

## Does Turkey's Iran Policy Serve Turkey?

May 31, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**T**he central problem with the recent nuclear deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil with Iran is that it does not quite tackle Iran's ability to weaponize its uranium stockpile. According to the arrangement, Iran is to deposit 1,200 kilos of enriched uranium in Turkey. Yet, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, Tehran already possesses over 2,500 kilos of enriched uranium and experts say that 1,200 kilos is all that is needed to produce a bomb.

The Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government in Ankara insists that this deal should be respected as an effective method of tackling Iran's drive toward nuclearization. Yet, if the Turco-Brazilian deal were to be ratified, Iran would not only retain enough material to make a bomb, but also be allowed to continue its enrichment activities designed to obtain more weapons-grade nuclear material. Turkey's policy vis-a-vis Iran appears to be enabling Iran to deflect Western criticism over its nuclear program, while continuing to stockpile the material needed to construct a nuclear weapon. The question remains: Is Ankara's Iran policy good for Turkey?

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East has shifted from an earlier strategy which sought to extend a cold shoulder to regimes such as Tehran. More recently, the AKP has taken a close interest in regional politics, suggesting it wants to become a key player in a region that the secular Republic has in the past, mostly, ignored.

On the surface this seems a positive development. A foreign policy that makes Turkey a regional power is good for Turkey. This officially stated reasoning guides Ankara's Iran policy. The irony is however, that Turkey cannot become a regional power if it enables Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. Once Iran goes nuclear, it would become the regional hegemon, extinguishing Turkey's hopes of becoming the premier regional power. In other words, the stated goal of Turkey's Iran policy and the results of this policy are in direct contradiction.

Therefore, one is forced to make one of two assumptions: the first is that Turkish foreign policy is naive, seeking to ascend to great power status by interfering in the conflict between Iran and the West, unaware that this policy will prevent Ankara from rising as a regional power. Yet, judging from their political savvy -- the AKP has singlehandedly run Turkey since 2002, winning three elections, and navigating through tough foreign policy issues, the least of which being maintaining a delicate balancing act with the United States since the Iraq War -- it is hard to suggest that the AKP's leadership is naive or gullible.

The second assumption is that the stated goal of Turkish foreign policy toward Iran is different than the working goal of Turkish foreign policy toward Iran. Perhaps Ankara does not really care that Iran is about to become a nuclear power. Why else would it insist on helping Tehran toward this end, knowing very well that the deal is not an effective way to prevent Iran's weaponization program?

Another official reason guiding Ankara's stated Iran policy is that this would help maintain centuries-long power parity between Turkey and Iran. This assumption, too, is revelatory. The AKP refuses to confront Iran's nuclear policy, claiming that Turkey and Iran have not fought since the 1639 Kasr-i Sirin Treaty (also called the Treaty of Zuhab) between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.

Following this logic, the AKP wants to avoid confronting Iran because it seeks to maintain the historic power parity. At first, this appears to be a smart approach. It could be argued that equilibrium between Turkish and Iranian power could be a stabilizing force in the region. However, the 1639 treaty was signed after the Ottomans and the Safavids fought incessantly for 166 years, beginning with the Otlukbeli War in 1473. Following two centuries of debilitating conflict, by the 1630s the two powers were both so economically and militarily drained that they concluded further fighting would result in pre-modern Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD. So, the two powers stopped fighting, settling for political power parity.

The AKP suggests its Iran policy is guided by a desire to maintain this precarious balance. This is ironic, since allowing Iran to go nuclear would, in fact, end this historic parity. Once Iran goes nuclear, becoming the regional hegemon, it can afford to push and bully Turkey around in a way that has not been possible since 1639. While the AKP's stated policy is to defend the historic power parity between Turkey and Iran, the party's actual Iran policy will end the 371 year balance of power between the two countries, subjecting Turkey to Iran's political will. Once again, the stated goal and the likely result of the AKP's Iran policy appear to be in direct contradiction.

The fact is, the AKP's Iran policy does not serve Turkey. Iran has recently tested Shahab-3 missiles whose estimated 2,000-2,500 km (1250-1560 miles) range can deliver nuclear warheads to Istanbul. Turkey cannot afford a nuclear Iran -- this development would end Ankara's hopes of becoming a regional player. The mullahs are dancing, while the Ottoman sultans who fought to keep the Persians at bay must be turning in their graves.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3F3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3F3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) at The Washington Institute. ❖

Hurriyet Daily News

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)