



# THE PERIOD AFTER 2002: THE TIGHTENING OF RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND TURKEY AND THE FUTURE PROSPECTS

## La fase después de 2002: el refortalecimiento de las relaciones Irán-Turquía y las perspectivas de futuro

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The course of Iran-Turkey relations over the past thirty years, reflects in some way two wider global changes. First, the reduction of securitization for the sake of economic cooperation, and second, the increasing importance of regional co-operation as a result of the emergence of a multi-polar world. The tightening of Turkey's relations with Iran began to strengthen after 2002. The reasons that led to this empowerment were the following: first, the rise to power of the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the emergence, a bit later, of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as prime minister. Second, the presence of the United States in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Third, the convergence of Turkey's and Iran's foreign policies of Turkey and Iran on the issues of Middle East. Fourth, Turkey's disappointment with West and the shape of a new foreign policy towards the Middle East. Fifth, economic criteria have also played a role. Intense cooperation between the two states seems to be suspended from 2011 due to certain problems that came up. These problems are: First, Iran's refusal to make economic concessions to Turkey. Secondly, the re-emergence of their prolonged competition in the broadest region of the Middle East, especially after the Arab Spring. However, the most decisive factor in the Iran-Turkey relations proved to be the armed insurgency of the Sunnis against the Syrian regime, although both countries are working together to combat Kurdish nationalism.



**Abstract**

Arab Spring; Iran; Middle East; Turkey; Erdoğan; United States.  
*Primavera árabe; Irán; Oriente Medio; Turquía; Erdoğan; Estados Unidos.*



**Key words**

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**Fechas**

*El curso de las relaciones Irán-Turquía de los últimos treinta años reflejan de alguna manera los dos grandes cambios globales: en primer lugar, la reducción de la securitización en favor de la economía de cooperación y, en segundo lugar, la creciente importancia de la cooperación regional como resultado de la aparición de un mundo multipolar. El refuerzo de las relaciones de Turquía con Irán comenzó a hacerse más fuerte en 2002. Las razones que han llevado a este empoderamiento fueron las siguientes: primera, la llegada al poder del partido moderado Partido de la Justicia y el Desarrollo (AKP) y la aparición, un poco más tarde, de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan como primer ministro. Segunda, la presencia de Estados Unidos en Afganistán e Iraq. Tercera, la convergencia de la política exterior de ambos países con respecto a Oriente Medio. Cuarta, el descontento de Turquía con Occidente y la formación de nuevas políticas exteriores hacia Oriente Medio. Quinta, el criterio económico también ha jugado un papel. La intensa cooperación entre los dos Estados parece que se suspendió en 2011 debido a los problemas que surgieron ese año. Estos problemas son: por un lado Irán se negó a hacer concesiones económicas a Turquía. Por otro lado, el resurgimiento de la competición entre ambos en el mayor territorio de Oriente Medio, sobre todo tras la Primavera árabe. Sin embargo, la insurrección de los Sunitas contra el régimen sirio ha probado ser el factor más decisivo en las relaciones Irán-Turquía, aunque ambos países trabajan junto para combatir el nacionalismo kurdo.*



## 1. Introduction

The course of Iran-Turkey relations over the past thirty years is a sign of two wider global changes: first, the reduction of securitization for the sake of economic cooperation, and second, the increasing importance of regional co-operation as a result of the emergence of a multi-polar world (Hentov, 2012, p. 267).

As Henry Barkey points out, Iran and Turkey, brought together by geography and separated by ideology and regime interests, have had a long history of conflict and co-operation. The two countries have competed for the leadership of the Muslim world since the beginning of the twentieth century and this competition continues even today, at a regional level. The territories they inhabit serve as gateways for both Europe and Asia and, as a result, straddle more than one natural geopolitical subset (Barkey, 1995, p. 147).

Turkey's relations with Iran have been periodically stained since the 1979 revolution. There is an intrinsic ideological antipathy between the Muslim world's most secular state, Turkey, and its self-professed leading theocratic state. Moreover their external behavior has also incorporated Turkey and Iran in different camps: Turkey, a member of NATO and the West, and Iran with a clearly anti-American foreign policy. However, the Iran-Iraq War brought the two countries closer, mainly through the growth of their economic transactions, in the hope of boosting regional stability. Turkey needed, if possible, to create a reasonable co-operative relationship with Iran, for pragmatic political and economic reasons. Outright hostility could have induced the Iranian to give all support the separatist Kurdish PKK. Another reason is that the two states have no significant bilateral dispute, territorial or otherwise. During the last years of the twentieth century the Turkish-Iranian relations had entered into a phase of tension, due to the emerging competition between Turkey and Iran for expanding their influence in the Caucasus area and Central Asia, the impact of the close relationship of Turkey with Israel, the Kurdish issue, their ideological and religious differences and the role of oil and gas pipelines

(Tsardanidis, 2001, p. 24). In spite of that, after 2002, the relations between the two countries became close due to a number of development: in northern Iraq and the common interest to prevent the creation of an independent Kurdish state; the opening of the new Turkish Islamic government of the AKP towards the Muslim world; the emphasis given by the Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East; and the mutual economic benefits from the impressive increase of the volume of the bilateral trade. However, these relations have been affected negatively in more recent years due to the different approaches Turkey and Iran have adopted over the Arab Spring and, above all, the way of dealing with the civil war in Syria.

## 2. Turkey and Iran: Tightening Relations (2002-2011)

Turkey's relations with Iran began to strengthen after 2002. The reasons that led to this development were the following:

Firstly, the rise to power of the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the emergence, a bit later, of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Prime Minister (Sinkaya, 2012, p. 140). In November 2002, for the first time in the history of Turkey, one Islamic-orientated party gathered enough votes to form a single-party government. The AKP was seeking international recognition and legitimacy and therefore, especially in the first three years of it being in power, its priority was to improve Turkey's relations with the EU and, to a certain extent, with the United States. Nevertheless, the ideological differences between Turkey and Iran were downplayed. Under Erdoğan, the AKP, that was the successor to the Welfare Part of Necmettin Erbakan<sup>1</sup>, managed to avoid the rhetorical extremities of its predecessor, without, however, denying the significance of the Muslim religion in his program, opening the way to cooperation with the states of Middle East and in particular with Iran.

Secondly, the presence of the United States in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Both Ankara and Tehran opposed to the possibility of the creation of an independent Kurdish state as a result of Washington's policies in the area. The American (and the British) presence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 has further intensified the fear of the creation of a federal Kurdish state with pro-American orientation. Iran was concerned about the presence of American troops close to its borders (Afghanistan and Iraq), while at the same time it saw Turkey as a close ally of the United States. For its part, Turkey was equally worried about the the Iraqi Kurds who managed to gain an autonomous status. Having rejected the request from the USA to open a second front against Iraq in the Persian Gulf war of 2003, Turkey was found with limited influence on Iraq and their serious doubts of how Ankara could influence the course of events in the future. In 2003 both Turkey and Iran suffered substantial geopolitical losses throughout the entire Middle East and in northern Iraq their losses were greater, although Iran did have the option of extending its influence among the Shi'a in Iraq (Olson, 2004, p. 212-213). If a civil war had broken out however in Iraq, Turkish could be given the opportunity to invade northern Iraq and to take under its control of the oil-rich Northern Iraq. Such an invasion, however, could have induced a common Iranian-Syrian reaction.

*The American (and the British) presence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein has intensified the fear of the creation of a federal Kurdish state with pro-American orientation*

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<sup>1</sup> Necmettin Erbakan, the long-time leader of Turkey's Islamic political movement, was briefly Prime Minister in the country's first Islamic-led coalition (1996-1997). Despite political bans and party closures, he always re-emerged and never wavered from his belief in an Islamic Turkey.

In the same period, the main concern of Iran's foreign policy was the changing global and regional scene in the wake of the 11<sup>th</sup> September attacks and the US invasions that followed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran reacted by deciding to exercise a more aggressive policy in the Middle East. Thus, Iran continued to supply the Palestinian organizations and Hezbollah in Lebanon with weapons, while at the same time it accelerated both its nuclear and its missile systems programs. It also increased its presence in Iraq by collaborating with the army of Mahdi Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite clergy, and other revolutionary organizations in Iraq, while it maintained its alliance with Syria. These policies of Iran were tied to its growing isolation by the USA and its allies. So, because of their strong, mutual interest in avoiding the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq and of the potential consequences of a military confrontation in the region, the two countries estimated that it would be better to try to accommodate their heterogeneous interests in northern Iraq. For Turkey, such a pursuit was becoming even easier or even more necessary after its partial disengagement from American influence, which enabled Ankara to try to exert its influence to the Middle East the Arab countries world as well as to Iran.

Thirdly, Turkey's and Iran's foreign policies began to converge on several issues of Middle East. Turkey, until December 2008, sought to assume its role as an intermediate between Syria and Israel, as well between Israel and the Palestinian organization Hamas. After the invasion of Israel to Gaza (December 1998 - January 1999) with the operation "Cast Lead", Turkey made an unprecedented criticism for Israel's policy in the Gaza Strip –while relations between the two countries deteriorated even more after the Israel's attack against the Turkish ship "Mavi Marmara" in May 2010, which participated in an international flotilla that attempted to break the blockage of the Gaza Strip–. Ankara also criticized the possession of nuclear weapons by Israel, as well as the USA's silent acquiescence of it. The Turkish government also defended Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear technology, especially while Tehran based its nuclear policy on two arguments: the equality of states in relation to the non-proliferation system and the right to gain access to civilian nuclear energy. The Turkish Prime Minister repeatedly stated that Turkey was against the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region. However, the Turkish government estimated that Iran's civilian nuclear technology was intended to be "exclusively for peaceful purposes". Further, he estimated that Iran's destabilization was more dangerous than developing its nuclear program (Ehteshami & Elik, 2011, p. 658). Ankara was also willing to play a mediating role between Iran and the West.

Fourthly, as a consequence of Turkey's disappointment with the West, Ankara started to implement a new foreign policy towards the Middle East. The linking by EU member states of the Cyprus problem with the issue of Turkey's accession to the European Union, as well as the objections of France and Germany for opening the accession negotiations, produced feelings of strong disappointment in Turkey. This fact has led the most conservative Islamists of the AKP to increase their suggestions and even pressure on the government to formulate a foreign policy much more orientated towards the Muslim countries. In particular, the appointment of Professor Ahmet Davutoglu, former adviser of Prime Minister Erdoğan, to the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his intentions of shifting Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East gave new impetus to relations with Iran. Ahmet Davutoglu named his policy as a "Zero problem policy". Even radical conservative elements like the Revolutionary Guards in Iran "stopped perceiving Turkey as an instrument of the West that is isolating Iran in the region" (Bas, 2013, p. 118). The main aspects of this policy were, on the one hand, to create a

regional economic zone that would facilitate Turkey's economic penetration in the markets of the neighboring countries; and on the other hand, the emergence of Turkey as a strong regional power that would be in the position of mediating in regional conflicts thanks to its influential diplomacy. Turkey, indeed, sought to mediate for the restoration of peace between Syria and Israel, and between Hamas and Fatah. In this context, the relationship with the Islamic Republic was considered to be both an opportunity and a challenge, as these mediation initiatives of Turkish diplomacy also facilitated the improvement of relations with Iran (Breitegger, 2009, p. 119). However, the beginning of the civil war in Syria and the tension of Iran's relations with the West, due to its Tehran insistence of proceeding with its nuclear program, created difficulties in the implementation of the "zero problem" policy.

Fifthly, the economic factor. Economic considerations have also played a role in increasing the interests of both countries to strengthen their relations. The two countries realised that their economic cooperation has a greater strategic importance than the thoughts of each country to use the Kurdish issue to its own advantage or to seek to exploit the internal problems of other countries (Olson, 2000, p. 889). The foreign policy of the AKP included the broadening of the field of influence of Turkey through the development of its economic relations with its neighbor states. A beneficial policy seemed to be the export of products and services of the Turkish industry to Iran, in exchange for natural gas and oil (Ehteshami & Elik, 2011, p. 654). Turkey of course has already received warnings from the United States to stop further agreements for the transport of natural gas from Iran, its second biggest gas supplier. But these warnings Turkey ignored. On the other hand, for Iran, the development of economic ties with Turkey would have positive political consequences, as Turkey seemed to prefer improving economic relations with Iran, despite the sanctions that were imposed by UN. Iran therefore, in its effort to avoid the economic and political isolation, turned to Turkey, which was a member of NATO and a candidate for EU membership, and therefore a precious ally to achieve its foreign policy's goals (Tsardanidis, 2014, p. 349-362).

The visits of the Foreign Minister of Turkey to Tehran (twice in 2003) and of the Iranian Foreign Minister to Ankara confirmed the common concerns and interests of the two countries for the developments in northern Iraq. Diplomatic discussions continued between senior officials with Erdoğan's visits to Iran in July 2004 and in December 2006. The two countries signed security co-operation agreements, focusing on the Kurdish issue. According to these agreements, Iran placed the PKK in the list of terrorist organizations and Turkey did the same in the case of the People's Mujahidin Organization of Iran. The agreements also included the terms for the border control, cooperation to detect the guerrillas of PKK, and the prevention of the creation of shelters in borders, the installation of communication lines between the commanders of the army and the extradition of PKK's rebels and Iranian protesters, respectively. One of the main objectives for Iran was to get Turkey away from Israeli influence, exploiting its concern for the Kurds. Nonetheless, Turkey did not just confine itself to improving its relations with Iran and Syria in various domains, but it began to strongly disagree with both Israel and the United States on issues such as the Israeli military interventions in Lebanon and Gaza. Since 2007, Turkey has supported, as mentioned above, Iran's nuclear program under the condition that it is used for peaceful purposes and it sought to mediate between the 5 + 1 group (Security Council's five permanent members and Germany) and Iran (Aras & Karakaya Polat, 2008, p. 507). In this policy context in May 2010, Turkish government voted against the imposition of sanctions on Iran by the UN Security Council. Turkey argued that the sanctions were not going to resolve

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the Iranian nuclear issue (Bleek & Stein, 2012, p. 29), by emphasizing the importance of the agreement on nuclear fuel, in cooperation with Brazil<sup>2</sup>. Ankara, following this policy towards Iran, aimed at another objective, too: to show how indispensable it was to the West and the US (Pieper, 2017, p. 47-51). In this regard, since the mid-2000s and until the first years of the Arab Spring, Turkey's rapprochement with Iran as well with other countries like Syria, Armenia and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq could be seen, as Mel Dal points out, "as a concrete sign of acknowledgement of its expanding regional power in the Middle East by the countries concerned" (Dal, 2016, p. 1443). The impressive increase in trade with Iran and its attitude to the nuclear issue, gave Ankara the ability to develop a policy to confront Iran's problem, which, if it had succeeded, would have made it a key mediator between the USA and Iran. On the other hand, by ignoring the sanctions imposed against Iran, Turkey benefitted a lot as Iran found through Turkey a way out for its financial transactions.

### 3. Turkish-Iranian relations since the Arab Spring

The period of intense cooperation between the two states seems to be suspended since 2011, due to certain problems: firstly, Iran's refusal to make economic concessions to Turkey. Ankara has persistently sought to reduce Iran's import customs for the Turkish products, in order to increase its exports. Iran refused, causing the dissatisfaction of the Turkish government. Secondly, the re-emergence of their prolonged competition in the broader region of the Middle East. For example, both states supported Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, their motivations were different. Iran reinforced both Hamas and Hezbollah due to their hostility towards Israel and the obstacles they created in the American policy in the region. In spite of that, Turkey supported them, because it believed that in this way these organizations would transform their policy into more moderate positions, which could pave the way for a compromise with Israel, a prospect that Iran rejected. Another development that has exacerbated the relationship of the two countries was Ankara's support for the opponents of Shiite President of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki during the 2009 parliamentary elections in Iraq, while Iran stood up for Maliki. However, the attitude adopted by Turkey on the issue of the sanctions of Iran's nuclear program (see above) reduced the importance of these differences.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, a series of additional developments that have taken place in the region after the start of the Arab Spring in 2011 contributed to the further undermining of the Turkish-Iranian relations. Ankara tolerated the expedition of Saudi troops that helped the king of Bahrain to suppress the uprising of Shiites in this country, which displeased Tehran. In addition, Ankara rushed –albeit in some cases late– to keenly support the riots in Tunisia and in Egypt, while it joined, eventually, the West regarding NATO's air strikes against the Gaddafi forces in Libya. Lastly, the Turkish government was worried about Iran's persistence on boosting tensions in Lebanon and in Iraq between the Shiites and the Sunnis and the support it was giving to radical Shiite organizations in Azerbaijan (Flanagan, 2012, p. 171). On the contrary, despite the fact that it applauded the Arab Spring, Iran was worried that the same thing would happen in its interior, when in fact, in 2009, the so-called "Green revolution"

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2 More specifically, the agreement's content was about a program of exchanging slightly enriched Iranian uranium with highly enriched nuclear fuel, in order to be used in the research reactor that Iran has. In particular, Iran would carry to Brazil, through Turkey, 1.200 kilos uranium enriched by 3.5%, that would be processed to be converted to nuclear fuel and through Turkey again, it would return to Iran.

took place immediately after the presidential elections in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected for a second term. The fall of Hosni Mubarak certainly satisfied Tehran, as the Egyptian President was not a friend of Iran. However, the regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya caused great concern in the Iranian regime (Demiryol, 2013, p. 133).

Iran interpreted the Arab Spring as an indication of a rebellion that expresses the Islamic awakening, which facilitated the theocratic regime to claim that in Iran this has already been achieved with the 1979 revolution. The prevalence of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the election of Islamist Mohammed Morsi to the post of President in June 2012, confirmed this allegation, when indeed the relationship between the two countries began to strengthen. The overthrow of President Morsi, however, by the Egyptian army in July 2013 gave Iran the right to claim that its own model of “Muslim democracy” is more stable and that the Western democratic processes cannot be met in the Middle East.

On the contrary, Turkey interpreted the Arab Spring as an indication of democratic awakening of the masses against the authoritarian and the corrupt nature of previous secular regimes. However, for Ankara, it quickly became clear that the policy that was adopted on the transformation of Arab political systems and the Middle East as a whole, could not be manageable without having previously dealt in the interior with its own democratic deficit, as proved by the popular protest over the remodeling of the Gzizi Park in Taksim Square in Istanbul in May-June 2013. As Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader point out “Erdoğan’s dismissal of the protesters as a bunch of ‘thugs’ and ‘looters’ and his harsh condemnation of the role of the foreign media raised a question in some quarters in the Middle East whether Erdoğan had a double standard regarding democracy: one concept for Turkey and quite another for the rest of the Arab world” (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 8).

Nevertheless, the most decisive factor in the Iran-Turkey relations proved to be the armed insurgency of the Sunnis against the Syrian regime. Syria epitomizes the geopolitical tensions between Turkey and Iran amongst a host of regional issues, in which they are at loggerheads over regional influence at the expense of each other (Kang & Kim, 2016, p. 17-32). After the Syrian crisis began, and wrongly considering that the overthrow of the Assad regime would happen within months, Turkey decided to change its foreign policy to foresee the expected geopolitical rearrangements in the sensitive area of the Middle East. So, it chose to associate itself with the United States, the Western Allies and the Arab Link, and to distance itself from the Shiite Arc (Iran, Iraqi government, Assad regime, Hezbollah). Turkey’s insistence on Assad’s resignation ultimately led it to a formal endorsement of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), allowing Turkish territory to be used for the transfer of funds, weapons and recruits to bolster the anti-Assad rebellion. This also preserved the excellent relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, so that in the aftermath of Assad’s time, Turkey would have the possibility to cooperate and influence decisions, in particular those that would apply to energy. “For Tehran this is nothing short of Ankara’s active involvement in a US-led, Saudi-funded plot to undermine Iran’s regional reach” (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 986).

On the other hand, Tehran supported the Syrian regime’s status in every way (political, economic, war material, fighters), because it knows that if it were overturned by pro-Western forces, then Hezbollah would be weakened and, therefore, its influence in Lebanon, too. Teheran estimated that Turkey’s policy over time would lead to its isolation. In the case that the Assad regime in Syria collapsed, of course Iran would become more vulnerable to a potential internal pro-Western rebellion. A development like this would, apart from the United States’

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geo-economic objective to control Iran's huge energy reserves and their transport routes, have yet another outcome: to acquire both the geopolitical and geostrategic control of the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and the Central Asia. That is why Tehran, in an effort not to lose control of the developments in Syria, presented a compromise plan to end the civil war, but without success. Nevertheless Turkey's opposition to Assad was considered a direct threat to the Iranian regime's most vital interests.

#### 4. Conclusions

As we have seen, the components that formed the Turkish-Iranian relationship refer to geopolitical, political, ideological, cultural and economic-energy factors (Hargital, 2013). There is no doubt that Turkey and Iran have moved to the center of geopolitics and their relationship will greatly influence the evolution of the region. "Whereas Turkey has struggled and aspired to become more engaged with the global actors and exert its influence through the means of regional engagement, Iran utilized its introversion and isolation to entrench its hegemony in its neighbourhood" (Keyman & Sazak, 2015, p. 333). However, do recent differences with Tehran represent a temporary blip in their relations? Or do they reflect more fundamental differences that are likely to lead to an open confrontation between Ankara and Tehran? (Larrabee & Nader, 2013, p. 35). Relations between Iran and Turkey in the immediate future will depend on developments in three main areas: a) economic relations; b) policies to be followed in relation to blatant regional problems; and, c) relations of both countries with the United States.

Turkey's trade with Iran has risen rapidly. In 2002, the value of trade between the two countries was \$ 1.2 bn, and in 2012 it was close to \$ 30 bn. But due to the imposition of economic sanctions against Iran, it dropped and started increasing again in 2016 trade (\$ 7 bn), and it is expected to increase to \$ 14 bn in 2017. In 2012, Iran had become Turkey's largest supplier of crude oil and the second best largest supplier of natural gas. Several economic agreements have been signed between Turkey and Iran after the AKP came in power (Cheema, 2015, p. 90). Progress in bilateral trade and economic relations automatically contributed to efforts of developing regional economic cooperation. Turkey and Iran are also founding members of the Economic Cooperation Organization. Participation in this intergovernmental organization, involving most of the Middle East and Central Asian countries, enables the two countries to increase their trade volumes by abolishing many of the existing artificial and fiscal barriers. Within this framework and through bilateral efforts, both Turkey and Iran can encourage the countries of the region to create mechanisms that are necessary for the establishment of a regional economic co-operation, which in turn will have a positive impact on their economies. Today, the biggest obstacle to such cooperation is the physical infrastructure of the area, such as long-distance motorways and railways, which do not favor the rapid expansion of trade. Existing roads are inadequate, and the rail network is not fully developed.

The most important regional issues will continue to be Iraq, the Kurds and the Syrian conflict. Cooperation against the PKK has already been achieved. Nowadays, as Turkey and Iran have overcome the issues of mistrust from previous decades, they are working together to combat Kurdish nationalism. If Turkey and Iran's cooperation against the PKK is maintained, it is likely that Turkey will pursue its cooperation with Iran in other areas as well. However, the Kurdish issue is of secondary importance to Iran. The country's main concern is its relations with the United States. A possible deterioration of relations between the two countries may provide Iran with the potential to

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greatly destabilize Iraq. If the rift between the Shiites and the Sunni in Iraq is further intensified, Turkey is more likely to back the Sunni of Iraq, while Iran will support the Shiites.

The two countries also support the Palestinian organizations and have criticized Israeli policies in Lebanon and Gaza. The ongoing situation in Syria, however, renders Turkey's cooperation with Iran more difficult. The support that Turkey and Iran provide to rival groups in Syria reflects the profound impact of the Arab Spring both on the domestic and foreign policies of these two countries. The distinction between domestic politics and the policy pursued by countries experiencing the Arab Spring is rapidly eroding, as demonstrated by the events in Turkey in June 2013, while Turkey's and Iran's expectations of what forces would prevail in Syria, are interwoven with the existing two-state governance systems. Ankara was expecting a Sunni revolutionary regime to prevail in Syria, which could be modeled on Turkey. This of course is not possible in the foreseeable future. The opposite may indeed happen. Assad was able to stabilize his regime and he is back at the table – regaining control most of the territory which has lost from ISIS during the last years. Therefore, as evidenced by the evolution of military operations, the Assad regime is able to resist vigorously, thanks to Iran's and Russia's support. Turkey views the development in Syria as not only a matter of international affairs, but also as a domestic security issue as the lack of central state control may give the PKK a staging ground in Syria from which to attack interests in Turkey and achieve limited regional autonomy (Cordesman, Gold, Shelala, & Gibbs, 2013, p. 4). Tehran, on the contrary, seeks to maintain the current regime in Syria not only for geopolitical reasons but also because, as mentioned above, an internal rebellion. The election as a new President in June 2013 (moderate Hassan Rohani)<sup>3</sup> is considered a sign of popular dissatisfaction with outgoing President Ahmadinejad (Monshipouri, 2013, p. 51). Syria's issue of the political leadership of both countries has taken on a dimension that is not only limited to the diversification of their foreign policy but, more importantly, to the strategies that the political leadership of both countries is shaping for the survival of political structures and systems of both Turkey and Iran. However some analysts argue that both countries do not seem interested in finding a middle ground or stopping the current cycle of conflict there are strong reasons for both Ankara and Tehran to explore opportunities for cooperation in three at least issues: Kurdish separatism is a real possibility in both Syria and Iraq and is threat in Turkey and Iran, the Russian attempts to increase their influence in the region through military activism in Syria and to a lesser extent in Iraq are a medium-to long-term threat to both Turkey's and Iran's objectives, extremism and terrorism is a common threat that requires a joint response (Aras & Yörlmazlar, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, strong economic ties between the two countries continue to prevail. Turkey and Iran's trade relationship is one of mutual dependence. Turkey's reliance on energy imports means that it needs Iranian gas, while the Iranians cannot afford to lose the Turkish gas market (Barkey, 2012, p. 155). An indication that both countries could come in the near future closer is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visit to Iran in October 2017 four months after accusing Iran of Persian "expansionism" in the Middle East. During the visit, expansion of economic and trade ties were discussed. Regional issues, including Syria, Iraq and the referendum in Iraq's Kurdistan were discussed as well<sup>4</sup>.

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3 He was re-elected for a second term in May 2017.

4 <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-turkey-visit/turkeys-erdogan-in-iran-kurdish-independence-on-agenda-idUSL8N1MF0QT>

In considering the American factor, it is perfectly legitimate to say that good relations between Turkey and Iran are a real paradox. This is because Turkey is a close ally of the United States, while Iran's relations with the United States are in the best case adversary (Sinkaya, 2012, p. 154). It seems that, to some extent, with its approach to Iran, Turkey is seeking to upgrade its role. Ankara, with its stance on Iran's nuclear program, was seeking to send the message to the US leadership that it remains a prominent player in the region who has the ability and capability to talk with all sides and that Washington's policy towards Iran it should also include Turkey's interests (Bleek & Stein, 2012, p. 34). However, in 2017, one could easily notice that Turkey's relations with the US had not been any worse. In a paper published by the Brookings Institution the areas of disagreement are as follows: "Turkey's discomfort with Obama's failure to enforce his 'red lines' with the Assad regime; the more recent burgeoning US alliance with Syrian Kurds; US frustrations with what the White House once described as rising authoritarianism in Turkey; Ankara's demand for the extradition of US –based cleric Gülen–, labeled by Ankara as the mastermind behind the failed coup-attempt in July 2016; and suspicions of prior US knowledge of the coup (Aydintasbas & Kirisci, 2017, p. 2). On the other hand, as a state under international pressures, locked with a deep antagonism with the United States (inspite of the nuclear deal) Iran has very few allies. "Syria has been a key ally and it simply does not compute for Iran to give up on its most reliable friend, especially since Syria also acts as a conduit for Iran's other strategic asset in the Middle East: Hezbollah" (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 1991). Thus, if relations between Turkey and the US and between Turkey and Israel are fully restored, the probability of deterioration of Turkey's relations with Iran could not be excluded.

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