

## Turkey and Iran Rivalry on Syria

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**Abstract :** *This article explores the Turkish-Iranian rivalry and the conflicting interests of the two countries in the region with respect to the impact of the Arab Spring on the Syrian regime. It first looks into the background of the rivalry between Turkey and Iran. It then examines the reasons of the Turkish-Iranian rivalry, particularly over Syria. It posits that the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, which had taken place as a result of the change in Turkish foreign policy in the last decade, faced a rupture with the breaking of the Arab Spring. It then argues that the rupture in Turkish-Syrian relations increased the Iranian influence on the Syrian regime owing to the long Iranian-Syrian alliance and their converging interests in the region. Finally, the article argues that while Turkey is in favor of a change of regime in Syria towards democratization of the country, Iran is in favor of the Syrian status-quo*

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## Introduction

The scenario unfolding in Syria does loom large. It is neither merely an issue of anti-regime protests nor the fact that Damascus is the seat of authoritarianism. Damascus grabs a special attention to the unique position it seizes in equation of balance of power. Accordingly, it functions as an epicenter for clout competition among several actors. Turkey and Iran have appeared as two prominent rivals in Syria.

Turkey does not feel easy of Syria's close connections with Iran. The ambitious Turks have for years strove to yank the Syrian government out of Iran's orbit of influence. However, the spark of protests in Syria jeopardized Turkish project of slow-pace engagement with Syrians. A sudden demise of the Syrian government has critical ramifications on Turkey. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the situation in Syria an internal Turkish issue.<sup>1</sup> That helps clarify Turkish early protection and constant demands for reforms in Syria. The implementation of reforms by the Syrian regime would ultimately culminate in a peaceful transition and take Damascus away from Tehran. Syria has not carried out Turkish demands. It has gradually trekked closer to Iran in putting down the protests. Turkey consequently switches into disengagement and isolation policy towards Syria; maintains supporting the Syrian opposition; provides shelter to Syrian Free Army; buttresses the anti-Syrian regime chorus. The Turkish attitude seemed to conflict with that of Iranian's over Syria.

Iran, on the other hand, provides the genuine shield to Syrian regime with which it shares strategic interests. Damascus gives crucial hand to cultivate Tehran's priorities. The removal of the current regime in Syria, suddenly or gradually, would cause a heavy blow to Iran's interests. For this reason, Iran works to keep Mr. Bashar al-Assad in power. Tehran offers ongoing assistance to the regime in Syria; strongly challenges and mobilizes its contours of influence against the forces that threaten the collapse of al-Assad. That enforces it to enter into a competition with Turkey.

## The Background of the Turkish-Iranian Rivalry

Turkey and Iran are conventional pursuers of regional influence. Any changes in their power would reflect in the balance of power in the region. Although they share a 312-mile border, they retain suspicious towards each other. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Turkey's rapprochement with the West has become a source of concern to Iran. The Iranian agitation for regional influence makes Ankara perceive Tehran as a threat to regional order in which Turkey enjoys influence. The sore points in relations, including Turkish accusations that Iran supports the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have heightened skepticism between them.<sup>2</sup>

In the new millennium, Turkish-Iranian course has improved. Thanks go to the policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara, Turkey and Iran

has better cooperated on various planes. Despite that closeness, the mutual intentions of the skeptics in Ankara and Tehran are yet to be removed. The failure of the United States to prevent Iran from extending and increasing its influence over the region during the 2003 invasion of Iraq created a headache for Turkey. Iran did succeed to establish well-natured networks in Iraq. It has effectively worked to unite the Iraqi Shiite in order to translate the demographic weight into political power in Baghdad; thereby enhancing Iranian manipulation. On the verge of the US troop's withdrawal, Iran will seek to solidify its influence on Iraq, and Turkey will intensify efforts to contain that influence. In fact, Turkey hopes its late engagement with Iraqi Kurds and Sunni segments bring good outcomes in containing Iranian influence and developing the Turkish one over the decision making process in Baghdad. The relations between Turkey and Iran remain uneven. A conflict on a wide spectrum of interests takes place. In addition to Iraq, Iran consolidates orbit of influence in several Middle East countries. Turkey, on the other hand, strives to extend its influence into these areas. In other words, the ambitions of Iran and Turkey are antithetical in the region. The regime in Ankara has been in a long-term competition with the regime in Tehran.<sup>3</sup>

### **Syria's Significance to Iran and Turkey**

Syria is the closest and most strategic regional ally to Iran. Together, they have enjoyed decades of hospitality and influence on the politics of the Middle East. However, they are ideologically asymmetric: the regime in Syria is secular, while it is theocratic in Iran; Syria is predominantly Sunni, while Iran is predominantly Shiite. Nevertheless, they share a range of interests, needs, as well as traits. Both regimes are authoritarian, belong to Shiites and definitely independent. They have huge economic ties, mutual defense pacts, and common foreign policy priorities. Besides constituting resistance to Israel, Iran and Syria cooperate to hinder the policies of their enemies. Syria plays a key political and logistical part in Iran's regional agenda. A good deal of Iran's interests lie on the borders of Syria. Syria, which enjoys influence over Hezbollah and a range of radical Palestinian groups, borders Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel. To Iran, Syria geographically serves a conduit to reach these groups and countries. Syria has helped and channeled Iranian assistance to these groups. Precisely, Syria affects Iran's regional agenda positively and negatively.<sup>4</sup>

The fall of al-Assad regime would drop a bomb over Tehran. In such an event, the Shiite minority would not have the chance to re-seize power in post-al-Assad Syria. However, there are indications that Iran tries to establish contacts with the Syrian opposition. Yet, a new government in Syria would not play al-Assad functions to Iran. The regime in Tehran would be put into further isolation; its opportunity for survival would reduce; its regional agenda would harshly be affected especially, if a pro-Western, Turkish-friendly, regime seizes power in Syria.

Unlike Iran, Turkey and Syria have come closer to war in the late 1990s. The Syrian tutelage for the PKK caused Turkey to issue an ultimatum. Since Syria expelled the PKK leader and reportedly gave up supporting the PKK, the relations with Turkey have developed. The AKP has firmly improved the relations with Syrian regime. The two countries abolished visas; held joint military exercises; paid high-level reciprocal visits, and had strategic meetings at the cabinet level, among others which positioned Turkey as a prominent interlocutor on Syrian affairs and a leading trade partner. Syria is significant to Turkish prosperity. It has played a key role in developing Turkish economy since it is not only a budding market for Turkish goods, but also a transit country for Turkish goods to reach other regional markets. In addition, the Syrian cooperation on security concerns is important to Turkey. Turkey desperately needs Syrian cooperation over the Kurdish case. It could arrest the PKK leader only when Syria refrained from supporting the organization. Also, the Syrian government went into cooperation with Turkey against the Iraqi Kurds.

Yet, the peaceful transformation into post-al-Assad era would not necessarily jeopardize Turkish security concerns. A new regime in Syria perhaps better collaborates with Turkey. The political circle in Ankara is now particularly worried about the current situation in Syria. The mosaic demographic structure in Syria poses a serious likelihood of an inter-sectarian conflict. In such an event, Turkey is subject to a heavy refugee onslaught. That onslaught, furthermore, would contain the PKK members and sympathizers settling in Kurdish cities along the Turkish border which would have unintended consequences over the Kurdish minority there. The Syrian branch of the PKK is well-organized and hard-line that opts for violence. This faction would ignite Kurdish nationalistic movement and direct it into a violent stance inside Turkey. Secondly, Turks have ethnic ties with Syrians. The sufferings of Syrians would stimulate an anti-al-Assad public opinion in Turkey. The effects of that move might be the destabilization of Turkey's relations with Syria taking into consideration the fact that Turkish public opinion might call for cutting off the relations with Syria. Thirdly, Turkey comprises the Alawite sect. The Turkish society is predominantly Sunni. The tension between the Alawite regime and the Sunni population in Syria is as well a source of concern in Ankara.<sup>5</sup>

Had a strong fear of refugee flow from Syria into Turkey not permeated the security mind of the Turkish policy makers, the Turkish National Security Council (MGK) would not consider the matter. Erdoğan's description of the Syrian situation as a domestic matter does interpret the need for a nearly five-hour-long meeting of that top decision-making body. On August 18<sup>th</sup>, the Council discussed the contingency of establishing a "buffer zone" along the Syrian border, and the Turkish Foreign Minister expressed readiness for "any scenario," including the establishment of a "buffer zone", should a large number of the Syrians flee the crackdown of the regime.<sup>6</sup> A quick collapse of the Syrian regime, the spread of instability in Syria or losing the Syrian cooperation would weigh heavy on Ankara.

## The Game of Rivalry over Syria

Mr. Erdoğan offered “[t]he best hope of luring Syria out of Tehran’s orbit”.<sup>7</sup> These are the words of a leaked 2009 diplomatic cable reflecting the belief of the Obama administration. The US President Barack Obama scrambled to reckon Erdoğan’s personal relationship with the Syrian President Mr. Bashar al-Assad as a chance to engage the Syrian regime. Should Erdoğan succeed, he would contribute to yank Syria out of Iran’s satellite. That event would endanger the Iranian influence in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup>

The AKP government has closely worked with the Syrian government. Rather aggressively, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu says he has made over 60 visits to Syria, aimed at convincing the Syrian regime to shift its behaviors; pulling it away from Iranian influence and convince it to give up support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance groups.<sup>9</sup> To that end, the Turkish efforts made strides. Since the engagement provided Syria with a crucial regional ally, decreasing the isolation Damascus suffers, the Syrian regime presented some flexibility to Turkish attempts. The Syrian reformist wing, on the other hand, strengthened as well. Also, the relations between Damascus and the West improved. In a step, Turkey orchestrated peace deal between the Syrian and Israeli governments. Though it is not an easy task to fulfill, the Turkish move to achieve progress in the Arab-Israel peace process was of critical importance. If not scuppered by Israel, the peace deal would contribute to re-structure the Syrian politics. The Syrian cooperation with Iran would be weaned consequently.

The anti-regime protests, however, have called for a quicker and radical transformation in Syria. The speed Turkey has been engaging with the Syrian regime should also be noted. Though, Ankara has gradually achieved that, it also wished for a balance between the protesters and the Syrian regime. The Turkish government demanded the Syrian government to undertake reforms while it maintained shielding the regime and hoped for a peaceful transformation. It has gradually increased the pressure on the regime to respond to the demands of the protesters. Syria, however, has merely voiced for some minor reforms.

The Syrian regime kept putting down the protests. As Damascus was getting closer to Tehran, it paid a deaf ear to Turkish demands. Ankara eventually reached at the end of its tether. Turkish top politicians delivered strong messages to their counterparts in Damascus in apparent attempts to increase the pressure on Syria to implement the reforms. The Syrian attitude, strongly affected by Iran, witnessed no change. Damascus seemingly preferred Tehran over Ankara. If Syria was pro-Western in the early years of the new millennium, then Iran could more likely be the single next target in the Bush administration’s “War on Terror”. The pace at which the US achieved victory in Iraq in 2003 did initially heighten the Iranian and Syrian fears that either one would be the next targets of the “War on Terror.” The

mutual fear contributed to markedly increase the cooperation between them. They cooperated on Iraq to ensure having a friendly regime in Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> And now, the regime in Damascus is in jeopardy. How would Iran act?

Since the first spark of the demonstration, Tehran seemed to have decided that it must employ its best available instruments to preserve Mr. Bashar al-Assad in power. According to Western intelligence, the Iranian assistance to Syria has included material, technical, and political realms. It has provided military hardware to the Syrian security forces. The intelligence services have, on several occasions, accused Iran of funneling support to Syria in order to contain the protests. They indicate “credible information” that shows that Iran assisted and trained the Syrian security forces to pull down the protests.<sup>11</sup> An official of the Obama administration credited that Iran transferred know-how to block and monitor the communication among the dissidents. “We believe that Iran is materially assisting the Syrian government in its efforts to suppress their own people,” the official explained.<sup>12</sup>

The attitudes of Turkey and Iran over Syria plainly contradict enough. The Turkish side tried to stop the Iranian arms shipments into Syria. Besides, Iran is under the sanctions of the UN Security Council due to its controversial nuclear program. To that end, Turkey caused serious lapses in Iranian military cargos into Syria. In August, Turkish Foreign Minister confirmed that Turkey had on April seized a truck full of Iranian weapons that was destined for Syria. On March, Iranian cargo plane bound for the Syrian city of Aleppo suffered setback at Turkey’s Diyarbakır airport. Turkish officials found that equipment listed as “auto spare parts” on the plane’s documents were weapons, including assault rifles, machine and guns mortars.<sup>13</sup> These actions reflect the increasing underlying tension between Iran and Turkey over Syria. They explain the fact that Turkey cannot remain a bystander to Iranian pro-Assad efforts, including arms shipment to Syria. They also imply that the Turkish-Iranian alliance would not be effective vis-à-vis Syria due to the conflict of interests. On the contrary, the mutual attitudes are on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Importantly, Turkey conveyed that Iran must figure out other mediums in case it still maintains its policy over the Syrian situation.

Iran did not act surprisingly. “The direct route is being set up to make it easier to pass advanced Iranian weapons and equipment to Syria,” disclosed a senior Western security official.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the truth, a recent report read that Iran already reached out and implemented the plan to arrange passing the weapon into Syria directly. Iran agreed to fund a \$23 million military base at Lattakia airport in Syria. Officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards will be stationed at Lattakia on permanent base to coordinate the shipment with the Syrian intelligence service as well.<sup>15</sup> Once completed, perhaps within one year, the project will strategically assist Iran to conduct arms shipments. Turkey will be unable to seize the Iranian clandestine arms shipment to Syria effectively. Significantly, the presence of the Iranian officials on the ground will enhance the Iranian upper hand in Syria, particularly if the future of Mr. al-Assad remained vague. When Iran buttresses the relations with the Syrian regime, it does not mean Iran’s unwillingness to engage with the Syrian opposition as

well. The establishment of contacts with the Syrian opposition, however, is a matter of Iran's capabilities and opposition's willingness or even obligation to achieve that.

Turkey already involved with the Syrian opposition groups while it continued dealing with the regime for some time. Turkey's engagement with the opposition dates back decades. When the Syrian regime massacred the members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, many of the surviving members crossed and settled in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> The success story of the AKP attracted their attention. The Turkish model of reconciling faith with democracy seemed to have impacted the ideological essence of the Brotherhood. In a move, the Brotherhood voiced liberal views of politics including support for women's rights. To them, the AKP is a unique model. They "believe that the state in Islam is a civil state, not a state ruled by any religious leaders or clerics," said Ali al-Bayanoino, the head of the group from 1996 to 2010.<sup>17</sup> "The AKP is neutral in the area of religion—neither does it impose religion upon Turkish citizens nor does it seek to fight religion...and for this reason," he said "we find [it] to be an excellent model," he continued.<sup>18</sup>

Crucial remarks! But are they real? The intentions of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood cannot be completely obvious. It is opaque whether Brotherhood's pro-AKP stance aims at gaining Ankara's support for its case or reflects the truth. Time will tell about that. Ankara, however, cannot take a naïve move towards sustaining the group. Taking into account the common interests with Ankara, including the joint stance vis-à-vis Tehran, the Brotherhood epitomizes a potential congenial ally to the AKP in the future.

But the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood cannot by itself leave great effects on the situation in Syria. The Syrian opposition includes a dozen of desperately divided groups. In case Turkey cannot ensure its upper hand on them or on the majority of them, its part to influence the developments would be limited in a democratic Syria. Accordingly, Turkey attempted to bring them under a common umbrella. Turkish cities have been a platform for the Syrian opposition groups to operate publicly. In a remarkable landmark, more than 300 opposition figures met in Antalya in late May to participate in the Conference for Change in Syria. The occasion, attended by the Brotherhood as well, aimed at constituting a group to stand for the dissidents internationally and domestically. It would be a significant step to internationally lobby and assist to achieve the demands of the anti-government protestors. The concluding statement is another attention-grabbing point. It called for the implementation of transformation in the country; rejected foreign military intervention; and affirmed the mosaic structure of the society.<sup>19</sup>

Turkey did not embrace the conference officially; logically a rational actor must behave so. This does not prevent one to conclude that the final statement of the conference is a mirror image of Turkish attitude on Syria as well. This thinking, furthermore, cues the influence Turkey has practiced on the Syrian scenario or the influence Turkey has essayed to practice for ensuring its interests in advance. Otherwise, there is little to reason behind Davutoğlu's remarks that Turkey will

continue to maintain contact with various Syrian segments or the disclosure that Turkey decided to choose the opposition to the Syrian regime.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, should Turkey subject itself to dangerous remarks that might prepare the ground for concrete actions by Syria? Prior to the Antalya event, Syria already vocalized discomfort towards the conference held for the Brotherhood in İstanbul. The Syrian ambassador to Turkey signals a tacit warning to Turkey when he made a comparison between the Brotherhood and the PKK, “for us, the Muslim Brotherhood is like the PKK for Turkey,” he said.<sup>21</sup> The ambassador seemed to tell Ankara that its interference in the Syrian domestic situation would receive a Syrian or even Iranian interference in Turkish domestic politics. The declaration is indeed a reminder to Turkey that Syria would support the PKK guerillas just as Turkey supports the Brotherhood.

The underlying tension between Iran and Turkey has gradually become public. Tehran has staged an anti-Turkish campaign. It has systematically and deliberately worked to disrupt Syria’s faith in Turkey. The Iranian and Hezbollah affiliated media outlets denounced Turkey’s policy over Syria harshly. They claimed that Turkey prefers the United States over Syria; Ankara engaged into an unholy alliance with Doha against Damascus; Ankara assists and provides the opposition groups with arms and intelligence in their struggle against the government. An outlet belongs to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards threatened that unless Turkey amends its current position on Syria, “the strategic logic will lead Iran to select Syria”.<sup>22</sup>

As the competition has become fierce, Turkish Foreign Minister paid a visit to Iran in June. The visit came amid the unwilling outcome Turkey had so far achieved in pushing the Syrian regime to carry out reforms. Turkish inability to influence Syria has critically been due to Iran’s support of Syria. Convincing Iran to shift or even amend its attitude towards Syria would produce great positive effects to Turkey that claimed that it could practice influence over the Syrian regime. Davutoğlu’s visit to Iran accordingly aimed at inducing Tehran to refrain supporting Damascus. He was in Turkey after the visit to let Turkish policy makers know that his demands were simply rebuffed by Iran.<sup>23</sup>

Although Turkey could not bring Iran into alliance over Syria, it constantly pursued forging a joint stance in order to avoid taking unilateral attitude against Syria. Indeed, a core dimension of Turkish policy towards Syria has been the formation of international and regional choruses against al-Assad’s government. Turkey and the Western countries, particularly the United States, have closely coordinated over the Syrian issue. In addition, it also had closely engaged with the Arab League, including the Gulf countries. Turkish President Mr. Abdullah Gül visited Saudi Arabia to attend a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Oxford Center of Islamic Studies reportedly. He was also supposed to hold meetings with King Abdullah. Importantly, the visit coincided with the release of a statement by the White House concerning Mr. Obama’s talks with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UK on the Syrian drama. This implies the fact that the visit to Jeddah came after Obama had reached out to the leaders of the UK and Saudi Arabia to build consensus for an end to the violent crackdown by the Syrian government.<sup>24</sup>



On the other hand, Iran has demonstrated its real muscles. It obviously indicated that the region will fall into chaos in case its demands over Syria are not met; that is, the removal of al-Assad will have damaging repercussions. The Iranian regional contours of influence, not to mention the international allies such as the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), have presented support to the Syrian regime. Indications have been made in several countries in which Iran enjoys visible influence that the interests of, particularly the West but also the Middle East states, would be endangered when Iran's position over Syria is neglected. Iran either enforced or stimulated the Shiite to offer assistance to the Syrian regime, and to express pro-Syrian policy in attempts to show that they are able to destabilize the region.<sup>25</sup>

The irony was in Iraq. Thousands of American troops were in Iraq to hear Prime Minister Mr. Nouri al-Malki break the silence Iraq has maintained since the Arab Spring started. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, he received the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Walid al-Muallem to emphasize that "Iraq is insistent on the stability of Syria."<sup>26</sup> "The stability of the region as a whole is linked to the stability of Syria," he said when he met a Syrian delegation of businessmen later.<sup>27</sup> The Iraqi government, reportedly coming under pressure from Iran, is claimed to have provided \$ 6-10 million to the Syrian governments to help it manage the situation in the country. After many countries called on President Bashar al-Assad to step down, Mr. al-Malki went further to indicate the "great and dangerous challenges" ahead.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, he vocalized Iranian position to attack Israel: "Semitism and Israel are the first and biggest beneficiaries of this process [the Arab Spring]."<sup>29</sup> Then, Mr. Muqtada al-Sadar, a Shiite with explicit and close ties to Iran, condemned "the Obamian interference in Syrian affairs."<sup>30</sup> The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions are not akin to the Syrian, according to him. Though the population might have similar traits, he further explained, the difference between these revolutions lies in the difference of the regimes. "Brother Bashar al-Assad," he describes, "opposes and resists the American colonial presence in the Middle East."<sup>31</sup> Besides, Iraq voted against the decision of the Arab League to impose a package of sanctions on the Syrian regime after several failed attempts made by Arabs to solve the crisis in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

Anti-Semitism or anti-Americanism are not only present in Iraq. Hamas has a history full of actions against these ideologies that stimulates Tehran to support the organization. However, the Syrian situation shook the roots of that support and put Hamas in a difficult position. Being aware of fulfilling a balance, the political circle of the organization seemed to have decided to maintain a semi-neutral attitude towards the Syrian revolution. It has been carefully acting not to lose its supporters in Syria as well as in Palestine. This policy, furthermore, enforced Hamas to remain silent when the Syrian forces extended crack down to the Palestinian refugee camps in Lattakia. Whether being embarrassed to stay paralyzed or not, Tehran wanted Hamas to arrange pro-Assad protests in these camps, if not in Gaza. Declining Iran's desire for any reason, Iran has reportedly decreased or totally stopped funding Hamas for a while that has for some few months faced liquidity issues and not been able to cover the salaries of around 40 thousand security and public sector employees.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, when Iran showed softness in its position towards the Syrian regime, the Hezbollah leader scrambled to follow. In a likely coordinated move, the Iranian President, Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his close ambassador to Syria, Mr. Ahmed Mussawi articulated the need for reforms in Syria. Mr. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, urged “the Syrian friends,” to help calm down the situation in Syria, and pave the ground for “dialogue and peaceful solution”.<sup>34</sup> Unless that followed, he simultaneously warned, other means to settle down the issue pose danger on Syria, Palestine and the whole region. “Any negative development will reach the whole region, and any positive development will be in the interest of the whole region. We must stand by Syria so that it does not give up, keep its national position, and can implement reforms.”<sup>35</sup>

Neither Turkey could compel Syria to implement its demands nor could Iran stop the anti-regime protests so far. Turkish efforts to stop Tehran from supporting the Syrian government have not been effective. The same has taken place with the Iranian attempts to refrain Turkey from handing off Syria. The matter continues to exist so as the competition between Tehran and Ankara does which reached a climax when Tehran touched upon a very hot-bottom case concerning Turkey’s internal affairs. In tandem with the increasing international and regional pressure put on Damascus, a great deal of which owed to Turkey, Iran resorted to remind Turkey of the Kurdish issue, perhaps an issue that Turkey hates the most to remember. The move came when the Kurdish issue, a time bomb that could go off any time, was witnessing progress. Hopes for a peaceful solution to Turkey’s Kurdish case were flying in Turkish sky, while Ankara had for some time been negotiating with the PKK imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>36</sup>

The Kurdish issue is a matter of great concern between Iran and Turkey. The two countries, particularly in the new millennium, have cooperated strategically on that issue. In addition to the fact that they have together consolidated opposition to the aspirations of Kurdistan Regional Government fearing it would leave domino effects on the Kurds, Tehran and Ankara pledged to “work together” against the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of the PKK struggling for Iranian Kurds’ rights, and the PKK as well.<sup>37</sup>

The game apparently began in mid-July when Iranian Revolutionary Guards launched offensive against the PJAK based in Qandil Mountain, Turkey-Iraq-Iran tri-point. Resisted by the PJAK militias, clashes were resulted in large number of casualties and from both sides. At its apogee, the Iranian state television announced the capture of Murat Karayılan, number two of the PKK, in an operation against a group of PJAK militants. “This information is correct...Our intelligence forces have done something great by capturing the number two of the PKK,” Allaaddin Bourujerdi, the Iranian chairman of the Committee for Foreign Policy and National Security of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, confirmed.<sup>38</sup> That news created confusion in Turkey for two days. Turkish officials contacted their Iranian counterparts. Iran claimed that the news was misunderstood: “I did not say Karayılan had been captured,” Boroujerdi said, “I said it would be better had he been captured.”<sup>39</sup>

A rational actor would not easily play such an immature game unless there are critical motivations lying behind. Taking into account the time frame and the fragility of the issue, Tehran's growing fury over the Syrian situation elucidates the action. More specifically, Tehran took a firm position towards the Turkish engagement in Syria. In other words, the rivalry over Syria propelled Tehran to warn Ankara that unless it took its hands off from Damascus, "it will have both the Turkish people turning away from it domestically and the neighboring countries of Syria, Iraq and Iran."<sup>40</sup>

A Turkish columnist interprets Iran's "evil" message to Turkey as follows: "To Turkey, you have a dominant role in the uprisings in Syria, which is an indispensable ally to us in the region. If you try to put pressure on Syria or start an operation against the Syrian regime, we [Iran] will be strongly involved in the game with the PKK. In regards to the PKK issue, we are capable of capturing its leader and eliminating its activities; but we are also capable of making it grow... If you give up on Syria, we will deal with the PKK together; otherwise, we will become allies with the PKK."<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

As the Arab Spring sweeps the despotic rulers in the region, theocrats in Tehran and self-styled champions of democracy and human rights in Ankara seek to take opportunities for their regional agendas. The strategic significance Syria solicits to Iran and Turkey maintains them carefully watching the situation unfolding in the country. But the anti-government protestors in Syria compelled Turkey and Iran to vigorously invest to ensure their interests in advance. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that some of their interests over Syria conflict. As Ankara has not refrained from guiding Damascus towards reforms, Tehran's angst has grown. The train did not shift its direction, however, and the tension becomes public between the governments in Ankara and Tehran.

Iran and Turkey are yet to tell us who would win the rivalry over Syria. However, some indications referred to a decrease in anti-Syrian government rhetoric as well as a toughening in Iran's stance in favor of reforms for a while, yet the scenario is still opaque in tandem with the increase of pressure put on Syria. Iran may temporarily keep al-Assad in power. Had Syrians went to elections, Tehran's ally in Damascus would receive a heavy blow. Having such event in mind, Turkey has been firmly coordinating with the Syrian opposition. Whether the opposition will embrace the Turkish model is a matter of concern as well.

The role of religion is evolving in the Middle East politics. The Arab-Spring increased the role of the Islamic movements in the region with some are already in charge of the state affairs. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its equivalent in the region do represent a tacit Islamic trend in the political plane. If these forces had

to choose, then, the Turkish model for reconciling faith and democracy is preferable over the Iranian model. Realistically, the Turkish model provides an amalgam of motifs to the moderate Muslims. Turkey is prosperous, democratic, and economically developed. It is an aspirant of the European Union and enjoys a regional role. On the other hand, Iran faces increasing international sanctions and isolation due to its controversial policies outlined by a regime which is not credited by many Iranians.

The failure of the United States in Iraq has deadly affected the American image in the region, and hence, its influence as well. Together with other Western powers, the United States closely coordinated with Turkey to deal with the developments unleashed by Arab Spring. Ankara, on the other hand, has showed an active role in the Arab movements towards democracy. In confluence with the evolving role of religion, the success story of the Turkish model, especially had the Turkish policy succeed to better democratize Turkish society, Turkish foreign policy would be assertive. Ankara would also enjoy better relations with the West, and actively influence the developments in the region.

#### NOTES

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