

Clashing and Cooperation: An analysis of Turkish-Iranian Relations



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Turkey and Iran have persistently, over time battled for hegemony on their communal grounds. However, since the Ottoman-Persian war, 1821-1823,¹ they have at most sustained cordial relations. As the two domineering non-Arab states with parallel geographies and customs of statehood, Turkey and Iran do not see each other as a threat but neither as friends resulting in the notion of “no eternal allies, no perpetual enemies, only permanent interests.”² In this essay, I will be analysing the plethora of the clashing and cooperation attributes of Turkish-Iranian relations through the lens of the Kurdish stance, the uprising of the Arab Spring and Islamic Nationalism.

The metamorphosis of the Turkish–Iranian relationship from an unrelenting geopolitical opposition to collaboration is conceivably the most apparent in the field of territorial security. Turkey and Iran frequently accuse each other of prying on each other’s internal affairs by assisting rebel groups. However, this remarkably transformed during the early 2000s,³ in which both nations feared the rise of Kurdish nationalism would interfere with their borders through the implementation of an independent Kurdistan.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003⁴ was a vital protagonist in the unification of Turkey and Iran regarding the apprehensions of security. Anxieties of the outcome of the invasion of Iraq consisted of an extensive civil war that would spread beyond Iraqi borders, the collapse of Iraq as a feasible nation, and the development of an autonomous Kurdish state in Iraq, increasing the prospects of an independent Kurdistan spanning over Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Emulating on these apprehensions, “Erdoğan and Khatami signed an extensive security cooperation agreement in 2004.”⁵ This was simultaneously beneficial for Turkey at the time as its ties with the US were disintegrating due to Turkey’s refusal of the use of Turkish airbases for the Iraq invasion.⁶ Seemingly well timed and calculated, for Turkey the security cooperation in 2004 proved to be more than the unification of powers for its borders in relation to the Kurdish spectrum but also as a significant political message towards the US through its new ties with Iran.

¹ Williamson Graham, War and Peace in Qajar Persia (Routledge, 2008)

² <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/no-eternal-allies-no-perpetual-enemies-128008>

³ Akkoyunlu Karabekir, “Turkey’s Iranian Conundrum: A Delicate Balancing Act” in Another Empire? Turkey’s foreign policy in a new century, (Biligi University Press, 2012)

⁴ Marcus Aliza, “Turkey’s PKK: Rise, Fall, Rise Again?” in World Policy Journal Vol. 24 No. 1 (Duke University Press, 2017)

⁵ Akkoyunlu Karabekir, “Turkey’s Iranian Conundrum: A Delicate Balancing Act” in Another Empire? Turkey’s foreign policy in a new century, (Biligi University Press, 2012)

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/20/iraq.helenasmith>

Despite the exchanges of intelligence between Turkey and Iran through the joint military operations against the PKK and PJAK, the differentiation of the notions towards the Kurdish issue of the two nations proved to be perplexing. “Iran is concerned about the possibility of a Kurdish state but it is not threatened by the Kurdish issue, given the deeper integration of Iranian Kurds in society. As such, Iran agrees with Turkey in opposing a Kurdish state, but fundamentally disagrees with Turkey’s approach towards its Kurds.”⁷

Turkey’s worries were directed to the potential Kurdish demands that would be initiated through Kurdish independence in order to destabilise Turkey’s security. Unlike Turkey, the Kurdish issue was not a primary angst for Iran as it felt more secure with its Kurdish relations as long as it did not disrupt territorial integrity. It is vital to note that Iran was able to divide its relations with Iranian and Iraqi Kurds by “controlling the first while developing ties with the second.”⁸ This enabled Iran to have a more concise and controlled approach in regulating the Kurdish threat that it perceives in comparison to Turkey who felt it was in a much more vulnerable stance with firstly its own Kurdish population and those in neighbouring countries resulting in a more aggressive and brash approach.

The increase of cooperation with Iran for Turkey initiated its changing notion of identity through its outlook of its surroundings, whereas for Iran, it had other concerns. Turkey’s intent was to further Turkish and Iranian relations beyond its border, replicated through the cooperation of the Kurdish issue in 2004,⁹ hoping to further other strata’s of possible cooperation’s for the future. Stable relations with Turkey would give Iran the opportunity to break its international isolation of economic, political and diplomatic repercussions. Sanctions imposed on Iran enacted as a prominent impairment, but despite this Turkish-Iranian cooperation persisted in being minimal due to perplexing Turkish and US relations establishing Turkey as not a trustworthy partner refraining from the prospects of a multidimensional cooperation with Turkey.

“By the late 2010, the Middle Eastern and North African dictatorships encountered with the challenges posed by the demands of their own citizens. The first uprising began in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 and resulted with the collapse of 23 years long Ben Ali’s regime. On 25 January 2011, Egyptians toppled the Mubarak’s regime. Then, these uprisings spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria and led to NATO operations against Qaddafi’s regime.”¹⁰ The popular uprisings of the Arab Spring did not just transform these countries internally but also had serious implications on the regional geopolitical front. Turkey and Iran, who are both political and economic prominent figures within the Middle East, seek to fill in the power void and increase their regional powers whilst having differing stances, placing them on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Therefore, the case of Turkey and Iran in relation to the Arab Spring is of great importance due to the implications of bilateral relations but also the geopolitics of the Middle East.

From the perspective of Turkey during the Arab Spring uprisings, Middle Eastern countries were/are predestined to naturally orientalise themselves towards democracy over time. Secondly, Turkey rejects any foreign interventions during the stages of orientalising, in which ex-Turkish foreign minister of Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu stated during the latter of the early stages of the uprising: “At that time, the question of what we attempted to find out an answer was: What is the ordinary course of history? Who stands on the right side of the history? Are the protesters in Tunisia or Ben Ali? Is

⁷ International Crisis Group, Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals, (International Crisis Group, 2016)

⁸ Ayman Gül den S, “Turkey and Iran: Between Friendly Competition and Fierce Rivalry” in Arab Studies Quarterly , Vol. 36, No. 1 (Pluto Journals, 2014)

⁹ Akkoyunlu Karabekir, “Turkey’s Iranian Conundrum: A Delicate Balancing Act” in Another Empire? Turkey’s foreign policy in a new century, (Biligi University Press, 2012)

¹⁰ Uzun Özüm S, ‘The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations’ in Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol.4 No.2 (Ortadoğu Etütleri ,2013)

Mobarak or youngs in the Tahrir Square? Kind of these questions came out. We decided that this is a natural order, and there is not any conspiracy. The Arab Spring was started by the young Arab generation, which should be respected.”¹¹ Davutoğlu pertains that Turkey views the democratic interests of the Arabs as the vocal element of the Arab Spring. It thus identifies itself as an imperative prototype in the Middle East by bestowing a notable example of being a democratic Muslim country and claims to have influenced the shift towards democratic demands of the Arab Spring.

On the contrary, from the Iranian outlook, the Arab Spring is an expansion of the “1979 Islamic Revolution,”¹² where by the developments of the Arab uprisings was the result of an Islamic awakening driven by the principles of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, alluding that Iran was responsible for the progressions of Arab countries by promoting the concept of Islamic awakening. “This Islamic awakening ... was created by the victory of the great Revolution of the Iranian nation... Islam has become the guiding principle of popular movements,”¹³ stated by Ali Khamenei. Secondly, Iran has also classified to the Arab Islamic awakening as a movement that enacted against the powers of the US and Israel. “The essence of the Islamic awakening in the countries of the region is an anti-Zionist and anti-US movement.”¹⁴ Highlighting that the Islamic awakening of the Middle East alluded to the journeys of the Prophets and, therefore, through persistence, Muslim countries should refrain from formalities with Zionists and Americans as it would derail the movement away from Islam. The juxtaposed outlooks of Turkey and Iran were not only produced by their views about the origins of the protests of the Arab Spring uprising but also whether the uprising was formed by “internal dynamics or by foreign interventions”¹⁵ resulting in the friction of Turkish-Iranian relations.

Taking a deeper look into the significance of religion, the enduring competition of Islam in the contemporary within Islamic countries has become an increasingly dominant tool used by leaders to shape the narrative of its nations and people. In the case of Turkey and Iran, the two have utilised Islamic nationalism in order to “misguide a vision of pan-Islamism to evoke a culturally hegemonic form of political Islam.”¹⁶

In the case of Turkey, Islamic nationalism has been subjugated to a significant increase through the notion of neo-ottomanism. Erdoğan revokes Turkey’s Ottoman past in order to be the father of a new Turkish identity shaped by Islamic domination vying for Islamic leadership by “ casting himself as a champion of Muslims across the world,”¹⁷ threatening other Muslim countries. In order for the re-establishment of neo-ottomanism to be implemented, “Erdoğan has been targeting the Turkish Shi’ite, Christians, Kurdish population while at the same time developing Sunni hardliners to buttress a Turkish identity that resonates with the Ottoman era.”¹⁸

However, amongst many Sunni Muslim populations in the Middle East, Erdoğan represents the hope to rebalance Western relations by being the only leader to have the courage to stand up to the West,

¹¹ Uzun Özüm S, ‘The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations’ in Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol.4 No.2 (Ortadoğu Etütleri ,2013)

¹² Khiabany Gholam ‘Arab Revolutions and the Iranian Uprising: Similarities and Differences’ in Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication Vol.5 No.1 (Brill,2012)

¹³ Uzun Özüm S, ‘The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations’ in Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol.4 No.2 (Ortadoğu Etütleri ,2013)

¹⁴ Uzun Özüm S, ‘The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations’ in Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol.4 No.2 (Ortadoğu Etütleri ,2013)

¹⁵ Uzun Özüm S, ‘The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations’ in Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol.4 No.2 (Ortadoğu Etütleri ,2013)

¹⁶ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-dangerous-new-exports-pan-islamist-neo-ottoman-visions-and-regional>

¹⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/7447e141-3d3f-4d98-953d-179e15909a7e>

¹⁸ <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/turkeys-imperial-vision-and-its-ramifications-10971051.html>

conveying that the Middle East is not subjugated to imperialist westerners. It is important to note that Erdoğan shifted from a Muslim democrat to an Islamic nationalist for a number of reasons. Firstly the Syrian crisis in which Erdoğan feels encircled within the region, feeling threatened by Syria and by the PKK, holding his grip on internal politics. Secondly, the EU's rejection, of Turkey in becoming a member of the EU which would be a tool to making Turkey a global and central actor in the international arena. However, due to the EU's rejection, Erdoğan as well as many Turks in Turkey and in the diaspora, feel humiliated. As a result many Turkish nationals who negate with Erdoğan's humiliation and with Islamic nationalism are supporting a president who has an aggressive stance, a vis-à-vis towards the West and who vows to show that Turkey is no longer "the sick man of Europe."¹⁹

In Iran, Islamic nationalism is referred to as Iranian Islamnationalism entailing an amalgamation of Iranian and Islamic principles. The foundations of Iranian Islamnationalism was primarily implemented through the publication of *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication/Westruckness) by Jalal Al-e-Ahmad in 1962²⁰ criticising the Westernisation of Iran under the Pahlavi dynasty in which Iran was on the cusp of being divided by Western Imperialists. Jalal Al-e-Ahmad noted that the Shia clergy were the custodians of Iranian indigenous traditions against the Pahlavi-sponsored westernisation. The *Gharbzadegi* prompted the "futural horizon of the 'Islamic Revolution' and was widely portrayed as a decisive step in readying the discursive terrain for its 'Islamic Identity' as well as the inevitable ascension of the Shi'ite clergy."²¹ Therefore, the push for Shia Islam as a necessity for Iranian identity alienated ethnic minorities and ethnic religions that did not fit into the consensus of the new Iranian identity, similar to Turkey.

Despite the difference in time frames between Erdoğan and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, it is important to note that in the case of Iran and Iranian Islamnationalism, this notion was continued and strengthened through the transformation of Iran becoming an Islamic Republic in 1979.²² Therefore the 50 year age gap of Islamic nationalism of Turkey through Erdoğan and Iran does not adhere to great value as the prospects of the importance of the implementation of Islamic identity still continues to this present day in both countries. However, regardless of the similar historical backgrounds and strategies from the journey of westernisation to the preservation of native cultural identity perpetuated by Islamic nationalism, the rise of such prospects has proven to be difficult for Turkish and Iranian relations through the Sunni and Shiite discourse. In the interim of establishing a new national Islamic identity. Turkey implements anti-shiasm, "The Alevi, a long-persecuted Shia sect to which 10-20 million Turks belong, say they feel menaced by the government's pro-Sunni stance in the Shia-Sunni struggle that is taking place across the Muslim world."²³ For Iran, anti-Sunnism, "Iran's Sunni minority—which in the absence of official and authoritative statistics in Iran is estimated to constitute around 10% of Iran's current estimated population of 86 million—has suffered disproportionately over the last four decades in terms of their political voice and representation."²⁴ The contrasting Islamic sects

¹⁹ Makdisi Ussama, "Ottoman Orientalism" in *The American Historical Review* Vol. 107 No. 3, (Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association, 2002)

²⁰ Al-e-Ahmad Jalal, *Gharbzadegi* (Westruckness,) (Mazda Publishers 1983)

²¹ Sadeghi-Boroujerdi Eskender, 'Colonial Capitalism and the Racial State in Iran' in *Post Colonial Studies*, Vol.4 No. 2(Goldsmiths Research Online 2021)

²² Bakhsh Shaul, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1989' in *The Wilson Quarterly* Vol. 13 No. 4, (Wilson Quarterly, 1989)

²³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-shias-in-fear-of-life-on-the-edge-8862645.html>

²⁴ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-iran-protesting-against-decades-discrimination-and-repression>

of Sunni and Shiite majority's results into "fundamentally opposed political systems"²⁵ which are both heavily influenced by religion. Therefore, there is only so much so Turkey and Iran can cooperate due to opposing attitudes towards Sunni and Shiite sects in order to follow their visions of national identity. Meaning on the grounds of religion, a distant and superficial relationship remains between Turkey and Iran, despite the unification of both countries on the religious front offering strong opposition to the west, which they both ultimately strive for.

Taking everything into account, the nature of Turkish-Iranian relations "is marked by nuances, uncertainties, and contradictions."²⁶ The geopolitical competition between Iran and Turkey showcases an old power game with a portentous quirk in which both closely pry on each other's moves enclosing their feelings of paranoia. Nevertheless, both powers play vital roles within the Middle East by sustaining sufficient levels of cooperation which embody the interests of both Turkey and Iran by confronting international orders. However, into the look to the future, Turkey and Iran would benefit in deepening their relationship by addressing the problems that divide the two nations and by following through with substantial results. Until then Turkish-Iranian relations will continue to endure its uneasy temperament and would potentially enable the formation of fault lines within the Middle East rather than enacting on the ability to permanently erase them.

²⁵ Tabaar Ayatollahi Mohammad & Yildirim A.Kadir 'Religious Parties and Ideological Change: A Comparison of Iran and Turkey' in *Journal of Public and International Affairs Academy of Political Science* Vol. 135 No. 4, (Academy of Political Science, 2020)

²⁶ Calabrese John, 'Turkey and Iran: Limits of a Stable Relationship' in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.25 No.1 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd, 1998)

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