



Turkish-Iranian ties flourish in new era

KEY POINTS

- Turkish policy towards Iran is shaped by a strong ideological motivation.
- A driving impulse behind the Iranian strategy is a desire to avoid further diplomatic and economic isolation.
- Turkey is one of the strongest opponents of imposing additional UN sanctions on Iran for its nuclear programmes.

Since Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP) formed a government in 2002, relations with Iran have undergone a dramatic transformation.

It is often assumed that in this relationship, Iran acts with ideological motives, while the AKP pursues national interests in an effort to make Turkey a regional power in the Middle East. Yet, an analysis of the two countries policies reveals that in fact the reverse is true: while the AKP's Iran policy is guided by a core ideological stance, Iran's Turkey policy is at core shaped by national interests.

Turkish strategy since 2002

While bilateral relations were characterised by hostility until the late 1990s, a change was evident from 2002 to 2003. The catalyst was Iran's 2003 decision to stop harbouring insurgents from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan: PKK), which campaigns for a separate Kurdish state in eastern Turkey. At the onset of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Tehran decided that the benefits of continuing its policy of providing safe havens to the PKK was now outweighed by the prospects of improved relations with Turkey in order to break the grip of US military encirclement forming around Iran.

While Iranian-Turkish security and economic co-operation continues to develop, the mutual interests underpinning this burgeoning relationship are not unlimited. *Soner Cagaptay* considers the ideological motivation of the Turkish government, while *Alex Vatanka* reports on different postures in Iran toward Ankara.

The AKP took this opportunity to promote Turkish-Iranian ties and Tehran has responded. Bilateral visits, co-operation treaties and large Turkish investment schemes in Iran appear in stark contrast to tense ties between the two countries in earlier decades. Bilateral ties have improved beyond recognition since the 1979 Iranian Revolution set secular pro-Western Turkey and Islamist autocratic Iran as neighbouring, yet ideological, opposites in the Middle East.

Recently, the AKP has defended Iran's nuclear programmes, voting against UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which was adopted in June 2010. The resolution contained the toughest sanctions against Iran to date, including a ban on exporting three major categories of conventional weapons. In an interview on US-sponsored sanctions he gave after attending US General Assembly meeting in New York City, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said: "We do not see them as measures, the implementation of which is compulsory under international law."

The AKP government has responded to criticism that such policies are pro-Islamist, arguing that they are promoting closer ties with Iran in the interests of establishing Turkey as a regional power. In other words, the AKP suggests that Turkish foreign policy towards Iran is

guided by national interests and not ideology.

At first glance, this seems to be the case as Turkey is perceived as a regional power with considerable influence, as underlined by its willingness to challenge Western policy towards Iran. However, this independence and regional power status will end if Iran becomes a nuclear-armed state.

On the surface, the AKP's Iran policy seems like a positive development. A foreign policy that promotes Turkey as a regional power is good for the country. However, the irony is that Turkey cannot become a regional power if it is part of a process that enables Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. If Iran acquires a nuclear capability, 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 policy towards Iran and the results of this policy are arguably in direct contradiction.

Therefore, its critics assert that although the AKP's Iran policy appears to be guided by national interests this is not the case. Rather, the policy towards Iran's nuclearisation seems to be shaped by the AKP's broader Middle East policy and in particular its attitudes to Israel. The party has taken an increasingly critical stance towards Israel and has repeatedly called international at-



tention to Israel's nuclear weapons, suggesting this is a challenge that has to be overcome. On 11 April, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: "We do not desire any nuclear proliferation in our region and our policy is well known regardless of which country has such programmes [a reference to Israel]."

Turkey has not exhibited any serious concern about Iran becoming a nuclear power. For example, Turkey sponsored the May 2010 trilateral nuclear fuel swap agreement (together with Iran and Brazil). Under the accord, Iran agreed to send 1,200 kg of its low-enriched uranium abroad in exchange for specially processed fuel for its medical isotope reactor, leaving Iran with enough fuel to make a bomb.

Historical parity

Another official reason guiding Turkey's stated Iranian policy is the intention to maintain centuries-long power parity between the two countries. This also informs the AKP government's refusal to condemn Iran's nuclear policy, as it claims Turkey and Iran have not entered a conflict since the 1639 Kasri 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 this historic power parity. Ankara also maintains that the equilibrium between Turkish and Iranian power could be a stabilising 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 so economically and militarily drained that they signed a peace treaty and settled for political power parity.

The AKP insists its Iranian policy is guided by a desire to maintain this pre-

carious balance. However, critics argue that a nuclear-armed Iran would, in fact, end this historic parity, enabling Tehran to dominate the region. While the AKP's stated policy is to defend historic power parity, many argue that 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.

Tehran's political amity

Irrespective of the motivation behind Turkish policy on Iran, the West has considerable concerns about the Islamist-leaning AKP's relations with the clerical regime that has controlled Iran since 1979. This unease has been exacerbated by what many of the AKP's critics deem a wave of creeping Islamisation. They point to the referendum of September 2010, in which 58 per cent of the Turkish electorate voted in favour of constitutional changes proposed by the AKP. While the government argues that the reforms will help meet requirements for EU membership, critics argue that giving parliament more power to appoint judges forms part of the AKP's attempt to seize control of the judiciary.

' Religious differences are evident when comparing AKP-endorsed Islam with what is sanctioned by the Iranian regime'

A further concern relates to the Gaza aid flotilla in May 2010, which resulted in the biggest chill in Turkey's relations with Israel in the 61 years the two states have had diplomatic ties. The flotilla, organised by the Free Gaza Movement

and a Turkish group called the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Aid (IHH), planned to deliver aid to Gaza in defiance of an Israeli blockade.

The Iranian press reported widely on Western allegations that Tehran was directing the flotilla initiative. However, Iranian officials and pro-regime media have strongly rejected Western charges that Iran was advancing Islamism in Turkey. Iran's *Raja News*, a prominent supporter of the policies of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said in an article Western charges are "bizarre", given that "90 per cent of the Turkish population is Muslim and a majority of them have clearly rejected [secular] Kemalism that does not even allow for their wives and daughters to wear the hijab [Islamic headscarf] in schools and universities".

Raja News predicted that this will not be the last Western charge against the AKP but stated that Turkey's re-orientation toward Islamism is a natural phenomenon rooted in religious beliefs and customs of Turks "who despite decades of Kemalism are turning to Islam".

This sort of enthusiasm for 'Turkey's rediscovery of its Islamic roots' can be detected across pro-regime Iranian media and statements of officials in Tehran. However, much of this sympathy for the AKP government is driven by the Iranian regime's urgent need to extricate itself from any further regional isolation, given that ties with its Arab neighbours remain tense and the lack of a resolution to Tehran's nuclear standoff with the UN can only exacerbate Iranian isolation.

The general interpretation by Iranian analysts about the drivers behind Turkish foreign policy re-prioritisation also focuses on strategic objectives. For example, Iran's Centre for Strategic Research [Markaz-e Tahghighat-e Estrajatik], a main research bureau of the Iranian state, which is affiliated with the Expediency Council and headed



by Hassan Rohani, who is an opponent of Ahmadinejad, reported in 2008 that 'Turkey's 2023 vision' (stated national goals) is multifaceted. However, not once did the 49-page report mention the role of Islam in Turkey's ambitious political and economic objectives, which that are intended to coincide with the 100th year anniversary of the Turkish Republic on 29 October 2023.

Instead of seeing the AKP's approach toward Tehran as shaped by the party's Islamist propensities, the majority of Iranian analysts tend to focus on Ankara's material economic and foreign policy aims in dictating its approach toward Iran. This partly reflects Turkey's often wavering stance toward Iran from 1979 onwards. Such analysis is also informed by uncomfortable foreign policy scenarios that the Iranian government has been forced to confront in recent years. One recent example concerns Russia's decision to support UN Security Council Resolution 1929. Russia also opted not to sell the important S-300 anti-missile systems to Iran despite years of Iranian outreach to Moscow.

Religious affinity

Intra-Islamic religious differences have increasingly become a factor influencing relations between Iran and some Arab states. For example, the Sunni-Shia divide is visible in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with elements in both states charging the other with sedition among the global Muslim population. The Sunni-Shia divide has also had an impact on relations with Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, all of which have at some point charged Iran with Shia proselytisation among their populations.

This Sunni-Shia schism is not found in Iranian-Turkish relations, despite the fact that Turkey is a large Sunni-majority country and up until the early parts of this decade the authorities in Ankara complained about Iranian sup-

port for radical Turkish Islamist groups. Nonetheless, religious differences, even though they are not rooted in the Sunni-Shia split, are evident when comparing AKP-endorsed Islam with what is sanctioned by the Iranian regime.

Iranian concerns

The Iran-based Shia News, which covers the affairs of Shia peoples, has been at the forefront in raising the question of Turkey as a role model for Muslims. On 25 April 2010, the outlet reported that a survey in Turkey "shows that 20 per cent of people in this Muslim country have never in their lives held a Quran in their hands" and raised questions about the depth of Islamic values in Turkish society.

'The AKP wants to avoid confronting Iran because it seeks to maintain the historic power parity'

A week later, Shia News reported the "opening of Turkey's first nudist hotel in this nominally Muslim country" and disapprovingly said the Turks "do not let any commercial opportunity go to waste". From the Iranian regime's perspective, these are exactly the kind of social freedoms and realities in Turkey that have necessitated a crackdown on Iranian tourism to Turkey.

For example, it is now illegal in Iran to advertise or have direct flights to the city of Antalya, on the Mediterranean coast of southwestern Turkey, which for a while had become a magnet for young Iranians seeking to temporarily flee the country's austere social rules and ban on alcohol consumption.

By the end of 2009, bilateral tourism

flows were overwhelmingly in favour of Turkey, as 1.5 million Iranians travelled to Turkey against 30,000 Turks who visited Iran that year.

On other occasions, suggestions have been made in Iran about likely Turkish collusion with Western interests in shaping popular attitudes among Muslims, although they do not go as far as labelling Turkey a 'Trojan Horse'. As one example, on 27 October 2009 the conservative, although anti-Ahmadinejad, Iranian newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* published a damning article about 'Westernising' Turkish institutions operating in Afghanistan.

The newspaper, which is close to former Iranian president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, said "the Turks have set up theological classes that undermine the general perception of Afghans toward their own Islamic and religious beliefs and alienate them from their beliefs, instilling in them beliefs favoured by Turkey" and alleged that the real funding for Turkey's efforts in Afghanistan came from the West that used the Turks as a safe conduit for propagating the "sort of Islam that the West would like to see blossom".

These examples underline the types of concerns that elements in the Iranian regime have about the nature of Turkish society and policy drivers in Ankara. In other words, when it comes to Turkey, there is hardly a uniformity of opinion in Tehran. Nonetheless, these concerns are far from constituting a critical mass that can spoil the presently flourishing political, economic and security relations between the two countries. ■

Further Analysis

■ Turkey's relations with Iran begin to flower

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