
Turkey In The Balance ? Inside The Improbable Turkey-Iran Partnership

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For much of the last 50 years, through the Cold War, Iranian Revolution, and Iran-Iraq War, Turkey and Iran have weathered ideological tension and mutual mistrust to maintain a peaceful coexistence. Over the objections of the United States, in the past decade Turkey has moved to solidify a pragmatic economic and geopolitical partnership with oil-rich Iran.

Turkey, a NATO ally seeking membership in the European Union, has long been the Muslim world's best prospect for a secular, democratic state close to the United States and Europe. Yet the country is divided over the issue of the Iraq-based Kurdistan Worker's Party. The party, also known as the PKK, is recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. The tension between the PKK and Turkey has drawn the latter closer not to the U.S. or EU, but to the region's staunchest enemy of the West, the Shia theocracy of Iran. As Washington attempts to isolate Tehran, stabilize Iraq, and address the PKK issue, it must simultaneously assure Iraq of its sovereignty and Turkey of its security. American relations with Turkey and policy towards Iran could be undermined by a Turkey-Iran relationship more cordial than one might expect, given their divergent histories, internal politics, and relations with the West.

Turkey's War on Terror As is often the case, diplomacy makes strange bedfellows. For much of the last 25 years, the Turkish military has been involved in a sporadic but continuous guerilla war with the PKK, a Kurdish separatist faction whose goal is to establish an independent Kurdistan in the largely Kurd-inhabited area comprising parts of northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, Syria, and Iran. With over 30,000 lives claimed by the conflict since 1984, Turkey—which has a significant Kurdish minority—considers the PKK a threat both to its national security and territorial integrity. Many Turks perceive the PKK with the same sense of urgency many Americans feel towards al-Qaeda, and view Afghanistan as a case study of how to respond when a country becomes a haven for terrorists that plague their own country.

Warplanes and long-range artillery have been continuously targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq since December of last year, but in late February the Turkish military launched an eight-day ground incursion into northern Iraq to attack PKK hideouts beyond the border. Abdulkadir Onay, a lieutenant colonel in the Turkish army and Visiting Military Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told the HPR that since Turkey has participated in international missions for the U.S.-led War on Terror, "she expects the same reaction for terror against Turkey." With troops spread thinly elsewhere, however, American forces can scarcely afford a bloody entanglement in the otherwise stable semi-autonomous Kurdish zone of Iraq. Until a few months ago, Washington was sending a strong message to Turkey not to enter Iraq for fear of unsettling regional stability.

Polls of the Turkish public have shown record-high levels of dissatisfaction with American foreign policy, underscoring deeper anti-American sentiment since the election of the current AKP government in 2002 and the Iraq War. According to a 2007 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, only nine percent of Turks express a favorable view of the United States, down from 30 percent in 2002. Meanwhile, as the United States attempts to exert pressure

on nuclear-bent Iran, Tehran sees a critical opportunity to bolster ties with Ankara by carrying out military operations against the PKK and strengthening cooperation on energy resources.

A Trend of Cooperation As the United States and others move to stifle Iran's nuclear ambitions, Turkey's strategic security and energy interests deter it from a supporting role. Robert Olson, Professor of Middle History and Politics at the University of Kentucky, noted in an interview with the HPR that Turkey is pursuing a nuclear energy program itself with plans to build several reactors in the next few years. In light of this, Olson said, "Turkey would acquiesce in Iran obtaining nuclear capabilities." It relies on Iran for 20 percent of its oil, maintains a major pipeline for the natural gas required to heat Turkish homes in the winter, and signed an energy agreement last year under which it would act as a transit venue and joint marketer of Turkmen and Iranian gas westward to Europe. In violation of America's 1996 Libya-Iran Sanctions Act, Turkey also plans significant investment in Iran with the construction of three large power plants. Threatened but persistent, Iran is eager to court its most powerful neighbor and a key ally of the United States. And Turkey, unwilling to play the obedient mistress in the U.S. campaign to isolate Tehran, has responded warmly to the wooing.

Tehran, moreover, is adept at turning the public relations game against Washington. In an interview with the HPR, Soner Cagaptay, Director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that Iran is attempting to "drive a wedge" between Turkey and the U.S. with what he calls "public diplomacy": on days when U.S. officials conduct talks in Ankara, Iran bombs PKK camps and steals headlines in the Turkish newspapers. Despite U.S. intelligence sharing on rebel positions, Cagaptay says, "the Iranians have created this semblance in Turkey that when it comes to the PKK, the Americans talk the talk and Iranians walk the walk."

Repairing Ties Last October, President Bush condemned a particularly deadly cross-border ambush by the PKK that killed 17 Turkish soldiers, saying, "the attacks must stop now." A few months later, the day before the majority of Turkish forces withdrew from Iraq, Bush joined Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in calling for Turkey to get out "as soon as possible." The rhetorical juggling act illustrates the fine line that Washington must tread between protecting the sovereignty of the fledgling Iraqi state and assuring one of its most important regional allies of the right to dislodge terrorists from border positions.

There is, however, potential for improved U.S.-Turkey relations going forward. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan met with President Bush in November 2007 partly to discuss the PKK, and the United States has since augmented its sharing of actionable intelligence to assist Turkish operations. Washington, Cagaptay says, also gave Turkey the "green light" for its recent incursions into northern Iraq, improving relations considerably. The defeat of the Armenian genocide resolution in Congress, a largely symbolic bill that is nonetheless a highly sensitive issue for Turkey, also eased tensions as the Bush administration made a strong show of resistance. And although the United States and Iraq pressured Turkey to withdraw at the end of February, Colonel Onay predicts that this will not be the last of Turkish offensives: "Turkey is determined to take all the measures no matter what it costs, because this problem is a matter of existence for her."
