

Turkish-Iranian Relations after the Framework Agreement

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Turkey has been closely observing the Iranian nuclear program and its bilateral, regional and global implications since 2002. As one of the most important neighboring countries, Iran's defense policy has always been an issue of great significance for Turkish policy makers. In the last one and a half decades, Turkey has been both directly and indirectly in pursuit of shaping the outcome of Iran's nuclear program and the negotiations between Iran and the world's major powers. For example, in 2010, Turkey and Brazil catered a nuclear fuel swap agreement designed to help Iran build a peaceful nuclear program and at the same time prevent weaponization of its nuclear capabilities. Although this initiative was considered to be highly promising in terms of what it could have provided to Iran and the rest of the world, the UN Security Council Permanent Members and Germany (P5+1) did not welcome it. The deal died shortly after Turkey and Brazil promoted it due to P5+1's opposition. After that experience, Turkey's direct involvement in negotiations has been rather low-key.

Turkey's reaction to signing a 'framework deal' between Iran and six major world powers has been generally very positive. On April 3 2015, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared that "We are very happy to hear that this deal was signed," immediately after the deal was reached. Çavuşoğlu stated that Turkey was against a nuclear weapons program in the region while she supported each country's right to use peaceful technology. More specifically, Turkey's reaction to the Iran-P5+1 agreement is threefold, including security, economic and political concerns. Turkey's perspective on each policy area is delineated in more detail below.

Security-related concerns

Turkey's reaction to alleged weaponization of Iran's nuclear program has been cautious. Although Turkish policy-makers have not directly blamed Iran of developing nuclear weapons and generally accepted that Iran's program is for peaceful purposes, they too are against Iran's 'going nuclear'.

Primarily, the Turkish government suggests that if Iran built nuclear weapons, other powers would follow the same course, which would result in a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Turkish officials posit that such a race would significantly decrease security for the region and at the same time result in substantial financial

losses. Turkish officials have always been critical of alleged Israeli nuclear weapons in the Middle East and have demanded the discontinuation of the Israeli nuclear weapons program as well. Therefore Turkey's preference is in line with 'a nuclear free MENA'. Domestically, a new and rather small-scale debate has emerged as to whether Turkey should develop its own nuclear program in case of a nuclear arms race in the region or whether the extended deterrence provided by NATO would still be sufficient for Turkey's defense. Knowing the costs of such an arms race, Turkish officials prefer not to have a nuclear neighbor, which, at a critical juncture, would pave the way for a path dependency towards a nuclear arms race in the region.

Yet, Turkey has not appeared to be very alarmed about the nuclear program in the last decade. Perhaps this is because what really alters Turkish threat perceptions is the Iranian missile program and Turkey's rather underdeveloped air defense system. Turkish officials deem the country's air defense system to be not developed enough to defend Turkey against threats in a region full of conflict and armament. The recent developments in Turkey have led the government to refer to Article 4 of the NATO charter and request the alliance to augment the air defense capabilities. Since January 2013, a group of Dutch and German batteries have been operational in Southeast Turkey against spillover from the Syrian civil war. Turkey has also considered buying missile defense systems from China, and some members of the alliance heavily criticized that foreign policy behavior. Turkey's argumentation is that the country needs its own air defense system in such a volatile region. Although Iran is not directly mentioned in policy papers or statements, it is known that Iran's advanced medium range ballistic missiles are of vital concern for Turkey.

Economic concerns

The economic relief for Iran that will result from a deal is going to be a development of utmost importance in terms of its positive externalities for Turkey. Turkey has repeatedly directed criticism against the international sanctions against Iran and how those sanctions hurt Turkish-Iranian trade and economic relations. Currently, the trade volume between the two neighbors is at about 15 billion US Dollars per year. Both Turkish and Iranian officials have emphasized that this volume could easily go up to 30 billion dollars in a short period of time, but that the scale of engagement has been negatively affected by international sanctions. Due to Turkey's exports being included in the list of international sanctions, Turkey's exportation to Iran has diminished threefold. With respect to the current development, Turkish businesspeople see an opportunity in areas where the sanctions will be lifted.

The second most immediate effect of this deal becoming a reality is the expected drop in the price of gold and energy. Turkey is a net energy importing country. Turkey imports most of its energy from Russia and Iran. Maintaining natural gas and oil imports and decreasing the trade deficit with Iran by growing exports are crucial for Turkey. Therefore, the lifting of sanctions against Iran is a pivotal step for Turkey.

Third, if the economic sanctions end, Turkey can pursue its regional policy of becoming an energy hub between the energy rich east and the energy-poor EU countries. Iran's contribution to Turkey's focus of integrating transit projects within its own territory is relevant both in terms of energy supply and geostrategic necessities. For example, a proposed pipeline would transfer Iranian gas via Turkey to European markets. If Iran is re-integrated into the international society with all economic cooperation schemes, this would also benefit Turkey.

Furthermore, Iran's normalization is likely to boost the border trade ratio between Eastern Turkish and Western Iranian provinces. This border trade has been a huge economic contribution to border cities on both sides. With respect to this mutually beneficial interaction, the Iranian normalization process may promote a further increase in the number of tourists visiting Turkey as well as an expansion of health tourism to Iranian hospitals. In addition to the above-mentioned positive ramifications, the lifting of sanctions is also expected to result in Turkey's strong construction sector's receiving important tenders on the other side of the border. Lastly, in the immediate period following the discontinuation of the sanctions, Iran may ask Turkey to export goods for critical sectors such as medicine, automobile/airline industries, textile, furniture, consumer goods and woodwork production.

Given the importance of Turkish-Iranian trade for both sides and Turkey's support to Iran during the implementation of the sanctions against the latter, Iranian officials have been confronted with the question whether Turkey will receive preferential treatment once the sanctions are lifted. The usual answer from Iranian officials is that they will continue to cooperate with Turkey on economic matters as before. However, the Turkish side is concerned about competing with large Western European and North American firms in various fields. Perhaps the best terms of cooperation will be achieved in areas where Turkey has a comparative advantage, e.g. Iran can use certain goods with lower costs such as agricultural technologies.

To sum up, Iran is an important trade partner of Turkey and lifting international sanctions will augment Turkish-Iranian economic relations to a great extent. Therefore, both the Turkish government and business representatives have welcomed the framework deal.

Political concerns

Possibly the most significant question regarding the end result of a one-and-a-half decade long stand-off is whether this deal will 'normalize' Iran's foreign relations. In other words, the key question is whether the Iranian government will stop being a revolutionary force and instead decide to be an internationally legitimate state integrated into the world system. In the best-case scenario, in Henry Kissinger's words, Iran will stop being a revolutionary cause and decide to be a state. In the worst-case scenario, the Iran P5+1 deal will not work and the Iranian revolutionary zeal will further destabilize the region.

If the best-scenario becomes reality, Turkey will enjoy better neighborly relations and inhabit a more stable region. Turkey has been negatively affected by the turbulence in the region since 2003. The invasion of Iraq followed by the civil war and Arab uprisings since 2011 have also destabilized Turkey's southern border security, as well as its economic relations. Turkish policy-makers hope that the framework deal with Iran will stop Iran's support for non-state actors in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the rest of the Middle East. If Iran is well integrated into the global governance structures and the state aims at maintaining legitimacy, they may – at least – decrease the level of support for groups such as Hezbollah and their belligerent activities. If Iran is on board for a peaceful solution with regard to the civil war in Syria, Turkey would greatly benefit from such a contribution. In short, if Iran stops being a geopolitical risk, this will greatly benefit Turkey.

The downside of such a scenario for Turkey would be the increasing popularity of Iran in the region. Iran and Turkey have been in a sort of competitive friendship in the last half millennium. If Iran were re-integrated into the world system, this would bring Iran a higher level of international cooperation, investments and friendship. In such a positive scenario, despite the benefits to Turkey, Iran's rising importance may also threaten Turkey's stance in the region. Especially in a time where Turkey does not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, Syria and Egypt, Iran's improved relations with regional countries as well as with the EU and the US may be a cause for concern in Ankara. The Turkish foreign policy elite has warned that this deal may bring back a pre-1979 balance to the region, throughout which Iran and Turkey competed for US and Western cooperation. In sum, Turkey is concerned about losing its importance in regional matters both for Western countries as well as vis-a-vis regional actors.

Domestic Criticism

The framework deal is generally celebrated by the Turkish policy makers as well as the foreign policy elite such as intellectuals, academics, journalists and business people. A small number of skeptic intellectuals have voiced concerns whether Iran would really adhere to the rules of the game or would again just buy time to continue with the nuclear program. However, this group has been small and not very vocal. Most of the domestic criticism has come from the opposition elite and the political parties, fearing that with the new framework deal there would be a great chance that Turkey will lose its role in the region and its status in important world capitals as the go-to actor when MENA affairs are concerned. Therefore, the critics suggest that Turkey must repair its worsened relations with Egypt, Israel, Syria and the Iraqi central government and should not let Iran take over her role as an important regional power. To this end, critics have warned Turkey to refrain from joining the anti-Iran coalition formed in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and to return to its path of good neighborly relations in the region. In that context, the framework deal's possible effect on Turkey may be the manifestation of more cooperative relations with the regional countries.

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