

Balancing Iran: Ottoman Echoes

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History shows that Turkey is a natural and effective offset to Iranian hegemonism, and Washington should take note.

This past May 29, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul came together to dedicate the building of a new bridge to span the Bosphorus. Launched on the anniversary of the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Istanbul, the new bridge was christened after Selim the Grim, the architect of the Ottoman wars against Persia during the 16th century. For observers of Turkey, the namesake certainly seemed suggestive: Selim I is also remembered for smashing the Ottoman Alevis and Shi'a during the most brutal chapter of the Turkic-Persian wars.

In exalting Turkey's Ottoman champion against Iran, Turkish leaders may have unwittingly paraphrased contemporary Turkish foreign policy. If nothing else, they called attention to an historical parallel that is increasingly coming into starker relief. Once upon a time, Turkish-Persian rivalry was the defining political contest of the Middle East. Today, the Levant's fluid political geography and the re-emergence of sectarian violence in Syria in the wake of Arab upheavals have coaxed Turkey and Iran into a renewed pattern of competition. If history is any guide, the implications of this nascent competition are likely to be profound. If history is to be a guide, however, we have to know something about it...

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