Iran-Turkey: From Economic Partnership to Regional Rivalry

Farhad Rezaei

Abstract
While Iran and Turkey have had a long history of rivalry which has hampered the more recent efforts to shape the region according to their respective visions they have also had a history of cooperation and robust economic ties. During the sanctions regime imposed on Iran for its controversial nuclear program Turkey was one of the countries that, without breaching international sanctions, assisted Iran’s economic survival by allowing private business transactions to continue. Since Tehran was seeking a reliable trading partner and Ankara needed access to the Iranian oil the arrangement was mutually beneficial and this brought the countries closer together.

Despite this the countries have been at odds over a number of issues - Iran’s support for the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, which has endangered Turkey’s influence in the region; Iraq, which has also been a field of growing competition between Tehran and Ankara since Iran began trying to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of American forces; and the Sunni-Shi’a sectarian conflict fueled by Iran which has drawn both countries into the conflict in Iraq on opposing sides. The objective of this article is to review the areas of both conflict and cooperation between Iran and Turkey and to offer solutions that might help develop a robust policy that will help prevent missteps that could harm their mutual interests.

Keywords
Iran; Turkey; Regional Conflict; Regional Cooperation.

Author’s contact: Dr. Farhad Rezaei, Center of Iranian Studies (IRAM), Ankara, Turkey.
Introduction
The history of Iran and Turkey, two of the most powerful nation-states in the Middle East, has been characterized by years of rivalry which remains the case today as the two countries seek to shape the region according to their respective visions.

Since Turkey is quite western oriented, the Iranian Islamist revolution of 1979 created tensions with Ankara because Turkey’s ruling secular elite viewed Iran’s new regime as a threat. This perception was in part fueled by the belief that Tehran was the main sponsor of terrorist groups operating in Turkey as part of its intention to export its particular brand of Islamism to neighboring countries. In turn, given Turkey’s secular ideology and its membership in NATO, Iran’s new regime viewed Turkey as a threat to its revolutionary objectives.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini viewed Turkey, a secular state and a member of NATO, with great suspicion and, in a speech made on August 24, 1986, Khomeini said:

In the Islamic world, the Ulama were led to believe that they had to obey the tyrants, oppressors, and the holders of naked power. Certain lackeys preferred to obey Ataturk, who destroyed the rule of Islam, instead of obeying the orders of the prophet. How can a reasonable mind accept this? Today, the Ulama [in Turkey] who are the puppets of the Pharaonic forces, teach the people the orders of God and the prophet, but at the same time call on them to obey Ataturk...How can one argue that this is consistent with the notion of [Islamic rulers] whom God ordered us to obey? Obviously, [Islamic rulers] in the real sense can only be those who follow the order of God and his messenger.¹

Khomeini’s message also affected Iran’s policy towards Turkey. For instance, in his visit to Turkey in the summer of 1987, Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi criticized the modernization and ¹Quoted in Ergun Ozbudun, “Khomeinism - A Danger for Turkey,” in David Menashri (ed.), The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 244-245.
reforms introduced by Ataturk and refused to pay his respects at his mausoleum, a protocol requirement for visiting dignitaries. Not only did Mousavi say that he would prefer to visit the memorial of Mawlama Jalaleddin al-Rumi - a very influential Turkish-Iranian theologian in the thirteenth century - in Konya but the Iranian media also attacked Ataturk by writing offensive articles about him. While the Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal did not respond the Turkish media did by criticizing Khomeini and writing the same type of articles about him. In another case, in November 1988 on the 50th anniversary of Ataturk’s death, the Iranian embassy in Ankara declined to lower its flag to half-mast to commemorate the Turkish leader, an action that was described as “unforgivable insolence” by the Turkish officials and media.

The Iranians were also greatly upset when, in 1996, Turkey signed the Military Training Agreement with Israel, which outlined a range of joint training and information-sharing activities and allowed Israeli access to Turkish airspace for training purposes. Other bilateral agreements between Israel and Turkey provided for “technology transfer, joint research, intelligence-sharing, strategic policy-planning talks, and bilateral and multilateral military exercises (patterned on the two ‘Reliant Mermaid’ search and rescue exercises held in cooperation with the U.S. Navy in 1998 and 1999) in which Jordan was also to participate as an observer. In addition, Turkey and Israel signed bilateral arms transfer and defense-industrial agreements which included Israel’s modernization of 54 Turkish F-4s for $650 million, a subsequent deal for the upgrade of 48 F-5s, and co-production of the Israeli Popeye II air-to-ground missile. There have also been reports about negotiations regarding Turkish participation in the Arrow anti-ballistic missile (ABM) program, co-production of Merkava tanks, and upgrades to Turkey’s aging M-60 tanks. Although Turkish officials asserted that the agreement did not include the formation of a military bloc and will not be directed against any countries, Tehran saw itself directly affected by this deal and announced their opposition to the rapprochement between

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Turkey and Israel arguing that the bilateral military agreement was a direct threat to Iran. The position taken by the Iranians was understandable because, for Iran, Turkey’s further military cooperation with Israel would have brought the latter to its borders.\(^3\)

Turkey and Iran, however, have a history of cooperation and robust economic ties. For instance, during the Iran-Iraq war, as Sunni Arab states and Western powers united behind the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Turkey maintained a neutral position and considered Saddam’s Regime to be a more ominous threat. Consequently, Iran did not pursue a confrontational policy toward Turkey, which enabled both countries to preserve the status quo between one another.\(^4\)

Relations between the two countries began to improve following the Gulf War as they pursued cooperative measures to address issues that threatened the territorial integrity of both states, particularly the ‘Kurdish question’. Following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Turkey in November 2002 Ankara-Tehran bilateral relations blossomed. Although the leading figures in the AK Party called their political vision ‘conservative democracy’, the Iranians perceived the new government as having been formed by a party with an Islamic agenda and welcomed this government in their immediate neighboring country, thereby stressing the importance they paid to improving relations with regional countries in almost all aspects.\(^5\)

During the past decade a number of factors have motivated the two states to enhance their bilateral economic relations especially Tehran’s desire for a reliable trading partner, Iran’s struggle to overcome the crippling economic sanctions imposed by Western countries and Ankara’s need of access to Iran’s energy resources. Within the period of 2000 to 2011 bilateral trade between the two partners was reported to have increased from $1 billion to $16 billion and the number of Turkey-based Iranian companies increased from


\(^5\) Ibid.
300 to more than 2,000 firms. Within Turkey’s framework of ‘zero problems’, ongoing relations between both countries have been based on ‘mutual pragmatism’, rather than competition, due to the mutual understanding that both parties will benefit more and preserve their interests by doing this.6

Although there have been major divergences and challenges, Ankara and Iran have even more shared objectives and common interests which could push them closer rather than break them apart and enable them to overcome their differences. During the sanctions regime imposed on Iran because of its controversial nuclear program, Turkey was one of the countries that assisted the Iranians to save their economy. Although Turkey did not actually breach the international sanctions, private deals helped Iran to prevent its economy from undergoing a total collapse. President Erdoğan repeatedly vouched for Iran’s compliance and peaceful intentions with its nuclear program at a time when there was growing alarm regarding the threat of Iran developing a nuclear arsenal. This was a significant psychological boost for the Iranians as the key question was Iran’s lack of compliance with IAEA safeguards. After the JCPOA was reached, Turkey was among the nations that welcomed the deal and lifted sanctions previously placed on Iran regardless of the fact that some of its allies had opposed the plan.7

The mutual benefit brought the two countries closer since Tehran was seeking a reliable trading partner and Ankara needed access to Iranian oil. Even after the nuclear agreement was signed with Iran on July 14th 2015, the trade relations have remained robust making it possible for Turkey to once again play a major role as a bridge between Iran and the West. This has become particularly important as Western countries try to find ways to reach into Iran and tap into its $500 billion economy.8

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7 Farhad Rezaei, Iran’s Nuclear Program: A Study in Proliferation and Rollback (NY: Palgrave Macmillan), 2016.
Furthermore, Iran is still an important partner for Turkey in other areas. Increased tourism, for example, which could help revitalize commercial activity in Turkey has intensified as a trade activity between both countries in recent years. According to reports from Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 1.7 million Iranians visited Turkey in 2015 ranking Iran as the sixth leading source of visitors to Turkey from among 90 countries.\(^9\)

On the other hand, Iran has been a major beneficiary of such trade since Turkey is a key customer for Iranian oil and gas with Iran being the second largest gas exporter to Turkey. While this has brought in considerably higher revenues for Tehran, Turkey has the potential to be a critical player in bringing in further foreign investments or directly investing in Iran’s gas infrastructure in order to modernize and increase production. This may force Iran to be cautious about implementing policies that might be counterproductive to Turkey’s interests out of the belief that Ankara might decrease its energy purchases from Iran and turn to other countries in the region, such as Qatar, for gas supplies.\(^10\)

Iran has probably taken into account that Turkey will more than likely become a hub for the supply of gas and oil to European countries and this is something that will facilitate trade between Europe and Tehran. The energy sector, however, is not the only sector in which Iran is trading with Turkey and this is attested to by the estimation that, while trade between Ankara and Tehran was about $10 billion in 2015, it will probably increase to nearly $30 billion in two years according to Riza Eser, chairman of the Turkey-Iran Business Council.\(^11\)

The above friendly relations between the two neighbors have, however, recently been strained due to the fact that both countries have been at odds on a number of issues in the Middle East, most importantly Iran’s support for the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad,


Iran’s only ally in the Middle East, who could seriously endanger Turkey’s influence in the region. Iraq has also become an arena of growing competition between Turkey and Iran as Iran has been trying to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the American forces in Iraq.

The Sunni-Shi’a sectarian conflict fueled by Iran has also drawn both countries into the conflict in Iraq on opposing sides. Turkish leaders have always warned of such a threat and have thus sought to reduce sectarian tensions by ensuring that Turkey’s diplomatic missions to Iraq have always included visits not only to the Sunni but also to the Shia leading figures of the country. In contrast, Shia Iran, which is in competition with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of Islam, has used the sectarian divide to further its ambitions.\(^\text{12}\)

Other sources of tension between Iran and Turkey have been the Kurdish and Palestinian issues. While Iran’s efforts to support Palestine and oppose Israel have been exploited to enhance its popularity in the Arab world Turkey’s assertive support for the Palestinians has been an important factor that has contributed to the deterioration of Iran’s popularity in the Arab world. This particular Turkish policy has been interpreted by Tehran as a threat to Iran’s role as the main state sponsor of anti-Israel movements.\(^\text{13}\)

There are a number of other issues that are causing tensions between Turkey and Iran including the fact that Turkey, which considers itself to be a leading regional leading power due to its democratic political system and high economic growth rate, has become a model for the political development of countries in the region.\(^\text{14}\)

While the historical rivalry between Shiite Iran and Sunni Turkey made it difficult to achieve more than modest cooperation, in the Syrian civil war Iran and Turkey have both tried to block Kurdish advances in Syria with Iran by, for example, fully supporting the Turkish initiative known as the Euphrates Shield to prevent the Kurds from establishing a contiguous presence with Turkey. The


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
future of the Assad regime is the most vexing problem disturbing Iranian-Turkish relations since the future of Assad has proven to be contentious because Erdoğan would want to see him gone.\textsuperscript{15}

The fight against ISIS in Iraq has opened another fissure between the two countries. Having established a strong influence in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion in 2003, Tehran has hoped to expand its reach around Mosul. To prevent the establishment of Shia dominance, however, Turkey has sent its own troops to areas bordering on Mosul and this is an act to which Tehran has strongly objected. The Iranian Foreign Ministry even summoned the Turkish ambassador to lodge an official objection to the presence of the Turkish forces but Tehran has few options for action here because the United States, which is coordinating the fight against ISIS, has given Ankara a green light to operate in Iraq as a counterpart to Iran.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Conflicts of interest}

\textbf{Syria}

Diplomatic tensions have intensified between Turkey and Iran as the two countries have begun trading accusations over their respective roles in the Syrian conflict. Iran summoned the Turkish ambassador in Tehran on February 20th 2017 over comments made by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and President Tayyip Erdoğan accusing the Islamic Republic of destabilizing the region.\textsuperscript{17}

Turkey, a country with a Sunni majority, and Shia Iran have been on opposite sides of the conflict in Syria, with Ankara seeking to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad while Tehran, along with Russia, is his key backer. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu lashed out at Iran in a speech to the Munich Security Conference on February 19th 2017, saying some of its actions had undermined security in the region and urging Tehran to promote stability. In a visit to Bahrain

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.


on February 14th Erdoğan had previously accused Iran of promoting “Persian nationalism” which was causing damage in the Middle East by saying: “There is Persian nationalism here, we have to prevent this. We cannot just watch this oppression.”

The Turkish government has been a constant critic of Assad since the start of the uprising in Syria with President Erdoğan saying it was impossible for Syrians to “accept a dictator who has led to the deaths of up to 350,000 people.” Turkey is also a key supporter of the Syrian opposition and has had to accept the burden of hosting almost two million refugees. In addition, Turkey agreed to let the US-led coalition against ISIS to use its air bases for strikes into Syria after an ISIS bomb attack in July 2015.

Iran, in contrast, is on the opposing side in the conflict in Syria since, virtually from the very beginning, the Islamic Republic of Iran forged a close relationship with the Assad regime in Damascus. The civil war in Syria has propelled the relations to a higher level to the extent that the regime not only considers Syria’s importance to be greater than one of its own provinces but many of the regime’s high-ranking officials have even publicly declared Syria to be a strategic province of Iran.

The notion that Iran needs strategic depth has been a popular one with the Revolutionary Guards and its international arm the Quds Force which is engaged in the exportation of the revolution. Hassan Abbasi, the head of the aptly named Center for the Borderless Doctrinal Analysis, the think tank of the Revolutionary Guards, has written about the strategy of exporting the revolution and has argued that the Islamic Republic cannot be safe unless it persuades other Muslim nations to take the path of Islamic revolution:

If we remain alone we will always be in danger. Our system will also be in danger if most Muslim nations take the path of Western-style democracy.²⁰

According to the Guards’ doctrine, Iran’s mission allows it to override the Western-based constructs of borders and state sovereignty that Abbasi has described as a colonial invention. As a result, and not by coincidence, shortly after their founding in 1979 the Guards created the Quds Force, its international operations branch.

While the Assad regime made Syria available as a land and air bridge for transporting arms and munitions to Iran’s “revolutionary outpost” in Lebanon the civil war, which could have caused the demise of the Alawite Assad dynasty, has actually become a strategic threat to the regime. The establishment of a Sunni dominated Syria supported by Saudi Arabia would not only have ended the transit privileges, thus undermining the viability of Hezbollah, but could have brought the regime’s enemies to Iran’s borders and, in order to prevent this outcome, the Revolutionary Guards decided to forcefully intervene in the Syrian civil war.²¹ Although the government of Hassan Rouhani was reluctant to approve what it considered to be a politically perilous and economically costly adventure, the Supreme Leader sided with the Guards. The hardliners simply ignored Rouhani because in the Iran’s political system, according to a system known as a negotiated political order, the Guards did not require governmental approval for its expenditures.²²

By any measure, the intervention has been the largest to date with some 8,000 to 10,000 fighters from the Revolutionary Guards participating in the Syrian civil war in which Iran has lost more than 1000 fighters, including 18 high ranking generals of the Guards. Other losses have been estimated as follows: Hezbollah 1,045 fighters and 1,047 Afghan, Pakistani and other Shi’ite militia fighters – all of whom had been under Iranian command. Iran is also paying

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²² Ibid.
a high financial cost for its intervention in Syria and, according to some estimates, Iran has spent some 15 to 20 billion dollars on the venture since 2011.\textsuperscript{23}

The significance of the Syrian campaign was made clear when the Revolutionary Guards deployed the Saberin Brigade, a special force modeled on the elite British Special Air Force under the command of Brigadier General Amanollah Gashtasbi. With the fall of Aleppo and the shrinking of other rebel-held territories, the investment seems to have paid off so handsomely that the Iranian regime has been turning Syria into a neo-protectorate.\textsuperscript{24}

Recognized in international law, a classic protectorate arrangement entails a stronger state protecting a weak one, in return for receiving certain political, economic, or strategic privileges. If such a neo-protectorate were officially established it would preserve Syria's sovereignty but its territory and borders, its foreign policy and its security apparatus would come under the considerable control of Iran.\textsuperscript{25}

Some elements of the neo-protectorate are already in place. Iran has acquired extensive rights to naval facilities in Latakia for its Mediterranean based fleet and the Quds Force, under its energetic commander Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani, is developing plans to use Syrian bases for training its newly announced Shiite Liberation Army (SLA) made up of Shiite volunteers from around the world. Creating a “Syrian Hezbollah” to be positioned on the Golan Heights is another project that Suleimani has embraced and, in lieu of a native Shiite population, Suleimani is hoping to enlist the Alawites and Shiite fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{26}

In yet another benefit derived from the neo-protectorate Unit 400, the Quds Force’s Special Operations force commanded by Major General Majid Alavi (a former deputy Iranian intelligence minister),


\textsuperscript{24} Farhad Rezaei, Iran Seeks Neo-Protectorate in Syria.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
Major General Hamed Abdollahi and Major General Mohsen Chizari, has begun to collaborate with the Mukhabarat, the feared Syrian intelligence organization. The Mukhabarat, which has penetrated virtually all the groups fighting in Syria, has provided intelligence to the Iranians and helped in some false flag operations. One example of this, according to a report by the Turkish intelligence agency National Intelligence Organization (MIT), involved information about the actions of Abdulgadir Masharipov, the man who attacked the Istanbul nightclub and killed 39 people on New Year’s Day 2017, and the fact that he entered Turkey via Iran.27

With Russia dominating the overall developments in Syria Iran has had a relatively free hand in pursuing its neo-protectorate but, more recently, Iran has encountered some push back. Israel, which bombed a convoy of arms to Hezbollah, has declared that it will not tolerate a “Syrian Hezbollah” on its border and the decision of the Trump administration to confront Iran as the “chief sponsor of terrorism” in the region has made matters worse for the Iranian regime. Faced with a serious pushback, including a demand to remove Assad, the Iranian regime would have to make adjustments to its neo-protectorate strategy.28

Eventually, in an attempt to reduce violence in Syria, Iran, Turkey and Russia signed a deal in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan to create “safe zones” also referred to as “non-conflict zones.” The three partners agreed to establish four “deconfliction zones” in four of the most contested areas in Syria: Idlib province, largely controlled by ISIS and other rebel groups; Eastern Ghouta, a Damascus suburbs besieged by government forces; areas north of Homs; and southern Syria along the Jordanian border.29

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
As part of a de-escalation deal between the three countries 300-500 Turkish military personnel will be deployed in northern Idlib.³⁰ Ibrahim Kalin, The Turkish president’s spokesman said:

We will probably be most prominent in the Idlib region with the Russians; mostly Russia and Iran around Damascus, and a mechanism involving the Americans and Jordan in the south in the Deraa region is being worked on.³¹

Regional developments have also brought Iran and Turkey closer together. On June 5th Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain broke off ties with Qatar, a country which has close ties with Turkey, and accused it of supporting terrorism. Both Turkey and Qatar have been strong supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Hamas, both of which have always been at the center of Saudi hostility. Not surprising, on June 7th 2017, Turkey’s parliament ratified military agreements with Qatar that allowed its troops to be deployed to a Turkish military base in Qatar.³²

Like Turkey Iran also announced full support for Qatar. Mohamad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, posted a tweet on June 5th that read:

Neighbors are permanent; geography can’t be changed. Coercion is never the solution. Dialog is imperative, especially during blessed Ramadan.³³

President Hassan Rouhani also sent a message to the Qatari Emir which was conveyed by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Jaberi Ansari during his visit to Doha in June 17th. In the message, Rouhani assured the Qatari emir that

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he could count on Iran for food and the use of Iranian airspace for Qatari planes. Rouhani further stressed that controlling tensions and resolving issues through dialogue would be the best (path forward).  

Saudi’s list of demands from Qatar as a precondition for the resumption of diplomatic ties, which include the reduction of diplomatic ties with Iran and halting the use of the Turkish military base in Doha, have once again brought Iran and Turkey closer together on one front. In an effort to reduce the impact of the sanctions imposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Tehran and Ankara are shipping several tons of food to Doha every day.  

**Islamic State (ISIS)**

The fight against ISIS in Iraq has opened another fissure between Iran and Turkey. After having established a strong influence in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran hoped to expand its presence around Mosul but, in order to prevent Shia dominance in the area, Turkey has had to send its own troops to areas bordering on Mosul and this is an action to which Tehran has strongly objected. The Iranian Foreign Ministry even summoned the Turkish ambassador to lodge an official objection to the presence of the Turkish forces.

As Erdem Aydin, an expert on Iran at Istanbul’s Bogazici University has noted:

> Iran views Turkey’s military presence in these countries as a significant obstacle [to] its desire to extend its influence in the region.” Aydin added that Iran also

34 Ibid.
wants to cut [off] Turkey’s efforts to create a Sunni controlled safe-zone in northern Syria at its roots.\textsuperscript{36}

The issue caused a diplomatic row between Turkey and Iraq to the extent that Baghdad complained to the U.N. Security Council but, from Ankara’s perspective, the disagreement with Baghdad over Turkey’s presence in Iraq is not so much between Turkey and Iraq as it is between Turkey and the Shiite-dominated Iran-leaning government in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{37}

Secondly, Ankara is not just concerned about Mosul proper but also about the surrounding area in which Iran would like to establish an outpost at the junction of the Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish Kurdish regions. Control of this territory would not only allow Iran to demonstrate its power — directly or via proxies — on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria, it would also give Iran the ability to harass the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. The Turks believe Iran is seeking to create a land corridor to the Mediterranean shores of Syria and Lebanon via Mosul, which would present the shortest route from Iran — and this is an outcome they want to block.\textsuperscript{38}

Thirdly, Turkey has historic and cultural ties with Mosul and its Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkomen populations. There is even a sense among Turkish leaders, as expressed by President Erdoğan’s chief adviser İlnur Cevik, that this region, along with northern Syria, should have never been relinquished after the First World War. Key Arab leaders in Mosul have a similar appreciation for shared history and view strong ties with Turkey as a critical element of balance in their dealing with the threat of Shiite militias and Iran. Turkey believes that the Sunni Turkoman population of the area is particularly vulnerable and has voiced concerns about possible plans by Iran and sectarian


militias to bring about forced demographic changes by displacing Sunni Turkoman populations from areas around Mosul such as Tel Afar.\textsuperscript{39}

**Kurdish and Palestinian issues**

Other sources of tension between Iran and Turkey have been the Kurdish and the Palestinian issues. Iran’s attempts to support Palestine and oppose Israel have been used as a way to enhance its popularity in the Arab world, while Turkey’s assertive support for Palestinians has been an important factor that has contributed to the deterioration of Iran’s popularity in the Arab world and as a threat to Iran’s role as the main state sponsor of anti-Israel movements.\textsuperscript{40}

While tensions between Turkey and Iran have also been exacerbated by differences over the Kurdish issue they also have some convergent interests concerning the Kurdish question. For example Tehran and Ankara have both tried to block Kurdish advances in Syria; Iran has fully supported the Turkish initiative known as the Euphrates Shield to prevent the Kurds from establishing a contiguous presence; and Iran and Turkey have pursued cooperative measures to address issues that threaten their territorial integrity, particularly the ‘Kurdish question’, since both countries have large Kurdish minorities on their soil and do not want to see the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Iran has also fought a low-level insurgency by the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), which is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).\textsuperscript{41}

The shared interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state has led the two countries to share intelligence regarding the PKK and, on occasion, to coordinate attempts to combat PKK and PJK attacks. During the summer of 2010 Turkey and Iran intensified cooperation to protect their borders and increased the coordination of intelligence and other activities against the PKK. Recent tensions


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
over Syria, however, have made cooperation over the Kurdish issue more difficult and, as a result, intelligence cooperation has been significantly cut back since the end of 2011.\textsuperscript{42}

The cutback in intelligence cooperation has complicated Turkey’s ability to combat PKK attacks and Turkish officials believe that Iran has been connected to the upsurge of PKK violence since the end of 2011. Shortly after the explosion of a bomb in the town of Gaziantep on the Turkish-Syrian border, which killed nine people, Hussein Naqavi, the spokesman of Iran’s parliamentary Affairs Commission, issued a statement warning Turkey that it should keep out of Syria since it was unable to deal with its own internal affairs. Naqavi’s statement was seen in Ankara as a veiled warning that if Turkey continued its support for the Syrian opposition it could face further threats to its internal order.\textsuperscript{43}

It is due to this fact that many Turks feel that Turkey is not simply facing an upsurge of Kurdish nationalism but that the PKK has become an instrument in a wider struggle with Syria and Iran. Many analysts have noted that, in response to Turkey’s support of the Syrian opposition, Iran may have begun to actively step up support for the PKK and turned a blind eye to PKK activity along the Turkish-Iranian border.\textsuperscript{44}

On August 15th 2017 Iran’s Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri made a rare official visit to Turkey to meet his counterpart Gen. Hulusi Akar, and senior Turkish officials, including President Erdoğan. According to Bagheri, the visit was

\textbf{[...]}necessary to exchange views and more cooperation over the military subjects and different regional issues, issues related to the two countries’ security, the security of borders and fighting against terrorism.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Larrabee and Nader, Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
According to President Erdoğan the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and the situation in Syria’s Idlib province were expressions of both countries’ desire to combat terrorism in a joint military campaign in northern Iraq against the PKK and the PJAK.\textsuperscript{46}

It is worth mentioning that the prospect of a possible end to the PKK insurgency raises difficulties for Iran since it has no interest in seeing an end to the PKK insurgency because this would deprive it of an important means of exerting pressure on Turkey. Because of this the Islamic Republic might step up its support for die-hard splinter groups in Turkey and in Syria in an effort to keep the PKK insurgency alive and thus maintain pressure on Turkey.\textsuperscript{47}

**Conclusion**

From the perspective of geopolitics and the regional balance of power, Iranian leaders should probably view their Turkish counterpart as a key regional partner rather than a rival due to the fact that the Arab Gulf countries have traditionally been Iran’s rivals rather than its natural allies.

Due to all of the above, as well as their common interests and objectives, the leaderships of both Iran and Turkey should realize that they need each other’s cooperation now more than at any other time in the past. It is in the interests of Iranian policy makers to understand that Turkey can play an important role in building bridges between the West and Tehran. It has also been proven that Turkey is a reliable and trusted partner since it faithfully sided with Iran and supported its neighbor at a most vulnerable time when tensions reached their height over Iran’s controversial nuclear program.

Strengthening the economic partnership between the two countries might reduce the sense of vulnerability each feels toward the other and both partners should increase the level of bilateral direct investment as an option to soften the impact of possible tensions emanating from political differences in the future. Having a strong economy and forming mutual dependencies through establishing economic partnerships with neighbors are prerequisites

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
for achieving the status of being a strong regional power. In this context, it would be beneficial for both Iran and Turkey to pursue pragmatic bilateral trade policies and concentrate on lessening political tensions, factors that would enable them to gain more than they would lose.

At this critical junction Iran’s leaders should be careful about pursuing policies that could potentially endanger their relationship with Turkey particularly since Washington’s new policy towards Iran will exert more pressure on Tehran and isolate it in the region, and especially since other regional countries have also welcomed Washington’s new Iran policy. More to the point, Turkey is more likely to join the United States in pressuring Iran to alter its foreign policy than otherwise.

In such a circumstance, the rational approach for Tehran to adopt would be to pursue an informed policy precisely designed to galvanize more support for it in the region. More specifically, to avoid the possibility of pushing Ankara away from Tehran, it is essential for the Iranian leaders to moderate those foreign policy initiatives that negatively affect Turkey firstly because of the fact that Turkey is a lynchpin between key regional players and secondly because enjoying the support of Ankara in the Middle East could significantly influence the regional balance of power.

Iran should also avoid tension with Turkey by moderating its role in Iraq because its role in Iraqi Kurdistan could have consequences for the Turkey-Iran relationship. The leadership in Tehran should therefore not attempt to increase their influence in Iraq and over the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), because this will pose a threat to Turkey’s national security.

Iran should also recalculate the role it has been playing in the Syrian civil war and its unconditional support for Bashar Al Assad since Iran’s inflexible stance towards the conflict in Syria has been aggravating the pressure on Turkey geopolitically, strategically and economically. The Revolutionary Guard’s increasing presence in Syria could also significantly escalate tensions with Ankara and, if Iran does not desire to relinquish its support of Syria, it might be able to agree to minimal abandonment of its support for Bashar Al Assad.
Because Iran needs Turkey more than ever before at this critical time, Tehran should avoid generating unnecessary tensions with Ankara by taking strategically wise steps and developing informed policies.

About the author
Farhad Rezaei is a research fellow at The Center of Iranian Studies (IRAM) in Ankara, Turkey, where he researches Iran’s foreign policy. He obtained his PhD in International Relations from the Department of International and Strategic Studies at the University of Malaya, Malaysia and is the author of Iran’s Nuclear Program: a Study in Proliferation and Rollback (NY: Macmillan Palgrave; 2017).