

## **Turkish - Iranian Relations: Prospects and Uncertainty**

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### **Abstract**

Iran and Turkey are two key regional actors that separately play a role in multiple geographies in terms of both geographical weight and tenets of identity. Geographically speaking, these two countries are simultaneously influential in political-security issues in different areas such as the Fertile Crescent. When it comes to identity, by making a link between their principles and values to regional issues, especially guiding ideological movements and non-state actors, Iran and Turkey try to influence the strategic areas. In fact, these two actors seek the point at which their national interests are met in the interconnection of these two aspects of regional policy. Accordingly, instability has become the main character of their bilateral relations. The objective of the present paper is to study the scope and the way various variables are applied by Turkey and Iran in the region and in their relations with each other. Hence, the main question of this article is what issues do the factors affecting the relations between Iran and Turkey concern about and how much is the sphere of influence of these variables? In this regard, it will be discussed that their future relations would be influenced, more than anything else, by the value-ideological issues, the balance of power, and their regional roles whose scope and dimensions are determined by the interaction with other regional and international actors.

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## **1. Introduction**

There has been almost a certain border between Iran and Turkey since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin onwards, this border has been one of the world's oldest political boundaries. Even when the United States of America and many European nation-states did not still exist in the international arena, there was a political border between Iran and Turkey, which has still remained more or less constant. With the Ottoman defeat in World War I and their submission to “the Armistice of Mudros” on October 30, 1918, strained relations between Iran and the Ottoman were suspended for a relatively long period and the modern history of the Republic of Turkey and Iran went through a similar path: their first measures in line with westernization initiated the alienation from this process, because none of them managed to realize their national ambitions solely based on Western standards. Suspension of westernization in Turkey distinctively came out of the Turkish conservatism which provided the opportunity for pragmatic cooperation with the West. In the meantime, Iran preferred to choose a revolutionary fever with a strong anti-West tone.

After the 1979 revolution, the great and wealthy Iran started using a traditional Islamic approach to overcome its Shiite isolation in the vast Islamic world. Hence, the feature of “effectiveness” was added to this collection. Faced with the post-Cold War identity crisis, Turkey reacted to this issue with a multidimensional approach and concentrated on the development of relations with its traditional areas of influence from the Balkans to the Caucasus (Friedman, 2015). Thus, the pro-West Turkey and the anti-west Iran were on an intangible competition with each other in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and even Afghanistan and Pakistan in the post-Cold War period.

However, Turkish influence in the Muslim world was realized after the Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) (AKP) took power in this country. Until November 2002, Turkey had shifted all its energy and attention to the West and paid less attention to the Middle East. As a NATO member, the most important role of Turkey was to protect the southern border of Western Europe against possible invasions of the Soviet Union rather than to inhibit a revolutionary Iran. Therefore, Turkey’s elites dedicated all their attention to strengthening their ties with the West (especially joining the EU), rather than establishing intimate links with the Middle East countries.

With the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Middle East underwent fundamental changes and a transition to a new political-security order in which all major regional players including Iran and Turkey ran a competition in the region to establish “new roles” for themselves. From this point onward, Turkey and Iran, as two non-Arab regional powers, played a more serious and decisive role in the Middle East developments. Although their roles are quite different, their movements in the region cannot be compared with any other period. Nowadays, Turkey and Iran do not share many in common in terms of strategic

objectives in their surrounding area, as they pursue different, and generally conflicting, guidelines in some regional subsystems, including in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. In fact, it can be stated that the nature of the interaction between Iran and Turkey has largely decided the fate of the Middle East molting, which involves a set of ideological issues including challenging each other's political system and religious legitimacy as well as geopolitical competitions in regional crises.

Accordingly, the inability of Iran and Turkey to reconcile their interests with each other has potentially undermined their strong ties over the past two decades. Although the political and tourism considerations of the two countries are intertwined, the way they use their choices to consolidate their power and influence in the region and to overcome their differences has been faced with many ups and downs.

Until two years ago, regional conflicts were restricted to Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon; no one would imagine that the Yemen crisis is one of the issues discussed between Iran and Turkey, considering the fact that neither Iran nor Turkey is Yemen's neighbors. This suggests serious realities that exist between the two countries. In order to better understand this political environment, the present paper aims to answer the questions how can the regional role of Iran and Turkey in the Middle East be evaluated in new conditions and to which side will the relations between these two neighboring countries be directed? Additionally, the key question is how will the current relations between the two countries be changed in the future? Another point is that whether recent disagreements between Ankara and Tehran are temporary and transient or reflect more fundamental conflicts between them that will probably culminate in a serious collision between Iran and Turkey.

## **2. Resetting and Short-Lived Friendship**

AKP's efforts to develop relations between Turkey and the Middle East implicitly paved the way for improvement of Iran-Turkey ties. Nonetheless, the growing trend of relations between Turkey and Iran during AKP power was primarily based on the same concerns about the Kurdish minority as well as their common economic interests, not necessarily due to religious and ideological affinity. Despite sermons preached on the Muslim solidarity and common political interests, major strategic and ideological differences existing between Iran and Turkey beneath this superficial shell have minimized the chance of this reconciliation.

The adoption of Islamism by Turkey, coincided with its reduced dependence on the US and more independence on what is called as the main interests in the Middle East- that is the expansion of economic and political alliance in the Middle East has changed the foreign policy of this country since 2005. Performance of AKP during the elections of 2007 and 2011, declined power of Turkey's pro-West army to advance the national security strategy, appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu to the Foreign Minister in 2009, and pursuance of the

“zero problems” policy are some of the developments which have redirected Turkey’s attention towards the Middle East.

It is apparent to the Middle East observers that Turkey expanded its influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam using the existing social context and making more intimate bonds with Kurds and Sunnis. Yet, Turkey was one of the countries that did not accept the consequences of the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and, by proposing the idea of the “national inclusive government”, practically opposed the election results and the numerical superiority in favor of the Shiites led by Iran. Although, in 2008, Ankara and the first government of Nouri al-Maliki agreed on the establishment of the “Supreme Council for Strategic Cooperation”, development of bilateral trade relations, and political talks between Iraq and Turkey and relations between the two countries was on a promising path, parliamentary elections in Iraq and appointment of the new prime minister in 2010 posed some problems. In this election in which Iran supported Nouri al-Maliki and Turkey backed Ayad Allawi, Nouri al-Maliki took the office for the second term and this provoked the wrath of Turkish authorities. In addition, it triggered changes and tensions in relations between Iran and Turkey, as Turkey’s involvement in the Syria crisis in 2011 was considered a response to Iran and a compensation for Turkey’s for failure in Iraq developments (Rezaei, 2014: 4).

However, with the aim of avoiding chaos in Iraq, strengthening its influence in the region and the world, and preventing the growing tensions between Iran and the US, Turkey promoted itself as a mediator between Iran and the US, particularly marked by efforts made to fill the gap between the US and Iran in May 2010 when the US was seeking to adopt a new round of sanctions against Iran's nuclear program. At the time, Turkey and Brazil persuaded Iran to sign a declaration demanding Iran to further limit its nuclear program. Although this deal did not materialize due to the US sabotage, it made for more closeness of Ankara to Tehran (Sanger and Slackman, 2010: 6). Deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel in 2009 and consolidation of Erdoğan’s power strengthened economic, political, and intelligence relations between Iran and Turkey. It also led to the rejuvenation of Iran’s traditional approach to attracting Turkey’s cooperation and reduction of competitions during the isolation of Ahmadinejad's second term of presidency.

While Turkey and Iran continued competing in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, they managed to draw a distinction the political issues and their increasing trade and economic relations which increased the value of economic ties between them to the brink of \$ 20 billion per year, as a result of economic sanctions against Iran (Aljazeera, April 16, 2016; Demirtaş, 2016: 3). Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran's regional competition dates back to the initiation of the Syria crisis in 2011 when Turkey tried to prevent Iran's influence in the axis of resistance by raising the strategy of “Muslim Brotherhood Belt”. Hence, it has been difficult for Iran to imagine how Turkey has to get prepared for playing its significant role in the region.

Accordingly, there have existed verbal conflicts and an all-out competition between these two countries in recent years.

Anyway, major differences can be here observed in regional policies of the two countries. Turkey is oriented to issues of the so-called “New Middle East” and its interest in this strategy has strengthened during the past decade. That’s why Turkey lacks a remarkable history in its regional foreign policy and does not follow a specific principle. By contrast, Iran has a history of nearly four decades in regional issues and always pursued certain strategic principles. Thus, this arrangement and the new perception of power and influence in “the Fertile Crescent”, taken as the “Near Abroad” by both Iran and Turkey, have placed relations between the two countries in the midst of identity, historical, and security issues, as in the sixteenth century. However, to understand why the “competitive interaction” model which had dominated Iran-Turkey relations for decades has now shifted to a “competitive conflict” in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, it should be discussed that how the Middle East conditions after Arabic uprisings changed both countries understanding of “national interests” in favor of “vital interests” and how this assumption, coupled with a historical mentality (mainly about Turkey), has become part of their identity-political and even geostrategic policy.

### **3. Arab Spring and New Layer of Competition**

The phenomenon of Arabic spring caused the emergence of a tripartite system in the Middle East consisting of Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The second and third sides of this system (Turkey and Saudi Arabia) have generally deployed against Iran. In 2011 when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Arabic capitals like a music star and spoke about democracy in Turkey, it seemed that nothing could stop Turkey's foreign policy (Peterson, 2015: 1). At the time, Turkish political authorities and intellectual elites assumed that the Muslim Brotherhood will come to power in the region, and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), as an Islamist movement, was in thought of leading these movements. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had publicly repeated this many times. In addition, Mohamed Morsi, the then president of Egypt, Rached Ghannouchi, whose party (Ennahda) had won the Tunisian elections as an anti-Assad movement, Tariq al-Hashemi from Iraq, and Khaled Meshaal as the representative of Hamas victoriously attended the AKP congress in Ankara in 2012. That’s why AKP tried to introduce itself as the Muslim world leader at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, almost all have come to the conclusion that Turkish foreign policy has been accompanied by a major ambition following Arabic uprisings in the Middle East, in a way that it should be regarded as a new era in regional

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1. Refer to Erdoğan’s speech in this congress: Başbakan Erdoğan'ın AK Parti 4. Olağan Büyük Kongresi konuşmasının tam metni, Eylül 30, 2012, [http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/basbakan-erdoganin-ak-parti-4.-olagan-buyuk-konusmasinin-tam-metni/](http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/basbakan-erdoganin-ak-parti-4.-olagan-buyuk-kongresi-konusmasinin-tam-metni/) 31771 # 1

behaviors of this country. The changing political geography of the Middle East and escalated domestic violence in Syria and conspiracies in Iraq forced Iran to strengthen its regional policy once again. The second wave of Arabic uprisings, especially in Libya and Syria, fully established a fundamental change in the regional behavior of Turkey. Unlike crisis in Tunisia and Egypt, they did not merely rely on talks anymore and immediately went into action (Marcou, 2013: 4). In fact, anticipating the decentralization of power in Syria after Assad and hoping to take advantage of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq, Turkey sought to expand its sphere of influence among the regional Kurdish population and major commercial centers like Aleppo and Mosul, the cities that are still remembered as the lands of the Ottoman Empire in historical memory of Turkish policymakers, by establishing a cordon around the northern part of “the Fertile Crescent” (Rezaei, 2014). Nonetheless, Turkey was at odds with Iran to achieve such a position and reduce the influence of Iran in the regions.

In the opinion of Iranian authorities, this policy of Turkey from 2011 onwards was very similar to the approach of American neoconservatives during the administration of George W. Bush who sought to give birth to the new Middle East out of military attacks and persistent insecurity. At the same time, Iran, through active involvement in Iraq, prevented western countries from achieving an easy victory in order to decrease the possibility of an attack on Iran after the fall of Saddam. Iran's support for Lebanon in 2006 can be also analyzed in this framework as a response to the Israeli attack (Rezaei, 2017: 43). In other words, when the Turkish government sought to put into action the regional strategy of “Muslim Brotherhood Belt” from Syria and Iraq to Egypt and Tunisia and tried to ride the wave of regional developments relying on its proponents, Iran adopted the same procedure, which was previously implemented against the US in Iraq, to confront with Turkey in Syria, because Iranian officials believed that the aggressive policy of Turkey could adversely influence Iran’s regional ties and relations. In fact, an imbalance in Iran's regional relations caused Iran to activate its patterns shifted to the network deterrence.

Therefore, the Syria crisis and Iraq war, as the two major variables, activated different choices of Iran and Turkey in their bilateral relations. While Turkey was pursuing the Syria crisis as a matter of human rights and an opportunity to increase its power and influence in the region, this was interpreted opportunistic as well as a serious threat to itself and its strategic ally, Hezbollah. This is due to the fact that Iran considers Syria a separation wall that should prevent destructive effects of the Arab Spring and the fall of states which are friends of Iran and also keep away any risk from its official borders (Larrabee and Nader, 2013: 2-3). Although the most important ideological challenge in relations between Iran and Turkey was Ankara’s efforts to replace its own political strategy in the Middle East as a rival for the Iranian model, Iran did not enter the issue of regional developments as far as this strife and conflict was at the

intellectual level and Turkey had not laid the necessary groundwork for armed groups in Syria and Iraq. But then, the issue became more complicated and verbal clashes between the two sides took an upward turn, as both countries accused each other of waging a sectarian war; the “Shiite Crescent” was raised, on the one hand, and the “Neo-Ottoman Orientation” was discussed, on the other hand. However, insecurity in Turkey marked a historical reality. After the rise of the ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in the Middle East, many international observers expressed the view that Syria has become Turkey’s Afghanistan and Turkey has played a role similar to that of Pakistan, through facilitating the movement of extremists across the border to enter Syria and making this country insecure. Accordingly, Turkey is now the only NATO country that shares borders with the ISIS, as well evidenced by the continued bombings and suicide attacks in this country.

This blunder of Turkey activated the hidden capacity of the Kurds. Iran and Turkey, which host the first and the second greatest Kurdish populations, fear of the separatist feelings of the Kurds. Since the failure of peace negotiations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in July 2015, this conflict has entered a bloody phase and involved large parts of the southeast of Turkey. Iran also has long been faced with sporadic and transient riots of the Kurdish guerrilla movements. In 2004, “the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan” (PJAK) emerged based on the leadership and ideology of the PKK. Although this part called a truce in 2011, it is still operating despite all occasional conflicts and disputes. In the middle of 2016, Iran witnessed the revival of the apparent and perhaps short-term unrests in the Kurdish region of Iran. The driving force of some attacks has been probably the attempts of Iran's regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia to avenge what they considered the interference of Iran in their internal affairs.

Although Iran and Turkey have always cooperated with each other in dealing with the Kurdish-centered nationalistic sentiments, it is about five years that this cooperation has been supplanted by competition. Turkey has supported Masoud Barzani, the President of “the Kurdistan Regional Government” (KRG). On the opposite side, Iran backs Jalal Talabani, the leader of “the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan”, who is the rival of Barzani. In the north of Syria, Iran and Turkey have also supported different Kurdish groups. However, theoretically speaking, although the strengthening power of the PKK and its affiliates is a threat to both Iran and Turkey, extensive land seizure by the “Syrian Democratic Union Party” (PYD) which is affiliated to the PKK and its military branch, that is “the People's Protection Units”, that directly act against Turkey’s interests has caused the authorities of Ankara to make accusations against Tehran. But the reality is that Russia has played a leading role in this matter and has openly expressed its support for a federal system of government in Syria. However, Ankara has noticeably kept silence about Russia’s involvement in the defeat of rebel fighters in Aleppo who were supporters of Turkey. By contrast, Iran is presented as a great enemy by Turkish authorities

and propaganda against this country laced with religious and historical appearance clearly reflects Turkey's efforts to stimulate public emotions (Idiz, 2016: 3-4).

Therefore, three main factors can be distinguished to be effective in creating such an atmosphere of tension between Iran and Turkey. Firstly, both Ankara and Tehran have governments that are committed to leadership-seeking views. Second, with the end of the Ba'ath regime dominance in Iraq and the emergence of Arabic uprisings, now it seems that "the Fertile Crescent" and two countries of Iraq and Syria have become more vulnerable to the competition of power between Iran and Turkey more than ever. In the past, Iran and Turkey used to compete to fill the political gap caused by the termination of the Mongol Peace, and today they have once again entered a competition to resolve the political gaps existing in two poor countries of Iraq and Syria (Cagaptay and Evans, 2013). Third, this political gap has further increased due to the prospect of reducing the influence and domination of the US which was informally considered the superior foreign power in the Middle East for more than half a century.

#### **4. The impact of Turkish Coup d'état Attempt**

Turkish coup d'état in July 2016 was considered a turning point in the improvement of Iran-Turkey relations. At first, the coup concerned Iranian authorities and that's why Tehran began to support Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, just a few hours after the event. In fact, Iran was the first country that declared its support for the legitimate government of Turkey, because this event was an alarming prospect of violent conflict in a large and major neighboring country that would be to the benefit of the Kurds living in Turkey and probably excite ethnic minorities in Iran, especially the Kurds. The possible collapse of an Islamic state, albeit a Sunni regime, was a dangerous heresy from the standpoint of Tehran. Considering this presumption, the nature of Iran's reaction to Turkish coup d'état attempt is interesting.

The Iranians stressed their support for the current elected government of Erdoğan and immediately compared it with the Syrian Bashar al-Assad's government-elect as the basis for their desire for the continuation of his rule and the upcoming election in Syria (under the obvious premise that the election result would ensure the continuity of the Syrian regime). Iran adopted such a stance with regard to the signs of the days before the coup anticipating that Turkey would change its position about the withdrawal of Assad from power. However, this comparison was not Turkey's cup of tea. Moreover, the first stance condemning the coup in Turkey, Iran had referred to the possibility of foreign intervention in the event, apparently aimed at warning Turkey about the real intentions and objectives of the West, particularly the US and some Persian Gulf countries. Iran found the opportunity to make Turkish authorities understand that although Iran is a permanent rival for Turkey, it is not among the seasonal and occasional friends of this country.

Changes in Turkish foreign policy, which dated back to before the coup d'état attempt in this country, are of great importance in this context, such as putting an end to the crisis in relations with Israel. According to senior Israeli and Turkish officials, the process of normalization of relations between the two countries was not influenced by the coup d'état attempt in Turkey. By the way, Turkey tried to improve its relations with Russia after a serious crisis resulting from the shooting down a Russian jet by Turkey in November 2015. Changes in relations between Turkey and Russia and understanding the fact that Turkey can adopt more flexible stances on the continuation of Assad regime in exchange for preventing the advance of the Kurds in northern Syria are important to Iran for two reasons; first, to resolve the crisis in Syria and, second, in the contest with Saudi Arabia to influence in the region. In fact, developments in the territory of Iran and Turkey go beyond the merely bilateral relations. Most likely, Saudi Arabia will not easily give up the restoration of its relations with Turkey which has started since the enthronement of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in January 2015. The willingness of Riyadh to continue close ties with Ankara can be interpreted as the agreement of Saudi Arabia with Turkey's request for arresting the Turkish military attaché in Kuwait in King Fahd International Airport on a charge of involvement in Turkish coup d'état attempt. Iran also intends to make use of the need of Ankara for expression of success in its regional policies and more focus on internal affairs.

However, a development of the same importance was the growing and non-expert optimism about the improvement of relations between Turkey and Iran after the coup which has been primarily exaggerated. It should be accepted that this transformation had already started and it cannot be merely considered the result of a conspiracy to overthrow the Turkish government. Nonetheless, this coup and its rapid failure could partially contribute to the improvement of relations between Iran and Turkey. This occurred despite the fact that Iran, like Russia as the main supporter of the Assad regime in Syria, was considered a regional problem to Turkey until recently. Several factors have played a role in the occurrence of this transformation. First of all, the Turkish government during the past few months has come to the conclusion that the ISIS, not Assad, should be the main area of concern for this country in Syria. Increased terrorist attacks of the ISIS in Turkey, led to the death of dozens of people, made Turkish authorities concern about the "Pakistanization" of this country (Rezaei, 2014 a: 3).

Thus, for a short period, Assad became a marginal problem for Turkey. Change in Turkey's stance towards Assad regime was marked by statements of Binali Yıldırım, Turkish Prime Minister, on the third of July when he said, "I'm sure that we will normalize our relations with Syria in the future ... we need it. We have normalized our relations with Israel and Russia. "I am sure that we will also normalize our relations with Syria." (Shaheen & Chulov, 2016: 5). This change of stance by Turkey paved the way for improvement of relations with Iran for a short term. Secondly, the Syria crisis has made it crystal clear to

Ankara that, in the case of Assad regime fall, the Syrian Kurds and especially the "Syrian Democratic Union Party" who have close ties not only with the PKK but also with the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), will be the winners of Syria dissolution. With reduced control of the Syrian government over regions bordering Turkey, the "Syrian Democratic Union Party" has dominated a large part of the Kurdish areas in Syria. However, any form of independence for the Kurds is rejected by Iran and Turkey.

Third, the implementation of the nuclear deal and the lifting of the UN Security Councils, the European Union, and the US sanctions against Iran were taken an opportunity by Iran and Turkey to strengthen their trade relations. We know that trade between the two countries was limited by imposing financial constraints on Iran, because these constraints did not allow Turkey to pay the cost of imported energy resources from Iran and, in turn, the transfer of oil and gas to Turkey was restricted. Traditionally, Turkey imports about a quarter of the oil and one-fifth of gas supply from Iran (EIA, August 6, 2015). The lifting of sanctions, based on the predictions of both sides, will probably lead to the tripling of the volume of trade between the two countries, up to \$ 30 billion by 2017 (Cetingulec, 2015: 11). While these factors have made for even closer ties between the two countries, Turkish coup d'état attempt further expedited this process. The government of Hassan Rouhani and the foreign policy apparatus of Javad Zarif wisely recognized that a successful coup will cause instability not only in Turkey but also in the entire Middle East and, undoubtedly, will bring about very serious consequences. This can be understood as Javad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister, contacted with his Turkish counterpart at least four times all through the night (Hashem, 2016: 2) to boost the morale of Turkish government. The Iranian elites empathy with and support for the government of Turkey had a profound psychological impact on Erdoğan and other Turkish senior policymakers for a short time. Iran's position was in stark contrast to the stance of the United States and the European Union whose leaders showed delayed and weak supports for the Turkish government. In most cases, they were interested in talking about the Turkish government non-abuse of its emergency forces after the coup rather than welcoming its success in suppressing the coup. This did not remain obscure to Ankara that, instead of its official allies, Iran and Russia, with both of which Turkey had major differences and conflicts, supported the government and people of Turkey at the most adverse situation (Ülgen, 2016: 4). Therefore, Iran found a new and multiplied credit to Turkey. It is noteworthy that cleansing of Fethullah Gülen agents and associates of key administrative and military positions after the coup was considered an upbeat development by Iran. According to Tehran authorities, it is not the matter whether Gülen's supporters were involved in the coup, but what Iran cares is that Gülen's supporters are known to be anti-Iran and anti-Shia (Erdem, 2016: 6), as they are influenced by the history of rivalry between the Ottomans and the Safavids as well as their disgust and hatred of Shia Islam. As a result, cleansing of the remnants of Fethullah Gülen movement of Turkish

policymaking circles causes the relations between Iran and Turkey to be less ideological and more pragmatic.

However, after the liberation of Aleppo, both countries have enhanced their local partners and affiliates in battle fronts of Mosul, Tal Afar, and Raqqa, those who are working hard to take the pulse of developments after the war. Although Iran and Turkey both have tried to emphasize their common interests such as defeating or at least marginalizing the ISIS and preventing the strengthened power of the separatist Sunni Kurds, deep suspicions about intentions of the other party to benefit from the turmoil have deterred them from adopting necessary measures in order to quell the flames of conflict.

### **5. The Prospect of Future Relations**

It is no secret today that the sectarianism caused by the Shia and the Sunni involved in the Syrian civil war and intensified conflict and confrontation between Iran, the Arabs, the Turks, and part of the Kurds have demolished the foundations of regional order and led to the loss of security and stability. Some believe that Iran has managed to make use of loyal forces and the sectarian card as part of its external defense system in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen (Nasr, 2016: 9). It is obvious that such claims are not much based on expert views, and any independent observer of the Middle East affairs can easily recognize that the Islamic Republic of Iran will suffer the spread of sectarianism. Since Iran is surrounded by many Sunni countries, the sustainability of its internal and regional objectives can be realized only through cooperation or at least coexistence with the rest of the countries in this region. On the other hand, Turkey's anti-sectarianism claims do not change the fact that this country, as a regional pro-Sunni power, has posed many problems for Shia actors. Nevertheless, this is a good sign neither for Turkey's broader goals, for example establishment of a regional alliance, nor for its internal campaigns, with regard to the large population of the Alawites and the Kurds living in Turkey who have recently being threatened by the ISIS under the pretext of Turkey's support for Sunni movements.

It is crystal clear that neither Iran nor Turkey can put an end to unbridled sectarian tensions that were initiated about 6 years ago. In other words, no one else alone cannot return this situation to the past status. Persian Gulf principalities are fearful of the material and spiritual influence of Iran in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other countries of the region. Hence, they have counted on a military force and a dogmatic religious power to prevent and roll back Iran's influence and what they refer to as "interference in the internal affairs of the Arabs (Dillow, 2016: 5). This combination of geostrategic competition with sectarianism, according to which the Arab power seek to push back the non-Arab claimants of regional leadership- Iran and Turkey- has resulted in a volatile regional situation that will not make for regional stability at all. Worse, Ankara is not apparently interested in finding a common point or stopping the current cycle of conflicts, as it has proposed no precise definition of the first

step necessary to establish stability in the region and form a new and stable regional order based on the national interests. Despite these problems, there are very suitable contexts and reasons for Tehran and Ankara to take advantage of détente opportunities in order to achieve new areas of cooperation. The Syria crisis has caused Iran and Turkey to be at odds with each other. However, these two countries have common challenges together either during the current situation or after the subsequent agreements. Looking to the future, determining the parameters of cooperation is of special importance for addressing the following three main challenges:

First, separatism of the Kurds is a real possibility both in Syria and Iraq and, yet, a serious threat to Iran and Turkey. “The Kurdistan Regional Government” in Iraq, strongly supported by the US, is still playing with the idea of independence. Syrian Kurdish fighters have asserted their autonomy in their own area with the military support of the US and Russia, although it seems that these supports be trimmed by defeating the ISIS. The PKK has resumed the campaign for military attacks against the Turkish government. Iran will be closely witnessing these developments while concerned about part of the Kurdish minority living in this country and well aware that the PKK and its Iranian version, PJAK, seek to overthrow the existing political regimes in Turkey and Iran. This is evidenced by recent clashes in the northwest of Iran (Erdbrink, 2016: 7 and Cook 2016: 3).

Some Turkish analysts argue that Russia's attempts to place itself in the position of the US through heavy military presence in Syria and less involvement in Iraq is considered a short and long-term threat to the regional objectives of Iran and Turkey, despite the current strategic relations between Tehran and Moscow. In other words, Russia had already worked on neutralizing the activities of Turkey and Iran for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and now is making use of its influence in Syria and Iraq, areas that were traditionally under the influence of Iran and Turkey (Özel, 2016: 2). On the other hand, the recent escalation of conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia would compound Iran-Turkey relations. This highlights the issue of the pipeline to Turkey and internal interaction with the large Azeri minority to Iran. Therefore, in addition to short-term concerns about the future of Damascus, Iran will probably find itself in the same position as Turkey. If the intimate ties between Washington and Moscow come true during the presidency of Donald Trump in a way that Iran's regional interests are ignored by Russia, this will affect Iran-Turkey relations both politically and economically.

The third point is “Turkey's strategic shift” which is a serious threat to Iran. This has increasingly suggested the instability or variability of Ankara's approaches, hostilities, stances, and cooperation with Iran in recent years. Hence, part of the political and strategic decisions adopted by Erdoğan and his entourage over the last few years has changed regional coalitions or stances that were seen mainly as an alignment. In this period, the least political and security cooperation is observed between Iran and Turkey (Rezaei, 2016: 2), although

considerations and realities of economic and trade ties between the two countries, as a counterweight, have helped them to maintain their relations.

It should not be forgotten that Turkey is really undergoing a harsh time in shaping its regional and foreign policy. Ankara constantly changes its stance; confront Russia and then apologizes, once declare that will join Saudi Arabia in Yemen war against Iran and then immediately enters political and economic talks with Iran. On the other hand, Turkey has gotten involved in an Iranian-Arab issue (the three islands dispute) with all its sensitivity to public opinion in Iran. The three islands dispute is a historical issue and it is not at all to the benefit of a third party to enter, as the Americans have never seriously adopted a stance on this issue. The Turks believe that the best position for them is achieved when they manage to establish a balance in their relations with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and Iran in a way to gain economic benefits from all of them while not fully committed to any of them. The method for establishing such a balance should be selected delicately because many measures should be taken in order to maintain it in the current highly tense situation in the region.

Certainly, Turkish coup d'état in July 2016 has added to the complexity of Ankara's foreign policy. The main problem of Turkish foreign policy is its political and ideological nature and its restriction to decisions taken merely by the president. For years, Turkish foreign policy has been based on a set of bureaucratic principles and objectives. Rapid changes in approach will undoubtedly challenge the foreign policy of any country. Many experts in Turkey believe that this country gets involved in issues and problems beyond its capacity and the traditional definition of regional issues. Currently, Turkey's participation in the war in Mosul itself has become a major internal issue. Thus, Turkey is faced with a multifaceted dilemma and feels that must confront the ISIS as security threat, while it is equally concerned about transfer of power to a post-ISIS regime which may increase Iran's influence, cause the autonomy of the Kurds or their independence on its southern borders, and change the Sunni-Shia balance in Iraq and Syria in favor of Iran.

Consequently, as a broader strategy, Iran and Turkey should fight against terrorism and try to respect the classical Sunni-Shia equations in the region, which probably make for stability in the turbulent Middle East of these days. Nonetheless, both countries are still far away from giving up their claims in a broader geostrategic competition. In fact, Turkey's movements to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and reconciliation with Israel may eliminate any glimmer of hope for cooperation with Iran. Both Turkey and Iran, for different reasons, have recently attempted to have Europe as their partner in overcoming some of their problems and difficulties, such as the influx of refugees into Turkey and Iran's economic isolation. Progress in these areas could pave the way for further collaboration, provided that the European Union comes to the conclusion that accepts both Iran and Turkey among its allies in the fight against the twin threats of terrorism and immigration. In this regard, the

agreement between Turkey and the European Union that Turkey joins the Iran-Russia axis in Syria not only can be followed by positive humanitarian effects but also can help remove the EU's concerns, especially about protection of civilians in Syria.

Iran still has both the ability and capacity to introduce itself as the alternative energy supplier to the EU and Turkey. On the other hand, with the rise of the anti-Iran right-wingers in the US, there is no hope for European investments to increase the economic benefits of the nuclear deal. By contrast, Turkey has always been seeking to strengthen its geopolitical and transit situation in order to facilitate the transfer of Iran's gas to western markets. Iran to overcome the effects of international sanctions is considered a trade opportunity by Ankara, given that both Iran and Turkey need alternative dimensions to achieve higher economic growth (Makovsky, 2015: 2-3).

## **6. Conclusion**

Uncertainty is a popular explanation for an assortment of regional events between Iran and Turkey. In this regard, the field of competition and conflict between two countries in the Middle East is decentralized, turbulent, massive, and rapid. Hence, Turkey and Iran can achieve the comprehensive goal of regional security and stability in bilateral relations only by finding common points and grounds. The aftermath of Arabic uprisings from 2011 onwards has shown to have no accomplishment but irregularity, human sufferings, and external factors threatening the internal affairs of both countries. Different results of the unsuccessful coup in Turkey can be also added to the long list of changes in the region that will have consequences in the future. It is expected that the effects of developments in Syria are important to different regional actors, especially the balance of powers between the Sunni coalition Saudi Arabia is trying to establish and the Shiite coalition led by Iran. Regarding the possibility of a cooperation agreement between the United States and Russia on Syria during the presidency of Donald Trump and possible changes in Turkey's stances in opposition to the preliminary removal of Assad until further notice, developments in Syria may affect Israel's view of the overall situation of Iran. The possible success of Iran and Russia in ensuring the continuation of Assad regime during the transitional period will probably allow Iran the opportunity to consolidate its permanent presence in Syria, something that will be definitely challenged by Turkey. This new phase in relations between Iran and Turkey is likely to be extremely significant for the entire Middle East for this simple reason that some Arabic countries, except Saudi Arabia, are outside the sphere of power due to civil unrest, so that Iran and Turkey will remain as the two sides of the power triangle in the region.

Defining specific principles in relations, both Iran and Turkey are naturally trying to bargain in order to increase their interests. Expansion of relations with Turkey is desirable to Iranians in any situation; a stable Turkey ruled by a non-

military government is in favor of Iran. Although Turkey is also aware the value and significance of Iran, involvement in party issues and distrust in political rivals have forced the Turkish president and his cabinet to adopt hasty policies and stances which are not pleasant to the public opinion in Iran. If the Islamic Republic of Iran is viewed as a threat by Turkey, this can dramatically damage relations between the two countries. Under these circumstances, relations between Iran and Turkey in the coming years could somehow reflect their relations in the 1990s.

The important thing about the future of relations between Iran and Turkey is related to internal policies and possible stability or disability in Turkey. We know that Turkey is at a critical historical juncture and that's why it is too early to say which direction the country moves towards. If the previous trends go towards multi-polarization and authoritarianism, this country may reach a certain point. But if a national unity based on a shared commitment to all walks of life and ethnicities find the upper hand, the political climate of Turkey will improve and the necessary context for the resumption of more stable relations with Iran will be provided. Nevertheless, hastiness in policies of the current leader of Turkey should not stimulate Iran to show reactions of the same kind. Relations of Turkey with Iran will ultimately find its point of balance despite all the ups and downs. If Iran and Turkey continue to restore their historical role as a regional power in the next few years, they will be able to challenge their new movements within "the Fertile Crescent", and their competition for influence in the Arab world would cause the experts of strategic predictions to yearn, from the bottom of heart, for the days easier than the current era.

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