

# Exposing the Myth of Lasting Iranian-Turkish Amity

May 23, 2006



Articles & Testimony

**W**ith Iran's nuclearization a hot button issue, analysts are asking how Turkey, the only NATO country bordering Iran, would respond if the United States imposed sanctions on Tehran or chose a military option to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. There is one answer that American policymakers will hear in Ankara: Turkey should not confront Iran because Turkey and Iran have been good neighbors since the 1639 Treaty of Kasri Sirin (also called the Treaty of Zuhab). Turkish policymakers assert that the two countries have neither fought nor changed their mutual border since that date.

The "Myth of Kasri Sirin" suggests four centuries of amicable ties between Turkey and Iran. Nothing could be further from the truth. Turkey and Iran have repeatedly fought since 1639, and since the 1979 Islamic Revolution Iran has supported terror groups inside Turkey to undermine governments there.

First, some history: The Ottoman and Iranian empires have fought many wars since Kasri Sirin. A full-scale war broke out in 1733 when the Persians attempted to take Baghdad from the Turks. The Persian siege of Baghdad and the accompanying battles ended in 1746 with the Treaty of Kurdan, signed between the new Zand Dynasty of Persia and the Ottoman Empire.

Soon after, in 1775, the Zand Dynasty attacked the Ottoman Empire again and captured Basra. The invasion lasted until 1821, at which time another war started between the Ottoman Empire and the new Qajar Dynasty of Persia. The war ended in 1823, with the First Treaty of Erzurum.

Rivalry over Muhammarah region (Iran's modern-day Khorramshar) deepened the conflict between the two empires by adding a new dimension to the conflict. Persians and Ottoman Iraqi governors clashed over its control, bringing the two empires to the brink of war in 1840. The British intervened, establishing a boundary commission composed of Iranian, Turkish, British, and Russian diplomats. As a result, the Persian and Ottoman empires signed the Second Treaty of Erzurum, reconfiguring the Iranian-Ottoman border.

Troubles between the two countries extended well beyond the Ottoman era. Fighting also took place across the Turkish-Iranian border during Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rule in Turkey. In 1930, when some Kurds launched a rebellion around Mount Greater Agri (Ararat) in Turkey, Kurdish bands armed by Armenian nationalists entered Turkey across the Iranian border to support the rebellion.

This was no small skirmish. Turkey used airplanes in a counterattack and mobilized 15,000 troops to suppress the incursion. In the end, the Turkish Army was able to put down the border infiltration, though with great difficulty, and only after losing several planes. In 1931, Ankara asked Iran for a border rectification that put Mount Lesser Agri, the base of the 1930 incursions, inside Turkey.

Volatility along the border became an issue again when the terrorist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) launched a campaign against Turkey in 1984. Iran's theocratic regime, diametrically opposed to Turkey's secular, pro-Western society, saw the PKK as a useful tool to wreak havoc in Turkey. Accordingly, Tehran allowed PKK bases such as Haj Umran, Dar Khala, Benchul, Mandali, and Sirabad in its territory. Ali Koknar, an expert on terrorism, writes that in

1995 the PKK "maintained about 1,200 of its members at around 50 locations in Iran." Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the PKK crossed from these bases into Turkey, attacking the Turkish military as well as killing civilians.

Iran has supported not only the PKK but also Islamist terrorist cells. Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian-backed cells have killed a number of secular Turkish intellectuals and journalists considered offensive, including theologian Bahriye Uçok, a female Islamist modernizer, and journalist Cetin Emec.

Interestingly, Iran's policy of war by proxy, the use of the PKK and Islamist terrorists to undermine Turkey's secular system, has recently come to a strategic halt. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, Tehran has been feeling an increase in American-imposed isolation. To break this policy, Iran has launched a policy of courting Ankara. Iran now aims to win the Turks' hearts. In this regard, Tehran is taking advantage of American inaction against the PKK's Qandil terror enclave in northern Iraq -- a fact that is planting seeds of resentment in Turkey toward Washington -- by launching attacks against Qandil and the very PKK camps Iran allowed in the 1990s.

While these steps are helping Tehran build a positive image in Turkey, the fact is that Tehran is far from the benevolent neighbor the "Myth of Kasri Sirin" implies. Turkey and Iran have fought many times since 1639, repeatedly changing their mutual border, including as recently as 1931. Lately, Tehran has fought war by proxy against Ankara. Yet, like all other myths, the "Myth of Kasri Sirin" satisfies a real need: So long as the U.S. ignores Turkey's battle against the PKK in Iraq, the future holds out the possibility that Ankara may be closer to Tehran than to Washington.

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