

Political History of Turkey-Iran Relations: Convergence and Divergence

Abdulrahman Al-Fawwaz

Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, Al-Balqa Applied University

P.O.Box: 15008 Amman 11134 Jordan

00962-777404832, 00962-64790333

E-mail: dr_fawwaz77@bau.edu.jo or fawwaz77@yahoo.com

Abdallah S. Abualkanam

Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Ahliyya Amman University, Jordan

Abstract

The current research project aimed to examine the factors that lead to competition and cooperation between these two states. To effectively address this, the key research question was: what are the factors that cause divergence or convergence in the political interests of Iran and Turkey, and how do these factors affect their political relations. In line with this, it was hypothesized that the historical political relations of Iran and Turkey are characterized by competition and cooperation due to the diverging and converging political interests in the Middle East. The study used a systematic literature review of secondary and primary sources to gather relevant information. The study identified five key factors that cause the on and off patterns of the political relation between Iran and Turkey. The Arab Spring is a major cause of diverging interests between Iran and Turkey since it divides the allegiance of Middle East countries as to who has the best system of government. The political relations between Iran and Turkey is strained by their different stance on the Syrian crisis. While Turkey is opposed to Al-Assad's regime, Iran has given support to the regime. The two states are also divided due to the competition to control Iraq. However, the two states converging security interests have led to their cooperation in dealing with the Kurdish insurgents in the region. The two states are also supportive of one another in the Iranian nuclear program since it deters potential attacks from the West. To ensure that these countries cooperate for future political stability in the Middle East, they should emphasize on ironing out their diverging political interests in the Middle East. These two states should not compete over Iraq and Syria, instead, they should strive to identify the fundamental needs of these two states and support free and fair elections to establish civilian governments that enhance democracy, political stability, and economic growth and development of Iraq and Syria. Besides, Iran and Turkey should use their political influence to establish a united, a safe, and secure Middle East that thrives on democracy.

Keywords: Turkey, Iran, Political History, Convergence and Divergence

Introduction

Iran and Turkey are considered the oldest civilizations in the Middle East. The history of their political relations can be traced back to the 16th century during the rivalry between the Ottoman and Persian Empires (Bahgat, 2015). Iran and Turkey share a common geographical boundary, religion, culture, and political history that is characterized by cooperation and conflicts. These two states are major

players in the economic sector, the political sphere, and identity issues of the Middle East region. Both countries have a say in the political and security issues concerning the Middle East, a phenomenon that has put the two countries in a miasma of conflicts and cooperation. Initially, Iran was considered pro-Middle East since its policies were aligned towards gaining political and economic dominance as well as an increased partnership with states in the Middle East (Hazir, 2015). On the other hand, Turkey was more pro-western since its policies and strategies focused on building a positive relationship with Western states, the US and the UK, in particular. This is evident in Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its quest to join the European Union (Yarmohammadian, Omid, & Ebrahimi, 2017). The tension between these two countries is heightened by external and internal factors that destabilize their political spheres. For example, the upsurge of Kurdish militants, Iraqi and Syria security, and the nuclear program by Iran. Despite this, the political relations between these two countries have improved after the Iranian revolution and after AKP's rise to power in the year 2002 and after the invasion of Iraq by the US in the year 2003. The improved political relations have been exhibited by increased high profile visits between the leaders of these two countries.

Statement of the Problem

As already alluded to in the introduction, the political relations of Iran and Turkey is characterized by patterns of fondness and conflicts due to converging and diverging interests in the Middle East. After the political revolutions in these two countries, Iran and Turkey chose different models of government, which has been the major cause of ideological differences between them. Iran follows a theocratic system of government where religion plays a significant role as the religious leaders presides over major decisions in the country (Wang, 2011). On the other hand, Turkey follows a secular form of government, which Iran considers to be a major threat to their system of government due to its potential ability to spread revolutionary movements within the larger Middle East region. In recent decades, the Arab Spring gave a new impetus to the restrained political relationship between Iran and Turkey. The increased state of unrest and the pressure to bring about changes in the manner in which these countries are governed increased the rivalry between Iran and Turkey. As a result of the Arab Spring, Turkey has taken an assertive policy in the Middle East, a step that Iran considers to be a major threat to its ambitions of political dominance in the region (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). Turkey regards itself as a leading power in the region and many countries in the Middle East now view Turkey as such, viewing it as an example of a good model of the democratic political system. Conversely, Iran considers itself the only power that can challenge the US imperialism in the Middle East. Despite the collaborative efforts, these two countries have diverging interests on political matters such as the Kurdish issue, Syrian Crisis, Iraq issue, and the current Iran nuclear program, which strain the previous and current political relations, hence, the current unstable and volatile political relationship between the two countries.

Study Aims and Objectives

The current study aims to examine the key factors and the pattern of the history of the political relations between Iran and Turkey. In this regard, the objectives of this paper are as follows:

- i. To discuss the factors that cause a convergence in the political interests of Iran and Turkey and how they affect the political relations of the two countries.
- ii. To discuss the factors that cause a divergence in the political interests of Iran and Turkey and how they affect the political relations of the two countries.

Study Questions

To facilitate the achievement of the aim and objectives of the study as stated above, the current study will utilize the following questions:

- i. What are the key factors that cause a convergence of political interests between Iran-Turkey political relations?
- ii. What are the key factors that cause a divergence of political interests between Iran-Turkey political relations?

Hypothesis

As already stated in the statement of the problem pattern of relationship is perpetuated by the search power and dominance in the Middle East region and internal political issues in these countries (Hazir, 2015). To gain political dominance in the region and beyond, each state must deal with internal and external political factors affecting it. However, the two countries have failed to deal with their political differences, hence, the unstable political relations between them. Despite this, the two countries need one another to preserve their converging political interests. In this regard, it is hypothesized that Iran and Turkey have a co-opetition (cooperative and competitive) political relations due to their converging and diverging political interests in the Middle East and regions beyond.

Significance of the Study

The current study aims at providing in-depth insight into the history of political relations between Iran and Turkey. A larger percentage of literature on Iran-Turkey relations have focused on economic and trade partnership between these two countries. Only a few scholars have taken a superficial examination of the political relations between Iran and Turkey; however, they have failed to examine the internal and external factors and the convergence and divergence of political interest of these two countries contribute to a political relationship that is characterized by peace and conflicts at the same time. In light of this, the current study will fill the gap in knowledge on the history of the political relations between Iran and Turkey. The intense rivalry between these two countries contributes to the current political instability in the Middle East and the volatile state of affairs is not conducive for economic growth and development. Therefore, a long-lasting solution that boosts a stable political relationship between Iran and Turkey must be found and implemented. In this regard, the findings and the recommendations of this study will also be used in promoting economic and political stability between Iran and Turkey and the Middle East region at large.

Literature Review

Recent literature shows that that emergence of the Arab spring is one of the major causes of the intense political rivalry between Iran and Turkey. The Arab Spring is a major divisive factor between Iran and Turkey due to the different perspectives that they hold. From the Iranian perspective, the Arab Spring is an awakening of the Islamic states, which was triggered by the Islamic Revolution that took place in Iran in the year 1979 (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). On the other hand, Turkey considers Arab Spring as the realization of democratic rule and the desire for transparent governments among citizens of Arabian countries, a factor that Turkey considers to have originated from the Turkish democratic government, which is a role model for many countries in the Middle East and North African region. The Arab Spring intensified the rivalry between these two countries since both of them were looking for dominance in the Middle East. Initially, the Arab Spring elevated Iran's position in the region by reinforcing the fact the Islamic state's leadership was favored by the region's geopolitical order (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). However, the reality on the ground was that Iran was still susceptible to the various socio-economic and political issues that were affecting the other states the region and that led

to the toppling of other Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, the popularity of Iran declined in the eyes of many Arab states. On the contrary, the Arab Spring played a significant role in boosting the image of Turkey in the Middle East since its government was considered more democratic and transparent as compared to that of Iran (Larrabee & Nader, 2013).

Another major external factor that leads to an unpredictable state of the Iran-Turkey political relations are the different positions on the Syrian crisis. Turkey has been a major critique of the Assad-led regime that has subjected millions of Syrians into a state of humanitarian crisis (Uzun, 2013). Upon the unexpected outbreak of the war in Syria, Erdogan of Turkey urged the Syrian President Al-Assad to implement immediate reforms that would reduce the social tension and cause a political crisis in the country. Instead, President Al-Assad increased his repressive measures against civilians who were opposed to his leadership. As a result, the Turkish government became more critical of the Syrian government and provided support to the Syrian opposition to fight against the government. On the other hand, the government of Iran sided with the Syrian government, a measure that caused serious political tug of war between Ankara and Tehran (Hazir, 2015). The Iranian government's alignment with Al-Assad's regime is a major violation of the stance that is held by most of the Islamic States since it is a violation of human rights, which they aim at protecting. This has been a major cause of the strenuous political relationship between Iran and Turkey. In addition to this, Turkey has diverged further from the interests of Iran by aligning itself with the Sunni insurgents, as a result, winning more support among many states in the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, Iran has constantly viewed Turkey as a threat to its Iranian national security and political stability in the Middle East (Unver, 2016). Besides, the government of Iran considers Turkey as a major stumbling block towards its economic and political dominance in the region.

The competition over Iraq has strained the political relations between Tehran and Ankara. The two countries have been divided over Iraq since the invasion of Iraq by the US-led forces in the year 2003. Historically, Iran's political policies have been more aligned to the issues concerning the Middle East while Turkey emphasized on improving its ties with the West (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). In the past few years, the US's gradual withdrawal from Iraq has led to a power vacuum in the country, hence, attracting the interests of both Tehran and Ankara. Iran has had positive political ties with Iraq way long even before the invasion by the US-led forces. This is contrary to the state of affairs between Turkey and Iraq since Turkey did not approve of Saddam Hussein's leadership. The differences in the perspectives of these two countries regarding Iraq has led to an unstable and volatile political relationship between them. The two countries have backed opposing political parties, for example, while Turkey supports the secular Al-Iraqiya coalition that supports a non-sectarian approach to the future of Iraq, Iran supports the Shi's parties during elections (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). Currently, the government of Turkey has established a strong political relationship with the Northern Iraq Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), a move that has escalated the tension between Turkey and the Iraqi and Iran governments. Iranian Prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has shown its undivided support for the Shi'a parties and is currently making efforts to influence the Kurds and Sunnis of Iraq. These efforts have been translated by Ankara as an intrusion of the Turkish international interests by Iran since Turkey has been supporting the Kurdish community, hence, increased political tension between Iran and Turkey.

The political relations between Iran and Turkey has not been always full of conflicts since there are some converging political interests between these two countries. One of the notable internal political issues of concern that is affecting them is the problem of the Kurdish community (Sinkaya, 2012). The Kurdish issue is considered an issue of convergent interest between these two countries since both of them have Kurdish populations in their land. Iran faces the problem of dealing with the Kurdish insurgents who are in constant resistance of the government (Sinkaya, 2012). Similarly, Turkey has a considerable large proportion of the Kurdish population and this present security challenges due to the incessant insurgent acts by a member of this community. The Kurdish community in the Middle East countries have been constantly pushing to form an independent state of

their won. This has presented a major security challenge for both Iran and Turkey government who do not want the independent Kurdish to see the light of day. This security issue of concern has led to increased political ties between the governments of Iran and that of Turkey as they seek to come up with effective strategies to suppress the Kurdish insurgents. As a result, these two countries have turned into the sharing of intelligence regarding the illegal activities of the Kurdish insurgents. The two governments have come together to stage a military offensive against members of the Kurdish insurgents. Despite the increased political ties to eliminate the Kurdish threat, other literature shows that the Kurdish issue is also a cause of conflicts in the political relations between Iran and Turkey. According to Larrabee and Nader (2013), The Turkish government believes that the Iranian government has been providing military support to the Kurdish insurgents and that this has led to the rise of violence that was attributed to the PKK in the year 2011.

In the past few years, the political relationship between Iran and Turkey has been on and off due to the Iran nuclear program. According to Dalay (2017), the nuclear issue has emerged to be the most delicate and contentious in the history of the political relationship between Iran and Turkey; however, it has formed the basis for political conflicts and cooperation between the two countries. Iran nuclear program can be traced back to the year 1950 when Iran and the US worked together in a nuclear program referred to as Atoms for Peace. The collaboration between the US and Iran in Atoms for Peace came to an end after the Iranian Revolution in the year 1979 when the last Iranian Shah was overthrown from leadership and since then the nuclear program has strained the political relations between Iran and Turkey. Turkey considers Iran's nuclear program as a threat to Turkish national security (Fuat, 2016). Turkish leaders such as Erdogan has incessantly expressed their fears about the ongoing nuclear program in Iran arguing that there is a high likelihood that Iran can launch nuclear attacks on Turkey. This has increased the political tension between these two countries especially due to their search for supremacy in the Middle East region. As a result, the Turkish government has not shown its support for Iran's nuclear program since it creates a major imbalance of power in the Middle East region (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). On the other hand, the Iranian government argues that its nuclear program is aimed at ensuring the safety and security of its citizens, especially now that Iran is under threats of external attacks from the US and Israel. Despite this, Turkey has not sided with the Western powers in condemning Iran for its nuclear program. Besides, Turkey has been supportive of Iran in the phase of US sanctions, a factor that shows that the two countries have diverging and converging political interests in the Middle East region and beyond.

Methodology

To gather relevant information that will help in addressing the research question above, the current research study will utilize a systematic literature review method on the topic under study. According to Creswell (2014), a systematic literature review refers to a method of data collection that involves the identification and evaluation of relevant existing sources on the topic under study in a bid to answer the research question. Currently, there is numerous publication on the history of the political relationship between Iran and Turkey, therefore, the current study will look at both the primary and secondary sources on the topic under study. The researcher will examine the sources and identify major arguments and findings on Iran-Turkey political relations, which will then be used to answer the research question. The primary sources to be considered include online newspaper sources and interviews between journalists and political analysis experts. In addition to this, the study will look at secondary sources including books and peer-reviewed journal articles that contain information about Iran-Turkey relations. To find relevant sources, the researcher will search various political science and international relation databases such as Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, Public Affairs Information Services, ProQuest Political Science, and International Relations and Area Studies Gateway (IREON). In addition to this, Google Scholar was also used to identify some of the books and

journal articles with relevant information regarding the topic of study. Since the current study is concerned with historical facts, the sources used were not limited in terms of year of publication.

Analysis and Discussion

The current study aims to examine the key factors and the pattern of the history of the political relations between Iran and Turkey. Based on the literature review, five dominant factors determine the pattern of the history Iran-Turkey political relations namely the Arab Spring, The Syrian Crisis, Competition over Iraq, The Kurdish Issue, and the Iran Nuclear Program.

The Arab Spring is one of the major external factors that have strained the political relations of Iran and Turkey over the past decades. The Arab Spring has pitted Iran and Turkey against one another by dividing the loyalty of other Middle East countries into two camps. For instance, Islamic states such as Iraq side with Iran due to the commonly shared theocratic forms of governments, which are believed to have originated from the Iranian Revolution of the 1979 (Kirişci, 2019). On the contrary, Turkey has gained the support of many other Arab countries in the Middle East since their form of government is a perfect model of the democratic governments that they have been looking for during the Arab Spring. In this regard, it is apparent that the Arab Spring has increased the intensity of the rivalry between Iran and Turkey. Hence, the two countries have entered into a competition with one another to win the support of other countries in the Middle East, which is consistent with the current study's hypothesis that Iran and Turkey's political relation is characterized with competition against one another.

Another dominant factor that contributes to a co-opetition political relationship between Iran and Turkey is the Syrian crisis. Recent literature shows that these two states have been divided on the issue of Syria, whereby, Turkey is against President Al-Assad's suppression of the citizens while Iran is in full support of Al-Assad's regime (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). The division over the Syrian crisis has led to a strained political relationship between these two states due to diverging policies and political interests. Turkey considers Al-Assad's brutality against the Syrian insurgents and innocent civilians a major violation of human rights and a deviation from the government's role of protecting its people. However, Iran supports the current regime to win the support of the Syrian government to its side. The division between these two states over the Syrian issue is fanned by their perceived alignment with the two world's leading superpowers namely, the US and Russia. Iran is known to be aligned with Russia and plays a major role in advancing the foreign policies of Russia in the Middle East (Calabrese, 1998). On the contrary, Turkey is popular for its pro-west alignment, with the US, in particular. The two global antagonists play a major role in elevating the political tension between Iran and Turkey making the two countries to compete for supremacy in the Middle East.

In a tight link to the issue of supremacy and power balance in the Middle East, the current research has proven that the patterns of the political relations between Iran and Turkey are defined by the Iraq issue. Just like the Syrian issue, Turkey and Iran have been divided over Iraq. According to Ehteshami and Elik (2011), the competition over who to occupy Iraq after the withdrawal of the US forces is a major cause of conflicts in the political relations between Iran and Turkey. These two countries aim at gaining political dominance in the Middle East, and having a major influence over Iraq is one of the key foreign policies of these two states. Iran considers Iraq key to its national security agenda, therefore, Iran aims at keeping a friendly relationship with Iraq to prevent any security threats from Iraq (Bas, 2013). On the other hand, Turkey is a major stumbling block to Iran's realization of this political goal. Turkey's government is concerned with establishing a more economically and politically stable country in Iraq according to the Turkish interests. However, Turkey lacks close ties with the Iraqi religious Shia leaders as compared to Iran. As a result, concerns over Iraq has caused intense competition between Iran and Turkey even in their efforts to maintain a stable political relationship.

Despite the strained political relationship between Iran and Turkey as discussed above, the current research has proven that the political relations between these two countries are characterized by

cooperation due to converging interests. Both Iran and Turkey face internal and external security threats, therefore, despite the competition as discussed above, these two political rivals have resulted in political rapprochement. According to the literature, the Kurdish issue is one of the major security threats that have forced a rapprochement in the political relations between Iran and Turkey (Zweiri & Staffell, 2009). These two states have a considerably large Kurdish population; however, this community has been marginalized by the governments, hence, they have formed insurgent groups that are a threat to the national security of these countries. Neither Iran nor Turkey wants the emergence of an established Kurdish insurgent group in the soil. The Kurdish insurgents are a serious threat to the political stability and the economic growth and development of these two states since they are associated with terrorist activities that can disrupt the operations of the governments of these two countries. Therefore, these two countries have come together in sharing intelligence on how to suppress the Kurdish insurgents.

Another dominant factor that has led to a rapprochement between Iran and Turkey is the Iran nuclear program. The Iran nuclear program, which began in the mid-20th century in collaboration with the US has been going on long after the withdrawal of the US from the program (Hilterman, 2018). The Iranian government has continued with the nuclear program and this has raised global security concerns and conflicts between Iran and the US. The Iran nuclear program has raised security concerns in Turkey who felt threatened by the imbalance of power that is created by Iran's possession of nuclear weapons (Gaouette, 2019). However, by looking at the larger picture, Turkey has never publicly condemned Iran for its nuclear program, instead, Turkey has been supportive of Iran over this issue.

Iran nuclear has led to a rapprochement between Iran and Turkey due to the perceived security that the nuclear weapons in possession of Iran create to Turkey and the Middle East at large. The Middle East is under a constant security threat from Western powers, the US, in particular. According to Clarke and Tabatabai (2018), Iran's nuclear program is as a result of the vulnerability and the fear that Iran has over potential attacks from the US and Israel, therefore, the nuclear program is a major deterrent from potential attacks not only on Iran but in any country in the Middle East. Initially, Turkey aligned its policies with those of the west; however, in recent decades, Turkey has changed its policies to focus on the Middle East. The diversion of attention from the West has made Turkey susceptible to attacks from the west. Therefore, Turkey needs the support of Middle Eastern countries to address its national security issues. In this regard, a collaboration with Iran, its immediate geographical neighbor, that is considered to be powerful enough to challenge the US, especially now with the possession of nuclear weapons was the next best alternative. In this regard, the need for security from external and internal threats has improved the political ties between Iran and Turkey.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the analysis and discussion in the section above, it is apparent that the aims and objectives, as well as the research questions, were answered, therefore, the formulated hypothesis was proven to be right. The study hypothesizes that the historical political relations of Iran and Turkey are characterized by competition and cooperation due to the diverging and converging political interests in the Middle East. The research aimed to examine the factors that lead to competition and cooperation between these two states. The findings show that the Arab spring is a major cause of rivalry between these two countries by dividing them based on the model of governments that they follow. While some Middle East countries identify with the theocratic form of government of Iran, some identify with the secular democratic form of government of Turkey. The search for political supremacy in the Middle East is another factor that leads to competition between Iran and Turkey as they scramble to have the largest influence in Iraq. The withdrawal of the US forces after the 2003 invasion has left a power vacuum in Iraq, as a result, the two countries strive to control Iraq; however, with different political ideologies that lead to conflicts between them. These two states are also divided over the Syrian crisis with their governments supporting different political blocks. Despite the conflicts, Iran and Iraq political ties are

characterized by cooperation since they have converging political interests. The Kurdish issue has boosted the political ties between the two states as they exchange information on how to handle the Kurdish insurgents that have posed major security threats to the two governments. Another cause of cooperation between Iran and Turkey is the Iran nuclear program. The nuclear program is a major deterrent factor for potential attacks of any country in the Middle East. In its pursuit of political dominance in the Middle East and its vulnerability to the US, Iran has resulted in continuing with its nuclear program. Turkey has supported Iran's program and even in dealing with US sanctions.

To ensure cooperation that will lead to stable political relations between Iran and Turkey and one that would lead to political stability and economic growth and development in the Middle East, it is recommended that the two states should strive to iron out their diverging political interests in the Middle East. In this regard, Iran and Turkey should integrate their political systems to accommodate one another. The theocratic form of Iranian government should embrace the elements of democracy that are brought about by the Turkish model of government. This will relieve the tension between these two most powerful Middle East states while at the same time eliminating the animosity that exists among other Middle Eastern countries that are divided between these two blocks. It is also recommended that the two states should not compete over Iraq and Syria, instead, they should strive to identify the fundamental needs of these two states and support free and fair elections to establish civilian governments that enhance democracy, political stability, and economic growth and development of Iraq and Syria. Finally, it is recommended that Iran and Turkey should use their political influence to establish a united, a safe, and secure Middle East that thrives on democracy.

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Turkey-Iran relations.2. Most analysts tended to attribute emerging sources of tension in bilateral relations to the revival of an historical Turkish-Iranian rivalry that dates back to the 15th century.3 It is widely assumed that interwoven geopolitical and ideological considerations accompany that rivalry. Nevertheless, the arguments that improvement of economic and political relations between Turkey and Iran. By rationalization I mean the promotion of economic interactions and cooperation that divergence of the Turkish approach towards the Middle East from the West. on a number of issues contributed to the improvement of Turkish-Iranian ties. However, Turkey-Iran relations did not turn into a strategic partnership due to the ideological and political differences of the two states. However, the relationship between Turkey and Iran has a history longer than the JDP rule in Turkey. Considering their age-old acquaintance, the recent development of an apparently close relationship between the two raises the following questions: What are the major trends in Turkish-Iranian relations? And, how has the JDP's rise to power affected those relations? In other words, what has changed in the relationship between Turkey and Iran since the JDP came to power? 2 This research paper aims to provide a trajectory of Turkish-Iranian relations particularly over the last two decades. It argues that throughout the long history of bilateral relations between them, Turkey and Iran have developed a kind of diplomatic culture in their dealings with each other. The history of relations between countries, and good or bad memories of each other have their impact on current and future affairs. In this respect, the history of the US-Turkish relations is qualified to be called a "friendship." But, we all know that friendship is like "fine china." When broken, it can be mended or fixed, but cracks remain. Turkey is capable of playing a key role in the process of democratization and in creating the conditions for peace and stability in this region. This is not to say that the relations between the USA and Turkey have always been free from problems and immune from tension. History has always been constructed and directed by "political might," and this power derives from the proper reading of the historical process. This means that the political aspect of relations between Iran and Russia has overshadowed economic aspects of those relations. Keyword(s): CONVERGENCE, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS, DIVERGENCE, CONVERGENCE, IRAN, RUSSIA. References: Persian Abstract Yearly Visit 45. Latest on Blog. Not.