

# Turkey Fears a Shiite Alliance

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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## Ankara would view an Iran nuclear deal and a negotiated settlement in Syria as Washington turning a blind eye to the emerging Shiite axis along Turkey's southern border.

In late 2011, Turkey, hoping to help oust the Assad regime in Syria, began to arm members of the Syrian opposition. But this policy has not yet borne the desired results. For whatever gains the Sunni rebels have made, Assad and his supporters -- thanks in part to Iran's assistance -- maintain their hold on other parts of Syria. Accordingly, instead of a speedy collapse of the Assad regime, Ankara faces a weak and divided southern neighbor, as well as a proxy war against Iran in Syria.

In facing its most complex security challenge since the Cold War, Ankara has turned to the United States.

Now, a U.S.-Iran deal would signal to the Turks that Washington has agreed to disagree with Iran on the nuclear issue and Syria. In this regard, the Turks fear a repetition of what happened in Iraq. In Iraq's hotly contested 2010 elections, Turkey supported the secular/Sunni Allawi block, which lost to the Shiite dominated party of Nouri al-Maliki. Ankara had viewed al-Maliki's party as a Shiite and pro-Iranian force. Having grown accustomed to viewing the Middle East through a sectarian lens, the Turks believe that Washington has surrendered Iraq to the Shiites, and for that matter to Iran.

A U.S.-Iran deal now would add to Ankara's self-informed view that the United States is advancing Shiite and Iranian interests in Syria. Turkey fears that this deal would help create a Shiite arch extending from Damascus through Baghdad to Tehran.

How will Turkey respond to the United States, given Ankara's mounting resentment? In a way, Turkey's struggles in the Middle East mirror those of Japan in East Asia. Even today, Japan, the consummate soft-power nation, relies on U.S. hard power for its security in East Asia against China and North Korea. After its futile foray into Syria, Turkey, the Middle East's largest economy but not the dominant military power, needs the United States to protect it against

the challenges posed by the Syrian civil war. Therefore, expect Ankara to acquiesce, albeit grudgingly, to a potential U.S.-Iran deal.

A U.S.-Iran deal has, however, taught the Turks the following lesson: Do not put all your eggs into America's basket. This explains Ankara's recent decision to buy Chinese weapons, in anticipation of a U.S.-Iran deal. Going forward, Turkey will look for additional security partners, from the Russians to the Chinese, while continuing to court the Americans.

*Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, is author of the forthcoming book [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>). ❖*

*New York Times*

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