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Samir Al-Arki

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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64  
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: [info@eis-eg.org](mailto:info@eis-eg.org)



## Turkish-Iranian Relations: Developments and Implications

Samir Al-Arki

The coincidence between the celebrations marking the national reconciliation in Gaza and the visit by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Tehran – although it was not pre-arranged – reflects a state of excessive liquidity that the region has undergone since the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions. Therefore, we are trying hard to understand the current situation and draw a rough picture of the region's likely future before being surprised by new developments for reshaping the whole scene. In fact, everyone knows that the expected changes will not be limited to loyalties and alignments, because the big players want to restructure the region both geographically and demographically, taking advantage of its ethnic, ideological, religious, and political contradictions.

The developments in the Turkish-Iranian relations on the one hand, and the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation on the other are deeply related to the regional events, and will undoubtedly affect the whole region amid the tension among Gulf countries, the vague situation in Yemen, the foggy scene in Libya, in addition to the deep crises in Iraq and Syria and the suspicious role played by Cairo and Abu Dhabi as guarantors of the Zio-American project.

If we put what has happened in Gaza aside, the Turkish-Iranian relations are one of the main factors that could determine the political, cultural, and ethnic balance in the Middle East region. Also, Turkey and Iran constitute two important crossroads between the Arabs on the one hand, and Central Asia and the Caucasus on the other.

### Turkish-Iranian cooperation & overcoming historical, sectarian differences

The relations between Turkey and Iran are very competitive, for historical, sectarian, and regional reasons. However, the two countries are well aware that despite their indirect competitiveness, cooperation has always dominated their bilateral relations due to deep-rooted stability traditions that state the impossibility of an outbreak of



direct confrontation between them. However, they are strongly competitive in areas such as the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Levant.

But in the past six years, the relationship between the two countries declined sharply due to the tremendous discrepancy in the Iraqi and Syrian files. Ankara adopted a sharp stance against the head of the regime in Damascus, Bashar Al-Assad, calling for his departure, and supported the revolution of the Syrian people. Also, Turkey strongly attacked the existence of the sectarian armed militias linked with Iran. Furthermore, it tried to establish a Sunni alliance in cooperation with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia to curb the Iranian expansion in the region. In April, 2016, Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz visited Turkey for participation in the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul, where he held talks with Erdogan in Ankara ahead of the summit. This was Salman's second visit to Turkey in six months, and about four months after an official visit by Erdogan to Riyadh.

Many observers expected that the intimacy in the Turkish-Saudi relationship at the time could further develop in the operational, political, economic, and military fields, especially after the signing of military agreements in late 2015, Turkey's participation in North Thunder Exercise early in 2016, as well as participation of units from the Saudi army in military exercises on the Turkish territory. Also, Turkey has been supportive of the Kingdom in the face of the U.S. JASTA bill.

Therefore, everyone expected to see the fruits of cooperation between the two countries in regional files, especially the Syrian and Iranian files, but unfortunately nothing happened at all. Instead, there has been a sharp decline in the relations between the two countries, starting with the failed coup attempt in July 2016, and ending with the crisis of the siege on Qatar with its regional dimensions which were open to all possibilities. At that time, Turkey realized from the early hours of the crisis that it would be the next target after Qatar siege unless it moved quickly to surround and face the crisis. So, Turkey acted immediately without hesitation, activating its military agreements with Qatar, and then sending some of its military units to Doha. This step was behind the early abortion of a plan for launching a military attack against Qatar – a fact that was confirmed by the Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-



Jaber Al-Sabah during his visit to the United States last September. So it was not strange that the Saudi response to Erdogan's repeated calls upon the Kingdom's leadership, especially King Salman, to lift the siege, was very negative.

## Variables:

In view of these facts, Turkey had to reconsider its foreign policy and regional alliances under a number of variables, including:

- The accelerated steps towards the establishment of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria, extending from Al-Hasakah and Kubani, west of the Euphrates, to Afrin in the east, along the Turkish border.

Turkey has clearly accused the United States of supporting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and providing them with modern military equipment. Ankara has insisted that these military formations are only a Syrian extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It also confirmed that a great part of these weapons finds its way into Anatolia for use in military operations against the Turkish state. In spite of Turkey's repeated calls upon the U.S. for the need to evacuate the area west of Euphrates of the Kurdish militants, but unfortunately they found no positive response. Instead, Washington sent some of its military units around the city of Manbij, Aleppo, where Kurdish gunmen have been stationed after capturing the city from ISIS, to prevent Turkish troops from advancing towards the area.

- Turkey needs serious understandings with both Russia and Iran in order to be able to move in the north of Syria, especially in the province of Idlib in light of the de-escalation areas agreement that emanated from the Astana talks.

- The referendum on the secession of Iraq's Kurdistan region on Sept. 25 2017, which paves the way for its independence, opening the door for similar claims in the north of Syria and south of Turkey as well as Iran, as a first step in the path of the creation of the Greater Kurdistan with all its implications and effects on the countries of the region.



- The collapse of the Arab system, the erosion of its basic components, the fragmentation scenarios of major Arab countries, and the foggy situation in the Gulf which led some of its political units to support the separatist tendencies of the Kurds to spite Turkey and punish it for supporting Qatar – all this made Turkey realize that the re-positioning of relations with Iran has become an urgent priority to face the repercussions of the referendum. Turkey, Iran, and Iraq activated a series of punitive measures against Erbil, including the closure of ground crossings and air navigation, and threatening to resort to the military option. The Turkish troops launched military exercises on the border with Iraq, and were later joined by units from the Iraqi army. Moreover, the chiefs of staff of the armies of Turkey, Iran and Iraq have exchanged visits to discuss possible alternatives in response to the Kurdistan referendum. Also, Turkey's Erdogan visited Iran on October 4, where the Iraqi and Syrian files were on top of his agenda during his talks with President Hassan Rouhani and Iranian officials in Tehran.

Ankara's re-positioning of its foreign policy was not limited to its relations with Tehran, but it also included the Turkish-Iraqi relations after a period of tension, against the backdrop of the controversy over the Turkish military base in Bashiqa, near Mosul.

But the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan region led the two countries to re-evaluate their relationship, especially at the military level, where the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi army Osman al-Ghanmi, visited Ankara and met with his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar, and agreed to start joint military efforts to address the common repercussions.

Unlike Tehran, which enjoys a relatively comfortable strategic position, due to its alliance with Russia, and possessing strong pressure cards that it can skilfully exploit in the region's conflicts, Ankara is concerned about the exposure of its Arab depth at least on the official level and the threats of establishing a Kurdish state near its southern border. Moreover, the Egyptian regime is leading active moves related to the natural gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean. Perhaps, the most recent of these activities was the joint military exercise between Egypt, Israel, Greece and Greek Cyprus.



## Development of cooperation and its regional consequences

Turkey's foreign policy has been characterized during the past few years by sharp shifts, not far from Turkey's pragmatic approach. This can be seen clearly in the Turkish-Russian relations; but the relationship with Iran is not expected to witness a similar shift. Anyway, the alliance between the two countries is expected to develop due to the following reasons:

a) The great setback that has affected the Turkish-Arab relations, especially following the great failure of the Arab spring revolutions, which Ankara bet on for forming new alliances and counter Iranian ambitions in the region, as well as Turkey's failed attempts to develop its relationship with the Gulf countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia.

b) Iran enjoys a better position in both Iraq and Syria, which are considered the strategic depth of Turkey's national security. Iraq's Popular Mobilization and Hezbollah forces enjoy high freedom of movement due to their legitimized presence through the governments of Baghdad and Damascus. These militias also have strong readiness in terms of training and armament compared to the Free Syrian Army (supported by Turkey). Therefore, chasing the secessionist (PKK) elements requires coordination with Iran to prevent any likely clashes. Iran also enjoys the same advantage in Yemen through the Houthi forces, in light of the retreat of active Sunni movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood due to several reasons.

c) The unwillingness of the Turkish decision-maker to bear the consequences of establishing secessionist entities along the country's southern border before the crucial local, parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2019, in application of the latest constitutional amendments. Therefore, any military adventure may cost the ruling AK Party so much in the next elections.

d) Although the military cooperation between the two sides occupied the greatest share of attention during the visit of Turkish Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar to Tehran – prior to President Erdogan's visit – however, the economic file imposed itself on the talks between the presidents of the two countries. During a joint press conference with Rouhani, Erdogan indicated his dissatisfaction with the volume of trade exchange



between the two countries, amounting to 3 billion dollars, and expressed his desire to raise it to 10 billion dollars.

Therefore, the implications of developments in relations between the two countries will be evident in several important files in the Middle East, first and foremost the Kurdish file, where the two countries will use all available tools to block the secession of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which could be taken as a model and repeated in the two countries.

The Iraqi government has announced a military campaign to recapture the city of Hawija, to the west of Kirkuk, from the grip of ISIS, which represents the repositioning of the Iraqi forces and the popular mobilization militants on close contact lines with the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. This is considered an implicit warning to the government of Erbil, and reflects Tehran's determination (through its support of Iraq) to face the expected Kurdish expansion in the region.

Also, the development of relations between Turkey and Iran will have its repercussions on the Syrian issue, especially as the two sides, in addition to Russia, have concluded the agreement of de-escalation zones, allowing the Turkish forces to enter Idlib while the Russian forces station outside the city. However, it is not yet clear how the two countries will be able to resolve the file of Bashar al-Assad, as their views are sharply divergent about his fate.

The crisis in Yemen will also be an arena for the expected repercussions of the developing Turkish-Iranian relations, in light of the failure of the Saudi-led coalition to win the two-year-old war there. Iran is likely to intensify its support for the Houthis in Yemen to force Riyadh to exclude the military option and return to the negotiating table in light of the declining Saudi-Turkish relations, the lack of cooperation between the two countries, and the UAE role in Yemen that raises many question marks.

## Finally

The two countries have been successful in putting an (interim) end to their differences while the Arab world is unable to play an effective role in solving its dilemmas or



building effective regional alliances. Instead, the Arab countries have undermined all opportunities for re-structuring the Arab system through the abortion of the Arab Spring revolutions and the crushing of its active forces. However, the Arab governments seem unable to recognize the fact that the Arab region will never return the situation prior to 2011, and that the solution of its issues has become in the hands of the two main regional powers: Turkey and Iran.<sup>(1)</sup>



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(1) The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS.