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NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East

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*Cover photo: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (right) talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (left) during their meeting in Tehran in 2009 (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi).*

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## Summary

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In the past decade, Turkish-Iranian cooperation visibly intensified. Turkish energy needs and Iran's vast oil and natural gas resources have been an important driver of the increasing Turkish-Iranian cooperation. Iran is the second-largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, behind Russia. Iran is also an important source of crude oil.

However, the degree of cooperation between the two countries should not be exaggerated. Turkey and Iran have historically been, and continue to be, rivals rather than close partners. While they may share certain economic and security interests, their interests are at odds in many areas across the Middle East. The two states have fundamentally different political identities and ideologies.

The Arab Spring has given the political and ideological rivalry between Turkey and Iran greater impetus. The fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, in addition to uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, has undermined the political order in the Middle East. Turkey and Iran both have sought to exploit the emerging "new order" in the region to achieve their respective interests in the Middle East.

Relations have been strained by a number of issues. The most important factor contributing to the growing strains in relations has been Turkey's support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Syria is Iran's only true state ally in the Middle East. Since 1979, the secular, Alawite-dominated, Baathist Syrian regime and Iran's Shi'a theocracy have strongly supported each other. Assad's downfall would be a serious strategic blow to Iran and could result in the growth of Turkey's influence. It could also have a demonstration effect on Iran, strengthening internal opposition to the Iranian regime and deepening the current divisions within the Iranian leadership.

Iraq has also become a field of growing competition between Turkey and Iran. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq has created a power vacuum that Iran has attempted to fill. The sectarian conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni has drawn Turkey and Iran into the Iraqi conflict on opposing sides. While the Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraq is not as significant as the tensions over Syria, it could gain new strength with Assad's downfall, leading to widespread sectarian violence that could be highly destabilizing.

The Kurdish issue has also emerged as a source of tension between Ankara and Tehran. The Turkish government suspects Syria and Iran of providing support to the main Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. As the unrest in Syria has spread, the Assad regime's control over the Kurdish areas along the Turkish-Syrian border has eroded, deepening Turkish anxieties that this will strengthen calls for greater autonomy among Turkey's own Kurdish population and that Syria and, to some extent, Iran may use Turkey's vulnerabilities on the Kurdish issue in an attempt to reshape Turkey's policy toward the Syrian regime.

The Palestinian issue provides yet another area of rivalry between the two countries. Iran views its opposition to Israel as enhancing its popularity in the Arab world. But Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's assertive support for the Palestinians has stolen Iran's thunder and has been an important factor contributing to the deterioration of Ankara's relations with Israel.

Turkey and Iran are also potential rivals for influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, competition between Turkey and Iran in these regions has been muted. Iranian influence has been constrained in Central Asia and the Caucasus due to a number of factors, including Russia's dominant role as a regional power broker.

Iran's nuclear program has been a source of strain and divergence in U.S.-Turkish relations, especially as Turkey has attempted to play the role of mediator between Iran and P5+1 (the United Nations Security Council plus Germany). However, the differences between the United States and Turkey regarding Iran's nuclear program are largely over tactics, not strategic goals. Turkey's main fear is that Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms could lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. This, in turn, could increase pressure on the Turkish government to consider developing its own nuclear weapon capability.

Turkey's approach to the nuclear issue will heavily depend on U.S. policy and the credibility of the commitment of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members to Article V of the Washington Treaty on collective defense. As long as Turkey feels that NATO takes seriously Turkish security concerns, Ankara is unlikely to rethink its nuclear policy. However, if Turkish confidence in the U.S. and NATO commitment to its security weakens, Ankara could begin to explore other options for ensuring its security, including the possible acquisition of its own nuclear deterrent. Thus, maintaining the credibility of the commitment of alliance members to Article V remains critical.

Given its dependence on Iranian energy, especially natural gas, Turkey has a strong stake in preventing relations with Iran from deteriorating too badly and in not taking actions that could give Tehran an excuse to step up support for the Kurdistan Worker's Party. U.S. officials should thus not expect Ankara automatically to fall in line with all U.S. policy initiatives directed against Iran. Ankara will seek to retain a degree of flexibility regarding its policy toward Iran and may be hesitant to support some U.S. initiatives if they are seen to conflict with broader Turkish national interests vis-à-vis Iran.