

Turkey's Role in Defusing the Iranian Nuclear Issue

In May 2010, while the United States and other Western powers in the UN Security Council were drafting a resolution on further sanctions to pressure Iran over its controversial nuclear program, Turkey and Brazil—then non-permanent members of the Security Council—announced a fuel-swap deal with Iran. The Tehran Declaration, as it was called, stipulated that 20-percent-enriched nuclear fuel was to be provided to Iran for its use in the Tehran Research Reactor, which produces medical isotopes, in exchange for the removal of 1,200 kilograms of 3.5-percent-low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey.¹ Initial reactions to the deal varied, but there was fear that the 20-percent-enriched fuel would enable Iran to further enrich uranium and attain the level necessary to construct a nuclear weapon more rapidly.²

Turkey and Iran had been discussing a deal for nearly eight months, since U.S. President Barack Obama sent a similar proposal to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in October 2009. Iranian officials initially stalled, not wanting to give up their uranium; however, when they received intelligence that China and Russia (sometime Iranian allies) were in accord with the UN sanctions, Iran reluctantly agreed to the swap deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil. As a result, the deal was regarded as a “tactical move” by the international community, particularly the United States.³

The United States did not approve of the nuclear swap agreement because “it did not address the continued production of uranium enriched to 20 percent inside Iranian territory.”⁴ Since the 1980s, the United States has maintained that Iran has sought to divide the international community by making only marginal concessions on the nuclear issue, thus buying time to continue its uranium

Dr. Aylin G. Gürzel has recently received her Ph.D. from the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University. She has written for the *Middle East Policy and Security Index*; *Russian Journal of International Security*. She can be reached at aygurzel@bilkent.edu.tr

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production. China hesitantly “welcomed the deal as a step in the direction of a peaceful solution,”⁵ but Russia flatly declined the deal and discarded any link between the swap deal and the Security Council sanctions. France criticized the swap because it did not involve any progress on essential issues—it did not address nuclear weapons proliferation challenges, suspending sustained uranium enrichment activity on Iranian territory, or the issue of transparency. “Let us not deceive ourselves, a solution to the [fuel] question . . . would do nothing to settle the problem posed by the Iranian nuclear program,” French Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero maintained in a statement.⁶ Turkish and Brazilian officials considered the deal a success, however, and announced it as an accomplishment and a potential breakthrough. Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, stated that the agreement “demonstrated once again that resolution could be reached through diplomacy.”⁷

In putting together the fuel-swap deal, Turkey, like Brazil, was trying to defend the autonomy of non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) to enrich uranium for producing electricity in their own territory and strengthen the right of NNWS to develop peaceful nuclear activities. Turkey also believed that finding a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue without consulting other powers about the negotiation process would burnish its credentials for membership in the elite club of “responsible” and “world order-supporting states,”⁸ which Ankara views as important as Turkey seeks to assert its growing power both regionally and globally.

Turkey’s Nuclear Non-Proliferation Policy

Although Turkey has been part of global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and endorsed international initiatives to strengthen the non-proliferation regime, it has remained indifferent toward the Iranian nuclear program for many years.⁹ Turkey signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on January 28, 1969, and ratified it on April 17, 1980. Ankara also played a role in international efforts to curb nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, participating vigorously in the process of enhancing the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) verification system to make safeguards inspections much more invasive after the 1991 Gulf War. It became part of the Additional Protocol (which enhanced the IAEA’s ability to detect undeclared nuclear activities) by signing and ratifying the document in July 2000.¹⁰ Turkey also is part of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a group of nuclear supplier countries that attempts to curb nuclear proliferation by not selling dual-use technology (technology that can be used for both peaceful and military aims) to NNWS.

Turkey’s motivation for participating in nuclear non-proliferation efforts is largely due to its NATO membership (since 1952); Turkish territory is protected by a “nuclear umbrella” against attack from other countries, including Iran, so it has

little military need to develop its own nuclear weapons. Moreover, Turkey possesses NATO tactical nuclear weapons and continues to deploy them on its territory (they are U.S. nuclear weapons under NATO's authority). Some were sent back to the United States after the end of the Cold War, but some are still deployed in Incirlik.¹¹ Turkey has security guarantees because NATO's Article V states that an armed attack against one or more NATO members is considered an attack on them all.

Turkey is also seeking candidacy in the European Union, and accordingly has endorsed international policies intended to curb weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation in general, and nuclear non-proliferation in particular in the Middle East.¹² Given the protection accorded from the above organizations, Turkey itself has no real reason to develop a nuclear weapons program. If it did, it would "be under the scrutiny of the relevant institutions of the EU throughout the accession process,"¹³ and if the accession process is successfully completed, Turkey will have to become party to the EURATOM [the European Atomic Energy Community] treaty. In other words, Turkey would have to comply with this treaty, which permits only peaceful applications of nuclear energy.¹⁴

Factors Shaping Ankara's Iran Policy

Since 2002, with the advent of the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has shifted its role toward Iran's nuclear program. It moved first from an observer to a facilitator, then more recently to a mediator. Turkey's own plans for nuclear energy have shaped its stance. The AKP intends to develop nuclear energy, and has signed a deal with the Russian Federation to build a nuclear power plant at Akkuyu, Buyukeceli—in Mersin Province. Turkey is also trying to conclude a deal whereby Japan would build nuclear energy facilities in Turkey.

These plans are being carried out with the aim to "[remain] in good standing with the NPT and [continue] to abide by the stringent inspections called for in the IAEA's Additional Protocol."¹⁵ Turkey has positioned itself as an advocate of non-proliferation, while maintaining a strict interpretation of Article IV of the NPT,¹⁶ which states that every member of the treaty has the right to pursue peaceful nuclear activities. Turkish officials have challenged any proposal intended to make it difficult for NPT parties to access nuclear technologies for the purpose of producing nuclear energy; they have perceived these propositions as a threat to their nuclear aspirations.¹⁷ Numerous Turkish

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officials and parliamentarians contend that if sovereign states meet their commitments and fulfill their obligations under international agreements, then neither the international community nor any individual country should intercede in Turkey's domestic affairs.¹⁸

That is not to say that concerns about Iran's activities do not exist. Several interest groups and parliamentarians, including Faruk Loğoğlu (a former Turkish ambassador to the United States, the current deputy of the opposition party People's Republic Party (CHP), and a member of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee) share the international community's concerns regarding Iran's intentions. Loğoğlu noted the "disparity between the characteristics of Iran's nuclear program and its supposed peaceful purposes as well as the suitability of its facilities for making nuclear weapons."¹⁹

The question is what Ankara should do about it? Although not explicitly voiced, Turkish actors are concerned that international proceedings against Iran might form a precedent for sanctions on states such as Turkey.²⁰ Other Turkish officials feel that sanctions would only delay Iran's nuclear capability to produce a weapon, not discourage its nuclear ambitions. Turkish trade with Iran is also a factor. The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchange of Turkey, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association, and the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey have become fundamental actors in Turkey's foreign-policymaking. Turkish trade with Iran has increased due to these actors' preferences, and Turkey's pro-Iran position on the Iranian nuclear program, as well as its increasing aspiration to play a constructive role as a mediating regional power, can be connected to the influence of these organizations.²¹

The supply of energy has been a main component of Turkish-Iranian relations as well. In July 1996, under Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the two countries signed a \$23 billion natural gas deal. In a RAND report, analyst F. Stephen Larrabee confirmed that since then, energy trade interactions between Ankara and Tehran have continued to increase gradually.²² Turkey imports 30 percent of its gas from Iran and cannot afford detached relations with a prospective market, which is probably what would happen if Turkey chose to carry out U.S. unilateral sanctions and pressured Iran not to enrich uranium in its territory.²³

The AKP's Islamic roots also have played a part in Turkey's policy. Professor Mustafa Kibaroğlu has noted that "the debate—concerning the Iranian nuclear program—is rather emotional, reactive to daily events, and also partly ideological."²⁴ For Turkish foreign policymakers, the "Muslim world" is an autonomous and peculiar geopolitical region where Turkey could be influential diplomatically and assume a primary role. Prime Minister Erdoğan has stated that if all obstacles could be removed, the world's 57 Muslim countries would be able to form a self-sufficient group.²⁵ This perspective fits within the changing social

and political texture of Turkey. Soner Çağaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, stresses that “religion remained the salient national identity during the Ottoman period,”²⁶ and now it seems that religion is again becoming an important part of the national identity for the Turkish population and the AKP government in particular. The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation confirms that the number of people identifying themselves as Muslim, rather than Turkish, increased by 10 percent between 2002 and 2007, and continues to increase daily.²⁷

Ziya Öniş, professor of International Political Economy at Koc University in Istanbul and Director of the Center for Research on Globalization and Democratic Governance, also maintains that Turkish foreign policy has moved beyond “the sphere of economics; [to] considerations relating to culture and identity, [which] are seen as a fundamental part of historical depth.”²⁸ Since it came to power, the AKP has worked to intensify relations with Iran and other Muslim countries in the region. The West often ascribes the Turkish–Iranian relationship to “the religiosity of the AKP and the party’s alleged sympathies for Iran’s conservative clerical elites.”²⁹ This perspective is somewhat true, in the sense that AKP parliamentarians wanted to establish better ties with Iran because of its Muslim identity. However, most AKP parliamentarians have realized this is not feasible because Iran has not recognized Turkey as a reliable partner. On the contrary, Iran has perceived Turkey as not only a competitor, but a threat.³⁰ As Mustafa Akyol posits, “Although the cadre at the top of the party is generally pious, it has not imposed sharia rule in Turkey, as some secularist Turks have feared, and has not geared its foreign policy toward spreading Islamism.”³¹ The AKP government has acted pragmatically, trying to balance its relationship with both the West and the East.

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In this context, in late 2008, Turkey’s stance toward the Iranian nuclear issue changed, due to its aspiration to play an active role in resolving the dispute about the program. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, then the advisor of Prime Minister Erdogan, was one of the leading actors in the Turkish government and became the Foreign Minister in May 2009. He wanted to engage in active diplomacy in resolving global disputes. Thus, Erdogan announced that Turkey could mediate between Iran and the United States.³² The Obama administration welcomed Turkey’s support to engage with Iran. Additionally, Mohamed ElBaradei, then the IAEA director general, also asked for Turkey’s diplomatic support to persuade Iran to end the stalemate and return to the table.

Moreover, Turkey has not favored sanctions against Iran. This is mainly because Turkey wants to pursue a multi-dimensional and multi-track foreign policy,³³ one that can boast of “zero problems with neighbors.” This concept derives from Davutoglu’s book, *Strategic Depth*, which promotes Turkish engagement with the region under the idea that Turkey is a key fulcrum between the East and the West. Such a policy would hesitate to provoke a neighbor, like Iran, with harsh sanctions. Moreover, Turkey imports approximately 200,000 barrels per day of oil from Iran, which represents over 7 percent of Iran’s oil exports, and it has gradually increased its imports from Iran since the AKP administration came to power.

Ankara regards Tehran not only as a significant neighbor but also an important factor in the Middle East, South Asia, and the Caucasus. In this regard, Turkey wanted to help resolve conflicting views and disagreements over Iran’s nuclear program through engagement and dialogue, not coercion and sanctions, in order to maintain peace and stability in the region. Turkey’s objective was to convince Iran to respond fully to the concerns of the international community. By brokering the fuel-swap deal, Turkey attempted to find a diplomatic solution to Iran’s nuclear issue in order to evade a military attack on Iran.

Turkey’s involvement in the 2010 Tehran Declaration came under fire internationally, which initially surprised Ankara. From Turkey’s (or at least the AKP’s) point of view, its involvement was simply intended to maintain peace and stability, avoid conflict, and fend off international sanctions that would also damage Turkish commercial interests with Iran. Turkey also wished to consolidate its position as a strong regional player in resolving disputes.

Turkish diplomats maintained that Brazilian officials were trying to conclude a deal parallel to Turkish efforts, so they decided to join forces.³⁴ Like Brazil, Turkey desired “to raise its status in the eyes of the international community.”³⁵ Also, both the Turks and the Brazilians believe that institutions such as the Security Council “reflect asymmetries in the distribution of power in the international system,”³⁶ so it should not have come as a surprise that the two decided to cooperate and circumvent the UNSC efforts. While all these factors contributed to its stance, however, Turkey’s principal motivations were its past nuclear non-proliferation policy and its future prospects as a regional mediator.

To achieve a peaceful settlement on Iran’s nuclear file, Turkish officials proclaimed that Turkey and Brazil “concluded the ‘Tehran Joint Declaration’ that was based on initial proposals of the IAEA, the Russian Federation and the U.S.”³⁷ Turkish officials claimed that they “had worked tirelessly to effectively address this issue in seamless consultation with the P5 + 1 and Iran.”³⁸ Even though Security Council member states said that the fuel-swap deal would not eradicate concerns about the Iranian nuclear program because it would not prevent Iranian uranium enrichment, Turkish and Brazilian officials argued that

it at least offered a confidence-building measure from which to reconstruct more than five years of failed negotiations with Iran.

A similar proposal to the fuel-swap deal, led by the Vienna Group (France, Russia, the United States, and the IAEA), had failed in 2009; therefore not many members of the Security Council were optimistic about the capability of Prime Minister Erdoğan and then-Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to achieve a comprehensive agreement with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about going further with the Tehran Agreement. Since Tehran and the permanent Security Council members mistrusted each other, Iran was much more comfortable negotiating with Turkey and Brazil, and thus tried to bolster its relations with the two significant intermediate states that were then non-permanent members of the Security Council.³⁹ Although Iran was still uncertain about Turkish motivations, it conceded that Ankara was genuinely trying to grow gradually independent from Washington. Iran was also aware that Turkey aspired to prevent new sanctions that would negatively affect its own interests. Turkey and Brazil's strategy can be summarized as seeking greater global influence, particularly in the Middle East, through active diplomacy. To that end, the fuel-swap deal was viewed in Ankara as a success.

What Will Ankara Do Next?

Ultimately, the fuel-swap deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil was not a comprehensive solution to Iran's nuclear program because it did not address interrupting Iranian production of uranium enriched to 20 percent. Iran did indeed agree to deposit 1,200 kilograms of LEU in Turkey, but it would remain the property of Iran, and Iranian officials could request the return of its LEU for any reason if they desired to do so.⁴⁰ The main problem with the deal was that it did not fundamentally change Iran's nuclear program.⁴¹ But Turkey never intended it to achieve that ultimate objective; it was merely a first step toward that end.

Nevertheless, numerous Turkish parliamentarians and diplomats have acknowledged the problems regarding the deal,⁴² and they have recognized the coordination problems with the United States and other Western powers during the negotiations with Tehran. In terms of Ankara's relations with the United States, President Obama and Prime Minister Erdoğan have apparently been in close contact since January 2011. The failure of the fuel-swap deal may have led the two governments to increase their communication to help ensure that another attempt at resolution succeeds. Coordination problems will try to be eliminated in future efforts.⁴³

Moving forward, the dynamics of overall Turkish–Iranian relations will be crucial in curbing nuclear proliferation and controlling Iran's nuclear program.

Ever since the two countries' border was delineated in 1639, the Turkish–Iranian relationship has been “nuanced and multifaceted and does not hinge on any single issue, but is instead an amalgamation of sometimes competing, sometimes common interests.”⁴⁴ Former AKP parliamentarian Murat Mercan, also the former president of the Council of European Parliamentary Assembly, contends that the two countries managed to coexist rather peacefully due to the isolation from each other's economic and political affairs for almost four centuries. But problems surfaced when the AKP government came into power and tried to bolster its relations with the Iranian regime. Turkish parliamentarians and diplomats realized the differences between the two cultures and their threat perceptions. Mercan contends that his encounters with Iranian officials such as Ali Larijani, Speaker of the Iranian *Majles*, and Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Chair of Foreign Policy and Security, did not inspire confidence. Mercan also asserts that Shi'a Muslims (Iran is a Shia-majority country; Turkey has a Sunni majority) have a very different threat perception, and their history, culture, and society are quite different from what is found in Turkey and the Arab world.⁴⁵ This conception will make it difficult for Turkey to play an active role in the negotiations.

Differences with Iran will make it difficult for Turkey to play an active role in negotiations.

Iran was skeptical about Turkey's actions during the mediations because Turkey is a NATO ally and a strategic partner of the United States. Even though Iran accepts the AKP government's growing independence from Washington's policies and Ankara's aspiration to prevent new sanctions that may affect its economic relations with Iran, it is still dubious about Turkey's intentions, which were made clear during the visit of Iranian officials to Turkey in October 2011.⁴⁶ Iranian officials explicitly told the AKP

parliamentarians that they realized that Turkey was collaborating with American officials behind closed doors.⁴⁷

It seems that Ankara has yet to appreciate the significance of how its actions are perceived by the international community as well. Although not a party in the dispute between the international community and Iran, Turkey is affected by the repercussions of any developments in it. This gives Turkey a vested interest in the settlement's progress (or lack thereof). Subsequently, Ankara's impartiality is questionable to the international community, no matter how much Turkish policymakers insist otherwise.⁴⁸

Although Ankara voted against the Security Council resolution that imposed sanctions on Iran in July 2010, Iran is still concerned about the agreement signed on September 15, 2011, between Turkey and the United States to station a U.S. missile-defense radar in Kurecik, which lies in Turkey's Malatya province—some

700 kilometers west of the Iranian border. AKP parliamentarian Hasan Fehmi Kinay was quick to clarify that the Kurecik radar station had been in use previously, and will merely begin functioning again.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Tehran is suspicious.

One could argue that if mediation is not working, it eventually will be regarded as futile. The feeling that Turkish mediation efforts have been misused by the Iranian regime to buy time has not completely vanished from the mind of Turkish officials.⁵⁰ Economic sanctions are criticized because, as noted, Ankara wants to improve its economic relations with Iran. However, sanctions have the greatest effect if all countries apply them, therefore Turkey may need to consider joining the U.S. sanctions if it desires a non-military solution to the problem.

Nevertheless, Turkish parliamentarian Volkan Bozkir, who heads the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, set aside and rejected the U.S. proposal to implement further sanctions on Iran. He asserts that “countries should be careful in warning Turkey [because] it’s not the country of ten years ago. Is there any rule in the world that the U.S. can impose any sanctions without any UN support or legal institutions?...We will abide by the UN sanctions.”⁵¹ Bozkir has been supportive of the increasing trade relations with Iran, noting that trade was to reach \$15 billion by the end of 2011, and that the figure was expected to increase to \$30 billion in 2012.⁵²

Turkey therefore is still viewed by some as an advocate of Tehran; if Turkey wants to help resolve the issue in the short term, former U.S. official Elliot Abrams argues that “[i]t should stand firmly behind [the] UN Security Council as well as the IAEA resolutions and urge Iran to comply with them.”⁵³ Anything else, from the perspective of these observers, will diminish international unity and allow the Iranian regime to buy even more time. Former European Commissioner Gunter Verheugen stresses that the recent IAEA report made public on November 8, 2011, “is alarming and something needs to be done,”⁵⁴ and argues that the best option is for Ankara to join the multilateral efforts. It is understandable, however, that the AKP leadership would rather continue along the path of dialogue, facilitation, and mediation.

In order to achieve its desired influence in the region, Turkey must prove its will and ability to settle disputes in its neighborhood, particularly the Iranian nuclear dispute. But Turkey has also realized that active diplomacy is not enough, and zero problems with neighbors is not feasible—therefore it has shifted its foreign policy. Turkey has drawn some lessons from its past experiences with Iran, and after some resistance, it has decided to look for other energy

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Turkish policymakers are dedicated to solving the Iranian nuclear file.

resources.⁵⁵ In line with this decision, in March 2012 Turkish officials announced that “it was reducing oil imports from Iran by 20 percent.”⁵⁶ The AKP government is diversifying energy supplies in the case of a disruption of Iranian oil production.⁵⁷ Turkey also intends “to build up northern Iraq’s energy infrastructure to expand its influence in Iraq and counter Iran.”⁵⁸ Currently, AKP parliamentarians are preparing for any eventuality, including the possibility of a military strike on Iran. Nevertheless, through continuing negotiations, Turkish policymakers, especially Foreign Minister Davutoglu, are dedicated to solving the Iranian nuclear file in Istanbul this year.

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