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Middle East Brief

Are Former Enemies Becoming Allies? Turkey's Changing Relations with Syria, Iran, and Israel Since the 2003 Iraqi War

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Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran were strained for almost two decades. This was primarily because both countries had supported the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as Kongra-Gel) since the organization launched its war against Turkey in 1984. But these relations have completely changed in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi war. Turkey has been enhancing its ties with Syria and Iran, at a time when the United States has been trying to isolate those countries. This has occurred because Turkey, Syria, and Iran are all concerned about potential Iraqi territorial disintegration in the future, which might produce a Kurdish state in the North. This, in turn, might lead to irredentist claims on the Kurdish-populated sectors of all three countries, which would threaten their territorial integrity.

Since the Iraqi war, the PKK, after renouncing a unilateral cease-fire in the summer of 2004, has resumed its terrorist attacks in Turkey; 1,007 Turkish citizens have been killed or wounded as a result of terrorist attacks.¹ In August 2005, the PKK also launched a campaign of violence in Syria and Iran.² Because of the continued presence of the PKK in the American-controlled region of northern Iraq and the mistreatment of Turkmens in Telafer and Kirkuk, Turkey has been deeply questioning the extent to which the United States can continue to be considered a trustworthy ally.³ Anti-Americanism is on the rise in Turkey. Whereas the United States has refrained from taking any measures against the PKK in northern Iraq, Syria and Iran proclaimed the PKK a terrorist organization and announced that they would take necessary measures against

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it.⁴ This created a positive image of Syria and Iran in Turkey. Thus, the Kurdish problem, which was previously the main source of Turkey's strained relations with Syria and Iran, has recently become the reason for its improved relations with the two countries in the face of the commonly perceived threat. At the same time, the United States, along with its close ally Israel, has come to be seen by many Turkish policy makers and security forces and by the Turkish public as supporting the PKK. In a survey conducted by the International Strategic Research Organization (ISRO) in March 2006, an overwhelming majority of respondents (83 percent) believed that the United States would not close the PKK camps in northern Iraq. The survey also shows that the Turkish public does not support United States policies toward Syria and Iran. Ninety-four percent of the respondents were against any military intervention in Iran, and 95 percent disapproved of any United States operation targeting Syria.⁵ This paper analyzes changes in Turkey's relations with Syria, Iran, and Israel since the 2003 Iraqi war.

Turkey and Syria

Traditionally, tensions between Turkey and Syria revolved around three issues: first, the status of the Turkish province of Hatay (Syria had irredentist claims over Hatay Province, which was annexed to Turkey in 1939); second, water rights (Syria argued that Turkey's construction of dams over the Euphrates River restricted its share of the flow of water); and third, Syria's harboring of PKK terrorists (including their leader, Abdullah Öcalan), and its training of PKK terrorists in the Bekaa Valley in order to realize its own irredentist demands. Syria's support for the PKK had brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war in 1998. Upon a warning from the Turkish military, Syria expelled Öcalan and banned the PKK.⁶

Bashar Assad's succeeding his father, Hafez Assad, as president in 2001 enabled a fresh start in bringing about a political dialogue between Turkey and Syria. Furthermore, after the Iraqi war, both countries shared the same threat perception, which was that the possible establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could generate separatist aspirations among their own Kurdish minorities.⁷ For this reason, both Turkey and Syria have supported Iraq's territorial integrity.

Since the Iraqi war, Turkey and Syria have signed a series of economic and security agreements, including one to jointly combat crime and terrorism.⁸ Syria's newfound determination to deny the PKK the use of its territory was welcomed by Turkey. In July 2003, Syria conducted military operations against PKK members in its Kurdish-populated regions along its Turkish border (Kamışli, Derik, Rakka, Afrin, and Derbesiye) and turned them over to Turkish authorities.⁹ In subsequent years Syria has maintained its military operations against the PKK.¹⁰ "Iraq's territorial integrity must be protected," Syrian Interior Minister Ghazi Kanan declared in July 2005. He added that his government shared Turkey's concerns with respect to PKK activities, and that "separatist attempts by Kurds in Syria were bound to fail."¹¹

Turkey and Syria have also improved their economic relations in the first half of the 2000s. In 2000, a Turkish-Syrian Business Council was founded. Between 2002 and 2003, Turkey's exports to Syria increased by 37 percent.¹²

In January 2004, Bashar Assad visited Turkey—the first Syrian visit at the highest level to Turkey in 57 years.¹³ Assad's visit was welcomed by the Turkish media.¹⁴ During the visit, Turkey and Syria signed two economic treaties aimed at developing trade, tourism, and investment between the two countries.¹⁵ Assad also

officially recognized Turkey's borders, thus dropping Syria's claims with respect to Hatay Province.¹⁶

Since Assad's visit to Turkey, trade between the two countries has grown considerably, exceeding \$800 million; the two countries seek to increase the trade figure to \$2 to \$3 billion in the future.¹⁷ In December 2004, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Syria and signed a free trade agreement. "Our links will develop in all fields in the future, especially in trade," Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri remarked. Prime Minister Erdogan commented that "it shows how far relations have come between the countries."¹⁸

Although the Bush administration regards Syria and Iran as members of the "Axis of Evil," owing to their support of terrorism,¹⁹ the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government's establishment of warm relations with Syria was welcomed by the Turkish security establishment and by political parties of various ideological orientations, from center-right to center-left and from nationalist to Islamist. Thus, when Robert Wexler, member of the United States House of Representatives and co-chair of the Turkey Friendship Caucus, criticized Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül's visit to Syria in 2003, Onur Öymen, the vice-chair of the main opposition party, the center-left Republican People's Party, commented that Gül's visit was normal. Öymen also observed that Turkey wanted to see banners of "Welcome to Iraq" instead of "Welcome to Kurdistan" in northern Iraq.²⁰ Turkey also declined to support the American proposal of instigating a possible change of regime in Syria in the aftermath of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, believing that any such intervention would cause havoc and result in the country's being in a situation worse than it currently finds itself in Iraq.²¹ In April 2005, notwithstanding American reservations, Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer paid a visit to Syria. Though President Sezer's visit—intended as a response to Bashar Assad's visit to Turkey a year earlier—had been planned and agreed on long before the Hariri assassination, it was interpreted, particularly by Syria, as constituting a direct challenge to the United States. A few months later, Prime Minister Erdogan paid an equally high-profile visit to Syria.²²

Turkey and Iran

In the 1980s and 1990s, Iran was both supporting PKK terrorism and trying to export its theocratic regime to secular-democratic Turkey. Thus, Iran was seen by the Turkish security establishment (mainly the military) as posing a vital threat to the existence of the Turkish state. The resurgence of PKK terrorism in Turkey along

with the rise of a Kurdish movement in Iran since the 2003 Iraqi war, however, seem to have united the two countries against the commonly perceived threat; they have a common interest in the protection of Iraq's territorial integrity.

Iran, once supportive of the PKK, has been facing security problems in its Kurdish-populated North. Iran's 67 million population includes nearly 6 million Kurds, many of whom are located in the Northeast, bordering Iraq and Turkey.²³ Pejak, a Kurdish rebel group in Iran regarded by Iranian authorities as linked to the PKK, has been attacking Iranian security forces²⁴; Iran has become increasingly cooperative against the PKK and has been initiating military operations against the Pejak.²⁵ Over the past 5 years, Turkey and Iran have also improved their economic relations by signing a 25-year contract for the sale of 10 billion cubic meters of Iranian natural gas.²⁶

In June 2005, the JDP government congratulated the newly elected conservative Iranian leader Mahmud Ahmadinejad for his electoral victory over the reformist President Mohammad Khatami, and expressed Turkey's willingness to improve bilateral relations with Iran. "Improving relations with neighboring countries is a priority for Turkey," noted Foreign Minister Gül.²⁷ That conservatives have come to power in Iran seems unlikely to strain secular Turkey's relations with Iran at this time, because the resurgence of PKK terrorism is seen as a more visible and more immediate threat than that posed by Islamic reactionism in Turkey. A former Turkish diplomat, İlder Türkmen, commented that "Iranian elections were a disappointment, given the hopes of the Iranian society for reform. But it is unlikely that Iran will take up an adventurous foreign policy stance similar to the policies of the 1980s."²⁸

In August 2005, the Iranian Foreign Ministry declared that "Iran is cooperating with neighboring Turkey against terrorism, and this cooperation will continue in the future."²⁹ In December 2005, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited Turkey seeking to strengthen bilateral relations;³⁰ in February 2006, Turkey and Iran entered into active bilateral cooperation in the fight against terrorism and signed a Memorandum of Understanding.³¹ According to the accord, Iran will fight against the PKK and Turkey will fight against the People's Mujahideen, an outlawed armed Iranian opposition group based in Iraq.³² Iranian Interior Minister Undersecretary Sehabettin Harput reassured Turkish authorities by declaring, "I can state that we're in full agreement concerning having tight and absolute cooperation against PKK terror and jointly fighting against any PKK activity in the region."³³

Turkish-Iranian cooperation against the PKK notwithstanding, Iran's nuclear program may be a potential source of tension in Turkish-Iranian relations; the Turkish military and the JDP government do not support Iran's nuclear ambitions. "Turkey regards the presence of nuclear weapons and their proliferation as a serious security threat," observed Turkish Foreign Minister Gül.³⁴ "Turkey supports Iran's use of nuclear power for peaceful means," Gül remarked. "However, the Iranian leadership must openly show its goodwill and convince the international community [that it is not pursuing a nuclear weapons program]." Both Gül and Prime Minister Erdogan also disapproved of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's controversial remarks on Israel, to the effect that the country should be wiped off the map.³⁵ In March 2006, Turkish Lt. Gen. Hilmi Akin Zorlu, head of the General Staff Planning and Principles Department, commented that "Turkey does not want any country in its region possessing nuclear weapons."³⁶

Turkey and Israel

Turkish-Israeli relations were mainly established by the Turkish military high command in the mid-1990s. Turkey and Israel, both suffering from terrorism (the PKK in the case of Turkey; Islamic fundamentalist terrorism with respect to Israel), had a basis for cooperation in the region. By allying itself with Israel, Turkey counterbalanced Syria and Iran, both of which were supporting the PKK.

Political relations between Turkey and Israel have seemingly been damaged as a result of the Iraqi war. The general view in Turkey is that Israel, as a close United States ally, has been a primary source of tension in the region, owing to the long-standing Palestinian problem, the instability in Iraq following the 2003 war, and the current war in Lebanon. Turkey's foremost goal has been to prevent the creation of an autonomous or independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Since the 2003 Iraqi war, however, it seems that Israel has no longer been sharing this Turkish interest. On the contrary, strategically Israel would greatly benefit from the creation of an autonomous or independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which would strengthen its defense capability against the rising threat of weapons of mass destruction, which might target Israel, posed by Islamic states like Iran and Pakistan.³⁷

Relations between Turkey and Israel cooled in April 2004 when Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan criticized Israel's policies toward the Palestinians and called the assassination of Hamas leaders "state terrorism" on the part of Israel.³⁸ "The Israelis are treating the Palestinians," he remarked, "in a similar way that they themselves were treated five hundred years ago."³⁹ While the JDP

government is particularly sensitive to the Palestinian problem, the secular military is concerned about the resurgence of PKK terrorism in Turkey following the Iraqi war. Thus, both the government and the military, though for different reasons, were inclined to pursue more distant relations with Israel. Neither the government nor the military showed an interest in the Israeli state's 56th anniversary reception, for example. While the JDP was represented at the event by two ministers, the military, which had attended previous receptions at a very high level, sent only a lower-rank general.⁴⁰ Israeli ambassador to Ankara Pinhas Avivi referred to the year 2004 as the year of the highest tension in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations.⁴¹

It should be noted that Turkey and Israel have maintained close trade relations, particularly in the defense/industrial area. In 2003, trade between the two countries reached \$1.15 billion, compared with only a million dollars ten years earlier;⁴² it reached \$2 billion dollars in 2004. Moreover, Turkey played a crucial positive role in hosting the first-ever public meeting between the Israeli and Pakistani foreign ministers. In so doing, Turkey contributed significantly to a broader Israeli strategic objective: namely, improving relations with non-Arab Muslim countries.

Notwithstanding these developments, there has been a decline in the frequency of reciprocal visits between Turkey and Israel. Prime Minister Erdogan declined then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's request for a visit in 2004;⁴³ instead, the JDP government sent a delegation to Israel with a message bearing Prime Minister Erdogan's good wishes.⁴⁴ Warmer relations were resumed in January 2005, when Turkish foreign minister Gül visited Israel. This was followed by Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Israel in May 2005, which was the first visit of the JDP government at the prime minister level since the party came to power in 2002.⁴⁵

Turkey's establishment of warm relations with Iran and Syria heightened Israel's concerns. In January 2006, Mordechai Amihai, Israel's consul general in Istanbul, commented that recent improvements in Turkey's relations with Iran and Syria could have a negative impact on the country's relations with Israel in the future.⁴⁶ The acceptance of a Hamas delegation headed by its leader in exile, Khaled Mashaal, in February 2006 by the JDP government and Foreign Ministry officials further strained Turkish-Israeli relations. (In January 2006, Prime Minister Erdogan had already suggested that both Hamas and Israel should recognize each other;⁴⁷ Israel rejects talks with Hamas unless it renounces violence and recognizes Israel's right to exist.) The Hamas visit to Turkey led to

harsh Israeli criticism. “How would you feel if we got together with Abdullah Öcalan?” Israeli government spokesman Raanan Gissin asked. JDP officials defended the talks with Hamas by arguing that they urged the Hamas delegation to renounce violence and recognize Israel’s right to exist. Thus, they asserted, they “defended Israel’s rights.”⁴⁸ Prime Minister Erdogan defended the meeting “as the fulfillment of a humanitarian, historic, moral responsibility on Turkey’s part” and added that Turkey “would continue to fulfill the requirements stemming from such responsibility in the future, in the name of peace.” In March 2006, Turkish foreign minister Gül reiterated that Israel should recognize Hamas as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and that Hamas should recognize Israel and end its attacks.⁴⁹ A March 2006 poll of Turks revealed that almost half of the respondents (49 percent) approved of the Hamas visit to Turkey, while 23 percent said that it was detrimental and 28 percent declined to comment.⁵⁰

Conclusion

This brief analyzed changes in Turkey’s relations with Syria, Iran, and Israel following the 2003 Iraqi war. Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran were strained for almost two decades because of those countries’ support for the PKK—and the PKK issue was a major impetus for Turkey’s alignment with Israel in the mid-1990s. Turkey then regarded the United States, which was backing the country’s struggle against the PKK, as its most trustworthy and dependable ally in the West. The Iraqi war, however, has changed all of these calculations. The war may lead to the disintegration of Iraq and the establishment of a Kurdish state in the North—a highly undesirable outcome from Turkey’s point of view. Furthermore, United States policy on the issue of PKK terrorism has changed, and there is a rift between the former close allies regarding the measures to be taken against the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq.

Israel, as a very close American ally, is now regarded as a source of tension in the region, mainly because of the long-standing Palestinian problem and the instability in Iraq following the 2003 war. While Turkey and Israel have maintained their economic relations, their close political relations have seemingly been damaged as a result of the Iraqi war. The Kurdish problem, which previously underlay Turkey’s uneasy relations with Syria and Iran, has instead given rise to warm relations against the commonly perceived threat. Syria and Iran clearly declared the PKK a terrorist organization; these countries, unlike the United States, initiated military operations against the PKK. Accordingly, since the war, Turkish-Syrian relations have improved to a great extent. And although Turkey has reservations regarding Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the two countries have enhanced their economic and political relations. It seems that Turkey will continue to improve its relations with Syria and Iran so long as the possibility exists of the establishment of a separate Kurdish state in northern Iraq and the resurgence of PKK terrorism.

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