

In Brief: Iran is now enjoying a shining moment in global politics, while many Arab countries are experiencing statehood crises and indeed, the Sunni world is struggling with desperate problems. This is the context in which Iran is re-entering the global state system, under the leadership of President Hassan Rouhani. This brief analyzes how Iran's new policies under Rouhani may affect Turkey's regional and transatlantic relations. Though both Iran and Turkey are eager to have close economic relations with each other, the limit of their bilateral relations is likely to be determined by the fact of the alignment of each in competing regional blocks. While in agreement on economic issues, their strategies elsewhere are potentially in conflict. Given Iran's priority of consolidating relations with the West, and Turkey's overwhelming foreign policy problems, the global community, particularly the United States, has an outsized role in Turkish-Iranian relations.

The Iranian Moment and Turkey

by Gökhan Bacık

Cold Peace

Turkey and Iran have opposing perspectives on many issues, a historical pattern that emerges from two different worldviews. Though this does not prohibit occasional economic relations, it does limit bilateral relations. While Turks and Iranians have rarely been at war with each other, their friendship is a "cold peace," as crises regularly make visible. For instance, in March 2015, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a dramatic shift on Iran and publicly criticized that country, outlining Turkey's general reservations: "Iran means to dominate the region. How can this be allowed? Iran has to abandon this ambition. It should withdraw its forces from Yemen, Syria, and Iraq." For Erdoğan, "it's not possible to tolerate" Iran in these areas.

Syria, Iraq, and Yemen today constitute the three major areas of conflict between Iran and Turkey. In each case, both are trying to shape events on the ground according to their opposite interests. Iran's vision of Syria (or Yemen) is unacceptable to Turkey, as is Turkey's to Iran. Meanwhile, the Arab Uprisings have destroyed many states, and statehood crises all over the region have fed a burgeoning sectarianism. State collapse leads to citizenship collapse, and once citizenship collapses, people tend to gravitate either to sectarian or ethnic identities, as we have observed

from Libya to Yemen. This has increased the role of transnational sectarian networks, transforming the Middle East into a post-modern zone of sectarian and ethnic wars and shaping the regional states' foreign policies.

A grand Sunni-Shia axis is in place today in Middle Eastern politics. Though never openly stated, many countries are acting in loose sectarian blocs. How Iran, for instance, reacted to the declaration of the recent Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Turkey is typical of this. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi commented that “the general atmosphere governing the OIC under the current circumstances is not really indicative of cooperation among Muslim countries, nor of unity in the Muslim world.” His country felt the final declaration was full of “anti-Iran articles.” More critically, Iran sees Turkey as part of a Saudi-centered Sunni strategy; Turkey's accord with Saudi Arabia is “proof” of a sectarian alliance. In fact, Saudi Arabia's hardline anti-Iranian strategies have put Turkey in a difficult situation with regard to Iran. Being part of the “Sunni axis,” it is

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hardly possible for Turkey to present itself as a neutral power in the region. The sectarian aspect is not simply antagonism between different groups; it is a major component of many major crises from Yemen to Syria raising serious questions regarding who should rule or be the legitimate shareholders in each country.

Iran's possible reaction to emerging regional blocks is to develop a global strategy. Tehran is aware of the growing tension between Saudi Arabia and the

United States, and of the fact that the chaotic situation in many Sunni Arab states has made Iran a relatively stable partner for West. Thus, rather than engage in any direct confrontation, Iran prefers to consolidate a role that might eventually give it increased leverage, adding to its already considerable leverage that might affect the course of events in countries like Azerbaijan, Armenia, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran's political and sectarian influence in the Gulf countries is equally critical. Typically, Iran's list of alternate foreign policy strategies is longer than that of any potential contesting state's (like Turkey's or Saudi Arabia's) in any potential bilateral rivalry. For example, there are many thorny issues for Turkey that could easily become the targets of Iranian counter-strategies.

Is Compartmentalization Possible?

Compartmentalization is the process whereby states cooperate in “neutral” areas like trade, and try not to bring their political differences into play. It fails when one state believes that the other has certain agendas that are somehow detrimental to its security. For instance, the Turkish-Russian compartmentalization worked successfully for more than a decade, until Syria-linked effects destroyed it.¹

Turkey and Iran are both enthusiastic about developing a compartmentalization strategy. Recently, they signed a banking protocol and a Joint Economic Commission protocol in a bid to improve economic and trade ties. Shortly after taking office, Turkey's new prime minister, Binali Yıldırım, stressed the need for improved relations with Tehran, and the Iranian media responded positively.² But can a compartmentalization agenda between Turkey and Iran work over a long enough time to make it worth while? There are five

1 On this, see Gökhan Bacik, “Turkey and Russia's Proxy War and the Kurds,” *On Turkey*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 21, 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-and-russias-proxy-war-and-kurds>.

2 Islamic Republic News Agency, “Turkish newly elected premier calls for boost of ties with Iran,” May 25, 2016, http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82087322/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

major potential areas of risk that may limit the lifetime of such a strategy:

1. In Syria, Iran and Turkey are at odds. Each country's strategy there is destructive for the other.
2. The Kurdish issue is always a thorny area. Keeping Kurds from becoming legitimate and autonomous actors in regional politics is a major agenda item of Turkish foreign policy. Iran may have different tactical approaches to this issue.
3. The Turkish-Saudi rapprochement (also including Qatar) is a new dynamic that is alarming for Iran. Tehran will do its best to make this block dysfunctional, since such Saudi-centered alliances are detrimental to its interests in the adjacent "Shia zone," which includes several Gulf countries like Bahrain.
4. The recent tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia is a new area of risk for both countries. But unlike Turkey, Iran has contact with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.
5. Iran is well aware of the current catastrophic situation in the Sunni Muslim states. It is clear that Tehran is doing its best to consolidate itself as a regional Muslim power. Unlike during the 2000s, Iran's current global reputation is not worse than Turkey's.

Though the five listed areas are distinct, governments will naturally shift from one to another. For instance, if Iran sees its interests threatened in Syria, it may play the Kurdish card. Or, if the Saudi-Turkish alliance keeps harming Iranian interests in Yemen, Iran may increase its support of Russian strategies in Syria, or take sides with Russia in the Azeri-Armenian conflict.

Thus, this compartmentalization strategy requires that both Turkey's and Iran's primary strategic interests be insulated against these risks, which is a tough

job in the long run. Unlike Iran, Turkey has become a country of quick and unusual foreign policy reactions. The list of regional issues that cause troubles for Ankara is long, and that makes its foreign policy a bit unstable. In contrast, Tehran refrains from abrupt foreign policy reactions, an important difference that might give Iran an advantage. Iranian political elites likely think that they have a historic opportunity (since the revolution) to come back into the international system through legitimate mechanisms. Not wanting to lose this opportunity, Tehran acts calmly, even on critical matters. A deep examination of what Iranians say about regional issues reveals that Iran is not much concerned about Turkey's capacity to harm its interests. As a result, Iran will be the more tolerant partner in the Turkey-Iran compartmentalization strategy, lest its grand strategy of reviving links with the global Western system be at risk.

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Implications for Turkey and the United States

Turkey's alliance with Saudi Arabia and Qatar will limit its autonomy with regard to Iran. Given its experiences with Russia and China, Ankara should have realized that "double alliance theory"³ will not prove valid over long periods. International politics does not leave states free to be members of contending blocks.

For the United States, Turkish-Iranian relations have mixed implications. Iran's need for normalization in the global system may become the anchor that reduces the scope of its possible reactions to regional developments. Thus, unlike how they played out during under the leadership of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Turkish-

³ The proposal in principle of the possibility of enjoying good relations with members of divergent foreign policy groups.

Iranian relations would proceed within the norms of international society. On the other hand, the “blocks competition,” when Turkey or Iran play key roles, increases the political costs and difficulties of U.S. policies in the region, causing the United States to be unable to form a line of allies on the major Middle Eastern issues. Moreover, in some cases, Turkey and Iran may make the United States face dilemmas reminiscent of those posed by the Turks and Kurds crises.

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About the Author

Gökhan Bacik is a professor of political science at Ipek University. His most recent book is *Hybrid Sovereignty in the Arab Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008). He also writes weekly columns for *Today's Zaman*.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org