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Turkish-Iranian relations in the shadow of the Arab revolutions: A vision of the present and the future

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This paper discusses the on-going regional geopolitical transformations in the wake of the Arab revolutions, and examines the impact they have had on two major regional actors: Iran and Turkey. It will look at these countries' interests, influence and the nature and future of their relations with each other. These questions will be discussed under three headings:

- The Arab revolutions from Turkish and Iranian perspectives;
- The Arab revolutions and their impact on the interests of Turkey and Iran; and
- The impact of the revolutions on the relations between the two countries.

The Arab revolutions from Turkish and Iranian perspectives

Iran and Turkey each has its own vision for the region that serves its overall strategy and is consistent with its broader foreign policy direction. In this context, it is natural that the way each of these states perceives developments in the Arab world – and the outcomes of these developments – will reflect its vision, ambitions, and hopes.

Turkey's vision is based on the idea that, even if long overdue, it is inevitable that countries in the region will orientate towards democracy. Turkey also holds that people ultimately will aspire to democracy. As such, it sees its role as that of supporting popular demands for the values that Turkey itself believes in and supports: democracy, freedom and human rights. As for the means with which to achieve this vision, Turkish policy holds that as long as there is genuine will for change, radical reform of each regime is possible. However, Turkey's preference is that state reform happens as a response to internal popular pressure, or, if that fails, through a peaceful transition of power. Turkey does not wish to be seen as a state that violates international law, on one hand, or of not fulfilling its international obligations and responsibilities on the other. It supports this approach because it fears that international interventions would leave it with no room to manoeuvre.

Iran – as it is represented by its highest authorities: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani – considers the Arab revolutions, with the exception of Syria, to be extensions of the 1979 Iranian revolution. These revolutions are thus seen as a manifestation of an Arab Islamic awakening led by the Muslim ummah, and centred on the same values that guided the Iranian revolution, namely:

- overthrowing 'tyrants' and 'agents of the west';
- enmity towards the US and Israel;
- supporting the vulnerable and the oppressed against the 'arrogant' global hegemonic powers; and
- contributing to the emergence of an Islamic Middle East.

According to its statements, Iran prefers change that is brought about by the Islamic movements that have been repressed in these states – whether through insurrection or coups. It should be noted that Articles 3 and 154 of the Iranian constitution confer on the state the duty fully to 'protect the downtrodden of the earth,' and to 'support the legitimate struggles of the oppressed against the arrogant in any place in the world.'

Impact of the Arab revolutions on the interests of Turkey and Iran

Until the outbreak of the protests in Syria, most analysts argued that the Arab revolutions would strengthen Iran's regional position. This was on the grounds that the wave of revolutions was directed exclusively against regimes allied to the United States, and that the uprisings were taking place because these regimes had failed to confront Israel and support the Palestinian struggle.

As events developed, the diagnostic inaccuracy of this assessment became apparent. The central issue was not about an external variable related to the Palestinian cause, relations with the US, or hostility to Israel; the motives driving the uprisings – without minimising or ignoring external factors – were internal, and revolved around key demands associated with freedoms and fundamental political, economic and social rights.

The accuracy of this revised analysis became apparent when the protests reached Syria. Although we cannot assert that either Turkey or Iran has benefited from these developments at the expense of the other, this should not preclude an exploration of the implications of the Arab revolutions on the interests of these two countries. Using available data, the costs and benefits, as well as potential negative implications for each in the short, medium and long terms must be understood.

Costs and benefits in the short term

The political level

The instability created by the Arab revolutions has undermined Turkey's foreign policy as well as Turkey's internal and external strategy that is based entirely on its 'zero problems' policy. This policy looks to achieve security and stability, and to eliminate conflict in Turkey's regional environment. It was easy for Turkey to apply this foreign policy vision when the region was relatively stable. With the change in the regional environment, and the instability brought about by the Arab revolutions, however, we can expect that these developments will pose a foreign policy challenge for Turkey. The issue is how Turkey will adapt to the contradiction between the idealism of its foreign policy and the realism of the current situation.

Iran, on the other hand, is better able to manage the regional situation of temporary chaos that has resulted from the Arab revolutions. This is because of its experience, the tools at its disposal, and its regional allies and proxies. These factors have enabled Iran to survive similar situations and conditions in the past. Indeed, Iran has been party to such disorder in the past, capitalising on it to incentivise regional forces into negotiations, and offering concessions. In such a climate Tehran may benefit from the political vacuum that now characterises some Arab countries, and the state of confusion that has arisen and can operate as an entry point for Iran's foreign policy. Similarly, Iran may be able to exploit this geopolitical upheaval in other areas too.

The economic level

In the short term, the Arab revolutions will undermine Turkey's economic project, which is the foundational strategy around which all its other policies revolve. Instability is, after all, the primary enemy of the economy and of investment. Turkey had built its regional project on the basis of an open economy. This revitalised and new economic relationship between Turkey and the Arab world can be seen in the growth in the volume of trade between Turkey and the Arab world: from seven billion dollars in 2002 to nearly forty billion dollars in 2008. Turkish analyses project an increase in trade volumes to 100 billion dollars within a few

years. Turkey hoped to achieve this through the exploitation of the strategic councils that Ankara had established with Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); the lifting of visa restrictions with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and other countries; and through common markets, the most important of which includes Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Given the current instability, and the potential that the situation may descend into a complete breakdown in governance, all of these achievements are now under threat.

The instability of the region has led to a rise in oil prices. Thus, the Arab revolutions have not only fed Tehran's coffers with dollars, thus fuelling economic growth, but, more importantly, they have undermined international sanctions imposed on Iran. These sanctions have recently lost their substance, and Iran has been relieved of some economic pressure, while simultaneously undermining US-led collective action – which includes action from Russia, China and regional states – aimed at pressurising on Tehran.

The security level

Instability sparked by the Arab revolutions may see a spread of violence onto Turkish territory, particularly from countries such as Syria and Iraq that share a border with Turkey. The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) may then look to exploit the situation – especially if Turkish armed forces are spread thinly. The possibility of international military intervention, as experienced in Iraq, could also have major ramifications for Turkey.

Iran, on the other hand, has traditionally defended itself across a line of defences beyond its borders. In the case of regional instability, Tehran does not face the same problem that Turkey does. In addition, the situation is likely to shift the dominant powers' attention away from the Iranian nuclear programme. The situation will also strengthen Iran's demand for an expansion of negotiations with the US to encompass the various regional issues that concern Iran. This will work to achieve recognition of Iran's influence and vital strategic interests in the region.

Regimes such as that in Libya that are facing uprisings – and have been able to hold onto power despite foreign military interventions – benefit Iran's position. Failed military intervention is therefore deemed as an ineffective option to potentially be used against Tehran.

Costs and benefits in the medium and long term

If the uprisings do not degenerate into a state of complete chaos, they are expected to lead to political systems that reflect the popular will in each country. These new regimes would thus be more representative of their people, more democratic in their governance, and able to achieve a more stable environment at the regional level. Turkish soft power cannot be underestimated. In the past few years it has influenced Arab populations with its economic openness, cultural interaction, and as a political model to be emulated. All this has carried the message that Arab peoples and their Muslim majorities can also create modern, advanced, democratic, independent and sovereign states that deal respectfully with their allies and adversaries, and that can also say 'no' to Israel.

There is no doubt that Turkey's regional experience will continue to loom large as an example for people in the Arab world in their aspirations for democracy. Turkey has offered a successful example of democracy, secularism and Islam as a political exemplar; Islamic moderation as a religious exemplar; independence and autonomy in its foreign policy decision making; and excellence as an economic and industrial exemplar. All of these

attributes are required of the new regimes that Arab people are aiming to create through the uprisings – states that are exemplars in and of themselves.

Iran, however, is expected to suffer great losses in the medium and long terms, losses that may be greater than any other since the 1979 Iranian revolution. This is especially the case if the Syrian regime is toppled, a possibility that would lead to a marked decline in Iran's regional influence, beginning in Palestine (something that has already begun), and passing through Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf, and ending in Iran itself. Indeed, many sectors of the Iranian opposition are monitoring the fate of the Syrian regime as an indicator of the fate of the Tehran regime. Even if the Iranian regime survives, it is likely to become isolated, and to fail to attract the people of the region towards its theocratic model, especially after its 2009 post-election protests. This, of course, is not to say that Iran as a religious and political exemplar does not have supporters in the Arab world.

The impact of the revolutions on the relations between Iran and Turkey

Thus far, Turkey and Iran have managed to keep their differences in check. In addition to their differing spheres of geopolitical interests, the balance in their capabilities helps prevent an eruption between them.

With the current regional changes, the Arab revolutions are likely to disrupt this balance in a way that will favour one of the countries, and bring their conflicting interests, visions and projects to the fore. This could happen, for example, if one vision gains precedence in the region, where its model of governance takes precedence at the expense of the other, or if Iran exploits the current situation to develop a nuclear arsenal. In such a case, Turkey will become more sensitive and vulnerable, potentially resulting in the development of a strained relationship between the two countries. The areas of tension between the two countries revolve around two regional areas and central issues.

The Arabian Gulf area

After Iraq, the Arabian Gulf is the most important geopolitical sphere for Iran. Turkey was formally introduced into this area by the GCC in 2008 through a treaty that encompassed strategic, political, and economic and security issues. The treaty was the first of its kind between the GCC and any other state. Although Turkish leaders have no problems or sensitivities regarding sectarian Sunni-Shiite relations, a factor that has enabled them to communicate with all sides, Iran is sensitive that the treaty was motivated by the GCC's desire to create a strategic balance to counter Iran. This is a matter that greatly aggravates Tehran.

During the Bahrain crisis, Turkey tried to play a mediating role to contain the crisis. Its official position was comprised of three key elements:

- to maintain the security and stability of the Gulf;
- to respect the sovereignty and integrity of Bahrain; and
- to impel Bahrain to move forward on political reform.

The contrast between Turkey and Iran's positions emerged vis-à-vis the Peninsula Shield Forces that were deployed to Bahrain. Iran saw the deployment as a military invasion, while Turkey was content to issue a warning about an escalation of tensions in the region.

While Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanded that Bahraini authorities show restraint so as to avoid a repetition of Karbala – referring to the battle (iconic for Shiites) between supporters of the Prophet’s grandson, Husain, and the forces of Yazid of the Umayyad caliphate, Turkey also rejected any external interference that might affect Bahrain and the GCC. This was a clear reference to Iranian interference. Another apparent message to Tehran came two days after Erdogan’s remark when Turkish authorities forced an Iranian civilian plane bound for Syria to land for inspection, announcing that Turkey had confiscated weapons, ammunition and equipment found on board. Ankara also tried to contain the eruption of a Sunni-Shiite crisis in the region by bypassing the Iranians, and communicating directly with the Iraqi Shiite leader Ali Sistani, a matter that annoyed Iran.

The Levant area

This issue relates to Lebanon and Palestine. Through its relations with Syria over the past few years, Turkey has been able to enter Lebanon. Ankara tried to reduce Iranian influence in Lebanon by weaving balanced relations with various Lebanese parties, but it seems clear that Turkey’s entry into the Lebanese sphere was not welcomed by Tehran – especially after Erdogan’s famous visit that came shortly after Ahmadinejad’s controversial one. The decline of Iran’s willingness to approve of a Turkish political role in Lebanon was especially apparent when Hizbullah categorically refused the offer of joint Turkish-Qatari mediation after the fall of the Saad Hariri government.

Unlike the challenges of making inroads into the Lebanese arena, there has been a clear rise in Turkey’s influence in the Palestinian arena. Turkey’s role came to the fore particularly after the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip. This was followed by Erdogan’s famous walkout at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos during a panel discussion with Shimon Peres, and then the Israeli attack on the Turkish ship, Mavi Marmara, which was part of the ‘freedom flotilla’. It is also apparent that Palestinian factions have moved closer to Turkey’s vision and position on such things as inter-Palestinian reconciliation, how to deal with Israel, and how to reclaim the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. This has been aided by the new Egyptian leadership’s approach to these issues, developments in Syria, and Hamas distancing itself from the approach used by Iran’s allies in the region during this period. Due to Iran’s and Turkey’s radically different visions on the Palestinian issue, it is expected that this issue will cast its own shadow over relations between these two countries in the next period.

The Syrian challenge

The situation in Syria poses a serious and important challenge to both Turkey and Iran, not only because Syria is an important geopolitical node connecting the two states to their regional interests, nor only because it is a point of intersection between the Turkish and Iranian projects, but also because the outcome of the events in Syria will have a dramatic impact on both countries – most likely with one benefiting at the expense of the other.

Turkey believes that the Syrian people’s demands for greater freedoms, democracy, and the lifting of all restrictions on political and human rights are legitimate, and that the friendship between the neighbouring states should not be at the expense of the Syrian people’s aspirations for democracy. Turkey also wants the change to come quickly and from within in order to avoid the sort of external interference that Ankara would be unable to counter, an intervention that becomes more likely the longer Syria refuses to heed its people’s demands for reforms.

Iran, on the other hand, believes that Syria is the victim of a western-backed conspiracy. Iran asserts that events in Syria are a form of sedition akin to what Iran experienced in 2009, when demonstrators from the Green Movement allegedly acted as agents for foreign powers with

the aim of overthrowing the government. Iran argues that Syria, like itself, should be supported for its attempts to resist Israeli and American agendas in the region. Tehran is confident that Damascus will overcome the uprising and end the strife.

Regardless of the outcome, the Syrian crisis will inevitably have negative implications for either Turkey or Iran.

- If the Syrian regime survives, Turkey will face immense problems, primarily in terms of its relations with Syria, and, secondly, in terms of Turkey's diminished capacity of developing strategic economic, political and regional initiatives that would rely exclusively on the presence of a friendly regime in Damascus.
- If the Syrian regime falls, with it will fall the most important strategic and stable Middle Eastern alliance that Iran has had in the past three decades. Extending from Palestine to Iraq and Iran itself, this would be a geopolitical earthquake that would end Iran's influence in some areas, and shrink it to a minimum in others.

Considering both the first and the second scenarios, Turkish-Iranian relations could witness severe tensions on the basis of the discrepancy in their positions. This may escalate into clashes in the coming period, especially since Iran and Syria have signed a mutual defence treaty. It is unlikely that Iran would allow its strategic ally so easily to be overthrown, even if that were at the expense of a clash with Ankara. It should be noted that there has been a cooling of relations between Ankara and Tehran, as evidenced by the coverage of Turkey's position towards Syria in some Iranian media controlled by the supreme leader and the president (particularly the Fars News Agency and Press TV), and in other Iranian-allied Arabic media (especially Hizbullah's al-Manar television in Lebanon). There have been accusations of Ankara's 'hypocrisy, and implementation of the policies of America and the Zionist entity to destabilise the situation in Syria,' and 'plans for sedition and a transfer of weapons, money and support to armed gangs and terrorists against the Assad regime in preparation for a military invasion dictated by their ambitions.'

Al-Manar's website also reported Iranian military threats towards Turkey, stating that a special envoy of President Ahmadinejad carried a message to Prime Minister Erdogan that 'the use of any Turkish military bases for an attack on Syria will expose it to an Iranian missile attack'.

In response, Arshad Hormozlo, senior adviser to the Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, commented that Turkey was not seeking a confrontation with anyone and had no hidden agenda. He explained that Turkey did not seek entry into any axes, nor did it seek to compete with anyone's role in the region. However, he added that Turkey would naturally not be pleased with anyone disrupting the regional balance by treating the region like a chessboard.

The Egyptian opportunity

In the current phase of reforms, both Turkey and Iran are involved in a race against time to influence changes taking place in their favour. Each is using the tools and capabilities that are in line with its vision of what is appropriate for the post-revolution stage. Egypt is a good case in point.

Turkey hopes that its model will prevail in states with new regimes. Its model is based on democracy, political rationality, Islamic moderation, political pluralism, the rule of law, and an autonomous foreign policy that does not conflict with relations with various international powers – whether western or others – in implementing its relations. Turkish discourse in this

area is based on three mechanisms: moderate discourse; an explanation of the Turkish experience and what is needed for its implementation; and reliance on its stock of soft power.

Iran hopes that an Islamic model inspired by the Iranian experience will prevail, or that there will at least be space for its influence. It also hopes that the new states will base their foreign policies on hostility towards the US, and, in accordance with the Iranian vision, escalate their military hostility towards Israel. This would be the standard by which friendship between Tehran and the new regimes will be measured. Iranian discourse in this area is based on three mechanisms:

- the ideological position and domestic experience;
- the achievements of its regional allies, such as Hizbullah, in challenging the US and Israel; and
- the Islamic orientation of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

While the Syrian crisis challenge the strength of the Turkey-Iran relationship, Egypt poses an opportunity for each of them to achieve its regional vision. The Turkish-Iranian race to influence the new Egyptian regime was evident from the moment Mubarak was overthrown. Turkish President Abdullah Gul visited Egypt soon thereafter to offer Ankara's assistance, and share the Turkish experience in meetings with government officials, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egyptian youth.

Iran, on the other hand, exhibited energised attempts to restore relations with Egypt. Considering the current regional equation, relations with Egypt are considered particularly important. Iran also hosted an Egyptian delegation that included clerics, academics, businessmen and journalists, and put on display the Iranian experience of resisting global hegemonic dominance, its support of the oppressed, as well as the ways in which the Iranian revolution was a source of inspiration for the Egyptian people.

In this Turkish-Iranian race over Egypt, Turkey seems to be somewhat ahead – at least as it appears based on the contrast between the warm reception of Tahrir Square protesters to Erdogan's speech, which included advice to the Egyptian leadership, as compared to the violent reaction to the famous speech by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, or that of Hizbullah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. There are also indications of Turkish influence on Egyptian political discourse in the moderate Islamist currents that seek a civil as opposed to theocratic state (such as that of the Reform and Renaissance party, the Freedom and Justice party, and the New Centrist Party).

This does not mean that Iran is incapable of influencing political variables in Egypt. As with Turkey, Iran and its model have local adherents and supporters in Egypt. Indeed, Iranian entry into the Egyptian political arena became much easier after the fall of the Mubarak regime, whether ideologically through 'enmity towards Israel and America', or financially. If Turkey placed its bets on a mature, democratic experience for Egyptians, Iran bet on some Islamic-oriented sectors as well as certain candidates for the Egyptian presidency to restore the momentum of Iranian-Egyptian relations through which Iran seeks to develop a new political equation for the region.

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