

## Turkey and Iran's Complicated Relationship

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### Introduction

At first glance it seems that Turkey, the United States, Israel and Europe share many, if not all, of the same goals vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear issue. All have proclaimed their determination to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, invested in technologies to defend against the Islamic Republic's growing missile capabilities, and squared off at one time or another with the Iranian regime. However, there remain serious disagreements about how best to pressure Iran to be more forthcoming with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about alleged weaponization experiments.<sup>1</sup> Turkey in particular has taken a much different approach than its Western counterparts. Instead of supporting sanctions backed by the threat of military action, policymakers in Ankara have left both off the table in favor of robust diplomatic engagement.

The policy differences are tied closely to differing assumptions about Iran's nuclear intent and the urgency of the threat. Many in the West see Iran's history of concealment and its dual track development of ballistic missiles and WMD capability as an indication of its ill intent. Turkey, by and large, agrees with its Western counterparts about the severity of Iran's previous nuclear indiscretions, but it differs in its assumption about Iran's true intentions. Absent the urgency of the threat, Ankara has dedicated its efforts to facilitating dialogue and preventing conflict. At times, the strategy has run afoul of Western efforts to sanction Iran and coerce the regime into making diplomatic concessions. As a result, Turkey has often times found itself wedged uncomfortably between its traditional Western allies and its centuries old neighbor.

### Turkey and the West Differ over Iran: Differing Security Considerations

Turkey - which has shared a relatively peaceful border with its Eastern neighbor since the two signed the Treaty of Kasri-i Sirin in 1639 and the Treaty of Erzurum in 1847 - has sought to work with Iran in areas of mutual interest. This approach, however, is balanced with a wide spread recognition that the two have a long-standing rivalry that has ebbed and flowed according to the geo-political realities of the time. Since the late 1990s, Turkey has concluded that its immediate short-term interests - growing the economy and combatting Kurdish insurgents - necessitate engaging Iran, encouraging stability, and preventing conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete summary of Iran's alleged weaponization experiments please refer to: "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Report by the Director General, The International Atomic Energy Agency, 8 November 2011, [http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/IAEA\\_Iran\\_8Nov2011.pdf](http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf).

Turkish policy is influenced by a number of differing objectives. With regards to the Western policy, Turkey believes that the sanctions led approach hurts the chances for a negotiated settlement. Ankara maintains that sanctions empower the elements of the regime more interested in weapons development at the expense of the moderates willing to make concessions. Turkey bases its assumptions on its experiences during and after the first Gulf War. Turkey had a front row seat to the pain and suffering caused by the United Nations Security Council sanctions in Iraq, and their inability to lessen in the slightest Saddam Hussein's iron grip on power. Turkish officials argue that instead of bringing about the conditions for Saddam Hussein's removal, the sanctions actually allowed Hussein to enrich himself and pass the country's economic malaise off on the West and the sanctions.

Turkey fears that the sanctions against Iran will have the same effect and will eventually pave the way for military action. Drawing reference from its post-Gulf War experience, Ankara believes that the fall-out from military strikes will have negative consequences for the economy and for stability in the already tense and turbulent Kurdish majority southeast. In the minds of many policymakers, Iran, since it started to crack down on insurgents linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), is an important source of regional stability and a valuable partner in its anti-PKK military campaign.<sup>2</sup>

An American lead military campaign aimed at regime change, or a more limited strike against Iran's nuclear sites, would lead to chaos, upset regional stability, and could lead to a factional conflict similar to what is taking place in Iraq. Despite not seeing eye-to-eye on a host of other issues, Turkey and Iran share an interest in preventing military action, blunting sanctions, and lessening the foreign military footprint in the region.

In addition, both have identified nuclear energy as a critical part of their energy futures. This has led both to interpret Article IV of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) similarly (see NPT Article IV: The Final Piece of the Puzzle below). Consequently, there are some in Turkey who see Western overreach in their handling of the nuclear issue. Most notably, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has defended Iran's right to enrichment and continually points out the perceived hypocrisy of the West's silence on Israel's nuclear weapons program compared to their loud condemnation of Iran's alleged weapons experiments.<sup>3</sup>

### **The AK Party and Iran: Energy and Economics**

Turkey relies on Iran for a large part of its imported energy and has long sought greater access to the Iranian market to lessen its large trade imbalance. While the policy of greater economic ties with regional neighbors did not originate with the AKP, the party has certainly benefitted from and come to symbolize Turkey's economic return to the Middle East. In 2011, Turkish –

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<sup>2</sup> Omer Taspinar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism," Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2008, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10\\_taspinar\\_final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> During a 2012 trip to Tehran Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said, "Israel has between 250 and 300 nuclear warheads. Nobody is discussing that . . ." "Israeli attack on Iran will devastate Middle East: Erdogan," *Press TV*, 1 April 2012, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/234090.html>.

Iranian trade reached \$16 billion, though much of the increase was tied to Turkey's growing import of Iranian energy.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey imports about one fifth of its natural gas and one third of its oil from Iran. Consequently, Ankara is far more exposed to the negative consequences of coercive policies aimed at Iran's oil and gas industry. However, as the EU and U.S. sanctions have tightened, Turkey has turned to Western preferred Saudi Arabia and Libya to offset reductions in Iranian crude imports. The AKP has maintained that Turkish businesses are not required to comply with Western unilateral sanctions, but it appears that Tupras - Turkey's national oil refinery – has succumbed to Western pressure. Since the December 2011 passage of tighter EU and U.S. Sanctions, Turkey has reduced its imports from Iran by twenty percent.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey's booming economy, which had turned to Iran to compensate for an expected slow down in business caused by the European economic crisis and the Arab revolts, have also felt the effect of the tightening sanctions. The latest sanctions have led to a fifty-five percent plunge in the value of the Iranian rial versus the U.S. dollar,<sup>6</sup> which has made Turkish products more expensive for Iranian businesses. In addition, all but one Turkish bank have stopped processing payments for Iranian customers. The combination of the higher prices, and the difficulties in sending payment, has led to a rapid decline in Turkish exports to Iran.<sup>7</sup> According to the Wall Street Journal, "Turkish exports to Iran, - which surged 12-fold in the past decade to top \$3.5 billion last year - plunged 25% in January from December [2012], as sanctions pushed the real value of Iran's currency, the rial, . . . lower against the dollar."

#### **NPT Article IV: A Critical Piece of the Puzzle**

While the Arab revolts have derailed the primary goals of the AKP's foreign policy, and Turkey's diplomatic defense of Iran has waned, the underlying assumptions about the country's Iran policy remain unchanged. The two still share many points in common about the non-nuclear weapons states' access to civilian nuclear technology and the right of all states to pursue peaceful nuclear programs.<sup>8</sup> One of Turkey's critical foreign policy goals has been to ensure that Western efforts to control the spread of nuclear technology do not infringe on the three pillars

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<sup>4</sup> "In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey," The International Crisis Group, Middle East and Europe Report N°116, 23 February 2012, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Iran/116--in-heavy-waters-irans-nuclear-program-the-risk-of-war-and-lessons-from-turkey.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Iran/116--in-heavy-waters-irans-nuclear-program-the-risk-of-war-and-lessons-from-turkey.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey to cut Iran oil imports," Reuters, 30 March 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/30/turkey-iran-oil-idUSL6E8EU39G20120330>.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Parkinson, "Iran Sanctions Put Wrinkle in Turkish Trade," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 March 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203961204577271281095768586.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> "We Need To Accept Fact That Turkey Does Not Have Oil And Natural Gas Reserves, Says Energy Minister Yildiz," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 9 September 2011, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/123019/we-need-to-accept-fact-that-turkey-does-not-have-oil-and-natural-gas-reserves-says-energy-minister-yildiz.html>.

of the NPT - nonproliferation, disarmament, and the right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey opposed the American led efforts at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to place non-NPT compliant limits on the spread of enrichment and reprocessing technologies. Ankara was particularly concerned about the proposals to impose “subjective” criterion on the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing technologies.<sup>10</sup> The proposed criterion would have forced the supplying state to consider whether the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing facilities would affect regional security and stability.<sup>11</sup> Ankara worried that its proximity to Iran and Syria, both states that are alleged to have pursued weapons of mass destruction, could be used a justification to deny it nuclear technology transfers. Turkey did eventually support conditioning the transfer of sensitive technologies on adherence to the Additional Protocol and compliance with IAEA safeguards.

Turkey’s nuclear power industry will be completely dependent on foreign technology transfers. Like other new nuclear energy producers, Turkey hopes to partner with foreign suppliers to train a new cadre of nuclear physicists and engineers so that it can begin to exploit the technology indigenously in the future. Officials point to NPT Article IV and the promise that the non-nuclear weapons states would maintain an inalienable right to nuclear technology, in exchange for their agreeing not to seek or develop nuclear weapons as justification for their nuclear views.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently, Turkey has maintained that all NPT states, including Iran, have the right to pursue and possess peaceful nuclear technology. Turkey has criticized Iran for its violation of the NPT and its safeguards obligations, but it has not endorsed the Western and Israeli calls for Iran to give up its enrichment program completely. The Turkish policy has centered on prodding the Islamic Republic to re-implement the Additional Protocol and the provisions contained in modified code 3.1. However, the language used is calibrated to Turkey’s interest in downplaying tensions and its commitment to negotiations, rather than the coercive approach favored by the Western states.

### **Turkey and the West Mend Fences: The Arab Spring Shakes Things Up**

Despite the incentives to cooperate, serious tensions have emerged over influence in the post-Arab Revolutionary world. The more recent tensions have largely overshadowed the fact that Turkey and Iran’s initial policy responses to the Arab Revolts were largely aligned. Both shared an interest in the ousting of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and opposed, albeit for

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron Stein, “Understanding Turkey’s Position on the Iranian Nuclear Program”, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 12 January 2012,

[http://cns.miis.edu/wmdjunction/120112\\_turkey\\_iran\\_nuclear.htm](http://cns.miis.edu/wmdjunction/120112_turkey_iran_nuclear.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Fred McGoldrick, Matthew Bunn, Martin Malin and William H. Tobey, “Limiting Transfers of Enrichment and Reprocessing Technology: Issues, Constraints, Option,” Project on Managing the Atom, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 2011, <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/MTA-NSG-report-color.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Official from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (name withheld due to conference format and Chatham house rules), Ankara Workshop on Nuclear Proliferation, Ankara, Turkey, June 2011.

very different reasons, foreign intervention in Libya.<sup>13</sup> The turning point in the post-Arab revolution relations was when Turkey backtracked on its opposition to the imposition of no-fly zone, and began to openly and forcefully support the Libyan rebels and their NATO/Arab allies.<sup>14</sup>

The NATO backed and executed operation to oust former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was viewed negatively in Iran, and when viewed through the larger prism of the West's relative silence about the events in Bahrain, as part of a larger plot to install pro-Western leaders in the region. Iran sees the Western/Turkish support for the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Saudi invasion as evidence of its double standards, and more broadly as evidence for its claims that the West is intent on influencing the revolts for its own political benefit.

The schisms have gotten worse as the violence in Syria has spun out of control. At the outset, Turkey and Iran both shared an interest in preventing foreign intervention in Syria. Both initially called for Syrian President Bashar Assad to implement reforms and listen to the demands of its people, rather than step down immediately.<sup>15</sup> Ankara reasoned that it could leverage its close relationship with Assad to convince him to make changes. Only after Assad had repeatedly spurned Turkey's efforts, and the violence escalated, did Turkey change its position and join the Western calls for Assad to step aside.

Iran, on the other hand, has maintained its support for the Syrian regime. It has held firm to its calls that Assad implement top down democratic reforms, but the Islamic republic has stopped far short of calling for the regime to step down. Iran's unease has grown as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two regional rivals, have thrown their diplomatic and financial weight behind the Syrian opposition.<sup>16</sup>

From the Iranian perspective, the region's Sunni heavyweights – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – and the Western powers have hijacked the uprisings for their own political gain. Policymakers in Tehran point to the alleged arming of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the political support of the Syrian National Council (SNC) - a loose coalition of rebels with alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni groups<sup>17</sup> - as evidence of their claims.<sup>18</sup> The AK Party believes that it can leverage its historical connections with the Muslim Brotherhood to curry favor and influence in the future Middle East. Iran, however, has struggled to make inroads with the

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<sup>13</sup> "Turkey calls for cease-fire in Libya, opposes intervention," *Today's Zaman*, 19 March 2011, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-238619-turkey-calls-for-cess-fire-in-libya-opposes-intervention.html>. "NATO's Libya attacks have only led to destruction of infrastructure: Iran," IRDiplomacy.com, 4 April 2011, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/52/bodyView/14398/NATO's.Libya.attacks.have.only.led.to.destructi.on.of.infrastructure:.Iran.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Sam Dagher, "Turkey Reveals Quiet Rebel Payments," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 August 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903461304576526173935320088.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Turkey against international intervention in Syria," *Today's Zaman*, 3 April 2011, [http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=240033](http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=240033).

<sup>16</sup> Martin Chulov and Ewen MacAskill, "Saudi Arabia plans to fund Syria rebel army," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/22/saudi-arabia-syria-rebel-army>.

<sup>17</sup> Randa Slim, "Meet Syria's Opposition," *Foreign Policy.com*, 2 November 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/02/meet\\_syrias\\_opposition](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/02/meet_syrias_opposition).

<sup>18</sup> Iran Interview

Brotherhood because of its Shi'i majority population and lingering anger amongst the Brotherhood over Musa Sadr's Fatwa<sup>19</sup> proclaiming that Syria's Allawites were Shi'i.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Turkey's confidence about the viability of the "Turkish political model" and the depth of its relationships with the emerging Sunni backed political parties, the regional political fault lines have become more pronounced. Turkish relations with Iraq and Bashar Assad's beleaguered Syria have deteriorated rapidly. Given the prevailing security situation, Turkey has once again been working to shore up stability by deepening relations with sympathetic states in the region and its traditional Western allies.

### **Tensions Complicate the Relationship: Iran and Turkey's Relationship Suffers**

In the nuclear sphere, the tensions have largely overshadowed Turkey's previous diplomatic successes with Iran. While imperfect, Turkey, Brazil and Iran did agree on a deal that called on Iran to ship out in one batch 1,200 kg of its 3.5 percent enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment and the on to France for fuel rod fabrication. Once completed, France would then ship the fuel rods back to Iran for use in the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).<sup>21</sup> The proposal was originally backed by the West, but after close to a year of diplomatic back and forth and disagreements about the place and the amount of material to be swapped, enthusiasm waned considerably.

Iran's nearly year long back and forth, coupled with the fact that the Tehran Declaration was agreed upon just days before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was scheduled to vote on sanctions, reinforced the wide spread belief that Tehran was using stall tactics and small diplomatic concessions to solicit a Russian and Chinese veto.<sup>22</sup> Dismayed by the Security Council's cool reaction, Turkey and Brazil voted no to UNSC Resolution 1929.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'Allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (London: MacMillian Press Ltd., 1997), pg. 111

<sup>20</sup> Walter Posch, Senior Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, e-mail message to the author, 26 March 2012.

<sup>21</sup> "In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey," The International Crisis Group, Middle East and Europe Report N°116, 23 February 2012, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Iran/116--in-heavy-waters-irans-nuclear-program-the-risk-of-war-and-lessons-from-turkey.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Iran/116--in-heavy-waters-irans-nuclear-program-the-risk-of-war-and-lessons-from-turkey.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Fareed Zakaria for Time Magazine U.S. President Obama said, "We actually put forward a very serious proposal that would have allowed them [Iran] to display good faith. They need medical isotopes; there was a way to take out some of their low-enriched uranium so that they could not — so that there was clarity that they were not stockpiling that to try to upgrade to weapons-grade uranium. In exchange, the international community would provide the medical isotopes that they needed for their research facility. And they delayed and they delayed, and they hemmed and they hawed, and then when finally the Brazilian-Turkey proposal was put forward, it was at a point where they were now declaring that they were about to move forward on 20% enriched uranium, which would defeat the whole purpose of showing good faith that they weren't stockpiling uranium that could be transformed into weapons-grade."

Fareed Zakaria, "Inside Obama's World: The President talks to TIME About the Changing Nature of American Power," *Time Swampland*, <http://swampland.time.com/2012/01/19/inside-obamas-world-the-president-talks-to-time-about-the-changing-nature-of-american-power/#ixzz1rGUYVcf8>

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1929, 9 June 2010, [http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/UNSCR\\_1929.pdf](http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/UNSCR_1929.pdf).

Turkey's no vote did solicit some sympathy from Iran, but much of the good will was soon squandered. On the Turkish side, Iran's continued refusals to lessen import tariffs and grant Turkey most favored nation economic status continued to prevent closer cooperation. In Iran, there was the belief that Turkey was using the nuclear issue to catapult itself to the center of world affairs. Turkey, in contrast, believed that Iran should have been grateful for its diplomatic defense and consider what its no vote meant for its relationship with the West.

In tandem, tensions have flared over the price of Iranian natural gas. Turkey pays \$500 for one thousand cubic meters of Iranian natural gas, compared to \$330 for Azeri natural gas and \$400 for Russian natural gas.<sup>24</sup> The reason for the price difference stems from conditions in Turkey and Iran's 1996 natural gas supply agreement. The twenty-five year agreement mandates that Iran supply Turkey with 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year. Turkey, however, imports considerably less. However, because of a "take or pay" clause, Turkey is still obligated to pay for a pre-determined amount of natural gas even if it purchases less than 87% of the agreed upon total. In 2002, Turkey was able to lower the threshold figure to 70%, but given the inflated prices, Turkey has continued to try and renegotiate the terms of the deal. Iran, naturally, is resisting and Turkey has indicated that it is considering taking Iran to an international arbitration court to secure better terms.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship really took a turn for the worse after Turkey and the United States made the final preparations for the deployment of a high-powered radar for NATO's ballistic missile shield at a military base in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> The Iranian regime's vocal barbs noticeably sharpened thereafter. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh warned, "If any threat is staged against Iran, we will target NATO's missile shield in Turkey and will then attack other targets."<sup>27</sup>

Given the stakes and the growing tensions, Ankara has sought to carve out a niche in the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Ankara's goal is to bring the P5+1's demands more broadly into alignment with its own objectives. It has sought to do so by trying to establish itself as a trusted go-between capable of helping to bridge the gap between the two sides. The approach is underpinned by Ankara's desire to bring about regional stability, while also lessening Iran's influence in general. To be sure, Ankara's pre-Arab revolt policies were also aimed at blunting Iranian influence through out the region.<sup>28</sup> However, as the violence has picked up, Iran and Turkey have increasingly found themselves supporting different and opposing political factions and Turkey's efforts to isolate Iran have become more pronounced.

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<sup>24</sup> Ergin Hava, "Turkish-Iranian gas conundrum: high time for statesmanship," *Today's Zaman*, 18 March 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-274598-turkish-iranian-gas-conundrum-high-time-for-statesmanship.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Justin Vela, "Turkey: Ankara Engaged in Energy Balancing Act," *Eurasianet.org*, 4 April 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65224>.

<sup>26</sup> For a full explanation of Turkey's missile defense plans please refer to . . . (Missile Defense brief)

<sup>27</sup> "IRGC Commander: Iran to Target NATO Missile Shield if Attacked," *Fars News Agency*, 26 November 2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007274969>.

<sup>28</sup> Omer Taspinar, "The Anatomy of Turkey's Iran Policy (1)," *Today's Zaman*, 26 July 2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-217169-the-anatomy-of-turkeys-iran-policy-i.html>.

## Turkey's Changes Tack: From Mediator to Facilitator

Turkey's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue noticeably changed in the months following the failed TRR deal. During the yearlong negotiations, Ankara sought to mediate the dispute between the Western Powers and the Islamic Republic. However, after the P5+1 spurned the Tehran Declaration, and relations with Iran began to sour, Turkey shifted its focus towards facilitating dialogue. The goal was create a better environment for diplomacy, rather than get in between the West and Iran.

To this end, Turkey has hosted two rounds of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in Istanbul. The first set of talks took place in January 2011. The two sides, however, failed to agree on a comprehensive agenda for the talks. Nevertheless, the Turkish foreign ministry, which played a limited role during the actual negotiations themselves, maintains that its close relationship with Iran and its continued diplomatic outreach was critical in securing Iran's participation in the first place.

In April 2012, a second round of negotiations was held in Istanbul, but this time around Turkey's role in the run up to the meeting was much less pronounced. Moreover, the simmering Turkish-Iranian tensions prompted Tehran to request a change of venue at the last minute from Istanbul to a friendlier environment like Baghdad, Beirut, or China.<sup>29</sup> Despite Iran's last minute venue change request, talks went ahead as planned and the P5+1 and Iran agreed on a follow up meeting in Iran preferred Baghdad in late May. Despite Turkey's limited role in the face-to-face negotiations, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu worked hard to facilitate dialogue behind the scenes, including allowing his vacated office to be used by chief P5+1 negotiator Catherine Ashton and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili.<sup>30</sup>

## A Renewed Push for Regional Stability

For pragmatic and geo-strategic reasons, Turkey's diplomatic efforts have focused on creating an atmosphere conducive for the on-going nuclear talks. Ankara's efforts are driven by a desire to prolong the discussions, in order to prevent American or Israeli preventative military action. Already faced with sectarian issues in neighboring Iraq, an unstable Syria, and a region in transition, Turkey fears that the fall out from military action would be destabilizing and further hurt its security interests. However, Erdogan has drastically tamped down his public support for Iran's nuclear enrichment program, in favor of a more subdued approach that seeks to prod Iran to be more conciliatory with the West.<sup>31</sup>

Amid the acrimony, Ankara has kept to its long held talking point that the Islamic Republic is not a threat. However, the tensions in Iraq and Syria, and the occasionally bellicose rhetoric from Iranian policymakers seems to have seeped into the public's perception of the threat posed by

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<sup>29</sup> George Jahn, "Is Iran's proposal to hold nuke talks in Syria, Iraq, or China brinksmanship?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 4 April 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2012/0404/Is-Iran-s-proposal-to-hold-nuke-talks-in-Syria-Iraq-or-China-brinksmanship>.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Rozen, "How Iran Talks Were Saved From Verge of Collapse," *Al Monitor*, 14 April 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/exclusive-how-iran-talks-came-ba.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Sinan Ulgen, "Erdogan the Peacemaker," *Project Syndicate*, 3 April 2012, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/erdo-an-the-peacemaker->.



Iran. According to a poll commissioned by the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) that asked, "In reaction to a possible threat from a nuclear armed Iran, should Turkey develop its own nuclear weapons or rely on NATO's protection," 54% supported the option of nuclear armament, while 34.8% believe Turkey should not develop nuclear weapons under any circumstances. When asked if NATO could be counted on to counter the threat of a nuclear armed Iran, only 8.2% of respondents believe that the Alliance's security guarantee can be counted on to protect Turkish security.<sup>32</sup>

While the poll results clearly demonstrate Turkey's historic mistrust of the NATO security guarantee, it also shows that the government's message that Iran is not a threat has changed dramatically since the collapse of the TRR deal. The image of Iran, as a beleaguered target of a U.S. led effort to cripple the regime, an untapped export market, and a new partner in the fight against Kurdish separatism has been replaced with the idea that the Islamic Republic is hostile and sectarian actor intent on undermining Turkish interests in the Middle East. While tensions are nothing new, the poll shows that the Turkish public has become increasingly concerned about the perceived threat of the Islamic Republic.

### **Conclusion: Similar Policies, Different Rhetoric and Broad Alignment with the West**

Despite the current tensions, Ankara remains committed to a diplomatic solution, supports Iran's peaceful nuclear program and is adamantly against military action. However, external events like the Arab revolts and Iran's refusal to give Turkish firms greater access to the domestic market have prompted Turkey to scale back its vocal support for Iran's nuclear program. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Turkey will radically backtrack from its long-standing preference for a negotiated settlement and support the more hardline calls to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability. Thus, despite the current difficulties, Turkey and Iran continue to share a similar interpretation of the NPT and a mutual discomfort with many of the West's hardline demands.

However, Turkey's main security priorities remain intricately connected with those of the NATO alliance. Ankara has tacitly endorsed the Alliance's efforts to blunt Iran's growing missile capabilities, and more recently has taken steps to conform more broadly with the Western efforts to sanctions the Islamic Republic. The efforts have been cloaked in diplomatic language designed to lessen tensions, but are still aimed at lessening Iran's regional influence. Given the current difficulties in Iraq and Syria, as well as its long standing commitment to the NATO Alliance, Turkey will likely continue to be a key cog in the efforts to contain Iran if it were to decide to weaponize or develop a robust nuclear latent capability. To this end, Ankara has maintained its support for a NATO missile defense shield, and continues its quiet commitment to the forward deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe.

The Turkish actions to date suggest that Ankara is quietly taking steps to ensure that its own security interests are well attended to in the event that Tehran decides to take the extra step and pursue a nuclear weapon. However, it is not ready to abandon its efforts for a diplomatic solution and hopes that a peaceful resolution would stifle regional instability.

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<sup>32</sup> Conditional Support for Nuclear Armament, Public Opinion Surveys of Turkish Foreign Policy, Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), <http://edam.org.tr/document/Edam2012Survey1.pdf>.