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Possibilities for a Turkish-Iranian Rapprochement

by [James Jeffrey](#)

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The prospect of warmer Iranian-Turkish ties is manageable so long as the United States maintains the intent and capability to promote regional security, and assuming Ankara continues to balance any such rapprochement with its ties to the West, Israel, and Arab states.

In this season of dramatic strategic surprises in the Middle East, seemingly almost anything is possible: Russia's successful military re-entry into the region, America's near abandonment of a 40-year commitment to that region under President Obama, the rise of an Islamic terrorist state, and a possible regional Sunni-Shia confrontation.

In such a fluid time, it is important to examine what appear to be fixed assumptions. One of those is the enmity between President Erdogan's Turkey and The Ayatollah's Iran. That enmity has historical roots dating back hundreds of years to the Ottoman empire facing off, along almost the same border as today, against the Safavid Persian empire. But it has flared up over the past five years, primarily over the fate of the Assad regime in Syria, which has been relentlessly supported by Teheran and challenged by Ankara. Moreover, Turkey, for religious reasons as well as geo-political ones, is seen as being part of the "anti-Iran" camp. It has a Sunni population led by a President with close Muslim Brotherhood links, and it has relations with Gulf states and Jordan, difficult but historic relations with Israel, and deep security ties with the U.S. -- all states traditionally arrayed against Iran.

But that can change. The dynamic of the Turkish-Iranian relationship is different than the Saudi-Iranian

relationship. Turkey does not feel threatened by Iran, in either its "country or cause" guise, to use Henry Kissinger's words. While up to 20 percent of Turkey's population adheres to the Alawite or Alevi sects of Shia Islam, these adherents have a worldview entirely different than that of the Iranian Ayatollahs and are thus unlikely recruits for Iran. As the one state between Egypt and Pakistan with a population equal to Iran's, with a strong economy not dependent on vulnerable oil and export sea lanes, a strong military, and an alliance with the U.S., Turkey's "Iran angst" is in check.

Despite tensions in recent years, the Turkish Republic has had reasonably good relations with Iran since the 1920s. Turkey and Iran were both beneficiaries of the Truman Doctrine, both members of the regional Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) alliance, and significant trading partners. Turkey purchased significant Iranian gas via a pipeline in place for over 20 years. Relations only took a turn for the worse as the strictly secularist Turkish state faced the intensely religious regime in Teheran after the fall of the Shah in 1979.

But neither state even then seriously challenged the other. In fact, once President Erdogan's party formed the government beginning in 2002, relations between the two states -- now both with "Islamist" leaders even if radically different societies -- improved. The culmination of this was the 2010 Teheran Agreement on Iran's nuclear program, an initiative Turkey and Brazil took with Iran, with initial backing from President Barack Obama. When the U.S. and the other members of the P5+1 group negotiating with Iran did not accept that agreement and instead pushed for UN sanctions on Iran, Turkey, then a security council member, joined Brazil in voting against them.

While the conflict between the two states over Assad is serious, Assad now has a new lease on life, owed not to Iranian support, although significant, but to Russian intervention. It is the latter, not Iran, that Erdogan has to blame for Assad's survival. Moreover, the Russian intervention has produced a lasting crisis between Moscow and Ankara over the latter's shoot-down of a Russian aircraft.

Russia and Iran are budding strategic allies, as then CENTCOM commander General Lloyd Austin told the Senate on March 8, but differences between them, including over Assad's fate, remain. Yet Turkey's ally Washington, under Obama, is pressing for better relations with Iran. That gives Turkey flexibility to play classic diplomacy, balancing relations among the four: Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the U.S. If Russia engages in a "limited win" for Assad with at least a theoretical role for a new Syrian government midwived by Moscow and the U.S., that would give Turkey room to maneuver to protect the Syrian groups it supports and to exploit possible fissures between Russia and Iran on Syria's future to its advantage.

Turkish-Iranian relations can benefit in other realms as well, from gas trade to joint opposition to Turkish and Iranian Kurdish separatist movements (the PKK and PJAK). Finally, with Russia on the march militarily from Crimea and Armenia to the Aegean and Syria, with Turkey in the middle, Turkey needs friendly neighbors including Iran.

Given Iran's continued hegemonic ambitions, "separating" Turkey from the "anti-Iranian front" could complicate the American-led regional security system. But the U.S. has lived with Erdogan's previous flirting with Teheran, and the U.S. goal to integrate a potentially more moderate Iran into the modern world likely will outlive the Obama administration. Thus the U.S. could adapt to warmer Iranian-Turkish ties, as long as the U.S. maintains the intent and capability to promote the region's security, and Turkey balances any approach to the Iranians with its ties to the U.S., the EU, Arab states, and Israel.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. ❖

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