

## HOW TURKEY'S ISLAMISTS FELL OUT OF LOVE WITH IRAN

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**T**urkish-Iranian relations have long been characterized by ideological polarity. Ever since the Ottoman expansion into the Levant in the early sixteenth century and the Safavid Empire's acceptance of Shiism as the official imperial religion, relations between these two empires have been defined along the prime schism in Islam. This antagonism had separated the Middle East between these two poles from 1514 until they collapsed early in the twentieth century. It was only during the secular, post-dynastic modernization period of the 1930s that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Reza Shah Pahlavi demonstrated that, for Iran and Turkey to pursue cordial relations, both regimes had to be secular-modernist. Such cordiality, however, was on a tightrope: if either regime emphasized religion as its main identity, relations between Turkey and Iran would revert to their sectarian animosity. Indeed, both leaders developed a close working relationship under the common goal of secular modernization. Reza Shah's Iran was one of the first countries

to sign a "friendship pact" with Turkey, in 1926. He then made a famous visit to Turkey in 1934 in order to see firsthand the accomplishments of Turkish modernization and seek opportunities to mirror these advances in Iran. Following the departure of Ataturk and Pahlavi from power, the brief warmth in Turkish-Iranian relations disappeared. Nonetheless, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's secular Iran did not witness the sort of major sectarian conflict with Kemalist Turkey that was the hallmark of the imperial period.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, on the other hand, changed this détente. By then, Turkey had long been a bastion of secularism in the Muslim world, and such credentials had rendered Kemalism the natural ideological nemesis of post-revolutionary Islamist Iran. To that end, Iran actively tried to destabilize Turkey's secular regime by arming and supporting the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Kerkaren Kurdistan, PKK), hoping to soften Turkey's secularist resistance to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

For Turkey, on the other hand, post-1979 Iran became synonymous with backwardness and religious reactionism. Therefore, Kemalist foreign-policy makers minimized Turkey's relationship with Tehran, neither cooperating nor openly confronting it.

Turkish Islamists' perception of Iran, on the other hand, was much different. Shelving their centuries-old sectarian differences, Turkey's Sunni Islamists tried to actively cultivate relations with their sectarian "other," Shiite Iran. They had seen a convergence of goals with Tehran and had chosen to ignore Iran's support for the PKK through the 1990s, arguing that Kurdish nationalism was the problem of secular-nationalist Kemalism and that the issue would be easily resolved if Turkey pursued a more religious and ethno-linguistically inclusive policy. Turkish Islamists' outlook towards the Kurdish problem effectively rendered the Islamic Republic of Iran an inherently "Kemalist problem."

Sectarian differences aside, the ideology of political Islam was thought to blur the nationalist differences between the two countries, acting as a common ground for Turkish and Iranian Islamists to address the problems of their society and the Muslim world in general. To that end, Turkish Islamists favored close relations with Iran, arguing that both countries' Islamization would be beneficial for the Middle East by blunting the chronic Sunni-Shia divide, thereby creating a monolithic pan-Islamist unity.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, Turkish Islamists' closeness with Iran had also deeply worried the secularist establishment in Turkey. Few remember that one of the factors that led to Turkey's 1997 "soft coup" was the "Al-Quds night" organized by the Islamist Welfare Party leadership on December 31, 1996, in the remote outskirts of Ankara. During this

event, Iran's then ambassador to Turkey, Mohammad Reza Bagheri, had made a well-received speech denouncing the Turkish secularist regime and declaring Iran's official support for the proclamation of an Islamic republic in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> At the time, AKP's founding figures — such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul and Bulent Arinç — were the rising stars of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) and the protégés of Necmettin Erbakan, the RP leader and mastermind of Turkey's flagship Islamist ideology, "Milli Görüş" (National Outlook). As a manifestation of this ideology, Erbakan had made his first foreign visit as prime minister to Iran and Libya, contrary to other Turkish governments' tradition of visiting Brussels, London or Washington. RP's overt Islamist policies had led to the infamous February 28, 1997, decree by the Turkish general staff, an ultimatum in disguise to the government party, eventually leading to its dissolution by the Constitutional Court. Even after the RP's closure, following the 1997 soft coup and the ascent of its more moderate successor, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), Iran's appeal to Turkish Islamists remained intact.

Two critical events had changed Turkish-Iranian relations for the better. The first was Turkey's threat to invade Syria in 1998, which forced Hafez al-Assad to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Damascus and led to his eventual capture in a joint U.S.-Turkish covert operation in 1999. After Öcalan's arrest, the PKK entered a period of interregnum, succumbing to internal leadership conflicts and effectively depriving Iran of its proxy and forcing Tehran to reconsider its policy towards Turkey. The second event was the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey

refused to allow U.S. troops access to Turkish soil, and Washington retaliated by closing northern Iraqi airspace to Turkish jets, thereby preventing “hot pursuit” operations in Iraq’s Kurdish area.

Through 2003-08, the PKK benefited from the no-fly zone in northern Iraq and re-established itself along the northern Iraqi-Iranian border, resuming attacks against Turkish targets by 2006. Following the PKK’s re-emergence, only two countries — Turkey’s former enemies — responded to Ankara’s call against the PKK. Syria arrested any PKK-affiliated operatives Turkey demanded (Turkey’s 1998 invasion threat had left a deep mark on Damascus’ foreign policy consciousness), and Iran shelled the positions of the PKK and its Iranian wing, PJAK, in mountainous areas close to its border. In return, and in the face of U.S. apathy, Turkish foreign policy tilted in favor of its two former adversaries. A joint trade and tourism agreement was signed with Syria in 2004, heralding a cooperative five-year period leading to an April 2009 joint military exercise that both states called “unprecedented.”<sup>4</sup> Relations with Iran followed a similar, albeit more cautious, line. While signing similar trade and tourism agreements, Turkey also invested in Iran’s South Pars natural-gas field, defying U.S. Congressional sanctions against investment in Iran.<sup>5</sup> Turkey also frequently played down the dangers of Iran’s nuclear capability, criticizing Israel’s nuclear arsenal instead.<sup>6</sup>

During this period, not only the ruling AKP, but also the Islamist and the Muslim-conservative media were unwaveringly enthusiastic about Turkish-Iranian cooperation. The high-circulation center-right conservative *Zaman*, for example, headlined many Turkish-Iranian cooperation agreements,<sup>7</sup> often featuring positive reports

on the significant increase in Iranian tourist visits.<sup>8</sup> The Islamist *Vakit* (currently called *Yeni Akit*) newspaper was the first Turkish media outlet to conduct an interview with Iranian President Ahmedinejad in November 2009, quoting him in the headline: “The West is worried about Iran and Turkey growing stronger.”<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Erdogan had also frequently addressed Ahmedinejad (as well as Assad) as “brother,” using the symbolism of a family to define the relationship. Furthermore, the AKP adopted a policy of “de-securitizing” the Iranian nuclear program. PM Erdogan frequently tried to allay Western fears about the Iranian nuclear program and diverted attention to Jerusalem, arguing that the issue of Middle Eastern nuclear proliferation should be addressed beginning with Israel.<sup>10</sup>

## THE ARAB SPRING

Few things in the Middle East shifted as fast as the Turkish Islamists’ outlook towards Syria and Iran, which has been a direct product of the Arab Spring. Successive revolts against postcolonial, quasi-secular dictatorships not only toppled authoritarian regimes, they also unearthed the sectarian tensions lying dormant across the Middle East, as pan-Sunni rhetoric began dominating the agenda. More specifically, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, its regional ambitions and the mobilization of the Syrian uprising under a Sunni discourse, fed Iranian fears of losing the influence it had expanded during the Iraq War. In return, Iranian foreign policy assumed a more defensively sectarian character, aiming to hold onto the zones of influence it had expanded in the last decade in Syria, Iraq and the Gulf region through actively divisive Shia rhetoric.

Turkey’s approach to the Arab Spring, on the other hand, went through a period

of transformation. At first, Turkish decision makers struggled to contextualize the uprisings and decided to act cautiously with the Tahrir Square revolt. After all, Mubarak's fall was far from certain. Besides, Egypt had always been a natural rival to the Ottoman presence in the Levant and too big a country for Turkey to trust. Therefore, Ankara refrained from putting its weight behind either Mubarak or the rebels. However, once Mubarak fell, Ankara began acting slightly more comfortable with the Libyan uprising. Although Prime Minister Erdogan initially warned NATO that an air campaign in Libya would not be sufficient to overthrow Qadhafi,<sup>11</sup> in the later phases of the conflict Turkey contributed to NATO efforts with limited aerial and naval assets. The fall of Qadhafi encouraged Turkey even further, causing decision makers to intervene in Syria more enthusiastically. After all, Syria was closer to Ottoman influence, and Prime Minister Erdogan had been cultivating a close relationship with Bashar al-Assad and his family. This relationship, the government argued, would be conducive to pressuring Syria to adopt democratic reforms.<sup>12</sup>

This was a miscalculation. Neither Erdogan's family relationship with Assad, nor Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's diplomatic initiatives led to a settlement between the Syrian Baath regime and the opposition. Turkey got exponentially more frustrated with the discovery of the limitations of its soft power. The AKP leadership then quickly lost patience with the low return from their personal connections to the Assad family and discovered what many seasoned Middle East experts had long been writing about: the behavior of both Damascus and Tehran was being determined by sectarian priorities.<sup>13</sup> In return, Turkey departed from its neutral stance

and gradually mirrored the perceived sectarianization in Syrian and Iranian foreign policy. An early sign of such sectarian discourse had come in January 2012, when Erdoğan lashed out against Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki, accusing him of fueling sectarian tensions and, in an unprecedented tone, calling him a follower of Yazid I, the controversial caliph of the Ummayyads, who fueled the Sunni-Shiite divide that culminated in 680 A.D. in the Battle of Karbala.<sup>14</sup>

Such a historically loaded analogy marked a shift in Turkey's policy of promoting regional unity and heralded a new period of sectarian divisiveness. As Assad's violence against the Syrian opposition intensified further, not only did Erdogan call the Syrian regime a "terrorist state,"<sup>15</sup> he also turned the spotlight on Iran, publicly criticizing it for stalling nuclear talks.<sup>16</sup> The pro-government newspaper *Sabah*, for example, began criticizing the Iranian nuclear program, underlining Iran's unwillingness to cooperate with the IAEA.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps in a more interesting move, the radically Islamist and traditionally pro-Iranian newspaper *Yeni Akit* headlined Egyptian President Morsi's lashing out against Assad during the nonaligned movement conference in Tehran, gleefully referring to Erdogan's insult to Shimon Peres at Davos in 2009: "Morsi said 'one minute' to Iran."<sup>18</sup>

As Turkey's involvement in Syria escalated into arming and training the primary anti-government militia, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Turkey found itself part of a proxy war in which Syria and Iran retaliated against Turkey's push in Syria by supporting Turkey's long-time nightmare, the PKK.<sup>19</sup> The first Turkish newspaper to report such intelligence was the Muslim-conservative *Zaman*, which argued that Iran

had regenerated its support for the PKK by allowing its leaders to locate in the Shahidan camp in northern Iran.<sup>20</sup> Afterwards, *Zaman* published a series of reports and analyses that connected the rise of PKK violence in Turkey to Iranian intelligence and covert military involvement, aiming to shape the public debate through its acute anti-Iranian tone. The pro-government *Sabah*, for example, reported that the reason PKK attacks had become so deadly was the fact that Iranian intelligence was providing them with actual coordinates of Turkish military positions.<sup>21</sup> The Islamist *Yeni Akit* has also lashed out against both Iran and Syria, reporting that “around 2000 PKK militants [are] being trained by Assad in Syria with Iranian proxy supervision.”<sup>22</sup>

Such statements are now also being explicitly made by the higher echelons of the AKP. Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, for example, did not shy away from publicly confronting Tehran, declaring that intelligence pointed to Iran with regard to the escalation in PKK violence.<sup>23</sup> The most recent, high-level statement came at a government-sponsored Middle Eastern peace conference in Istanbul, during which Prime Minister Erdoğan made blunt criticisms of Shiite theological foundations, accusing Iran and Syria of fueling a religious schism similar to that in Karbala.<sup>24</sup>

#### MAKING SENSE OF THE SHIFT

Iran's rapid fall from grace with Turkish Islamists is one of the most important recent structural shifts in the Middle East. Such a break is far from marginal and yields several important points for consideration. This shift validates the Atatürk-Pahlavi example, which shows that détente in Turkish-Iranian relations can only happen when both countries are ruled by a secular-modernist regime. If either coun-

try's ruling government has an Islamist identity, relations can only improve to the extent dictated by the Ottoman-Safavid divide. If Islamism dictates both countries' policies, then strategic conflict is inevitable, and the Sunni-Shiite historical memories and symbolism related to Karbala are evoked by both sides.

Second, Turkish Islamist discourse appears to be fluid on Iran and Shiism. Turkish Islamists may appear to be defending their relations with Iran or downplaying its nuclear ambitions, but the determining feature of their outlook will be the maintenance of the Sunni-Shiite status quo. If major sectarian influence shifts, either through war or nonviolent crises, Turkish Islamists may support Iran on the surface; but they will revert to their historical religious symbolisms and will actively try to suppress creeping Shiism. We have seen that in a matter of 10 months, Turkish Islamists shifted from criticizing international sanctions against Iran to vehemently criticizing the Iranian nuclear program.

Third, Turkey's disdain for Iran has become an almost unanimous national position following Tehran's falling out with the Turkish Islamists. Both Turkish secularists and Islamists have now strangely joined the same anti-Iranian camp, due to the unintended sectarian effects of the Arab Spring. Such foreign-policy consensus is a rarity in Turkish politics and will probably leave a legacy for years to come.

Fourth, Turkish Islamists' shift towards Iran highlights one critical and obvious — yet frequently elusive — fact: the PKK remains the primary lens through which Turkey views its allies and foes. A foe can quickly turn into an ally, and vice versa, depending on its position vis-à-vis the PKK. The reason Turkey adopted a pro-Iranian foreign-policy line in the first place

was because of Iran's skilful manipulation of Washington's apathy towards the PKK during the Iraq War and its concrete "on the field" help against Turkey. Likewise, the main reason Iran is *regionem non grata* now is because of its perceived decision to aid the PKK against Turkey.

Finally, does the Turkish Islamists' shift against Iran mean that Turkey is now more likely to cooperate with Israel against Iran? Like Iran, Israel is a highly toxic issue for Turkish Islamists, and it is not very likely that Turkey would side with Israel just because Turkish Islamists have disowned Iran. Turkey believes that its struggle in Syria, as well as in Egypt and Libya, has won it the support of the post-revolutionary Sunni regimes and, most important, the anti-Iranian Gulf capitals. Therefore, Turkey still feels that it has a large space in which to maneuver diplomatically, staying apart from both Iran and Israel.

The fact that the current U.S. government is also growing a bit colder to Israel's position on Iran makes Turkey comfortably ambivalent to Israeli threats. More important, the fact that civilian casualties were involved in the Turkish-Israeli rift makes it politically costly for Turkey to warm up to Israel again. Like Iran, the *Mavi Marmara* issue has become a national cause on which Islamists and secular nationalists are in consensus. Without a formal apology, it is unlikely for their position to change in favor of Israel. On the other hand, if Israel ever chooses to apologize for the *Mavi Marmara* civilian casualties, this would perhaps be the best time to do it. Such an apology would affect Turkey's policies in favor of Israel in a way that would not have been possible before the Syrian uprising.

As mentioned earlier, disdain towards Iran's sectarian policies has become a

national issue since the ruling AKP's pan-Sunni Middle East policy converged with the Turkish secularists' agenda on Iran. This means that Turkey will now be more likely to be critical of the Iranian nuclear program in the coming months, both explicitly through official declarations and through back-door diplomatic moves. Whether this translates into joining diplomatic forces with the United States depends largely on the result of the U.S. elections. Turkish leaders have developed a close working relationship with the Obama administration and will be more likely to support American initiatives if the current administration remains at the helm. Ankara saw Mitt Romney as a continuation of the dreaded Bush-era foreign policy and the American neoconservative *Weltanschauung*.

With regard to the region, Turkey's anti-Iranian shift closes the northern flank of Iran's western window into the Middle East. As the Arab Spring effectively revived a pan-Sunni consciousness that seeks to repel foreign involvement — as well as creeping Shiism — the Middle Eastern system has now reverted to its historical divide between the two main poles of Islam. Such a pan-Sunni revival, however, should not be taken for granted, as there will be an intense inner rivalry among Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia regarding who will lead this revival in the future. This rivalry may seriously impair the unity of pan-Sunnism, as happened after the Arab Revolt of 1916, or during the United Arab Republic project of the 1960s. If that becomes the case, exercising a unified Sunni foreign policy may not be possible where it matters the most: to push back Shiite expansionism, to pressure Israel on the Palestinian issue or to achieve foreign-policy autonomy from the United States.

- <sup>1</sup> Nader Habibi, "Turkey and Iran: Growing Economic Relations despite Western Sanctions," Crown Center for Middle East Studies (Brandeis University, 2012), 62
- <sup>2</sup> Turkish Islamists' perception of Iran has been covered in Banu Eligur, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press), 90-92.
- <sup>3</sup> Yalcin Dogan, "The Shifting of Power," *Turkish Daily News (now Hurriyet Daily News)*, January 6, 1997.
- <sup>4</sup> Charlie Philips, "Turkey, Syria's New Best Friend," *Guardian*, October 1, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> "Turkey Will Invest \$3.5bn to Develop Iran's South Pars," *Gulf Times*, July 7, 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example, "Iranian Nuclear Programme 'Solely Civilian' – Turkish PM," BBC News, March 16, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> One such report had portrayed Turkish-Iranian energy cooperation as "key" to European energy security: "Turkey, Iran Sign Strategic Deal to Carry Gas to Europe." *Today's Zaman*, October 30, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> "Turist var rehber yok" (There are tourists, but not enough tour guides), *Today's Zaman*, November 07, 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> The full version of the interview is available in Turkish at <http://m.haber5.com/haber/112818>.
- <sup>10</sup> "Erdogan: Israil yalnızlığa mahkumdur" (Erdogan: Israel is doomed to isolation), NTVMSNBC, September 25, 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> "PM Rules Out NATO Intervention in Libya," *Today's Zaman*, February 28, 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> Author's personal interview with a senior Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs official. September 2010. Ankara.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Mona Yacoubian, "Syria's Alliance with Iran," United States Institute of Peace Brief, May 2007, <http://www.usip.org/publications/syria-s-alliance-iran>.
- <sup>14</sup> "Déjà Vu All Over Again? Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis," *International Crisis Group Middle East Report* No. 126, July 30, 2012, 12.
- <sup>15</sup> "Erdogan Brands Syria a 'Terrorist State'," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> "Erdogan: Iran Making Excuses to Stall Talks," *Jerusalem Post*, May 4, 2012.
- <sup>17</sup> "Erdogan: Iran ipe un seriyor" (Erdogan: Iran [is stalling]), *Sabah*, April 6, 2012.
- <sup>18</sup> "Mursi Iran'a One Minute dedi" (Morsi said 'one minute' to Iran), *Habervaktim*, August 30, 2012.
- <sup>19</sup> See, Akin Unver, "Turkey's 'Free Syrian Army' Troubles," *Fikra Forum*, September 6, 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> "PKK yöneticileri İran'daki şehidan kampına yerleştirdi" (PKK leaders relocated to Shahidan camp in Iran), *Zaman*, August 10, 2012.
- <sup>21</sup> "İran ajanlarından PKK'ya koordinat" (Iranian agents [provide PKK] coordinates), *Sabah*, August 31, 2012.
- <sup>22</sup> "2 bin PKK'lı Suriye'ye eğitime gitti" (2000 PKK [militias] went to Syria for training), *Habervaktim*, September 1.
- <sup>23</sup> "Turkey Says It Will Do 'Whatever Is Required' against Iran," *Today's Zaman*, August 10, 2012.
- <sup>24</sup> "Dini liderlerin İstanbul buluşması" (Istanbul meeting of religious leaders), CNN-Turk, September 7, 2012.