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Turkish-Iranian relations & the NATO Missile-Defense Radar

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Turkish-Iranian relations have always been antagonistic. Periods of peace and restricted rivalry in their bilateral relations are quite rare in history. The change of attitude of the Turks toward Tehran in the last two years has coincided with the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. But could this recent development alter the traditional model of antagonism between the two foes? The ongoing positive climate in bilateral relations seems to have been shattered recently by different interests of both countries regarding geopolitical developments, such as the Syria Crisis, and more recently the installation of the NATO missile radar.

Turkish-Iranian relations are based on mutual respect and sense of interest in the region. Both countries have found a geopolitical common ground: the Kurdistan issue, energy pipelines, trade and Islamic worldview. The Turkish-Iranian rapprochement is based on mutual interests in the region, either in terms of geopolitical security or economic gains.

Turkey needs Iran mainly for three reasons: to secure its southeast provinces from Kurdish separatism, to make economic gains by taking advantage of its strategic position in combination with Iran's isolated economy, and finally to boost its profile in the Islamic world, especially amongst the Palestinians. All these aims are framed harmoniously in the ideological framework of the Neo-Ottoman foreign policy.

In regard to Kurdistan, both countries are in close contact on how to prevent Kurdish separatists from establishing an independent Kurdistan which would include lands from Iran and Turkey. The two sides share intelligence and they operate against Kurd guerilla fighter both inside Turkey and Iran but also inside northern Iraq.

Economically, undoubtedly the Turks have been instrumental in making more and more economic gains by offering Iran a vital economic corridor at a time of hard sanctions against Tehran. By providing Iran with bank transaction facilities, buying Iranian gas and oil and supporting Iran in the international economic bodies, Ankara has been able to profit by receiving an enormous commission percentage per project. Additionally Turkey, a bridge between East and West as well as North and South, tries to use Iranian gas pipeline as a pretext to drop the prices of Russian gas.

In regard to the spread of Islam as a political power in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean, Iran has been the driving force in the last 32 years. Regardless of the type of Islam that each country suggests for the Arabs, Turkey acts on a threefold pattern to promote its aspiration as the future Muslim country-leader and protector of the Islamic world: a hostile rhetoric against Israel, a brotherly alliance with Iran and an attempt for rapprochement with Riyadh and Cairo.

Similarly Tehran needs also Ankara in order to counter-balance international economic sanctions against its nuclear programme, to coordinate efforts in the case of Kurdistan and to strengthen its Islamic foreign policy in the region against Israel. In economic terms the change of the political status-quo in Turkey was an unexpectedly positive development for Iran. The Turkish offer for bilateral economic collaboration provided Tehran with more options on the economic table at a time of limited choices for Tehran due to increasing international sanctions. Even though this collaboration is very expensive for the Iranians, they seem to prefer it because this type of economic modus vivendi influences bilateral and multilateral collaborations in the region, especially between Iran and Russia, even China. Having more options on the table is always good and Tehran knows it well.

In the field of religion, Iran views the resurgence of Islamists in Turkey as an overall positive development in Islamic terms, given that Turkey has been the spearhead of modernization against Islam in the last 80 years. This resurgence is ideologically within the same Islamic framework despite various ideological differences and the type of secular Islam that the Turks propagate in the Arab world. Tehran is convinced about the sincere intention of the Turks to reform Turkish society based on an Islamic model. What the Iranians are not convinced about is Ankara's intentions toward Israel.

In the last two years Iranian officials have been quite cautious regarding Turkish diplomatic attitude toward Tel Aviv. Despite the high rhetoric of the Turks against Israel and the flotilla incident, the Iranians have not seen anything essentially ground-breaking regarding Turkey's anti-Israel policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The anti-Assad Turkish policy harms Iranian interests in the region and certainly strengthens Israel. In a previous note by the same author (BN4, July 2011) it was suggested that Turkish-Iranian relations underwent a cooling stage due to their different approach to the Syrian crisis. Tehran was cautious on how to address publicly the Turkish policy in Syria. But recent developments regarding the NATO radar system made Iranian officials quite outspoken, for they perceive Turkey's double game as a direct threat to Iran's interests.

According to Iranian officials, what is contradictory in Turkey's decision for the radar installation is that it comes at a time of deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. What is clear is that having the NATO radar in Turkey is in favor of Israel's security and at the expense of Iran's defense policy in the region. Statements by Iranian officials, including President Ahmadinejad, manifest the degree of their dissatisfaction.

Washington's move to ask Ankara to install the radar system aimed to further isolate Tehran, test Turkey's devotion to its duties within the NATO alliance and boost Israel's security. So far it has worked. Yet it is questionable whether such a move will help Turkey to maintain and increase its high profile amongst the Muslim world as the leading Islamic country which aims to introduce a secular form of Islam in the region.

Regarding the future, recent developments related to the NATO radar system denote that Turkish-Iranian relations are going to deteriorate further. The 'honeymoon' period of the previous two years seems to be over. Turkey has invested on its high economic importance for Tehran's interests. Yet despite the Iranian dependence on the Turkish corridor, Tehran is not expected to show much patience with Ankara's geopolitical experiments. In the last three decades the Iranians have been used to being under immense western pressure and sanctions. They think that they can perform well without Turkish financial facilities.

In security terms the Iranians are expected to exert their influence in order to prevent Ankara from actually installing the radar system in Turkey. If Tehran fails to do so, then Iran could diminish gradually and selectively its economic dealings with Ankara, and take diplomatic and security measures against Turkey, including the role of Iran in the Caucasus and the support of specific elements in the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey. Undoubtedly the case of Iran clearly suggests that Davutoglu's 'zero problems' foreign policy is not viable.

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