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Turkey and Iran a regional cold war justified by economic interests

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The increasing number of differences in opinion between Turkey and Iran has been reflected in exchanges of statements and counter-statements between the two countries in recent weeks. It seems that the extent of these discrepancies will gradually increase in the near term, especially given the tendency of both countries towards increasing their political and military influence in Syria and Iraq.

While Turkey seeks to build and extend military bases between Jarablus and Azaz in Syria, and to intensify “Operations Euphrates Shield,” which was launched on August 25, 2016, despite strong Iranian opposition, Tehran, as the primary regional supporter of the Assad regime, has strengthened its influence in several centers in Syrian territory to enable the Iranian regime to control the land corridors which it requires to maintain its strategic access to the shores of the Mediterranean. These centers are tasked with strengthening Iran’s “Shiite Crescent,” bringing Iran into direct conflict with Turkey in Ankara’s commercial, economic and political gateway to the Arab world, with the Turkish leadership already in a tense relationship with the European Union over the freezing last November of negotiations in the European Parliament about Turkey’s application for EU membership.

On a separate but related issue, the battle to liberate the Iraqi city of Mosul, which began on October 17 last year, revealed the extent of the conflict between Turkey and Iran. While Iran considers the battle of Mosul to be the primary action to expand Shiite influence in the region and to re-establish Iraq’s demographic balance in favor of Shia by reducing the Sunni presence in northern Iraq, Turkey sees the battle of Mosul as being strategically important for its own national security. To that end, it pressed Washington to participate in the fight for the city, as well as implementing security and military measures on its border with Iraq in preparation.

Turkey is supporting a number of armed opposition groups in Syria and opposes the establishment of an independent Kurdish entity there, while Tehran supports the Assad regime and does not mind giving the Kurds a greater position and prominence in Syria and Iraq.

The already frosty climate between the two countries entered a freezing phase after Iran’s official protest against Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu’s description of Iran’s regional policy as “sectarian” in remarks made on the sidelines of a security conference in Munich last February, in which he said,

“Tehran aspires to turn Syria and Iraq into two Shiite states.” This was the second time in a short period Çavuşoğlu had made such a controversial statement, asserting on the eve of a visit to Bahrain in mid-February that Iran is seeking to divide Iraq and Syria, and is acting from a nationalist standpoint.

The Iranian regime’s sectarian orientation has become clearer and caused more anxiety since the regime admitted in August 2016 that it had formed a sectarian military force, named the “Shiite Liberation Army,” which is fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. General Mohammad Ali Falaki, a senior commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and a commander of Iran’s forces in Syria formally announced the creation

of this new army, during an interview with the Iranian state-owned Mashreq news agency, which has close ties to the IRGC. In the interview, General Falaki stated that Iran had “formed the Shiite Liberation Army led by the commander of the Quds Force, Qassim Suleimani, who is fighting on three fronts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.”¹

As part of Iran’s military build-up in the region, the regime has established a base at Damascus International Airport, which acts as the headquarters of the IRGC in Syria, as well as another base at Mount Ezzan near Aleppo. The Iranian regime believes that it has become known as a growing military force to reckon with among conventional international forces, with this new status making it all the more vital to establish military bases outside its territory that reflect its military prowess. In this context, the Iranian military’s Chief of Staff, Major General Mohammad Baqri, on November 26, 2016, said that Iran is moving towards “the construction of naval bases on the coasts of Syria and Yemen, meeting the need of Iranian fleets to travel to distant bases.” These statements have caused concern not only in Ankara but also among Iran’s neighboring states, particularly in the Gulf.²

The Central Asian region and the Caspian Sea represent an area of influence and conflict between Ankara and Tehran, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states in this region, which contain significant levels of natural energy resources, particularly oil and gas.

Against this general background, the conflict between geopolitical and sectarian tendencies has escalated, resulting in historically poor relations between Iran and Turkey. The increasing political and cultural tensions between the two countries remain the most prominent and public example of the worsening bilateral relations; however, these are still tempered, as always, by economic cooperation and trade exchanges.

Stimulus of conflict and its maximum level

As well as the escalation of long-term tensions over old issues, this is the first time in modern history that Ankara and Tehran have rushed towards real political conflict against the backdrop of a situation in Syria and Iraq. The mutual recriminations over their network of economic and trade interests have been overshadowed by the suspension of meetings of the Turkish-Iranian Business Forum, with the last one, scheduled for February 25, 2017, not taking place at all.

Over the course of the six-hundred-year history of the relationship, since the war between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, both Iran and Turkey have previously shown pragmatism in their bilateral relations and prioritized finding balance despite the many factors of conflict. Although they differ over almost everything, from the struggle for influence in the Central Asian republics to the Arab world, the two nations

have always been keen to maintain bilateral relations, which are often leveraged and driven by the economy. Here, the Turkish discussions avoided the revival of the fifth anniversary of the “Jalderan” battle which took place between the two countries in 1514 to avoid tension with Iran.

The uprisings of the Arab Spring since 2011, however, have revealed profound contradictions between the two countries, with sharp differences emerging from the beginning of the crisis in Iraq and Syria. While Ankara initially tried to convince Damascus to reform and respond to popular demands instead of raising its “big stick” against protesters then sided with the anti-Assad opposition after this diplomatic approach failed, Tehran sided with the regime from the start, almost immediately deploying its forces and militias, as well as deploying its regional proxies, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias and volunteers.

The Turkish-Iranian relationship was further complicated following the emergence of the so-called “Islamic State” organization, widely known by its pejorative Arabic abbreviation “ISIL,” whose primary objective was to dismantle and destroy these nations and peoples, and apparently to slander and distort Islam. Following the emergence of ISIL, Turkey opened its “Incirlik” airbase to the U.S.-led international coalition forces founded in 2014 to defeat the terror group. Turkey’s subsequent decision to allow the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which it is a member state, to establish an anti-missile shield on its territory on the eve of Russia’s entry into the Syrian debacle, caused concern and anger in Tehran.

The aforementioned comments by Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu on the sidelines of the 53rd Security Conference in Munich on February 17, in which he labeled Iran’s policy as “sectarian” and claimed that Iran is seeking to spread Shiism and convert Syria and Iraq to two sovereign Shiite states further increased tensions, as did a statement by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a visit to Bahrain in mid-February, in which he asserted that “Iran seeks to divide Iraq and Syria and act from a national standpoint.” The Iranian regime officially protested against these comments and summoned the Turkish ambassador to Tehran, calling the remarks “unconstructive.” In a barbed response to the Turkish comments, Iran’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, called Turkey “a neighbor with weak memory which denies the good.”

Despite recent tensions over differences in the handling of some issues, such as the battle of Mosul and developments in the countries involved in the conflict, especially Syria and Yemen, however, the two countries have not forgotten that many considerations could be influenced by changes in their relationship; this motivates both to attempt not only to control the limits of this tension and not to escalate them any

more than is essential in an effort to avoid negative repercussions on their interests but also to seek to reach consensus on controversial issues.

It is likely that despite the current grave differences between the two countries, given the folk memory of previous bloody wars between them five centuries ago, and despite their expansionist aspirations and historical tensions over their regional projects, the leaderships in both nations will impose red lines on any escalation of tensions, with both taking the other's objectives into account before acting to fulfill their own ambitions in order to avoid direct military confrontation. Thus, while Tehran may frustrate Ankara with its use of multiple regional players, including the Shiite militias and the PKK and its proxies, it cannot risk further intensifying its dispute with Ankara. Meanwhile, Turkey's pragmatic nature prevents it from being dragged into any military adventurism with Tehran.³

Historical experience in the joint management of protracted conflicts between the two countries, and the longevity of Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations, which witnessed some 12 wars in 1823 alone for only one example, confirm the political realism that characterizes the relations between the two countries. This was manifested in the signing of the Treaty of Qasr-e-Shirin, also known as the Zehab Treaty, signed on May 17, 1639, which, despite sporadic conflicts, has proved a remarkably long-lasting and useful reference point for the peaceful settlement of disputes between the two countries.

Although the governments in Ankara and Tehran represent two very different political systems, one secular and the other theocratic, they have coexisted for some time in this state of ideological dissonance with no significant problems, with both countries keen to develop and strengthen their economic relations. Levels of bilateral coordination and economic exchange increased with the arrival of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power in Turkey in 2002. The first ten years of Erdogan's rule were marked by convergence between the two countries of a warmth unseen since the fall of the Shah in 1979. Within that decade, political ties between Turkey and Iran were greatly strengthened and the number of official diplomatic visits doubled, while trade between the two countries increased from \$1 billion in 2000 to around US \$16.5 billion in 2012.

This political coordination reached a peak in 2010 with Ankara's involvement in June of that year, along with Brazil, in a United Nations mediation mission concerning the Iranian nuclear dossier. Turkey's official position was based on the principle of refusing to impose further sanctions due to the lack of sufficient evidence to convict Iran. Turkey, therefore, voted against UN Resolution 1929 of June 2010, which would have seen new sanctions imposed on Tehran.⁴

In light of the above, the study sheds light on the historical relationship between Iran and Turkey and the thorny issues in their current relationship, as well as the counter-considerations that impede any narrowing of the gap between them, in addition to the incentives for continued cooperation.

Different visions

The relationship between Ankara and Tehran was given a great boost in terms of its development after Iran adopted a supportive stance towards Turkey in the wake of the failed coup in July 2016, underlining its support for Turkish sovereignty in alignment with the “Moscow – Tehran – Hezbollah” axis regarding the Syrian crisis, and the engagement of the two countries in the Astana negotiations. Despite this, however, the need for improved political relations remains a concern.

If the conflict of influence between Turkey and Iran remains the most prominent dispute between them, there are other differences, which are no less important:

Crisis Management in Syria

The standpoints of Ankara and Tehran differ significantly towards the management of the Syrian crisis. The Iranian regime is extremely sensitive to Turkey’s military presence on Syrian territory, with Brigadier Dehghan, the Iranian Defense Minister, asserting, “Turkish military intervention on Syrian territory, is an assault and a violation of all Syrian territory, and is without consent, and is even resented by the Syrian government.” Dehghan added, “If Turkey enters Syria even at the request of the Syrian government, they must leave immediately, whether at the request of Damascus, or otherwise; they are aggressors against Syria.”⁵

Such statements very clearly reveal Iran’s views on the Turkish military presence in Syria and on Turkey’s “Operation Euphrates Shield,” launched on August 25. On the other hand, the Assad regime’s “liberation” of Aleppo last December, which relied on both Iranian and Russian backing, was a turning point in the Iranian presence in Syria, with the Tehran regime betting on a political settlement. On the other hand, Turkey had a starting point for wider military operations in eastern Syria, which is quite the opposite of Iran’s political and military priorities in the Syrian conflict.

Another issue is evidence of the mutual antagonism between Iran’s and Turkey’s positions in the Syrian crisis, which show deep differences and a lack of any shared view on the future of the Syrian political system. The main question for Turkey here is the impossibility of tolerating a ruler who has systematically killed his people in an effort to crush a popular uprising against tyranny and oppression. On the other hand, Ankara believes that its entry into strategic cooperation with Iran under the current situation would offer a political advantage for Iran in support of the Assad

government in future Syrian developments, although Ankara considers Assad to be wholly illegitimate.

Iran's sectarianism

Iran's sectarian practices in Syria and Iraq, and systematic doctrinal policies and efforts to build Shiite influence in the region, made the rapprochement between Turkey and Iran on the eve of the Turkish coup fragile, and escalated the dispute between Ankara and Tehran, especially after the latter's refusal in February 2016 to heed Turkish calls for the establishment of safe areas in Syria to accommodate the displaced people there. Responding to Turkey's calls, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qasimi claimed that such action would "further exacerbate the situation there," with Iran rejecting the proposal to establish safe areas, arguing that the situation in Syria is complex, and requires multiple understandings and initiatives to reach a solution.

On the other hand, the situation between Iran and Turkey has recently turned into a hotbed of tension and confrontation, and all the signs seem unmistakable that the timeless conflict between the two countries, with its Ottoman-Safavid dimension on the basis of Sunni-Shia sectarian divisions, has turned Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon into the battlegrounds of this conflict.⁶

This appears to mean an inevitable escalation of the sectarian conflict, with Turkey opposing the "Iran project," which relies on the use of sectarianism in neighboring countries as a military and political tool in achieving the Tehran regime's expansionist objectives in the countries of the region. From the Iranian regime's perspective, the Shiite presence in the Arab region is a scattered minority among a geographically connected Sunni majority. To achieve meaningful penetration of and dominion over this Sunni territory, therefore, Tehran sees it as essential to make demographic changes in the Sunni Arab majority extending from Mosul to Aleppo through Iraqi cities such as Tal Afar and Sinjar on Turkey's borders with Syria and Iraq.⁷

It seems likely that the wholly sectarian orientation of the Iranian regime's regional objectives became even clearer and more alarming to Turkey with the aforementioned announcement in August 2016 by General Falaki of the IRGC of the establishment of the "Shiite Liberation Army" led by Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani.⁸

Reducing Turkish influence in Iraq

The battle for the liberation of Mosul, which began on October 17, 2016, has wrought further division between Tehran and Ankara, after the Iranian regime's initial push to prevent Turkey from participating in it. In October 2016, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Amir Abdullahian said the presence of Turkish troops at the Iraqi

camp of Baashika was “wrong,” despite Ankara’s belief that it is legally entitled to participate as a member of the international coalition against ISIS, authorizing Turkey to deploy its forces in Iraq to fight the terror group without the approval of the Baghdad government. This is substantiated by the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2249 (2015) and the 1919 Treaty of Lausanne, which give Turkey the right to secure its borders by military intervention in Iraq or Syria.⁹

The repercussions from the battle for Mosul have had a negative effect on the relationship between Iran and Turkey, especially while the Iranian regime supports the well-documented violations by the “Popular Mobilization Forces” militias or Popular Mobilization, a de facto unofficial military wing of Iran in Iraq, which participated in the battle of Mosul; this participation and the abuses perpetrated by the militia members against the Turkmen minority loyal to Turkey based in the Tal Afar area further escalated these tensions, with Turkey likely to bear the humanitarian and economic consequences of the demographic changes and forced displacements inflicted by the militias.

Following the start of the battle for Mosul, Iran succeeded in forcing the Iraqi government to include large numbers of the Popular Mobilization in the official Iraqi forces via legislation passed in the Iraqi Parliament on November 26, effectively institutionalizing Iran’s presence in the country. Under this controversial new law, the Popular Mobilization factions and formations now have official status and legal protection as legal entities subordinate to the country’s security forces, giving them the right to maintain their identity and privacy.

With the imminent conclusion of the battle of Mosul and expectations that the liberation of the city will be announced following military advances that have succeeded in fatally wounding ISIL, there are widespread perceptions that the Popular Mobilization militias may subsequently launch a bid to seize power in Iraq. The members of these factions view themselves as more deserving of ruling the nation than the politicians who came to power with the protection of the Americans following the occupation of Iraq in April 2003, despite being associated with Nouri al-Maliki, an Iranian proxy, who was himself appointed by the USA. The Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization wants to re-divide the Iraqi “cake” using a framework and maps that are not very different from the current framework of party, factional and regional quotas.

Ankara believes that this legitimization of the Popular Mobilization will contribute to the escalation of sectarianism in the region, as well as thwart efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis. Foreseeing intensifying Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraq, Turkey is searching for new means to bring balance to the situation and prevent the sectarian

influence of the Iranian regime from escalating by strengthening the Turkish presence in northern Iraq and intensifying its support for the national mobilization forces in the Baasheqa camp.

In fact, the absence of Turkey from the battle of Mosul was a major blow to Ankara's interests and involvement in wider Iraqi and regional security, as well as increasing its concern over Iran's penetration of Iraqi Kurdistan in light of the broad area of understanding and coordination between Kurds and Iran, giving Tehran further control over Iraq, and enabling it to shape the landscape to fit its regional ambitions. Turkey is also concerned about the growing refugee crisis, which is directly impacting it, especially in light of the Popular Mobilization militias' massive ethnosectarian cleansing of the Sunni people of Mosul and other cities.

In addition to the above factors, the Kurdish issue itself represents an irritating aspect for the Turkish and Iranian regimes, with military confrontations escalating between the Turkish army and the PKK in southeast Turkey since July 2015 following the failure of political settlement negotiations which began in 2012, while Tehran is also increasing its punitive approach to the Iranian Kurdish population, demonstrated by the regime's mass execution of 20 Kurds on August 2, 2016 and threatening military operations in the areas of northern Iraq with a large presence of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Iranian-Kurdish PJAK militias in response to clashes between these forces and Revolutionary Guards in some western regions of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in Iran. Both Iran and Turkey share a common vision of the Kurdish organizations in Turkey, Iran, and Syria as "constituting the source of the threat."¹⁰

Although Turkey and Iran are unable to change the existing rules of strategic understanding between them to stifle the aspirations of the Kurds in the region, the Iranian regime continues to exploit the Kurdish issue where expedient, as shown by Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani intervening to provide assistance for the PKK, classified as a terrorist organization by Ankara, in order to enlist its help in liberating Ain al-Arab (Kobani) from ISIL around two years ago. Turkey is also monitoring Iranian support for Kurdish factions in southeastern Turkey.

The gap between the positions of Iran and Turkey has widened over the PKK, with Ankara seeking to prevent the expansion of Kurdistan in northern Iraq, especially after the deployment of PKK bases in Sinjar, which followed the PKK's assistance in 2014 in helping to free the region from the grip of ISIL. The Turkish President warned on October 27, 2016, "Sinjar is turning into a new Kandil," a reference to the Kandil Mountain in the triangular Iraqi-Turkish-Iranian border region in northern Iraq, which is the backbone of the PKK. In contrast, Tehran has strengthened the PKK's presence

within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by Jalal Talabani, which welcomes its presence in Kurdistan. Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani has called on the PKK to participate in the battle for Mosul and vowed to increase military and material support for the group, despite the rejection of both the presidency of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Turkey on allowing the PKK to participate.

Iran aims to strengthen the PKK's presence in northern Iraq to use this as leverage against both Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by Masoud Barzani, who enjoys a broadly positive relationship with Turkey.

The clash of Iranian-Turkish influence through the countries' patronage of Kurdish groups and militias was even clearer after the events seen in the town of Sinjar in Iraq on March 26, 2017, when clashes broke out between members of two factions, the PKK's "Sinjar Protection Units," which have close ties to both Iran and the Popular Mobilization militia, and the "Syrian Peshmerga forces," trained by the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by Masoud Barzani, which have close ties with Turkey. These confrontations were not the first of their kind, with other examples such as the confrontation on March 2, 2017 on the eve of the assumption of control of the area by a Kurdish Peshmerga faction belonging to the PKK party, led by Jalal Talabani close to Tehran's oil fields in Kirkuk operated by Kurdish forces belonging to the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Barzani, which is supported by Ankara.¹¹

It is likely that these events are only one manifestation of the Turkish-Iranian power struggle through the use of Kurdish proxies, especially as Tehran seeks to acquire a significant share of Kirkuk's oil reserves and build an export pipeline from Kirkuk to Tehran replacing the Kirkuk-Ankara line, which turned Turkey into a global energy center, after it made major strides in the construction of the Turkish pipeline to transport Russian gas to European markets via Turkey.

Gulf Circle

Iran is closely watching the consensus in the relationship with between Turkey and the Gulf States with growing concern, with this relationship crystallizing since early 2015, and becoming even more firmly established with Turkey's announcement of its support for the Saudi-led "Operation Decisive Storm" against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, although Ankara is not participating in the military offensive. Turkey also supported Saudi Arabia's position after the execution of the Shiite cleric, Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, in January 2016, in the face of Iranian intervention in Bahrain through Tehran's support of Shiite groups.

The growing shared interests and common political visions on regional issues between Turkey and the Gulf nations, demonstrated by the visit of the Turkish President

on February 13 to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar, have led to a qualitative shift in relations between Ankara and the Gulf countries, as Turkey's trade with Saudi Arabia and the UAE reaches advanced levels. The total sum of non-oil-related foreign trade between the two countries at the end of 2015 reached around \$7.4 billion, including the free zones, while the rate of exchange with Qatar stood at around \$700 million.

The volume of trade between Turkey and Kuwait, meanwhile, has tripled since 2002, rising from around \$165 million that year to approximately \$700 million by the end of 2011. The number of Kuwaiti tourists in Turkey has also increased in recent years, with Turkey registering 180,000 Kuwaiti tourists in 2016, compared to a mere 8,000 in 2002.

The number of Kuwaitis who own real estate in Turkey has also risen, currently standing at around about 1,744 in total, with Kuwaitis occupying third place in the list of foreign real estate owners and realtors in Turkey after Iraqis and Saudis. Kuwaiti investments in Turkey, meanwhile, amount to around \$2 billion, spread across 271 companies and institutions active in the Turkish market since 2004 in the real estate, commercial and industrial sectors. On the other hand, the volume of trade exchange with Bahrain reached about US \$350 million.¹²

Turkey's relationship with the Gulf States was further enhanced with the establishment of the Saudi-Turkish Coordination Council in April 2016. The most important development for Ankara has been the opening of a Turkish military base in May 2016 in the State of Qatar, Turkey's closest ally in the region, the first such regional initiative for Turkey since the end of the Ottoman Empire. This move was in line with the Sunni alliance officially launched by Riyadh in March 2016, an alliance that both Ankara and Doha have joined.¹³

While Turkey is witnessing a close convergence with the Gulf, the relationship between Tehran and its Gulf neighbors appears to be a concern, especially as negative perceptions of Iran have sharply increased in Yemen and Bahrain in recent years due to Tehran's support for the Houthi organization in Yemen and for the Saraya al-Ashtar terrorist group in Bahrain, which has targeted Bahraini security forces and is widely viewed as undermining the stability of the Kingdom.

The relationship between Tehran and Riyadh also deteriorated markedly in the year after the Iranian authorities banned Iran's citizens from performing the Hajj pilgrimage due to the regime's political disputes with Saudi Arabia, which suspended its diplomatic and political ties with Tehran after an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in January 2016. This took place against the background of the execution of 47 "terrorists and instigators," including the Shiite cleric Baqir al-Nimr, and the Iranian

authorities' refusal to punish the perpetrators of the embassy attack.

These Iranian-Saudi tensions were not the first of their kind in recent years; in October 2011, two Iranian operatives tried to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, on Tehran's behalf, with the U.S. Justice Department revealing details of the thwarted murder plot.¹⁴

Iran is currently making efforts to calm the tensions with the Gulf and to rebalance the growing Turkish role in Gulf circles, as seen in the visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Qatar in early 2017, not to mention an Iranian message received by Kuwait at the end of the month, part of a diplomatic outreach initiative by Tehran attempting to normalize its relations with Gulf countries. Iran's attempts to improve its relations with the Gulf nations do not exceed the level of rhetoric and slogans, however, while in practice the regime continues its aggressive efforts to expand its influence within the geographical circles that represent the strategic depth of the Gulf, including Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Kuwait and the Sultanate of Oman in mid-March 2017 demonstrated the Iranian regime's desire to quell tensions with the Gulf, especially in light of the escalating rift between Iran and the United States of America following threats against Tehran by the administration of US President Donald Trump in recent months.

The Trump administration began its mandate by adopting a tougher stance against Iran. Recently, Trump wrote on his Twitter account that "Iran is playing with fire – they don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them. Not me!" As White House spokesperson Sean Spicer later said, "The Iranians got the message and they continue to get it, and the administration will be tougher in dealing with them than it was under President Obama." Trump's administration has also escalated the sanctions against entities involved in the Iranian ballistic missile program, with Congress extending the sanctions for another ten years.¹⁵

These points provide context in showing the importance of Rouhani's visits to Kuwait and Oman, demonstrating Iran's determination to attempt to establish back channels through which to reach understandings with the new US administration on the various contentious issues linked to the factors controlling the limits of Tehran's handling of the pressures imposed by successive US administrations since the Revolution in 1979. They also once again demonstrate Tehran's determination to maintain its constant pursuit of its expansionist objectives, despite the regime's implausible claim of "adaptive flexibility" within its ideology, and its determination to achieve its aims even in the event of any possible danger approaching its borders. Another goal in

Rouhani's visit was to persuade Kuwait to mediate in normalizing Tehran's diplomatic relations with Riyadh. It's also notable that the Iranian President's visit took place in the wake of NATO's opening of a regional center in Kuwait in January 2017; this regional center is the first such NATO facility in the region, signifying the magnitude of the threats it faces.¹⁶

Convergence of necessity

In spite of the controversy in the relationship between Iran and Turkey, as well as rising concern over statements and counter-statements, and Ankara's alarm at Iran's seeking to extend its influence in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, through exploiting the danger posed by ISIL and Al Qaeda in these countries to control their policies, many factors may push the two regional powers to work together to control the limits of the tensions between them and maintain open channels of communication in the next phase.

Ankara and Tehran have shown particular interest in working together to confront the terrorist threat, particularly the danger posed by the ISIL terror group, especially in the wake of recent attacks on some Turkish cities. The group claimed responsibility for the attacks on the basis of its anger at the Turkish-backed "Operation Euphrates Shield" in northern Syria. Iran's policy in confronting ISIL, meanwhile, is based on countering the rise of foreign influence in the region via the Washington-led international coalition to fight ISIL and the regime's search for alternative ways to end the power of ISIL and similar extremist organizations without increasing foreign, particularly Western, influence in the regional countries.¹⁷

Another factor possibly influencing Iran's decision is that Iran itself has now become a nominal target for ISIL, at least verbally, especially after Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir, a spokesman for the terror organization, threatened Iran in a speech broadcast on December 2, 2016, by ISIL's own Amaq News Agency, in which he said, "Iran, through its agents and experts and consultants...is now roaming in the land of the people of the Sunnah and fighting the worshipers of God, the united Mujahideen long and wide who they are bombing by supporting the Crusaders and their apostate governments."

This speech was not the first of its kind, with former ISIL spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issuing an audio recording published by the Amaq agency on July 27, 2016, in which he accused Arab regional nations of appeasing Iran "to maintain the interests of al-Qaeda, and its supply lines," while calling for bombings in Iran, saying, "I call upon all Muslims in Iran to carry out bombings in Iran in the heart of Tehran to respond to their crimes against Sunnis in Iraq and Syria."¹⁸

It is clear that the ISIL terror organization has become a phenomenon that threatens all the region's countries, although many have expressed well-founded suspicions

of the Iranian regime's hand in the organization, which has provided it with a useful pretext for achieving its goals in "restoring security" in Syria and Iraq via its own militias, particularly the Popular Mobilization militias, which have played a pivotal role in the battle of Mosul, as well as in Syria. Turkey also needs to eradicate ISIL, which has engaged the forces backed by Ankara in "Operation Euphrates Shield" in heavy fighting in the city of Al-Bab.

In addition, potential important benefits for Turkey and Iran in the next phase may impose on both parties a need to work to reduce tension and expand the scope of understanding, with positive bilateral relations forming a crucial focal point in attaining those benefits, especially as they relate directly to events in Syria and Iraq and the nature of the relationship with the Gulf States, issues of primary importance for the leadership and political parties in both countries.

On April 16, Turkey is expected to hold a referendum on constitutional amendments aimed at transforming the country's political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system, with the aim of strengthening the president's powers. Meanwhile, presidential elections in Iran will take place on May 19, with nominally reformist President Hassan Rouhani seeking a second term. Rouhani faces strong competition, especially under the threat of conservative blocs and fundamentalists, who would like to prevent him from nomination by withdrawing the vote of confidence in him in the Guardian Council, which determines the eligibility of candidates and who dominates the list.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, Turkish-Iranian relations are becoming increasingly important after the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, with Trump's administration calling for the weakening and encirclement of Iran. This is reflected in Trump's negative comments on Iran. On February 2, for instance, he wrote on his Twitter account, "Iran is rapidly taking over more and more of Iraq even after the U.S. has squandered three trillion dollars there. Obvious long ago!"

Meanwhile, the US House of Representatives, "Congress," last December extended the "Iran Sanctions Act," which had been scheduled to expire on December 31, 2016, for another ten years by an overwhelming majority, with 419 supporting the move and only one voting against.

Iran has been subject to US sanctions since August 4, 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the sanctions law on Libya and Iran, known as the "Damato," which was subsequently approved by Congress. In 2006, amendments were made to the legislation, with the sanctions on Libya being abolished, so that the bill was limited solely to the Islamic Republic of Iran; the legislation penalizes companies that

invest more than \$20 million in annual trade with Iran in the oil and gas industries. The penalties provided for in the law include various types and generally constitute a protective barrier to foreign investment in energy in Iran.¹⁹

Despite its continuing criticism of Iranian policy, Turkey does not appear to wish to further escalate tension with Iran to an unprecedented degree, especially during the current period, particularly after Washington expressed its preference to rely on the forces of “democratic Syria” in the battle to liberate Raqqa. In this battle, Washington has also coordinated with Moscow as well as Turkish forces and other forces affiliated with Ankara, such as the Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Moscow also recently hosted a “Kurdish conference” and called on the PKK-affiliated Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to attend the Geneva negotiations, a move which angered Ankara.

On the other hand, the dispute between Ankara and Washington over the situation of the Kurdish forces in northern Syria has deepened, with the US administration ignoring Turkish reservations, especially concerning the participation of the YPG forces in the liberation process. The United States has reinforced its military presence in Manbij in northern Syria, as well as resuming support for a third phase of military operations by Syrian Kurds on March 5, which coincided with the announcement by Stephen Townsend, the US Commander of the international coalition forces, that the Kurds of Syria would participate in the restoration of Raqqa. On March 4, the Turkish President expressed his country’s readiness to join Russia in the fight against ISIL in Syria, which some interpreted as an offer to cooperate in the process of liberating Raqqa.²⁰

Ankara is also in dire need of coordination with Iran and Moscow in the north of Syria, in light of recent military developments in the area following an announcement by the Manbij Council under the control of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units that it will hand over the villages along the line with the adjacent Al-Bab area on the west of the town, currently under the control of the Euphrates Shield forces, to the forces of the Syrian regime under an agreement concluded by the Council with Moscow, with Russian troops driving military vehicles and armored vehicles to the western Manbij countryside to secure the villages handed over by the Manbij military council.

On the other hand, the expected upcoming Battle of Raqqa may necessitate under-the-table coordination between Ankara and Tehran, as Turkey seeks to prevent the participation of Kurdish forces in the fighting, while Iran fears that this battle may be the beginning of dismantling the Russian axis in the region, of which it is part, through working to break its close relations with Moscow by playing on the hidden contradictions of the two allies in terms of the mechanisms of the Syrian crisis. Tehran knows that the Battle of Raqqa, if successful in evicting ISIL, may be the back door

to reducing its influence in Syria, especially with the announcement of the Trump administration's Ambassador to the UN Nicky Haley, who told the UN that her country "supports a dialogue on Syrian peace, led by the international organizations," stressing that "Syria cannot remain a safe haven for terrorists, and it is important to remove Iran and its agents from Syria."²¹

The fourth consideration concerning this issue and how it affects Iranian-Turkish relations is Iran's recognition of the importance of Turkey as a key regional player, which effectively represents Iran's economic lung after the US Congress' decision in November 2016 to extend the sanctions on Iran for another decade. Ankara is aware of Turkey's importance for Iran as a gateway to Asia.

It should also be remembered that both Turkey and Iran, despite their contradictions in the region's total portfolio, retain important ties in a range of economic and energy-related issues. First, oil and gas are imported, while Tehran relies on Ankara to provide a significant portion of its consumer needs in materials as diverse as bananas, cereals, tobacco, industrial machinery, cotton, medicines, and paper.

Despite the diplomatic relationship between Tehran and Ankara extending back more than six centuries, a relationship necessitated by considerations of shared interests and geographical proximity, the curve of the relationship reached its nadir with the Syrian revolution in 2011, and Tehran's insistence on aligning itself with Assad. The Iranian role has been a crucial factor in keeping Assad among the components of the Syrian scene thanks to Iran's unstinting military support and aid policy.

The political and ideological breach between the two countries has increased in light of the developments in Syria and Iraq, due to Tehran's attempt to tailor and design demographic changes on the ground to fit its political objectives, with Turkish forces in the camp of Bashika and near Mosul in Iraq recently described by Iranian President Rouhani as "illegal elements." Rouhani also referred to the presence of a battalion of the Turkish army in the city of Baishika Iraqi as being "very dangerous."

There is also growing unease in Ankara over Iranian expansion on Turkey's borders, and direct Iranian support for PKK bases in the area around Sinjar in Iraq, in addition to concern about Iran's efforts to reduce Turkish influence in Iraq.

In this general context, it is theoretically possible to identify three levels of Iranian-Turkish relations, the first of which is the freezing of the situation, i.e. without any tangible increase in existing tensions, with the possibility of some form of escalation in the future.

The second level is limited improvement allowed by the local developments in the

two countries. Iran is considering presidential elections that are the most exceptional in the Islamic Republic's history. These elections are witnessing a sharp political polarization between Iran's reformists and hardliners, especially as the regime's authorities continue to impose house arrest on reformist candidates Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who have both been under house arrest since 2011 for their leadership of the protests of the 2009 Green Movement, when they announced their rejection of that year's election results; these concerns are further heightened by the decline of the Iranian economy and the role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in engineering the electoral process.²²

On March 21, 2017, US President Trump called for the removal of elements of the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization militias, with the new president asserting that the militias should be forced to hand over their heavy weapons to Iraq's conventional forces, and should not continue to play any role in the Iraqi security system.

Meanwhile, Turkey is set to witness a referendum on constitutional amendments mandated by the system of governance in terms of the presidential system in addition to the overall regional conditions, especially after the entry of Turkey militarily into the Syrian quagmire. In this context, a number of problems may be resolved, while escalation may be averted in other areas, which are difficult to resolve at the present time.

The third level is the movement of the two countries towards ending the bilateral tensions, which have been reflected in fiery mutual recriminations. An example of the efforts to heal this rift came with the meeting between Turkish President Erdogan and his counterpart Hassan Rouhani on the sidelines of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) summit in Islamabad in early 2017, with the Turkish Foreign Minister lauding the "brotherhood" between Turkey and Iran prior to the meeting, and stressing that Ankara has not forgotten Iran's support following the failed coup of July 2016.

In fact, Iran was one of the first countries to express solidarity with Turkey in the wake of the failed coup, with the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs posting a message of support for the Turkish government on Twitter in the hours following the announcement of the coup attempt's being thwarted, while Iran's Supreme National Security Council headed by President Hassan Rouhani met and expressed the State's official support for the Turkish government.

Akbar Velayati, an adviser to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, also emphasized Iran's opposition to the coup in Turkey, issuing a statement, which said, "The neighboring and brother country Turkey held elections and formed government years ago in accordance with democratic principles. If a small group of military personnel

seeks to neglect the votes of the people under any influence or factors and to topple the popular government of Erdogan, it is natural that the Islamic Republic and its principles will reject this coup and any other coup.”²³

It is true that Iran made its position in support of the AKP government conditional in the context of its support for all legitimate governments, supposedly led by the Syrian government, but the Iranian move to condemn the coup also shows that Iran’s aspirations concerning Turkey are limited to bringing about a change in the Turkish leadership’s position on the Syrian crisis and on other regional issues.²⁴ Thus, the two countries are likely to maintain a cooperative relationship, albeit one characterized more than previously by wariness and caution, without entering into full-blown tensions. This was also demonstrated by Turkey’s refusal to participate in the Saudi-led “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen and its quest for a peaceful settlement to maintain its interests in maintaining good relations with both Riyadh and Tehran.

For its part, Tehran offered to mediate in resolving the crisis that arose between Ankara and Moscow after a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Sukhoi plane on November 27, 2015. In the spring of 2016, the two parties also signed a bilateral tourism agreement, and have continued their strategic cooperation in the field of oil and energy.

If the political and regional ambitions represent a deep gap between the two countries that is difficult to bridge, economic factors are still a persuasive motive for maintaining positive relations as far as possible, as well as providing a guarantee at the same time that any tension between them will be overcome as rapidly as possible, with a bilateral diplomatic infrastructure linked to the effects of economic and social direct superstructure that relate to ideology and the coordination of values and ideas.

Although the differences between the two countries have been clearly reflected in the value of the economic exchanges between them, the economic relationship has been damaged by the events of recent years, with trade levels falling sharply, from \$21.89 billion in 2002 to \$13.7 billion in 2014, and then to \$9.7 billion by the end of 2015. Following this continuous decline in trade, it seems likely that the efforts to end the tensions between the two countries aim to increase the exchange rate to about \$35 billion and perhaps \$50 billion by 2020.²⁵

It should also be noted that joint Turkish-Iranian efforts are already underway to restore the momentum of economic exchange, especially as Ankara seeks to re-engineer its foreign policy by reducing its liabilities in the region, especially with the escalation of tension with Europe and the decline of 20 percent in Turkish economy figures since 2012. Turkey is also keen to meet its energy needs and secure its returns

from Iranian gas, while Tehran is a lucrative market for Turkish exports. For its part, Iran seeks to freeze the dispute with Ankara, as well as to prevent any regional expansion by Turkey. With the escalation of international and Western sanctions against Tehran, Turkey is an important outlet for Iran to circumvent these sanctions, particularly in securing continued Iranian access to revenues from the export of energy production, as well as access to gold as an alternative method of payment, given the prohibition of many foreign transactions from abroad.

The revival of the economic momentum between the two countries was revealed in a statement issued by Istanbul's Chamber of Commerce on October 27, 2016, which unveiled a new plan for the establishment of a joint industrial zone, the first of its kind, a project that is estimated to be worth US \$10 billion.

It should also be emphasized that the legacy of over 600 years of historical expertise and cooperation is inevitably a crucial factor in leading both parties to wish to continue this long record of mutually beneficial collaboration, which has resulted in long-term stability since the Treaty of Qasr Shirin, which first set the Turkish-Iranian border, the oldest fixed borders between two countries in the Middle East, as well as influencing regional developments concerning the Syrian crisis. A period of stagnation in Obama's era, not to mention developments domestically in both countries and possible repercussions as Iran awaits a presidential ballot, while Turkey is preparing for a referendum on constitutional amendments which could give the president wider powers and may bring him closer to autocratic rule.

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