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Turkish-Iranian relations and the crisis in Syria

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The ongoing crisis in Syria has caused worldwide interest not only due to the future of the inner political landscape in Damascus and the future of the Assad rule but also due to the geopolitical significance of the country. Given the strategic position of Syria and her anti-Israeli foreign policy, Damascus has become the backbone of Arab resistance against Tel Aviv. Expectedly enough the Syrian revolt has drawn the interest of various political powers outside the country, both in favour and against the Assad rule. In this regard the case of Turkey and Iran are of particular interest.

In the last two years there has been an unprecedented rapprochement between Tehran and Ankara, two traditionally antagonistic powers in the Middle East. The Neo-Ottoman doctrine of Turkish foreign policy and the concept of zero problems with the neighboring states have led Ankara to the formation of a strong alliance with Tehran. The Iranians under the economic pressure of the West welcomed the change in Ankara's attitude, aiming to counter the consequences of the ongoing embargo. A point of mutual interest and concern for both countries is the case of Kurdistan. Within this framework Turkey has become a key friend of Iran, providing commercial and bank allowances to Tehran, damaging Israeli efforts to isolate Iran further.

The Iran-Turkey rapprochement was developed in close connection with the pre-existing stable alliance between Damascus and Tehran. Pursuing the same policy of zero problems with her neighboring Syria, Ankara combined the Iran-Syria alliance in order to boost her own profile amongst the Palestinians. In this context an anti-Israeli axis was formulated including Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

However the political crisis in Syria altered Ankara's stance toward Assad, urging him to reform his country politically. Moreover, Ankara has sided openly with the anti-Assad powers by welcoming Syrian refugees in Turkish soil and by hosting conferences and meetings with top anti-Assad Syrian leaders. This unexpected shift of Turkish foreign policy has irked Damascus and Assad's allies. The echo of the shifting Turkish foreign policy in Syria reached up to Tehran.

In spite of the currently positive relations between the two countries Tehran seems to be concerned about Davutoglu's policy toward Assad. The latter is of paramount importance for Tehran, because he is the key ally in preserving the anti-Israel axis in the region. Thus any inner political instability in Syria or even the fall of Assad from power will automatically be a serious setback for Iranian foreign policy with regard to Lebanon and the Palestinian issue.

In this context Iranian diplomats and politicians have recently reacted to the role of Turkey in Syria. On 12 July 2011, President Ahmadinejad warned Davutoglu of US and Israeli plots in the ongoing unrest in the Arab world. The message was clearly linked to Turkey's role in Syria: Ankara must be cautious, alter and side with Assad in the Syrian crisis. The Iranian allegation about US and Israeli plots in the region were strengthened four days earlier by the emotional move of Robert Ford, the US Ambassador in Damascus, who visited the restive city of Hama on July 8 in order to prevent a crackdown against the protesters by the Syrian forces. Ford's rather undiplomatic move, despite the support he received from the State Department as a brave example of protecting human rights in Syria, fueled conspiracy theories in the public opinion of the Arab world regarding the role of the US in the region.

The deterioration in Iranian-Turkish relations is also evident in the discussion in the Iranian parliament about the possible agreement between Turkey and NATO to install a missile-shield radar system in Turkey. According to the statement of the Iranian lawmaker Fatemeh Alia on 18 July, such a NATO act will constitute a threat toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. The aforementioned developments suggest that Turkish-Iranian relations undergo a cooling stage. Iranians view Turkey as a key ally in the case of Kurdistan and in their efforts to counter western economic sanctions. Yet Tehran is increasingly concerned about the double game foreign policy of Ankara in Syria, which threatens Iranian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Apparently Iranians will not tolerate Turkish support for the anti-Assad political leaders and this will result to the -possibly ephemeral- deterioration in the bilateral relations between Tehran and Ankara in the next few months.

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