

# Turkish-Iranian Tension: A New Regional Flashpoint?

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Brief Analysis

**B**uoyed by its recent antiterrorism successes in facing down Syria and capturing Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey now turns its sights on Iran. A series of Turkish-Iranian security meetings tomorrow through Friday will focus on Tehran's allegedly growing support to anti-Turkish organizations. In trying to convince Tehran to curtail assistance to these groups, Ankara wields clear military and economic assets. Leveraging that edge into a change in Iranian behavior, however, will be a difficult task.

Recent Incidents. With the PKK having announced last week that it will withdraw its fighters from Turkey, the Turkish-Iranian security meetings take on added significance for Ankara, which accuses Tehran of supporting the separatists. Iran could well be a major gathering-point for the retreating insurgents. Turkey, which has been noncommittal regarding its view of the PKK's withdrawal plans, will have to decide whether to try to capture the departing militants or to accept the withdrawal without contest. If it chooses the former course, Ankara will demand that Tehran help by blocking the border and turning over the fighters.

The security meetings will take place following serious bilateral tension fueled by Iran's capture of two Turkish soldiers, accusations from Tehran that Turkey bombed Iranian territory, and some of the harshest criticisms of the Iranian regime ever leveled by a Turkish official--all within the past month. Presumably to ease the tension, Iran today returned the soldiers to Turkey. They had been captured two weeks ago after apparently straying into Iranian territory while pursuing the PKK; rather than return the soldiers immediately, Iran initially announced that they would be put on trial. The soldiers' capture followed Tehran's complaint just days earlier that Turkey had bombed an Iranian border town, killing five people and wounding ten; the alleged bombing was at the mountainous junction of the Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish borders--a favorite redoubt of the PKK. Turkish military officials denied the charge, insisting their planes had been in the area bombing PKK camps in northern Iraq and did not miss their targets. Turkey did, however, send a delegation to Iran to investigate.

Just a week before the alleged Turkish trespasses into Iran, Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit labeled student protest demonstrations rocking Iran's cities a "natural" reaction against an "outdated regime of oppression." This criticism was particularly striking coming from Ecevit, who has long emphasized the need for Turkey to develop

good ties with its Middle Eastern neighbors, whatever their regimes, and who, as prime minister in February 1979, had quickly recognized the fledgling Islamic republic next door. Until two years ago, when Turkish military officials began to voice long-held convictions about Iranian support to Turkish Islamic fundamentalists, Ankara almost never openly confronted Tehran. Its "pragmatic" approach extends even to exempting visiting Iranian officials from diplomatic obligations to pay respect to the memory of Turkey's secularist state founder, Kemal Ataturk.

Ongoing Disputes. Ideologically, secular Turkey and Islamist Iran are polar opposites. Naturally, each sees the other as an unwelcome example and source of inspiration to subversives within its own society. But current Turkish unhappiness with Iran goes well beyond philosophical disagreement. Turkish officials are convinced Iran has emerged as the region's leading supporter of the PKK, even while continuing its long-time support to Islamist movements within Turkey. Turks now reject the notion that PKK cross-border activity is strictly the result of Iran's inability to control its border--Tehran's traditional explanation--though some Turkish officials privately blame the hostile action strictly on Iranian hardliners acting independently, rather than on the government of President Muhammad Khatami. Turkish officials reportedly believe that Iran provides the PKK with weapons, training, and funds, and that it hosts up to fifty PKK camps. Ecevit recently claimed that "after Syria halted its support of the PKK to a certain extent, Iran took over Syria's role [as the PKK's leading state supporter]."

Iran generally sees Turkey as a pro-U.S., and now pro-Israeli, regional rival of growing strength--in short, as an agent and potential launching pad for its enemies. The Iranians particularly object to a 1996 Turkish-Israeli military cooperation agreement that allows Israeli jets to exercise in Turkish airspace four times a year. Iran's concerns that Turkey has brought the once-distant Israeli enemy to the edge of the Iranian border are fanned by numerous press reports suggesting that Turkey and Israel are cooperating in intelligence-gathering against Iran. Tehran also suspects Turkey of subversion. It accuses Ankara of giving refuge to members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq, opponents of the Iranian regime. (This is not quite the mirror-image of Turkey's accusations about Iranian support for the PKK, as Iran does not claim that the group uses Turkish territory to attack Iran.) Tehran also probably worries that Ankara seeks to subvert the Islamic Republic's large Turkic-language-speaking Azeri minority, which constitutes some one-fourth of Iran's population.

In addition to all these concerns at home, the field of Turkish-Iranian rivalry has widened considerably in recent years, now encompassing northern Iraq, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In northern Iraq, Turkey cooperates closely with Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, while Iran generally supports Barzani's rival, Jalal Talabani. In the Caucasus, Turkey firmly backs Azerbaijan in its dispute with Armenia, while Iran tilts heavily toward Armenia. Both Turkey and Iran hope to be the site of the main export pipeline for Caspian Sea energy. Turkey and Iran are also rivals for influence in Central Asia.

A "Syria Model"? In October, after Turkey threatened armed action against Syria, Damascus expelled Ocalan, long resident in the Syrian capital, and generally reduced its support for the PKK. At first glance, the Iranian-Turkish dynamic would seem to be quite different from the Syrian-Turkish one. Iran's population is roughly the same as Turkey's--more than three times Syria's--and Iran is an important oil power. Turkey traditionally respects Iran as a strong civilization and, much as it dislikes the current regime, probably wishes to avoid any action that will do lasting damage to bilateral relations.

On closer examination, however, Turkey's relations with Iran have surprisingly much in common with its relations with Syria before the Ocalan expulsion. As was the case with Syria, after a long period during which Ankara simply turned the other cheek, Turkey is growing increasingly frustrated by Iran's support of anti-Turkish terrorism. Iran, like Syria, is preoccupied on other fronts--Iraq, the Gulf, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan--and is in no position openly to confront Turkey. Economically, Iran has little leverage over Turkey; Syria is now a larger market for Turkish goods--\$309 million imported in 1998--than is Iran, which imported only \$194 million from Turkey last year. Iran's market

significance peaked in the early- to mid-1980s, when it used to buy more than \$1 billion a year in Turkish goods. Iran remains a convenient source of oil, but Turkey can and does buy oil from many other sources.

Turkey holds widening economic and conventional military advantages over Iran, though not as decisively as it does over Syria. Turkey's 1997 GNP was about \$190 billion, or approximately double Iran's. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, oil-rich Iran traditionally had a larger GNP than did Turkey. Iran generally has not upgraded its debilitated ground and air forces since its eight-year war with Iraq ended in 1988. Turkey, meanwhile, has acquired the rudiments of a modern conventional force, with more than 200 F-16s fighter-jets, nearly 1,000 M-60 tanks, and big plans for further military spending. Iran--to a greater extent even than Syria--has missiles and chemical and biological warfare capability, whereas Turkey has no known national missile, weapons of mass destruction, or (other than one Patriot battery stationed at Incirlik Air Base) antimissile capability. Still, Iran, like Syria, would probably feel constrained from using its missiles in a limited skirmish with the Turks.

Turkey does not want confrontation with Iran, and Ecevit no doubt means it when he says he wants a "diplomatic" resolution to Iran's support for the PKK. Given Turkey's more assertive regional policies of recent times, however, Ankara likely will continue to press Tehran--over time perhaps with threats or even limited use of force--if the Iranians do not alter their behavior and rein in the PKK. Today's release of the Turkish soldiers may be Iran's implicit acknowledgment of the current Turkish-Iranian power balance.

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