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**TURKEY-IRAN RELATIONS  
AMID THE US RETREAT FROM THE REGION**

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Turkey's emergence as an independent political and military power has created many challenges to the regional and global powers deeply involved in the Middle East, North Africa and the Caucasus region. Iran, which has since the 1979 revolution been aggressively promoting its interests in the region, is also at odds with Turkey's interventions in the neighbourhood, especially in Syria and Iraq, and more recently in Azerbaijan. Both Turkey and Iran aspire to influence regional events and compete with each other. Turkey's growing profile in the last two decades has created a challenge to Iranian ambitions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Azerbaijan, all of which have significant Shiite populations except Syria, which is predominantly Sunni but ruled by Bashar al-Assad, who belongs to the Alawite sect that is an offshoot of the Shiite sect.

Despite their substantial differences and increasing geopolitical competition, Turkey and Iran are also a good example of peaceful coexistence in which both are able to wisely compartmentalise their trade and economic relations and various issues of friction. They know how to get along on issues of mutual interest and avoid open confrontation.

### *Ankara's and Tehran's different foreign policy approaches*

This is the first time in many decades that the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular has witnessed something other than the Iran versus Saudi Arabia dichotomous discourse. The Turkish discourse is fundamentally different from Saudi Arabia's hardcore Sunni Wahhabism and Iranian Shiite Khomeinism. Turkey is widely acceptable to the region's Sunnis and also agreeable to many followers of the Shiite doctrine, especially the non-Persian Shiite Muslims of Azerbaijan, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon.

Turkey's dependence on Iranian oil and gas has sharply declined in the last few years. Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran and Turkey's state policy of energy diversification to reduce dependence on Russian and Iranian supplies created a massive decline in Iran-Turkey bilateral trade from approximately \$11.5 billion at its peak in 2017 to \$6.35 billion in 2019. The bilateral trade further reduced in 2020 to \$2.28 billion because of Covid-19 during the January-September period. On the other hand, Iranians overtook Iraqis as the top property buyers in Turkey. Turkey's energy dependence on Iran is expected to further decline after the Turkish discovery of natural gas reserves in the Black Sea, and Ankara is able to buy relatively cheaper CNG from the US, Qatar and Algeria<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike Iran's strategic reach, which is limited to some geographical areas, Turkey's natural reach goes far beyond the Middle East as a true multi-regional or Eurasian power. In the last few years, Turkey has emerged as a balancing power in many places. The West wants to counter Iran on its nuclear programme and here Turkey has an important role to play due to its wide-ranging relations with Europe.

Ankara may be forced to find other avenues for its foreign policy expansion as Europe is abandoning Turkey. Both Turkey and Iran aspire to lead the Muslim world and both have distinctive approaches as to how to accomplish this objective. Turkey's ruling AK Party-led government, the opposition and the population at large reflect the unified national outlook about Iran. Turkey's open society and democratic culture are admired across the Muslim world. The Iranian regime, on the other hand, cannot survive without its policies of Shiite expansionism. The Iranian system binds government, opposition and population in an uncompromising foreign policy unlike Turkey, where flexibility and accommodation are normal.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-27/iran-turkey-trade-has-been-upended-by-trump-and-covid-19-charts>

Turkey has taken a lead in challenging Islamophobia, whereas Iran is relatively soft on the issue because it faces pressure from Europe on the nuclear issue and has tense relations with the US. Iran's priorities are more sectarian. The revolutionary regime has made ideological inroads among the Shiite population centres of the region as it styles itself and acts as a protector of the global Shiite population. Its politicians and clerics boast control of the four capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa. Turkey, on the other hand, has a military presence in northern Iraq and northeast Syria and enjoys considerable acceptability in Lebanon, especially among the Sunni population of the country.

### *At odds in Syria ...*

Turkey's military operations in northeastern Syria, where Iranian forces and Iran-backed Shiite militias are fighting alongside the Assad regime forces, is one of the major points of friction between the two countries. The December 2019-March 2020 Assad regime offensive on the rebel stronghold of Idlib with the assistance of Iran-backed militias has soured relations between Ankara and Tehran. In Syria, it will be impossible for Iran to find another Bashar al-Assad. Even a replacement within the Bath party won't be acceptable to Iran, while Turkey would like to see Assad ousted and a more inclusive Sunni-led democratic political order emerge in Damascus that would obviously be friendlier to it. Turkey's current priority is to have a stable border with Syria and it is working to eradicate terrorist activities of Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate People's Protection Unit (YPG) in the areas controlled by militants in Syria.

Facilitated by the US invasion of Iraq and Russian military intervention in Syria, Iran started encroaching the Aleppo, Mosul and Idlib regions, which Turkey sees as its historic sphere of influence. Having pushed the ISIS out of the towns of Jarablous, al-Rai and Dabiq near the Turkish border in the Operation Euphrates Shield between August 2016 and October 2019, Syrian rebels backed by the Turkish army began to advance southwards to fulfil President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's pledge to establish a virtual safe zone in northern Syria. They cleared the strategically important al-Bab city east of Aleppo, held by ISIS but coveted by the YPG as a land bridge between its Kobani and Afrin cantons. Later, they further cleared important settlements such as Afrin, Azaz, Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn from the Syrian army and Iranian-allied forces, as well as, on the other side, from the US-backed YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) north of Aleppo.

Turkey reported that an Iranian-made drone killed four of its soldiers near al-Bab in 2016<sup>2</sup>. Iran condemned Turkey's defiant reaction against the Syrian regime's advances in the Idlib region in February 2020 when at least 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in Syrian military airstrike. The Turkish counter-offensive, which killed hundreds of Assad regime forces, Iran-backed forces and destroyed vital military infrastructure of the Assad regime, finally enforced a virtual no-fly zone in the Idlib region.

Turkey and Iran share the goal of defeating ISIS and pushing back against the US-backed and YPG-controlled federal system in northern Syria. They both fear US policies will divide Syria. However, huge differences persist in their priorities. Turkey's aim is to defeat the PKK-YPG and Iran wants to save the Assad regime.

### *... And in Iraq*

Iraq is another place where Turkey and Iran have opposing interests. Although both Turkey and Iran seek to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, ensuring Shiite-majority rule is critical for the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iranian-made-drone-involved-in-attack-on-turkish-soldiers-in-syria-106965>

Iranian influence in Baghdad. A more inclusive system that takes care of the marginalised and dispossessed Sunnis in Iraq's governance is important for Turkey. In Iraq's complex riddle, Iran is actually facing a much more robust competition from Turkey than from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.

The Iran government maintains religious, cultural and historical links with Iraq and treats it as a natural extension of Iran. Tehran wants domination in Iraq, unchallenged from the West and Turkey. That is why Iran and its proxy forces in Iraq oppose Turkey's military presence in Iraq.

Iran was perturbed by Turkey's resolve on a role for the militia it has trained at its Bashiqa military base east of Mosul, the Sunni Arab al-Hashd al-Watani (also known as "Mosul Knights"). Turkey believes Baghdad's opposition to a Turkish role and presence in northern Iraq comes from Tehran's control of the Iraqi government. Turkey countered Iran-backed Shiite militias' intent to push toward Tel Afar, an old Ottoman garrison town west of Mosul with a majority Turkmen population. The prospect of Shiite militias entering Tel Afar alarmed Ankara, which deployed tanks and artillery in Silopi close to its border with Iraq to warn off intervention in case of reprisals against the city's Sunnis. That provoked a harsh response from the Iraqi prime minister, who warned: "We do not want war with Turkey ... but if a confrontation happens, we are ready for it."

Ankara also sees Tehran's hand in the presence of PKK and YPG fighters in Sinjar, west of Mosul close to the Syrian border. On the other hand, Iran views Turkey's intervention in Mosul to create a Sunni-dominated autonomous federal region in northern Iraq as a move to counterbalance Iran's influence elsewhere in Iraq. Turkey believes the Iranians neither recognise Turkey's legitimate interests nor demonstrate any flexibility on key issues, such as a post-Assad transition or equitable power sharing in Iraq and Syria.

### *The Caucasus conundrum*

Turkey has close ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political ties with Azerbaijan: their bilateral relations are at the highest level, and their military cooperation is robust. Turkey's staunch military and diplomatic backing of Azerbaijan in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war played a key role in Baku's decisive victory. Ankara and Baku describe their relationship as "one Nation, two States", promising to give full support to Azerbaijan. Turkey and Azerbaijan have historically been close to the Western bloc. The former has the second largest military in NATO and the latter maintains solid diplomatic and economic ties with the US and its allies.

However, Turkey's relations with the West have become more complex in recent years. In addition, the importance of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline (BTC) and Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which connects the two countries via Georgia bypassing Armenia, complement the strategic ties.

Armenia has a territorial dispute with Georgia and its border with Turkey is closed. This leaves Armenia with a functioning border only with Iran. Due to economic interests as well as historical ties, it has close relations with Tehran. Moreover, a large number of Armenians live in Iran and maintain close ties with Armenia. Iran is actually considered one of the informal allies of Orthodox Armenia, because in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran has always been closer to Armenia.

Some media speculated that Iran supplied the Armenian rebels in Nagorno-Karabakh with weapons in order to weaken the position of Baku. However, the authorities in Tehran categorically rejected these accusations<sup>3</sup>. Iran insists it is neutral and is trying to position itself as a mediator in

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/iran-denies-transferring-military-equipment-to-armenia/1989383>

order to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict between the two countries. Regardless of the diplomatic rhetoric, the fact is that Iran harbours a certain degree of distrust towards Azerbaijan, although it shares ethnic and religious closeness with that country. Therefore, the question arises how is it possible for Iran to be closer to Orthodox Armenia and not to Muslim and Shiite Azerbaijan. Most Muslims in Azerbaijan are Shiites. Linguistically and culturally, the Azerbaijanis are closer to the Turks. About 30 million ethnic Azerbaijani Turks live in Iran, mostly in the northern provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan. Although they are quite integrated into Iranian society — even Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei's mother was Azeri — due to occasional ethnic tensions caused by aspirations for a greater degree of autonomy, Iran fears that, with the help of Western powers - especially Israel with which Azerbaijan has close diplomatic and strategic relations - Baku could encourage Iranian Azerbaijanis towards secession because of the Iranian support for Armenia.

The aforementioned fear of Iran significantly influences the direction of its foreign policy towards Armenia, with which Tehran has historically cultivated close trade, cultural and political relations. Iran's close ties with Russia also affect Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan. All this speaks of the complexity of relations in the South Caucasus region, the complex relations of regional actors, their interests, fears and aspirations.

### ***A Turkish involvement in Yemen and Lebanon?***

Turkey has not yet forayed into Yemen due to the direct Saudi involvement but it will be compelled to enter the Yemen conflict if the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue their destructive role and the problem becomes more regional. The unresolved conflict of Yemen, which is becoming a turf war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is also immersed in a civil war that confronts the established power against the Houthi rebels, Shiite militias that try to undermine the UAE and the Saudi-supported government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. Turkey's regional adversaries of the so-called Arab quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) find themselves frustrated by the prolonged warfare in Yemen. UAE-backed separatists of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which aspires to secede from Yemen, have prevailed over the UN-recognized and Saudi-backed Yemeni government of Al-Hadi in recent battles. With Saudi Arabia's backings, both sides signed a power-sharing deal in November last year; however, none of the steps undersigned could be realized in one year. Saudi Arabia's failure to unite the two factions has become a bigger hindrance to launch a broader military campaign against Iran-aligned Houthi militia in northern Yemen. In such a situation, it seems that Turkey will be compelled to challenge the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition of the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, which has also imposed a political and economic blockade on Qatar in 2017 after accusing Doha of supporting terrorism and extremism.

The overstretched war in Saudi Arabia's backyard has already drained Riyadh's resources and engulfed it in war fatigue. Turkey's participation in the conflicts of Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan has been successful both militarily and politically, as Turkish interventions realised some kind of ceasefire agreements reached in all the three countries. An online campaign was launched in June after Turkey achieved major military success in Libya, indicating that the electrifying effects of such success may have travelled deep into the heart of Yemen arousing potential support for Turkey. Turkey supports the internationally recognised government of al-Hadi and the Al Islah party also supports the Hadi government and Saudis have already mended ties with Al Islah. Turkey has huge influence in Yemen and there are political factions like Al Islah that support Turkish policy, so there is indeed room for Turkey to get involved in Yemen.

In Lebanon, public protests have exposed Iran's vulnerabilities. Demonstrations flared in September 2019 against bad economic conditions as the country grappled with a deepening financial crisis. Countrywide protests broke out again after a massive explosion at Beirut port killed nearly 200 people, injured 6,500 and damaged most of the city's buildings. Protests in

Lebanon have also threatened Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Lebanon: the most powerful foreign armed group loyal to Tehran is silently pushing to quash political upheaval which challenges Tehran's deep-rooted influence in the country.

Total absence of Saudi Arabia, one of the main architects of the 1989 Taif accord which ended the civil war in Lebanon, in the country's political arrangement<sup>4</sup>. The devastating Beirut explosion provided ample space for Turkey to strengthen its position as a key political and economic actor in Lebanon. The Turkish vice president and foreign minister visited Beirut immediately after Beirut blasts and received a rousing welcome from Lebanon's civilian population.

Cross-regional alliances involving ever more aggressive actors are exacerbating mistrust and deepening sectarian rifts that prolong the standoff. There is an alternative. Ankara and Tehran could de-escalate and re-energise cooperation. There are instances of cooperation between the two regional powers. In 2017, Turkey and Iran, along with the central government in Baghdad, forged a joint strategy to thwart western and Arab-backed independent referendums in Northern Iraq. They have effectively stopped the plan to partition Iraq. Turkey and Iran also coordinated to fight the PKK terrorist group and its Iranian offshoot Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). A joint declaration was issued by both the countries in September this year to coordinate efforts to fight PKK in Iraq<sup>5</sup>. Coordination was also seen when Iran supported Turkey's efforts to help Qatar faced with the Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain sponsored blockade.

### *The US factor*

Turkey, which has been a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member since 1954, was a rather loyal ally of the US until a decade ago. The US invasion of Iraq and Turkey's assertion of its national interests under the AK Party since 2003 created first challenges for bilateral relations. Turkey and Brazil played key roles in brokering the Iran nuclear deal five years before the signing of the JCPOA nuclear deal by the Obama administration in 2015.

The Gaza Flotilla, US anti-Turkey policies in Syria and other places started creating a wedge between the US and Turkey. Ankara has started taking independent routes in its foreign policy. Turkey's relationship with Iran is one such example where Turkey has been trying to deal with Iran bilaterally and independently, away from the not-so-predictable US policy towards Iran.

Turkey has bypassed US sanctions and kept trading with Iran in the first round of sanctions imposed by the Obama administration before the signing of JCPOA. It even helped Iran to receive payments of its oil sales to countries like India and South Korea. Turkey's state-owned Halkbank was charged in the US federal court for its alleged participation in a multibillion-dollar Iranian Sanctions Evasion Scheme<sup>6</sup>.

The Trump administration's policy of US troop withdrawal from the warzones has compelled Turkey and Iran to create as many facts on the ground as possible before the Joe Biden administration assumes charge in January and sets its Middle East policy in general and Iraq-Syria policies in particular.

Iranian authorities welcomed the victory of Joe Biden in the presidential election. Iranians are relieved that Trump lost the White House and the victory of Joe Biden may usher in a new beginning in Iran-US relations. Biden is expected to carry on from where he left as Vice President in the Obama administration. His tenure is anticipated as the third term of the Obama administration. Iranians hope the JCOPA would be revived. On the other hand, the Turkish President congratulated Biden only 3 days after his victory and also thanked Trump for his

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<sup>4</sup> <https://peacemaker.un.org/lebanon-taifaccords89>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/09/c\\_139353446.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/09/c_139353446.htm)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/turkish-bank-charged-manhattan-federal-court-its-participation-multibillion-dollar-iranian>

personal efforts to improve US-Turkey relations. Turkey, especially President Erdogan, experienced bitter personal relations with the then vice-president Joe Biden. A 2019 video of Biden in which he was advocating support for Turkish opposition to dislodge the Erdogan government has stirred Turkey's concerns about the new US administration.

In any case, the Biden administration would need Turkey's help to implement its new Iran policy. Removal of Iran sanctions would provide Turkey with a huge opportunity for trade and commerce in Iran. Yet, sanction-free Iran with money in its coffers and US and western tacit backing may become emboldened to back its Shiite militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, where it may clash with Turkey's interests. Iran's realignment with the West will significantly decrease Russian influence on Iran.

If sanctions are to be lifted on Iran and the JCPOA becomes reality, the US would try to get the Gulf Arabs to normalise their relations with Iran and encourage them to jointly counter Turkey's growing involvements in regional conflicts.

### ***Conclusions***

The difference between Turkey's and Iranian influence in the region is quite significant. Turkey's military involvement in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan is overt and officially sanctioned by the Turkish parliament and under national military uniform, whereas Iran uses covert means through proxies to exert its influence in the region. It is true that Iran's last four decades of work, nurturing political groups and militias based on its ideology, have expanded its influence in the region. This is reflected in the relentless rise of Iranian influence among Shiite communities across the Middle East, South Asia and as far as Nigeria in Africa. The regime in Tehran cannot survive for long without continued Shiite expansionism. The anti-government protests in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon show that Iran is losing its sheen and Iran-backed militias mainly view the popular protests as an existential threat to the political order in Tehran.

Iran's policy towards Turkey is paradoxical. While Tehran declared support to Turkey's military intervention to prevent the fall of the internationally recognised government of National Accord in Libya, Iran's close ally Bashar al-Assad lent his full support to warlord Khalifa Haftar.

Political leaders of both countries also face the challenge to manage public feelings. Due to Iran's policies in Syria and Iraq, there were times when anti-Iran sentiments rose exponentially in Turkey, especially at the height of Aleppo and Idlib offensives of the al-Assad regime against the Syrian opposition forces<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, sectarian killings of Sunni Muslims in Iraq created public outrage in Turkey. On the other hand, Iran's clerical regime adopted a hard line whenever the country's interests clashed with those of Turkey in the region.

However, it seems that despite all the concurring differences over regional issues, Turkey wouldn't like to see a forced regime change in Iran. A puppet regime of the West and Saudi Arabia-UAE like that of al-Sissi in Egypt will bring more troubles to Turkey. In the same way, Iran would prefer a Turkey that is charting its own independent policy than toeing the US or western policies in dealing with Tehran.

As strong regional powers and age-old neighbours with some common security concerns, both Turkey and Iran know that they will have to live with the outcome of the conflicts around them. Iran has lost the primacy to find sustainable solutions in conflicts where both countries are at opposite ends. A viable solution will require a regional power balance acceptable to both.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/eef438bc9e894660b015d0f5e113f194>

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