iranian offshoot—the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK)—risked derailing Ankara's strategy at home. Arming the PJAK would have allowed PKK hardliners seeking to maintain armed conflict against Turkey to migrate to the Iran-based affiliate, giving the PKK new life and thwarting Turkey's plans to disarm the group. For the time being, Trump appears to have **backed off (https://www.jpost.com/international/article-895828)** reported plans to support the Kurdish insurgency, evidently owing to objections from Ankara and Erdogan personally. If active conflict resumes, however, and Washington revisits arming the PJAK, Ankara will almost certainly move from agnostic to pro-Iran in the U.S.-Iran conflict.

Israel. Reporting **(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-887316)** that Israel may have reached out to the PJAK has further frayed Ankara's already weak ties with Jerusalem. Strategic competition between the two countries in Gaza, where Turkey backs Hamas, and Syria, where Israel backs Druze groups among others, could now spill into Iran. The United States should monitor Israel's ties with Iranian Kurdish groups to prevent deeper deterioration between its two regional allies.

A "Third Pillar" in the Middle East

Turkey's Iran war policy can be best described as nonbinary, rooted in equal worry about the Islamic Republic and Israel. Specifically, Ankara has pursued new strategic thinking in response to Iranian missile attacks against Turkey and its Persian Gulf allies—Qatar and Saudi Arabia—paired with rising competition against Israel across the Middle East. The new strategic model rests on deepening security cooperation with three like-minded states, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan. While unlikely to replace Turkey's existing commitment to NATO, this quartet signals a third pole in Middle East politics (and also in South Asian politics considering strong Israeli and Turkish ties, respectively, with India and Pakistan), oriented to varying degrees against Iran and Israel.

Conclusion

Given Turkey's desire to prevent Iran from going nuclear or being overtaken by chaos, Ankara would seem well positioned to serve as a go-between to end the war. Such a formulation also takes account of Erdogan's strong chemistry with President Trump. But a competitive bilateral history will make Tehran unwilling to let Ankara earn credit for ending the war. This is why Turkey has followed Pakistan's thus far unsuccessful lead toward a political settlement. It is also why the current scenario does not mirror the Syrian war, when Turkey occupied center stage on matters relevant to U.S. policy.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Turkish Research Program. ❖

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