


The Impact of Syrian Crisis on Iran-Turkey Relations

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Abstract

What impact has the Syrian crisis had on Iran-Turkey political relations? Some analysts argue that divergence in Iranian and Turkish outlooks and roles played in the Syrian crisis have adversely affected their bilateral relationship. But the authors believe that in spite of the conflict in Iran's interests and Turkish policies towards Syria, their broader relations in other areas –security and economy- have prevented the rupture of political relations. In this regards, after the dimensions of the Syrian crisis are briefly described, Turkish foreign policy strategy in the Middle East will be explained. Then, Turkish-Syrian relations prior to the outbreak of the crisis will be analyzed followed by a discussion of Iranian and Turkish foreign policies towards the Syrian crisis and their impact on their mutual relations. The authors will conclude that although the Syrian crisis has given rise to certain tensions and adverse consequences in their political relations, their bilateral ties have persisted as manifested in high-ranking diplomatic meetings between their political authorities and in ongoing deliberations on important regional issues.

Keywords: Syrian Crisis, Iran, Turkey, Political Relations, Security, Economy

Introduction

The political crisis in Syria has concerned major regional and international actors within the past two and half years in such a way that in a short period of time, a new political alignment has taken shape at the regional level as well as in the international arena. Currently, given the outlooks of the actors and their different strategic considerations towards the crisis in question, there are two political axes. As two major regional powers, Iran and Turkey have been placed separately in these two coalitions; Iran, Russia, Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas form the anti-Western coalition and Turkey, the United States, European Union and the Persian Gulf countries are in the opposing side.

This article seeks to examine the impacts of the Syrian crisis on Iran-Turkey political relations, given their totally divergent policies towards Syria. From the authors' point of view, however, the Syrian crisis has not prevented their continued political relations despite the fact it has caused tensions in their bilateral relations, interests and broader ties in other spheres. On this basis, the dimensions of the current political crisis in Syria are first traced at the three domestic, regional and international levels. Then, Turkish foreign policy strategy in the Middle East and Iranian and Turkish foreign policies towards the Syrian crisis will be described. In conclusion, the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iran-Turkey relations will be explored.

1. The Dimensions of the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian crisis which broke out in March 2011 gradually turned into a violent civil war with regional and international dimensions. In this perspective, like the other Arab nations, Syria is entangled in political, social, and economic problems against which people have fought through protests. On the one hand, the majority of the people wish for their rights and freedoms and on the other the military seeks to implement the iron fist policy. In other words, the Syrian crisis may be resolved only with the elimination of one of the parties involved. In addition, some observers believe that the events in Syria are also the result of external sources, as domestic instability has created fertile ground for exploitation and the rivalry of regional and international actors (Niakoui & Behmanesh, 2012: 99-100). On the one hand, the Syrian conflict is a multi-layered conflict. On the other hand, the discipline of International Relations (IR) emphasizes the interconnectedness of various levels of analysis, namely the "domestic and international levels of analysis,"

as essential to understanding phenomena. For this reason, in order to offer a better analysis of the root causes of the developments in Syria, a multi-level analysis should be considered which would lead to a better understanding of the interests of actors involved in the crisis and their interconnections. On this basis, the roots of the current political crisis in Syria are explored at the three domestic, regional and international levels of analysis. At the regional and international levels, strategic role and considerations of the main regional and international players involved in the Syrian crisis will be examined.

The starting point of the Syrian crisis was the demonstrations in 2011. Overall, Syrian opposition groups can be classified into six major groupings: 1) Kurds 2) Muslim Brotherhood 3) Foreign Opposition of Syria 4) the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) 5) Salafists 6) Free Syrian Army. Generally, since the early 1990s, the international system has altered the structure of most conflicts as they tended to emerge outside the states. However within the past 20 years, domestic disputes have, in addition to regional repercussions, lead to global consequences, attracting many international actors through international intervention. International intervention can take two forms. Direct intervention involves other states interfering in a country's domestic conflict, such as the overthrow of Gaddafi's regime in Libya. Indirect international intervention means that other countries allow domestic actors to resolve the conflict, while backing the faction that aligns with their interests, as is currently the case in Syria.

On this basis, two other levels of analysis, the regional and international levels help us better analyze the Syrian crisis. In these two levels, the motives and strategic considerations of major actors including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Russia and the United States will be briefly reviewed. Developments at one level will affect the outcomes at the other level and as such coalitions at one level are parallel to the coalitions at the other. With regard to the regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis, Iran aligned with Russia and China, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other Persian Gulf states view themselves as allied with the United States and European Union.

After the Conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People was held in Tunisia in February 2012, Saudi Arabia expressed its support for arming the Syrian rebels (Al-Rashid, 2013: 36). Overall, Saudi support for the Syrian opposition is derived from

three major concerns. First, this state seeks to deflect international attention from domestic protests inside Saudi Arabia (Karami, 2011: 84). Second, the Saudi government presents its religious validity by backing the Sunni Syrians against an Alawite regime. Third, Saudi government wants a pro-Saudi regime in Syria, which would in turn undermine Iran's influence in Damascus, as well as, in Beirut as Saudi influence has diminished in Lebanon after Saad Hariri was dismissed from the position of Prime Minister (Al-Rashidi, 2013: 37).

The third layer of the multi-layered Syrian crisis includes the international (systemic) layer. The United States and Russia represent the major players at this level. The United States seeks its policies through economic and political sanctions. U.S. interests in Syria as understood in broader objectives in the Middle East can be summarized as follows: protecting Israel's national security and strategic interests, weakening the axis of resistance (comprising the Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas), and weakening Iran as the main actor of the axis of resistance. The overthrow of Assad's regime as the geopolitical link between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah could significantly enhance Israel's position and undermine the resistance front, shifting the balance of power to the benefit of the U.S. at the Islamic Republic of Iran's expense (Niakouei and Behmanesh, 2012: 129-130).

The second major international player in the Syrian crisis is Russia, which has so far vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions that were supported by the Western powers in October 2011, February 2012 and July 2012. The main reasons for Moscow's support for the Assad regime can be classified into military and economic factors (Troyansky, 2012: 1). The Tartus Port, as the Russian naval base in the Mediterranean, represents the military reason for Moscow's support for the Syrian regime as a change in Syrian government might lead to the loss of the base which matters greatly to Russia for accessing warm waters. The economic motivations refer to the fact that Syria has always been a major buyer of Russian weapons; for instance, in 2011, Syria was the fifth biggest buyer of Russian weapons with agreements worth between \$3.5-4.8 billion. The other economic reason revolves around the presence of Russian businesses in Syria. In 2009, Russian investment in the country surpassed 19.4 billion. Thus instability in Syria will disrupt production there, jeopardizing the future of those agreements (Troyansky, 2012: 1).

2. Turkish Middle East Policy

The new Turkey's foreign policy can be explained within two paradigms: 1) Kemalist (West-oriented) pattern and 2) Multilateral policy pattern (adjusted Kemalism, in line of Turkey's geopolitical realities). The Kemalist pattern encompassed the era from the establishment of the Republic of Turkey to the end of the Cold War enshrined in the 1937 Constitution in the following principles: 1) nationalism, 2) secularism, 3) republicanism, 4) populism, 5) statism, and 6) revolutionism. These principles impacted Turkish foreign policy in two ways: First, they distanced Turkey from the Orient, Middle East and Muslim World questions, and second they led Turkish foreign policy further towards the West (Omidi and Rezaei, 2011: 236 -2 37). The second paradigm governing Turkish foreign policy can be called multidimensional foreign policy which seeks to adjust the traditional Western-oriented policies and to increase economic-trade and political-security relations with the regional nations (Banihashemi, 2012: 102).

With the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy was formulated by Ahmet Davutoglu in his book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth). He argues that Turkey's geographical location which has placed it at the intersection of cultures and regions including Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Europe would determine the country's foreign policy dynamisms (CIDOB International Yearbook, 2011, Country Profile: Turkey, 2011: 237). On this basis, Turkey has to engage constructively with all these geographical areas. Since Turkey's new foreign policy seeks to increase Turkish influence in surrounding areas which were once part of the Ottoman Empire, it has been labelled as Neo-Ottomanism (Omidi and Rezaei, 2011: 240). Some features of Neo-Ottomanism include striking a balance between security and freedom, zero problems with its neighbors, active peace diplomacy, multilateral foreign policy, and presenting Turkey's image based on its soft power sources. This new attitude was vividly manifested in a look Eastward policy, reviving relations with the Arab World, mediation in the Arab-Israeli peace process, establishing closer relations with Iran and enhancing relations with Syria before the eruption of the Syrian crisis.

The Arab Spring revolutions, which affected foreign policy and domestic politics of regional countries, also significantly influenced Turkish foreign policy. One of the most important consequences of the Syrian crisis has been the rapid collapse of the zero problems

policy. At the same time, respecting Egypt and Libya, by supporting popular uprisings and advocating the principle of ‘striking a balance between security and freedom’, Turkey ignored the policy of zero problems with neighbors (Banihashemi, 2012).

Generally Speaking, regional developments, especially the Syrian crisis, appear to have challenged Turkey’s foreign policy approach based on soft power. Of course, the AKP leaders maintain that the new orientation in Turkey’s foreign policy indicates an effort at adapting to the regional developments rather a change in the principles (Noureddine, 2013: 6).

In 2002, Turkey invested heavily in Syria both diplomatically and economically, making it the centerpiece of its emerging regional policy. Ankara became the main corridor for Damascus both economically and geopolitically even during Syria’s isolation following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2009, in a visit to Damascus, Turkish President Abdullah Gul remarked that “Syria is Turkey’s gateway to the Middle East and Turkey is Syria’s portal to Europe” (Walker, 2012: 2).

Extensive bilateral collaborations led to the establishment of the ‘High Level Strategic Cooperation Council’ and a free economic zone, a visa waiver program between the two countries and so on. Bilateral trade tripled between 2006 and 2010, making Turkey Syria’s third biggest trade partner after Saudi Arabia and China in 2010. With Syria turning into a priority in Turkey’s new regional foreign policy, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Syria more frequently than any other neighboring country until the crisis broke out in the country in 2011 (Walker, 2012: 2).

The turning point in Turkey-Syria relations occurred on November 22, 2011 when for the first time Erdogan explicitly called for Assad’s dismissal after he saw his pressures for implementing political reforms as futile. On November 30, Davutoglu announced a series of sanctions against the Syrian government which is much more severe than any other sanctions imposed by Turkey against its neighbors including against Iraq in the 1990s (Aras, 2012: 47).

3. Iran and Turkey’s Foreign Policy toward the Syrian Crisis

In the Syrian crisis, the Sunni bloc comprising Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey is actively trying to change the regime in Syria. In contrast, the anti-Western axis, including Iran, Russia, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Hamas seeks to maintain the current regime. Here,

Iranian and Turkish foreign policies are examined within the framework of Syria's geopolitical significance for each of these countries.

With U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, both Iran and Turkey have made efforts at increasing their influence in the region, which in Iraq, occurs along the Sunni-Shia fault lines. In Syria, Turkey also seeks to change Assad's regime in order to boost its regional role in the context of the future political arrangement of the Syrian government (Kasapoglu, 2012). Generally speaking, Syria is of vital importance for Iran, because, first, it is the main portal of Iran's access to the Levant. Syria has been Iran's regional ally since the Islamic Revolution, acting as a bridge between Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, which would threaten Israel's security (McDaniel, 2013). Second, the future of Syria's political alignment would greatly matter to the Islamic Republic of Iran for the purpose of preserving regional role, balance of power and enhancing the resistance current (Barzegar, 2011). A Sunni coalition or a new pro-Western government would undermine the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional influence which would undermine Iran and the axis of resistance vis-à-vis Israel. Syria's significance for Iran also arises from Syria's connection with the Sunni-Salafist axis as Syria stands opposed to the Salafist ideology represented by Saudi Arabia. For the aforementioned reasons, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its regional allies consider efforts at regime change in Syria to undermine the axis of resistance (Ertugrul, 2012: 4 -5).

Turkish policy to become a central player in the Middle East encountered a roadblock in Syria, in spite of supporting the Syrian opposition groups politically and militarily (Ertugrul, 2012: 8). Overall, the reasons for Turkey's incorrect prediction on the Syrian crisis, i.e. Assad's overthrow within a few months, can be summarized as follows: 1) resistance of Assad's regime, 2) structure of the opposition groups (inconsistency and lack of unity), and 3) the role played by some actors (Ertugrul, 2012: 2). Through the regime change in Syria and the future political makeup of its government, Turkey seeks to become the paramount regional actor, undermining Iran's regional role. It also intended to pave the way for its enlarged influence within the framework of Neo-Ottomanism (Noureddine, 2013: 4).

4. The Syrian Crisis and Turkey-Iran Relations

In spite of deep differences between Iran and Turkey over the Syrian crisis, their political relations still continue. In this section, first structural contradictions between Iran and Turkey will be explained, then the main foundations of Iran-Turkey conciliatory political relations (including the most important domestic and external factors) will be examined.

Since the 16th century, there have been a few structural contradictions between Iran and Turkey, the most important of which include: geographical location of the two countries, minorities, religious differences and different political systems. Located in eastern part of the Middle East, both countries connect Central Asia and the Caucasus, providing a portal for Europe to reach these two regions. Iran's particular geographical location arises from its control over the energy resources of the Persian Gulf. It also enjoys religious influence on the Shia Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkey's geographical location, however, has more international strategic value, since not only it connects Asia and Europe, but also occupies the five sea passages including the Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Marmara, Aegean and the Mediterranean, all closely connected with trade and energy. The characteristic of this geographical composition is one of the roots of conflict between Turkey and Iran, which has been caused by the competition for control and influence on this region (Bo, 2011: 2-3).

The second factor is the issue of minorities with which both countries have been faced. In Iran, the largest minority group are the Azerbaijanis, accounting for 25% of the population. The widespread Kurdish ethnic movement in Turkey has also raised a significant challenge for the country. The third factor is the religious differences. Between the 16th and 20th centuries, the Ottomans had competed for the leadership of the Muslim World with the Shia Safavid and Qajars, which has also become a decisive factor in the conflicts. Therefore, competition for Islamic leadership is still embedded in the cultural traditions of the two nations.

The fourth factor is the two distinct political models of Turkey and Iran in the late 20th century. The two different choices of governmental structure have become the major source of ideological differences. Following the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Islamic Republic replaced the monarchy, leading to the rupture of Iran's relations with the Western world and NATO. Turkey's secular government worried that Iran would spread the revolutionary movement into the entire Middle East and Iran

accused Turkey of sheltering the Iranian refugees in Turkey (Ahmadi, 2010: 180-181). Finally, the fifth factor involves the border disputes, which are also a historical root of the conflicts. The boundary of the two countries was mainly determined by the 1639 Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin. Over the past centuries, there has been no major war because of border disputes. However, some armed hostilities have remained unsolved. For instance, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has frequently used the disputed border areas to launch attacks against Turkey, causing occasional tensions between the two states (Bo, 2011: 5).

While there are structural contradictions between Iran and Turkey, three factors have contributed to enhanced cooperation between the two nations, i.e., preservation of regional stability, security cooperation and economic collaboration. In other words, despite contradictory and different outlooks on Iraq, Syria, and relations with the United States, European Union and other international organizations, the two parties have certain overlapping interests, which give way to a degree of cooperation and diminish tensions (Stein and Bleek, 2012: 148). At the same time, a few factors including the rise of Islamist Refah Party to power, détente period under Iranian President Khatami and AKP's coming to office helped improve bilateral relations. Mutual interests in preserving regional stability, facing common threats, shared commitment to contain Kurdish separatism in the Middle East (security cooperation) and growing trade between the two sides constitute the most important elements that have facilitated the continued political relations.

Historically speaking, change in the external environment has had similar repercussions for bilateral relations, despite fundamental contradictions between them. In recent years, the external setting has largely reduced tensions between Iran and Turkey. In the Cold War era, as regional actors, Iran and Turkey joined the U.S.-led Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in order to fight the common threat of communism (Bo, 2011: 6). After the Islamic Revolution until the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1979-1988), the two states maintained their lukewarm political relations. Between 1988 and 2000, the two sides experienced a period of hostility as a result of U.S. dual containment policy. Iran distanced itself from Turkey and expanded relations with Russia, and they were engaged in a rivalry to spread their spheres of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Calabrese, 1998: 93). From 2000 onwards, Iran-Turkey relations improved particularly as a result of the U.S. invasion of

Iraq in 2003. The question of the reconstruction of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdish separatism led Iran and Turkey to coordinate their stances, and unite for the maintenance of regional stability.

The common threat of Kurdish separatism and Iran-Turkey collaborations in this regard, has been one of the reasons for their continued political relations. Although the 1990s was an exceptional decade when Turkey accused Iran of providing logistical and financial assistance to the PKK in an effort to destabilize Turkey's political regime, as Iran allegedly deemed the PKK a useful tool in its rivalry with Turkey over northern Iraq (Demiryol, 2013, 121). Indeed, Turkey recognized Iranian post-revolutionary government three days after the advent of the Revolution on February 14, 1979, because it was concerned about a civil war in Iran which could provoke Turkey's Kurdish separatism along with the country's eastern borders (Bo, 2011: 7).

Since the late 1990s, with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's detention, security collaboration between Iran and Turkey expanded. During Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem's visit to Tehran, Iran emphasized that it considered the PKK a terrorist organization. Then high-ranking strategic contacts continued through meetings of the Turkey-Iran High Security Commission and Joint Security Committee. As a result of the creation of Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) as an offshoot of PKK, Iran and Turkey signed a security cooperation agreement in 2004, stressing shared commitment to regional security. During the 12th meeting of the Turkey-Iran High Security Commission in April 2008, an Iranian official indicated that Iran regarded the PKK and PJAK as a single terrorist organization under two titles (McCurdy, 2008: 8-10).

With regard to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, both Iran and Turkey oppose an independent state for the Kurds, while defending Iraq's territorial integrity. At the same time, some analysts like Nathalie Tocci believe that Turkish policies towards KRG would strengthen its de facto independence; these policies and actions include Erdogan's visit to Erbil in 2011 and Turkey's economic activities in the region such as the 2012 agreement for constructing gas and oil pipelines from northern Iraq to Turkey (Tocci, 2013: 2-3).

In an interview, Turkey's advisor in Tehran Baris Saygin indicated that no change had taken place in Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraq since 2003 as Turkey still believes that, regarding both Iraq and Syria, all religious-ethnic groups should live within their territories with a democratic attitude (Turkey's Embassy in Tehran,

2013). Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, growing economic relations between Iran and Turkey have facilitated continued political relations between the two sides. Here the role and place of the economy in Turkey's foreign policy is explored before we examine their bilateral economic relations.

Turkish diplomacy in the recent century shows that its foreign policy positions have been largely affected by economic considerations. From the onset, leaders of the Turkish republic desired industrialization, modernization and development as strategic targets leading them to pursue Westernism and avoidance of tension and conflict in foreign policy, which would bar progress and development. They have also pursued two imports substitution and exports expansion strategies in order to attain economic development. They have mainly relied, in two stages, on an exports expansion strategy within the past three decades which required a pacifist foreign policy and enlarged regional and international relations and cooperation. The first stage started in the 1980s under then Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, which changed Turkey from a security state into a trading state leading to the expansion of trade and investment becoming the country's main foreign policy goal. The second stage was initiated in 2002 with the AKP's coming to office, which still continues (See Ghanbarloo, 2012). Indeed, industrial-commercial interests with exports orientation gained more momentum with AKP's victory in a way that AKP government seeks to reduce tensions and expand economic relations in the Middle East, the Balkans and Russia (Kirisci and Kaptanoglu, 2011, 715). On this ground, Turkey is now referred to as a trading state according to Richard Rosecrance's characterization as the main goal of the state in foreign policy is to find foreign markets for the goods produced by the country (Ghanbarloo, 2012: 191).

There is interdependence in Iran-Turkey economic relationships, meaning that both sides benefit from mutual economic collaborations. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iran established economic relations with Turkey in order to import strategic commodities, which improved Turkey's bankrupt economy. After the Refah Party came to office in 1996, the two parties signed a series of economic cooperation agreements including Turkey's procurement of \$2.3 billion natural gas from Iran. With AKP's rise to power in 2002, bilateral trade and economic relations have increased (Bo, 2011:7, 11) in such a way that bilateral trade rose from \$1.2 billion in 2002 to more than \$16 billion in 2011. The two sides, moreover, have committed to

increase their bilateral trade to \$30 billion per annum by 2015 (Khajehpour, 2012: 19).

Turkey's overall foreign policy strategy is focused on expanding its commercial strength; thus it needs Iran's vast domestic market as well as its energy. In return, Iran sees Turkey as a country with which it can undermine its economic isolation (Bo, 2011: 14). After Iranian banks were sanctioned in 2011, some Turkish financial institutions helped Iran. In 2011, Halkbank – with 75% of its shares belonging to the Turkish government – helped the Indian oil company to pay for the oil it purchased from Iran. The Turkish government has so far avoided implementing the U.S. and EU sanctions against Iran despite U.S. warnings that Turkish institutions would lose their access to the American market. While Turkey has expressed its willingness to cooperate with sanctions adopted by the United Nations, it continues to expand its trade relations with Iran in areas not targeted by the UN sanctions (Habib, 2012: 6).

Energy trade and the interdependence between Iran and Turkey should also be mentioned as natural gas and oil comprise more than 80% of Iran's exports to Turkey. It is beneficial for both sides, because Turkey is faced with rising energy needs, while Iran sees a growing foreign energy market in Turkey and a suitable corridor through which to reach European buyers (Demiryol, 2013: 127).

Since the Islamic Revolution, the three factors of the economy, security and preservation of regional stability have consistently facilitated continued collaborations between Iran and Turkey (the three main pillars of bilateral relations). For instance, before the Syrian crisis, Turkey continued to support Iranian nuclear program and there were high-ranking diplomatic visits. Turkey and Brazil mediated for an exchange of nuclear fuel deal in 2010. After the deal failed due to U.S. objection, Turkey opposed the adoption of UN Security Council resolution for more severe economic sanctions against Iran on June 9, 2010 (Chappell, 2010: 13-14). On high-ranking diplomatic visits, in the time period between July 2002 and January 2012, Iranian presidents or speakers of the parliament paid six visits to Turkey and three visits were paid by the Turkish prime minister or president to Iran (Habib, 2012: 2).

An analysis of the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iran-Turkey political relations would demonstrate that this crisis, in spite of tensions arising from deep disagreement and divergent strategic considerations, not only has not led to the rupture of their political relations, but also that their relations still continues to evolve. The

reason can be understood in the foundations of their political relations as mentioned above, in the way that the Syrian crisis and their opposing alignment have not shaken those foundations. On this basis, certain tensions and adverse repercussions arising from the crisis in question on bilateral relations will be described.

After the Syrian crisis broke out, political authorities in both countries began criticizing each other's policies and occasionally condemned them. For instance, a member of Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Seyed Hossein Hosseini Naghavi stated: "The Turkish government bears the main responsibility regarding these bombings, because it explicitly speaks of arming and sponsoring paramilitary groups acting in Syria" (Resalat Newspaper, May 14, 2012). Brigadier General Seyed Hassan Firouzabadi, Chairperson of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also stated that "The House of Saud, Qatar and Turkey are to blame for bloods shed on Syrian soil. ... After Syria, it will be Turkey and other countries' turn. ... Lest Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar fall victim to al-Qaeda's expanded terrorism. For this reason we warn our friends." After NATO's Patriot missiles were deployed to Turkey, the head of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Aladdin Borujerdi observed that "These missiles would not bring Turkey security, because all Turkey's neighbors are unsatisfied with the missiles" (Shargh Newspapers, August 8, 2012). Advisor to the Leader's Representative at the Revolutionary Guard Corps General Yadollah Javani remarked: "The Islamic Republic does not see the deployment of NATO's Patriot defense system along the Iran-Turkey border as benefiting the regional nations. Iran believes that the deployment of these missiles will be counterproductive even for Turkey itself" (Ettelaat Newspaper, December 24, 2012). In reactions, Turkish President Abdullah Gul issued a statement saying that "We asked Iranians not to support Bashar Assad's government as he is no longer able to run the country" (Vatan Emrouz Newspaper, January 10, 2013). Also another Turkish newspaper had written that Iran was training Syrian military forces (Siasat Rouz Newspaper, May 28, 2012).

Critical reactions and occasional condemnation by Iran and Turkey towards each other, nonetheless, have brought about practical consequences as well including cancellation of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's visit to Turkey in protest to the deployment of Patriot missiles on Turkish soil in December 2012 (Ettelaat Newspaper, December 24, 2012) and suspension of the visa waiver program by Iran on August 9, 2012 in response to

Turkish foreign minister's official statement on August 8, 2012 in condemnation of Iranian authorities' remarks regarding Turkey's support for Syrian Kurdish opposition and participation in the U.S.-led coalition for overthrowing the Syrian government (Bavand, 2012).

But as mentioned above, bilateral political relations have continued as dictated by important issues of security, economy, and regional stability. In this regard, the authors' argument is based upon three objective reasons. First, "Although there has been an exchange of rhetoric by political authorities – particularly Iranian military commanders – in Iran and Turkey, both sides immediately have made more conciliatory statements; this would indicate the existence of a will to continue and improve the relations" (Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013). For instance, Turkey's Ambassador to Iran Umit Yardim stated in response to Firouzabadi's remarks: "Turkey has never considered Iran as a threat and the claims made in this regard are absolutely baseless. Turkey and Iran have long had good relations and there is no reason for Iran to be concerned about the deployment of the missile system on Turkish soil" (Abrar Newspaper, September 25, 2011). Furthermore, certain actions following relatively harsh reactions can be mentioned; for example a few days after Ahmadinejad's visit was cancelled in December 2012, the spokesperson of Iranian Foreign Ministry headed a delegation to Turkey (Bavand, 2012).

Second, certain statements made by the two countries' political authorities have both emphasized their difference in outlooks on Syria and also that these differences would not impair bilateral relations. For instance, Umit Yardim said "There are some differences on the question of Syria, but at the same time we are engaged in numerous negotiations with Iran on this. Anyway, the Syrian problem will be finished within a year or two, but in any case, Iran and Turkey are destined to live next to each other for hundreds of years. It shows the value Turkey attaches to Iran" (Shargh Newspaper, May 12, 2013). In a news conference in Tehran, in reply to a journalist who believed the Syrian question has undermined Tehran-Ankara relations, Spokesperson of Turkish Foreign Ministry Levent Gumrukcu rejected it, speaking of the long bilateral ties between the two countries (Shargh Newspaper, May 12, 2013).

Third, meetings between high-ranking Iranian and Turkish political authorities and regular phone conversations signify both parties' will to continue and expand bilateral political relations.

Umit Yardim commented on these meetings saying “In 2012, the Turkish Prime Minister visited Iran and Speaker of the Iranian Parliament visited Turkey. There have also been several visits by foreign ministers and their deputies” (Shargh Newspaper, May 12, 2013). Erodgan's visit to Tehran on January 29, 2014 and Davutoglu's visit on November 26, 2013 , as well as their emphasis upon friendship signified that the Syrian crisis had failed to significantly damage Iran-Turkey bilateral ties.

Finally, with respect to the Syrian crisis and political relations between Iran and Turkey, it should be mentioned that the Turkish officials are of the belief that “although the Syrian crisis has not fully disrupted Iran-Turkey relations, its symptoms and adverse effects can be seen in Iran-Turkey relations. In spite of differences on the Syrian crisis, talks can continue and bilateral relations will expand in political spheres, apart from the Syrian question, as well as on cultural and economic issues. In the international organizations wherever Iran is portrayed as an international threat, Turkey has always objected to it. Hence, Turkey acts in good will in its political relations with Iran” (Turkey’s Embassy in Tehran, 2013). The depth of bilateral political and economic relations will overshadow the Syrian crisis. Finally the crisis will disappear and what will remain are the mutual relations that the two nations will not lose (Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013).

Conclusion

The most important regional and international actors of the Syrian crisis can be placed in two distinct coalitions; Iran and Russia in one side and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United States are in another coalition. Of the major players involved in the crisis, this article has dealt with the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey and their distinct motivations and strategic considerations towards the Syrian crisis. From an Iranian perspective, efforts made by the pro-Western actors at overthrowing Assad’s regime would shift the alignment of regional coalitions, disrupt the balance of power at Iran’s expense, undermine the resistance front. In contrast, Turkey seeks to replace Assad's regime with a one consistent with its national interest – like Iraq for Iran - in order to expand its influence in the region. In addition, Turkish mentality took shape within Turkey’s Neo-Ottomanist thinking on increased regional power and turning into a pivotal player.

Some analysts maintain that the different place of and roles played by Iran and Turkey in the Syrian crisis have jeopardized

their bilateral political relations. Nonetheless, their differences on the Syrian crisis have not resulted in the rupture of their political relations. The two states continue to have subject-specific relations rather than relations rooted in their shared values or consistent outlooks on regional issues. Essential issues of security (common threat of Kurdish separatism), economy (with priority given to energy) and preservation of regional stability have always facilitated continued political relations. Therefore, although the Syrian crisis has given rise to certain tensions and adverse consequences in their political relations, their political relations have persisted as manifested in high-ranking diplomatic meetings between their political authorities and in ongoing deliberations on important regional issues.

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