



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Periodical Journal

Year 2, Issue 8, September 2018

ISSUED BY



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

TURKEY'S APPROACH TO IRAN'S SHIA CRESCENT

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East has experienced several critical junctures since King Abdullah of Jordan first warned his Arab counterparts in 2004 about Iran's design to project abroad its political, religious and military influence. Due to bitter domestic factionalism between President Ahmadinejad and the Rahbar Khamenei, the emergence of a "Shia crescent" was relatively kept under control by rival Arab countries as long as Iran was isolated from international politics. However, the outburst of the Arab Spring in 2011, the ensuing human tragedy in Syria and the sealing of a historical deal on the nuclear issue between Iran and Western powers all signalled that such a prospect would become a major existential threat for them.

This paper will analyze Turkey's perceptions and attitudes about Iran's project to emerge as a dominant player in the Middle East. Drawing on a cognitive model developed within *foreign policy analysis* (FPA) by Michael Brecher, back in the late 1960s to study Israel's foreign policy, I argue that Turkey tried to take advantage of Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shia divides to play an active role in Syria and look for "strategic autonomy". Put it more specifically, Turkey has not been so much disturbed by the widely perceived threat of what has been dubbed as the "Shia crescent", but rather has learnt how to coexist with it in order to pursue its own national goals. In doing this, I will try to address the long-standing question about which drivers underpin Iran's foreign policy (whether strategic and pragmatic or religious and ideological), investigate the unclear responses Western powers have delivered to Iran's moves in the region, and find out which strategic tools Tehran has adopted to achieve its goal, especially benefitting from the Syrian quagmire.

Introduction to the FPA model and to the main tenets of Turkey's foreign policy

The value of Michael Brecher's contribution to FPA is in that it sketches out a very structured model to analyze the foreign policy decision-making of any country by relying on Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell,⁽¹⁾ David Easton⁽²⁾ and James Rosenau's insights⁽³⁾ about the idea of "system". So conceived, a country's foreign policy can be examined as "a flow into and out of a network of structures or institutions which perform certain functions and thereby produce decisions. These, in turn, feedback into the system as inputs in a continuous flow of demands on policy."⁽⁴⁾ Decision-makers generally operate within the so-called "operational environment" that comprises the setting of ten factors or structural conditions which may potentially influence a country's external behaviour. Such an operational environment can be divided into external and internal and is made up of the following ten variables: global system, subordinate (regional) system, subordinate other, dominant bilateral relation, other bilateral relations, military capability, economic capability, political structure, interest groups, and competing elites. However, Brecher suggests that decision-makers are influenced by a "psychological environment" too, which comprises of attitudinal prisms and elite images. The former refers to the lenses through which any individual sees and interprets the outside world; it depends on the latter which is constituted by the set of beliefs or perceptions any human being keeps in mind about the outside reality. Not only such beliefs or world visions affect how decision-makers interpret the world but they also have an influence on how decision-makers make decisions. A researcher is tasked with analyzing the specific context in which the decision is taken. By reviewing a lot of speeches, interviews and declarations taken from official websites or newspapers, his job consists in understanding what decision-makers think and why they take a specific decision rather than another one. The purpose is to catch what are the main factors affecting a country's decision-making processes – whether material, psychological or a combination of them both. That's exactly what we intend to do in the below-presented study. Due to reasons of simplicity and space, the focus here will chiefly be on the main Turkish decision-makers of the past years, i.e., Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the current President, and Mevlut Cavusoglu, the current (2014-) Minister of Foreign Affairs. Particularly, investigating the main tenets of Turkey's foreign policy over the years by drawing on Brecher's model.

First, the operational environment. Historically speaking, the most important of them is Turkey's NATO membership. In 1952 Ankara joined the Western camp in response to the Soviet threat coming from the north.⁽⁵⁾ A second one is represented by the European Union when Turkey officially applied for full membership in the late 1980s. The military is another important material factor shaping not only Turkey's foreign policy but also its domestic one, as a consequence of its self-appointed role as constitutional-guarantor and custodian of Turkey's Republican "Kemalist" values from any threat (whether internal or external).⁽⁶⁾ A fourth one

is the economy, especially based on the assumption that Turkey is an energy-thirsty country that heavily relies on hydrocarbon imports.⁽⁷⁾ This driver, has become the most important one under Erdogan's rule. It first explains the rise of a conservative bourgeois middle class and then the increasing legitimacy of Erdogan's AK Party itself.⁽⁸⁾ It also entails a huge element of discontinuity with reference to the pre-coup (1980) era, when Turkey was committed to an ISI (*import substitution industrialization*) economic model based on replacing trading relations with huge domestic production.⁽⁹⁾ Moreover, such an economic philosophy mirrored Turkey's official foreign policy line as late as the 1970s to avoid interference in regional affairs as much as possible.

Secondly, the psychological environment. The main element which has been affecting the Turkish establishment can be summed up in the concept of "Sèvres syndrome". Dating back to the perceived European treason after WWI, when the Ottoman Empire was carved up, it specifically "refers to those individuals, groups or institutions in Turkey who interpret all public interactions – domestic and foreign – through a framework of fear and anxiety over the possible annihilation, abandonment or betrayal of the Turkish state by the West"⁽¹⁰⁾. Such a fear of dismemberment has overwhelmingly come under light in the wake of the Syrian uprising, as a Pavlovian conditioning due to the reactivation of the Kurdish guerrilla's along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Historical patterns of Turkey-Iran bilateral relations

Historically speaking, Turkey-Iran relations have been characterized by both a strong geopolitical rivalry and a high level of economic cooperation especially in the energy sector, at least considering the past decades.⁽¹¹⁾ Upon a closer examination, increasing economic cooperation, especially on energy, and strengthened commercial ties have helped soften their political, ideological and even military competition on the regional system alike. This, in turn, has helped in improving bilateral relations, or at least finding strategic compromises, especially against the background of the Syrian war.

From a realist perspective, Turkey and Iran can be considered as *regional middle powers* seeking regional hegemony and are prone to engage in reciprocal skirmishes as far as their respective power projections could collide with each other's strategic interests. According to Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, who adopted a realist perspective to define the Syria-Iran alliance, *regional middle powers* can be defined as states which may rank as no more than middle powers in the global system but which are key actors in their regional systems. While the goals and geographical range of regional powers are more modest than those of great powers and centre on regional politics, their regional behaviour, determined by similar systemic rules, is likely to approximate that of larger powers in playing the "realist" game. They are distinguishable from lesser regional powers by their assertion of regional leadership in the name of more general regional interests, by their centrality to the regional power balance, their regional spheres of influence and by their ability, from a credible deterrent capacity, to resist a coalition of other regional states against them. Finally, such powers generally have leaders enjoying more than local stature and some extra-regional influence"⁽¹²⁾. Based, among others, on Eduard Jordaan distinction between *established middle powers* and *emerging middle powers*,⁽¹³⁾ Onis and Kutlay specifically include Turkey in the latter group⁽¹⁴⁾. Indeed only recently Turkey has experienced a process of transition to liberal democracy and integration into the international political economy, but is still struggling to become a consolidated and successful "role model" for its regional system. Emerging middle powers in fact "face the dilemma that they are both critical of the existing liberal order dominated by the established Western powers and, at the same time, have an incentive to be part of an international order based on liberal norms."⁽¹⁵⁾ Such a dichotomy properly mirrors the case of a country like Turkey which has been anchored to a

Western military alliance, while belonging to a culturally different regional system. The basic ambiguity of such a case strongly emerged after the end of the Cold War, when Turkey's leeway on the global scene was significantly augmented as a consequence of the relative decline in US hegemony. On the one hand, Ankara had become aware that it could abandon its traditional *status quo* role to play a proactive one on the global scene. On the other hand, it also had started questioning its traditional alliances. This did not entail that it would deny its membership in the Western camp. However, Turkey started adopting a "multidimensional", not-competitive but complementary foreign policy, as was then foreshadowed by Ahmet Davutoglu, the main architect of the early Turkish official foreign policy position.⁽¹⁶⁾ Such a newfound role in regional politics mirrored in a self-conceived role as a pivot rather than a mere bridge. This resulted in acting with more protagonism in regional affairs through the use of soft power and "rhythmic diplomacy" to pacifically handle many problems, from terrorism to the Palestinian Question, and from Israel-Syria reconciliation to Iran's nuclear issue.

Evidently, Iran-Turkey regional competition is overwhelmingly a result of power distribution. Identity can be considered as a second element of this rivalry. Their respective national characters affect their self-perception in the outside world. First of all, both countries consider themselves the geopolitical heirs of great empires that dominated power politics in the past centuries, the Turkish Ottomans (1453-1923), the Persian Safavids (1501-1736) and the Qajars (1796-1925). Such historical legacy provides them with distinctiveness from other Middle East countries. In the case of Iran, far from being merely a matter of culture, it is remarkably about religion. Turkish and Persian nationalisms often have ideologically and politically clashed with Arab nationalism, especially during the Cold War, when Iran and Turkey experimented with the sealing of a strategic Periphery Pact with Ethiopia and Ben Gurion's Israel for some years.⁽¹⁷⁾ Iran's Shiite character is a key question *vis-à-vis* the surrounding Sunni-dominated regional landscape. As an element marking their "exceptionalism", the Turkish and Iranian identities have affected their respective defence and foreign policy positions over time. Such an "otherness" from both Arab nationalism and Sunni Islam reflects today in their mistrust of Saudi Arabia. If Turkey suffers from the Sèvres syndrome, the same psychological roots can be found in Iran's historical encirclement syndrome, which the Shia crescent project aims to break.

The discussed characters – regional distribution of power, identity, search for regional hegemony – not only have often put the two countries on opposite sides but have created some room for economic cooperation which has spilled over into political cooperation and alignment.

Turkey's approach to Iran's Shia crescent

As recently as February 2017, on the occasion of the Munich Security Conference (MSC), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu criticised Iran's Middle East policy by depicting it as sectarian, stating that "Turkey is very much against any kind of division, religious or sectarian"⁽¹⁸⁾ and "Iran is trying to create two Shia states in Syria and Iraq. This is very dangerous. It must be stopped."⁽¹⁹⁾ His comments followed similar statements by his Saudi and Israeli counterparts, Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir and Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who overtly condemned Iran of being the main sponsor of "global terrorism" and "the most destabilising force" in the region. Such a framework emerged against the background of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's call to establish a "dialogue with brothers in Islam" in order to reduce violence across the Middle East. It goes without saying that Zarif's appeal has been rebuffed as an attempt to distract his rivals from the widely perceived threat of Iran's goal to establish a Shia crescent aimed at gaining regional hegemony. Cavusoglu concluded his speech "with a warning against sectarian policies and discrimination in the Middle East. These will only worsen the current crisis. For a sustainable solution, the region needs inclusive perspectives, greater sense of regional ownership - this is very important – and cooperation and solidarity."⁽²⁰⁾

This is the starting point to get a full understanding of Turkey's approach to Iran's Shia crescent, to both deconstruct it – by clearing it of all rhetorical and ideological language which is typical of political discourse and competition – and to perceive Turkey's regional goals which it has been realistically pursuing particularly post Arab uprisings. Three are the main regional theatres where it is possible to test such a hypothesis: Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

Yemen. The small Arab Republic located at the Southern end of the Arabian Peninsula has been home to a bloody war between the Houthi rebel faction and the legitimate rule of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi as of 2012, as a consequence of the Arab uprisings which washed over the country. Analysts have depicted the Yemen crisis as a religious and sectarian war, where Sunni and Shia groups are confronting each other. President Hadi has indeed received the support of Saudi Arabia to stifle Iran's help to the Houthi forces and reconquer the former capital Sana'a. On March 2015, taking a fierce stance against Iran and officially declaring its support for the Saudi-led military operation against the Houthi rebels, President Erdogan warned Tehran that Turkey would not tolerate its bid to dominate the region anymore "Iran has to change its view. It has to withdraw any forces, whatever it has in Yemen, as well as Syria and Iraq and respect their territorial integrity. [...] Iran's attitude towards the matter is not sincere because they have a sectarian agenda. So they will want to fill the void that will be created by Daesh (Islamic State) themselves."⁽²¹⁾ Interviewed by France24, Erdogan had voiced that Turkey would consider providing logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.⁽²²⁾ However Cavusoglu soon toned down his remarks by emphasising that Ankara had no intention to fuel any sectarian war – delivering an eloquent message to Saudi Arabia too – and would prefer a political solution.⁽²³⁾

As a matter of fact and notwithstanding his previous declaration, Erdogan went to Tehran next month to meet President Rouhani and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to discuss the increase of trade exchanges from the level of \$ 14 bn in 2014 to a total of \$ 30 bn⁽²⁴⁾. Such a prospect mirrored high hopes as generated by the nuclear agreement known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that Iran historically sealed in Vienna in July 2015 with the 5+1 powers (the five members of the UNSC plus Germany).

Furthermore, Turkey and Iran had recently signed an important preferential trade agreement (PTA) in 2014 which took effect in January 2015 with the aim of enlarging bilateral trade up to \$30 million. Since Iran is not a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), concluding such a deal seems to be the best way for a country to enhance commercial ties with other partners and put an end to its economic isolation. Under the PTA provisions, Turkey and Iran would in fact benefit from the lowering of tariffs related to each others' agricultural and industrial common goods in a list that included 140 Iranian products and 125 Turkish products.⁽²⁵⁾ The PTA would achieve two main goals from the Iranian point of view: it would open the way for Iranian products to enter the EU market and it would pave the way for Iran to enter the WTO.⁽²⁶⁾ This agreement would also help to combat the smuggling of goods between the two countries.⁽²⁷⁾

Economic cooperation indeed represented the bedrock of improving bilateral relations and defusing eventual competition over political and military issues. It seems evident that the will to overcome political rivalry was reciprocally far more relevant for both contenders. Iran had been experiencing political and economic isolation from the rest of the world for the past 30 years and reasonably looked for a way to lift economic sanctions which had been crippling its economy. Turkey had in turn seen its "zero-problems" foreign policy fading away in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and suffered from an unprecedented political crisis with its old strategic partners, notably the US and EU.

However, upon mending fences with Russia in the summer 2016, Turkey benefitted from a positively renewed geopolitical environment, especially concerning the Syrian crisis. Its tactical agreement with both Moscow and Tehran gave Ankara a new regional clout which it tried to exploit also at Riyadh's expense. This is mostly evident in the Yemeni context where Turkey in

the end of 2018 could use the Khashoggi affaire⁽²⁸⁾ as a game changer to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and restore its diplomatic capacities. Instead of being worried about Iran's support for Houthis in Yemen, Turkey is rather interested in taking advantage of this situation to recover its soft-power strategy which had helped her grow as a legitimate regional power during the last decade.

Syria. Iran is indeed all the more focused on its "engagement with Syria."⁽²⁹⁾ The main postulation in this paper concerns detecting the threat of the Shia crescent in Turkey's perspective. In the afterwards of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the Syrian crisis had set the stage of an incipient restructuring of regional power which is still *in fieri*. While one of the key pillars of Davutoglu's zero problems foreign policy had officially sunk, Iran overtly benefitted from America's hesitation to intervene and strove to project upon Damascus its *longa manus*. Bashar al-Assad's stay in power would soon become the main bone of contention between the two middle powers. In giving Assad its military support, Iran looked for creating a power corridor in the Middle East which would territorially connect Tehran to Beirut, where it enjoys Hezbollah's allegiance, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. Contrary to common assumptions, Iran-Turkey disagreements over Assad were not religiously motivated, but primarily politically and militarily. On the other hand, the Syrian case opened up some space for a convergence of interests especially with reference to the fight against Daesh. Thanks to Russia's increasingly influential role, Iran and Turkey managed to find some sort of compromise to overcome political and military discrepancies.

Turkey's main geopolitical concern over the past decades has been the looming emergence of a Kurdish state near its South and Eastern borders. Actually, the Kurdish issue can be considered as the psychological projection of Turkey's Sèvres syndrome⁽³⁰⁾ to the present day. The anti-Assad rebellion has fuelled Kurdish aspirations to finally carve out a state, something that has greatly concerned the AK Party's decision-makers. As Turkey hosts at least half of the approximate 30 million total population of Kurds, the most frightening aspect of the Syrian crisis was represented by an eventual spillover effect of the uprising within Turkey's Kurdish community. Ankara's concerns about Kurds have been expressed on many occasions. As a consequence, Ankara's regional stance vis-à-vis Damascus, and transitively Tehran, has been guided almost completely by the Kurdish Question.

Turkey chose to exploit Daesh's geopolitical and military fortunes and indirectly use it against local Kurds, especially between its rise in 2013-2014, by refraining from explicitly joining the Western coalition. In standing idle as Daesh expanded from Iraq to Syria, Turkey wished that the Kurdish forces would be contained. However, the Kurdish strong resistance against jihadists – with Kobane's battle in Fall 2014 rising to be symbolic in Kurdish social imaginary – proved to be successful in rebuffing Daesh's forces and retaining a substantial part of Syrian territory next to the Turkish border, which was then known as Rojava. In that phase Erdogan was still striving to pursue a domestic strategy of rapprochement with the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan. However, when things got worse in 2015 and Daesh started perpetrating terrorist attacks in Turkey, even against Kurdish targets, especially in Suruc on July 20 and Ankara on October 10, the PKK restored its terror strategy too, as it felt betrayed by the AK Party. Erdogan's decision to start playing the nationalist card domestically along with his reluctance to stand by Kurds in their fight against Daesh deteriorated the situation⁽³¹⁾.

In making no distinction between jihadists and Kurdish armed groups, Ankara justified the launch of a military operation on August 24, 2016 named "Euphrates Shield" with the aim of stifling any kind of terror activity, whether coming from the Islamic State or from Kurdish terrorist groups such as the Turkish PKK and the Syrian YPG/PYD. "The PKK is a direct security threat for Turkey, Iraq and the Kurdish regional government. The fight against Daesh shouldn't be a legitimizing factor for the PKK or its affiliates in Syria. In Syria, does the YPG fight Daesh

for the unity of Syria? No, on the contrary: they are fighting Daesh to gain more territory and also for their own agenda to create an independent state or canton. We cannot tolerate any terrorist canton or state in the northern part of Syria and Iraq" – stated Cavusoglu at the 2017 MSC.⁽³²⁾ In addition, Cavusoglu stated at the Eighth Annual Ambassadors Conference in Ankara "We maintain our resolute stance in the fight against terrorism. There is no "good" or "bad" terrorist for us. The PYD/YPG and Daesh are the same as the PKK, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, Al-Qaeda and Al Nusra"⁽³³⁾. Therefore, it seems much likely that Ankara's sudden but belated involvement against the Islamic State in Syria with the Operation Euphrates Shield has been chiefly motivated by avoiding the formation of a Kurdish enclave (Rojava) close to the Turkish border⁽³⁴⁾. In that phase, Turkey-Iran relations were significantly strained because of a power vacuum each of them was anxious to fill – not to mention that Iran's goal to achieve a historic deal on the nuclear issue with Western powers in July 2015, which Turkey was deliberately sidelined from. Indeed the rationale is as follows "The more territories the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant loses, the more rivalries emerge over who should control them [...] In a sense, for Turkey the de-ISIL-ification of these areas has turned into their SDF-ification or PYD-isation."⁽³⁵⁾

As the US had chosen not to be actively engaged in the Syrian quagmire all along – but to indirectly fight Daesh through delivering military support to the YPG – Turkey was forced to find an accommodation with the other actors mainly involved, Russia and Iran *in primis*. Indeed, the Operation Euphrates Shield could not be possible if Erdogan had not personally apologized to President Vladimir Putin in summer 2016⁽³⁶⁾ for the shooting down of the Russian Sukhoi-24 jet on November 24, 2015 which had suddenly chilled Moscow-Ankara relations⁽³⁷⁾. From that moment on, Erdogan wisely and prudently started to approach both Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to find a compromise in Syria. His battle against the PKK and YPG resulted in an implicit and clever trade-off solution which he conceded to his Russian and Iranian counterparts in exchange for keeping Assad in power and actively engaging against Daesh. In fairness, the YPG was realistically far more threatening to Ankara than Assad. Retaining the *status quo* in Syria and safeguarding the Assad regime in Damascus were indeed two vital goals for both Moscow and Tehran. While Russia is primarily concerned to keep its access to the Mediterranean Sea through its military base in Latakia, Iran is interested in keeping a geographical corridor through which it will be directly connected with Lebanon's Hezbollah and allow it to counterbalance its most threatening geopolitical nightmare, Israel. Indeed, Tehran's strategy in Syria seems to be overwhelmingly guided by security considerations towards Tel Aviv. Felt frustrated by Iran's clout in the Middle East and by Tehran's ominous assistance to Hezbollah, Israel started to directly engage the Syrian crisis from the Golan Heights by shelling some Iranian military targets and Syrian military facilities in February 2018.⁽³⁸⁾

Upon recognizing their mutual interests in Syria, the three major powers officially launched the Astana process in January 2017.⁽³⁹⁾ It established the so-called "de-escalating zones" and would foresee a *de-facto* partition of Syria into spheres of influence among them. Within this framework, Putin, Erdogan and Rouhani managed to find a sensitive win-win solution. By turning a blind eye on Assad, already an indisputable issue for both Russia and Iran, Erdogan had been given the green light to set a second stage of military operations against the Kurdish enclave in Northern Syria early in 2018, as the PKK/YPG considerably took advantage of Daesh's military losses in that area. Launched on January 20 and officially known as "Operation Olive Branch", it focused on the Kurdish mostly-populated town of Afrin in Syria, but it was intended to extend towards other Kurdish populated cities along Rojava till defeating the YPG. However, the Afrin Operation raised Iran's concerns, allegedly displayed by Rouhani during his tripartite summit with Putin and Erdogan which took place in Ankara on April 4-5, 2018.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In turn, the Turkish President has recently showed his discomfort towards the presence of pro-Assad Shiite

militias outside Afrin who, according to the Anadolu Agency, "tried to enter Syria to support the YPG/PKK-Daesh against Turkey's ongoing operation in the region" and defined them as "terrorists."⁽⁴¹⁾

Notwithstanding indirect fighting and strong support for opposing forces on the ground, Iran and Turkey have found a common base of understanding to keep safe the 7-years-torn country and maintain unity and stability through a staunch commitment against sectarianism, thanks to Putin⁽⁴²⁾. Furthermore, there is a noteworthy aspect in Iran-Turkey reciprocal imaginary with reference to Syria. If Turkey has officially accused Iran of undermining Middle East stability by promoting sectarian policies, Tehran has never put the same blame on Ankara. Indeed, Iran's pragmatic foreign policy – which understandably has exploited the Shia factor⁽⁴³⁾ – is not based on a Manichean framework. Iran has never depicted the AK Party's Middle East policy in terms of sectarianism nor religious inspiration, despite Erdogan's foreign policy being described as religiously-driven in academic and think tank circles⁽⁴⁴⁾. Iranian decision-makers have always preferred the concept of "neo-Ottomanism" a more suitable term⁽⁴⁵⁾ to indicate Turkey's hegemonic push in the Middle East, based on nationalism, search for strategic autonomy, even presenting imperialist ambitions, in which religion is merely relegated to be all but one factor. In such a sense, Turkey's foreign policy has been perceived by Iranian decision-makers "as a threat as it was seen to be encroaching on Iranian interests in the region" and was compared to Western and Zionist domination.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Iraq. Iraq has also represented a crucial test for Iran-Turkey relations. The Kurdish Question in particular has generated major rifts between them. Turkey is much more concerned than Iran about the eventual establishment of a Kurdish state. Ankara considers both the PKK and the YPG (that is the military offshoot of the PYD, the Syrian Kurdish Party) as terrorist organizations and has always pushed the US and EU to do the same. Even if both countries consider all the Kurdish organizations as a source of threat, Iran has been able to establish cooperative relations anyway with local Iranian Kurdish groups such as the PJAK (that is linked to the Turkish PKK).⁽⁴⁷⁾ Therefore, what has mostly undermined Ankara's interests in Iraq over the past years has been Tehran's leveraging of the PKK in the Kobane conflict and then in it providing assistance to the Kurds in the battle for Mosul in October 2016, when the Quds Force Commander of the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), General Qassem Soleimani, called on the PKK to join the battle alongside the Shiite Liberation Army⁽⁴⁸⁾. By the way, when asked about General Soleimani, Erdogan answered as follows "This is someone I know very well [...] He is part of the operations in Iraq. So what is their objective? To increase the power of Shiite in Iraq. That's what they want."⁽⁴⁹⁾ Ankara accuses Tehran of sectarianism and it is Turkey's official foreign policy line. It serves Turkey's official narrative to legitimate itself in the Middle East. During the February 2017 MSC already referred to, Erdogan put the blame on Iran for trying to split Iraq and Syria from a national standpoint, while Cavusoglu overtly stated that "Iran is trying to create two Shia states in Iraq and Syria."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Actually Turkey seemed very much disturbed with a potential "sectarianisation" of Iraq. Turkey has viewed the Shiite Liberation Army as a dangerous attempt to religiously empower local Shia communities at the expense of Sunni-Turkmen. Indeed, what really concerns Ankara's decision-makers is the increasing influence Iran has been exerting in Iraq and Syria through a clever exploitation of the Shia factor. Tehran had also strongly encouraged the Iraqi government to include the Popular Mobilization Forces in the official Iraqi forces, a measure that reinforced Iran's Shia presence in Iraq⁽⁵¹⁾. Turkey had significantly suffered from such a sectarian policy promoted in Iraq by the former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to totally isolate Turkey from Iraqi politics.⁽⁵²⁾ Paradoxically, and to counterbalance Iran's ascending clout, Ankara established warm relations with the KDP, the Iraqi Kurdish Party led by Massoud Barzani, who was the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) till 2017. Normalising relations with

Barzani has always been considered a key goal for Turkey's decision-makers and instrumental to having access to the KRG's oil rich area – which has always been a matter of major contention with the Iraqi central government, because of oil revenues and their management.⁽⁵³⁾ Such a framework deeply explains the support Iran has delivered to Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is the main Iraqi-Kurdish competing party to Barzani's KDP, on the one hand. On the other hand, since Baghdad's government has always been Shia-dominated post Saddam Hussein's fall, Ankara has always preferred the unity and indivisibility of Iraq, based on a federal framework to stifle the threat of sectarianism promoted by Tehran. Therefore, as a result of the regional balance of power, Ankara sees Baghdad as a regional rival.

The fight for Mosul in October 2016 is an example of the dispute between opposing forces on the battlefield. While Tehran considered it as a building block of its (Shia) power projection in the Middle East –to the extent that it cooperated with Kurds to dislodge Daesh's forces– Ankara's aimed to retake control of the city by rebuffing Kurdish forces and this went along with warnings by AK Party's decision-makers that any Shia involvement sponsored by Iran would result in increasing regional tensions. Turkey's decision to establish a military contingent in the Bashiqa camp raised the Iraqi governments anger and called on it to withdraw.⁽⁵⁴⁾

However, the most recent regional developments along with the ongoing Astana process mark some important steps towards defusing differences and reaching a possible compromise. After all, economic relations indicate that Russia, Iran and Iraq – more specifically the KRG – represent Turkey's three major trading partners as far as energy is concerned. The KRG accounts for 23% of oil imports, the first in this special rating.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Through an energy-oriented approach with the KRG, Turkey is ensured to have a say in Iraqi politics, it looks to Barzani's support in containing the PKK and defusing the power of Iran's Shia factor in the Middle East.

Conclusions

In this paper I used a FPA model to discover which are the main material and psychological factors that affect Turkey's approach towards Iran's Shia crescent. In this way, I tried to deconstruct this concept and clear it from any ideological dimension. I argued that both Turkey and Iran's moves in the Middle East are primarily motivated by strategic concerns. Psychological factors such as Tehran's fear of encirclement and Ankara's Sèvres syndrome are crucial. On the other hand, if religion, ideology and rhetoric are typical elements of political competition, both at home and in foreign affairs, their specific weight has to be put into context and understood to the extent that their exploitation by foreign policy-makers can be instrumental in pursuing strategic goals. I tried to furnish some examples of this, by focusing on three key-cases taken in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

What came out is that moving from a classical framework based on economic cooperation and geopolitical rivalries, Turkey and Iran have found a common ground for a mutual understanding, although political and military divergences still remain at work. In the wake of the Syrian crisis, a major source of strain in bilateral relations had come out when Turkey decided to host a US- military shield on its soil, a move that was perceived by Tehran as a direct threat to its own security.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Turkish officials tried to assuage their Iranian counterparts that the program had only defensive purposes. Felt beleaguered by the ceaseless presence of US troops beyond its borders, statehood instability in bordering countries, as well as threatened by Sunni and Islamic jihadism, Iran has kept on pushing its influence abroad by leveraging the Shia factor. This has allowed it to create a power geopolitical corridor that projects its influence close to the Israeli border.

Alongside Saudi Arabia, Tel Aviv has indeed seemed to be the most important actor in orienteering Iran's foreign policy over the years. Therefore, apart from realistic geopolitical rivalry – because of their middle powers status – Turkey and Iran have always acted as if

some room for reciprocal understanding could open up to defuse reciprocal syndromes of encirclement/isolation. Further exhaustive examples in this sense are given by: A) an emerging Turkey-Iran-Qatar entente to counter Arab and Sunni Gulf States' efforts to economically isolate Doha in Summer 2017⁽⁵⁷⁾; B) Iran and Turkey's convergence concerning the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri in November 2017.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Moreover, the Syrian crisis has not only put Turkey and the Kurds on different sides, but it has also set the ground for an eventual confrontation between Iran and Israel. Such a framework has prevailed over Iran-Turkey classical geopolitical rivalry and has pushed them towards cooperation. Although evident political and military differences still remain at work, Ankara was forced to find a compromise with Tehran on the thorniest Middle East issues. This was a result of Turkey's search for strategic autonomy⁽⁵⁹⁾ under the AK Party, its progressive slipping out from traditional alliances, its embracement of an Euro-Asian approach,⁽⁶⁰⁾ a contextual re-evaluation of the importance of exerting influence in the Middle East by moving on from its failed normative approach under Ahmet Davutoglu⁽⁶¹⁾ to embrace a new "tactical Erdoganism" (best mirrored in a tactical engagement with Moscow) to finally respond to Iran's project to establish a Shia crescent and to diffuse bilateral tensions. A former convergence on economic issues and energy has proved to be a leading element in this process. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region and the Caspian Sea represented an area of influence and conflict between Ankara and Tehran as it contains significant levels of natural energy resources, particularly oil and gas. Turkey needed to import hydrocarbons (90% of the total) to satisfy its national demand, while Iran urgently looked for energy-thirsty buyers to deal with the crippling regime of sanctions that brought it to economic ruin and international isolation over the past decades.

In conclusion, sectarianism in Iran's foreign policy is not that important in itself, while it works as a political tool for pursuing hegemonic and geopolitical goals. At the same time, Turkey pursues what has been called "strategic autonomy", or "Turkish Gaullism,"⁽⁶²⁾ a foreign policy strongly based on nationalism. Religion can, at best, be exploited to cleverly pursue pragmatic and rational goals.

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