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Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Redux

In the Middle East, there is room for one shah or one sultan, but not for a shah and a sultan

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Oct 16, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

Ankara and Tehran appear locked, once again, in their centuries-old competition to become the region's dominant power.

In the years to come, the overarching rivalry in the Middle East will be neither the Arab-Israeli conflict nor Saudi-Iranian tensions. It will be a revived Turkish-Iranian competition.

The Turkish-Persian rivalry is, in fact, the oldest power game in the Middle East. Between the 15th and 20th centuries, the Ottoman sultans and the Persian shahs -- the precursors to modern Turkey and Iran -- challenged each other for regional dominance.

After the fall of the Ottoman and Persian empires and modern Turkey's abandonment of the Middle East in favor of the West, it appeared as if this rivalry was over. More recently, Turkey's Middle East-oriented foreign policy appeared at first to bring Ankara closer to Tehran. However, by becoming a Middle Eastern player again, a resurgent Ankara has, in fact, emerged as the natural challenger to the other key Middle Eastern actor: nuclear-power and hegemony-seeking Iran.

Accordingly, the Turkish-Persian rivalry is, once again, the key power game in the region. Take for instance their competition in Iraq. Although both Turkey and Iran opposed the Iraq war at first, the fact that they have supported opposing camps in successive Iraqi elections has rekindled their competition. Today, Ankara and Tehran eye each other warily; neither wants the other to have more influence in Baghdad or over the Iraqi Kurds.

More importantly, the Turkish-Persian rivalry has recently come to a head over Syria. Ankara is the key regional opponent of the al-Assad regime's crackdown on demonstrators. Tehran, on the other hand, not only stands with Assad but funnels funds to the Baath regime so it can continue with its oppression.

This is the most important, and perhaps somewhat unintended, consequence of Turkey's turn to the Middle East. Even if this turn initially appeared to create an Ankara-Tehran axis, it has, in fact, yielded the opposite result: triggering competition for regional dominance and reviving centuries-old memories.

Turkey and Iran have always been wary of each other. After launching debilitating campaigns against one another for almost two centuries, the Ottomans and the Persians settled for a Cold War-style peace in 1639; they agreed not to fight directly but instead engage in proxy wars to undermine one another. The two countries competed for influence in 19th-century Iraq, for example.

The region's oldest competition subsided briefly by the middle of the 20th century when Turkey turned Westward, leaving a vacuum in the Middle East. It helped that, at this time, Iran's shahs sympathized with the modernizing mission of Turkey's Ataturk.

After Iran's 1979 Islamist revolution, however, the Turkish-Persian rivalry returned to life. From Tehran's perspective, the revolution cast Iran and Turkey as two diametrically contrasting models for the Middle East: an authoritarian theocracy versus a pro-West, staunchly secular democracy. Turkey's emergence as a Middle East giant under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) completed the loop by positioning Ankara as the main challenger standing in the way of Tehran's desire to dominate the region.

Now, from Iraq to Syria, the two countries oppose one another for regional leadership. Ankara's recent acceptance of the installation of radar stations on its territory as part of NATO's missile defense project signaled to Tehran that a Middle Eastern Turkey, anchored in NATO, is perhaps a greater threat to Iranian interests than a merely pro-Western Turkey.

This is where the issue of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) comes in. In the past decade, PKK attacks against Turkey and PKK franchise Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) attacks against Iran led Ankara and Tehran to hold tete-a-tete security discussions. At present however, Iran has made peace with PJAK and reportedly saved the life of PKK leader Murat Karayilan by "taking him into custody" as Turkey was bombing PKK camps in Iraq. Iran and Turkey are slowly showing their hands in the region's oldest power game.

In the Middle East, there is room for one shah or sultan, but not a shah and a sultan. Ankara and Tehran appear locked, once again, in their centuries-old competition to become the region's dominant power.

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