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# Why, When And How Turkey Becomes A Nuclear Power

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The trendy rhetoric regarding Turkish-Iranian relations is that the two have enjoyed friendly relations ever since the Kasr-i Sirin Treaty of 1639, which more or less determined today's border between the two

It is also fashionable to wish that the Middle East be cleared of nuclear weapons. Whether or not it is true about Turkish-Iranian relations, the real question is whether it is justifiable in terms of Turkish national security interests to have a nuclear power next door while Turkey itself does not have the same capabilities? Another question is what is Ankara's plan B if Iran eventually becomes able to develop its own nuclear weapons? Wishing for the region to be free of nuclear weapons is one thing, and failing to counter the shift in the regional balance of power is another, even if Iran arguably does not pose a direct military threat to Turkey.

Furthermore, the German Marshall Fund's recent report 2008 Transatlantic Trends signals that whether Turkey becomes a nuclear power may not necessarily be up to the political leadership in Ankara, but rather to the Turkish public, which is becoming increasingly confident and nationalistic. According to the report, 48 percent of the Turks who participated in the poll want Turkey to act unilaterally in its international affairs, while only 8 percent view US global leadership as desirable and only 22 percent the EU's. The numbers of Turks who view Iran and the EU positively are almost tied, with the first group at 32 percent and the second at 33 percent. The numbers are not so favorable for the US and Israel. Only 14 percent of Turks view the US positively while only 8 percent see Israel in a positive light. Another poll recently conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org indicates that 36 percent of the Turkish respondents believe that Sept. 11 was an insider job, and 39 percent believes that al-Qaeda was behind it. While, as some may argue, these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive possibilities, the evolving trends in Turkish public opinion suggest that the question of whether Turks would favor the idea of Turkey having its own nuclear capabilities seems irrelevant.

So the real question is why, when and how Turkey would become a nuclear power? What are the underlying and governing assumptions? And finally, what are the possible scenarios that could lead Turkey to become a nuclear power?

In the retrospect: Turkey acquires nuclear weapons technology

Underlying assumptions

Anchored in the Western hemisphere and encouraged by the recently improved prospects of Turkey's EU membership, Ankara is unlikely to proactively adopt a policy toward acquiring nuclear weapon capabilities. Any signs of such policy would irritate Turkey's Western allies, most notably the United States and the EU, and put the present government's political survival at risk. That is, the government in Ankara with little or no Western support would be vulnerable to the continuous interference of the Turkish military, though the military may seem relatively silent at the moment. In addition, such an orientation would dramatically weaken Ankara's diplomatic capabilities with regards to its major foreign policy and security issues, which include EU membership, the Cyprus issue, the so-called Armenian genocide issue, the Kurdish formation in northern Iraq and fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been launching attacks on Turkey from northern Iraq.

Although all these foreign policy and security matters seem to have been handled relatively well and hence lie dormant thanks to the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government's diplomatic skills, they can easily be used against Ankara at any given time. Therefore, Ankara, be it under the current AK Party government or another one in the near future, would first be inclined to seek the protection of the security alliances such as NATO instead of itself becoming a self-reliant military power.

However, Iran's emergence as a nuclear power in the region changes the regional balance of power, puts Israel's survival at risk and bolsters the extremists around the Muslim world. Therefore, it becomes a moral and strategic imperative for Turkey to seek nuclear weapon capabilities to counterbalance nuclear Iran and offset its possible radicalizing impact on the Muslim world. Once Iran declares its nuclear weapon capabilities, the Turkish public will force the standing government to make Turkey a nuclear power as well. As a matter of fact, the 2008 Transatlantic Trends report indicates that 48 percent of Turks already want Turkey to act unilaterally in its international affairs, which requires it to be fully capable of doing so. Moreover, in recent years an increasing number of Turks have criticized the AK Party government for not being as bold as Iran in pursuing a nuclear program independently from the West.

#### Governing assumptions

1. The EU accession process is directly related to the political survival of the current AK Party government and likely to be so for the following government(s) given the importance attached to Turkey's Western orientation and secular-democratic regime. Therefore, Ankara refrains from any move within the realm of nuclear energy that would harm its EU accession negotiations.
2. Turkey and Iran have been inherent rivals, with both aspiring to become the regional leader. Turkey aspires to do so via becoming de-facto leader of the Sunni world, while Iran seeks to do the same through reviving the Shiite populations not only in Iraq but also within Saudi Arabia and even in Yemen.
3. Iran is likely to continue its financial and military support of the Shiites inside Iraq for the duration of the US occupation and after the number of US troops are substantially reduced. Iran does so in order to make sure that in Iraq, whether it is governed under a representative central government or under a federal system, the Shiites dominate Iraqi politics, especially policies and international agreements governing the country's energy resources.
4. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria are cautious about Iran's prospects of acquiring nuclear weapon capabilities. They would seek to acquire the same capabilities in order to counterbalance nuclear Iran. For Saudi Arabia, it seems also a moral and, as they would put it, divine imperative to do so because it perceives itself as the natural leader of the Sunni Muslims vis-a-vis the Shiite Iran.
5. Compared to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria, with their authoritarian regimes and lack of checks and balances, Turkey, with its secular and democratic regime and modern military closely cooperating with the US and Israel, would seem more amenable to become a nuclear counterbalance to nuclear Iran.

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