

How Iran and Turkey See Each Other

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Articles & Testimony

Welcome to the new Middle East, which increasingly looks too small to accommodate both Turkey and Iran. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is visiting Riyadh on Friday. The Syrian crisis will dominate the agenda in Riyadh, and Iran will scrutinize every statement made by Erdogan and his Saudi hosts. Welcome to the new Middle East which increasingly looks too small to accommodate both Turkey and Iran.

This is why Iran-Turkey relations remain in dire straits even after Tehran reluctantly agreed to have Istanbul as the venue for the next round of Iran-P5+1 talks. The key dispute is centered on the future of the al-Assad regime in Damascus. Iran considers al-Assad's departure as an important geopolitical loss, while Ankara is busy building opposition to Damascus

From Iran's perspective, its disagreement with Turkey over Syria is an unbridgeable rift. But the debate in Tehran has moved on and is now about whether Iran can afford to let ties with Ankara slip further.

Despite Syria, the Iranians know that Turkey can still be helpful in the context of Iran's standoff with the West. First, in a world where Iran has few friends, Turkish willingness to act as a mediator is recognized by seasoned diplomats in Tehran as valuable.

Second, Turkey has so far mainly implemented UN sanctions resolutions against Iran. Though there are signs that Ankara is moving to join U.S.-supported sanctions, Tehran, nevertheless, maintains hope. From Ankara's perspective, the Turkish stance on sanctions is about self-interest, given economic ties between the two countries. From Tehran's perspective, this is a useful tool with which to circumvent Western pressures.

The Iranian debate about where to go from here in relations with Ankara has two principle strands. The first group is made up largely by hardliners around the Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei. They see the rivalry with Turkey as a zero-

sum game and warn of further tensions with Ankara. For example, they warn that Turkey and Sunni Arab states are mobilizing to weaken the Shiite political elite in Baghdad who back Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and instead want to empower a coalition comprised of Iraqi Sunni Arab and (Sunni) Kurdish interests. In other words, Ankara's challenge to Iranian interests is not limited to Syria but extends to Iraq and beyond.

The second group is made up of Iranian bureaucrats who shun the zero-sum-game approach, and they also do not recommend that Iran's regional jockeying be based on sectarian calculations. They tend to emphasize Turkey's usefulness as a mediator and economic partner and stress that it is foolish for Tehran to expect Turkish accommodation of Iranian interests at all times. In other words, Tehran should be realistic in its demands and above all avoid pushing Turkey away.

For its own part, Turkey's economic growth and emergence as a regional giant under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have made it a Middle East power. The Turks were, initially, not interested in competition with the Iranians, and relations between Ankara and Tehran seemed quite warm. However, from the Syrian uprising to Iraq's sectarian convulsions, recent developments have made Ankara the main challenger to Tehran's desire to dominate the region.

Competition over Syria has only added to the fault lines in Iraq, where Turkey and Iran have been supporting opposing camps. Since Iraq's first democratic elections in 2005, Iran has supported the Shiite-backed Dawa party of al-Maliki, while Turkey has backed the secular pan-Iraqi movement of Ayad Allawi.

Maliki has cracked down on Ankara-backed factions, issuing an arrest warrant for Tariq al-Hashimi, Iraq's vice president and leader of the country's Sunni community, scoring a victory for Tehran and building a Shiite-dominated government, as Ankara sees it.

Today Tehran views Turkey, anchored in NATO and oriented toward the Middle East, as a greater challenge to Iranian interests than the merely pro-Western Turkey of a decade ago. Meanwhile, Ankara increasingly sees a "Shiite axis" formed by Iran and its allies as its likely biggest challenge in the Middle East.

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