



Ahmedinejad's Visit to Turkey: Two Neighbors Oscillate between Threat and Friendship

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This article considers the August 2008 visit to Turkey by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and analyzes relations between Turkey and Iran in general. The tensions and crises that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution are briefly presented in order to provide a better understanding of the present state of relations. Then we draw a picture of the situation after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, bringing widespread changes to Turkish foreign policy. We also call attention to Turkey's changing role in the regional balance of power, and to the significance of that role both in Turkey's relations with Iran and with the United States.

On July 13, 2007, there was perhaps a single political item on Turkey's agenda: the general elections that would be held some 10 days later. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government that had governed the country since the end of 2002 had initiated early elections following a series of turbulent developments. Turkish citizens and the world at large waited impatiently for the outcome of the polls. Just at that moment, a statement by Hilmi Güler, the Minister for Energy, made ripples in Washington-Ankara relations. Washington was disturbed by Güler's declaration that Turkey had signed an agreement with Iran to send Turkmen gas over Iranian oil in order to reach Turkey and, from there, to Europe. Circles close to the AK Party met the statement with applause.¹

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¹ The Turkish press covered this topic largely on 14 and 15 July 2007. There were those who argued that the government used the publicity to gain more votes and also those who supported playing the Iranian card in international politics. For the latter view, see Necdet Pamir's "İran'la Mutabakat, ABD ile Durum Sakat" in *Enerji ve Jeopolitik Dergisi*, September 2007, Issue 3.

The Country Officially Declared a Threat

In debates about Turkey-Iran relations, the argument is often raised that the two countries have not experienced any crisis since the Treaty of Kasr-ı Şirin in 1638. This is indeed true, yet we have to keep in mind the fact of an ongoing regional competition between the two countries. Before turning to this competition, however, it is necessary to remember an important crisis in the recent history of Turkish-Iranian relations in order to analyze what is happening today.

Many countries in the region perceived the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as a serious threat with many possible ramifications for the region. Turkey did not have much time to discuss this threat as the Turkish military took control shortly after on 12

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September 1980. Iran became the focus and often the culprit for two important agenda items in Turkey during the 1990s: First was the

accusation that Iran supported the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) that carried out terrorist acts against Turkey. Second, Iran was suspected of supporting Islamic movements in the country, usually referred to as the “exportation of the revolution.” Tensions between the two countries increased with the claims that Iran was behind several political assassinations in Turkey.²

The Welfare Party and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan who became a partner in the coalition government in 1996, were keen on improving relations with Iran. The first official visit by Erbakan was to Iran. Turkey signed a natural gas agreement with Iran during his a year long government. Trade relations were growing as well. All these developments made Iran a contentious factor in domestic political debates.

Most interestingly, Iran was defined by Turkey as a threat in the 28 February 1997 ultimatum drafted by the military that paved the way for ousting the Erbakan government.³ The coalition government in which Erbakan’s party was the major partner was shortly dissolved. The Constitutional Court duly closed the Welfare Party and its successor, the Virtue Party. Tensions grew in Turkey’s relations with Iran in the wake of these events, as Tehran did not appoint an ambassador to Turkey for quite some time.

² The claims that political murders of journalist Uğur Mumcu, Bahriye Üçok and various other figures were committed by Iranian-backed persons or organizations were spelled out in court files during this era. Iran, however, always categorically denied those allegations.

³ This item was classified as “secret” following the National Security Council meeting; however, it was later disclosed that it defined Iran as a national threat. The item reads: “Close scrutiny needs to be adopted for Iran’s efforts to destabilize Turkey’s political regime. Policies should be designed to prevent Iran from meddling in Turkey’s domestic affairs” (28 February 2007).



The Normalization Process

Turkey's "Islamic" political parties were left outside the government following the 1999 general elections as other parties of different political leanings established a coalition. The *Milli Görüş* (National View) tradition led by Erbakan went into a period of self-critique and an eventual break-up that produced a new middle-stream party. After 2000, little and cautious steps by Iran and Turkey led to a normalization in bilateral relations. Especially important were Iran's changing attitude towards the PKK, marked by increased border security that softened the lines in the focus of "security." The debate over Iran's alleged export of its regime to Turkey almost faded out.

The AK Party governments that came to power following the November 2002 elections created a breakthrough in relations. The first AKP government under Abdullah Gül, and the second under Erdoğan took fast steps in improving relations with Iran. The AK Party government, unlike the Welfare Party, perceived these relations as a pretext for carrying Tehran to the international system and reprimanding her. The new political language that the AKP created diminished the pressure on mutual relations.

It would be appropriate to recall the speech by Abdullah Gül, then foreign minister in Tehran, in which he criticized the Islamic World: "We need a new and fresh vision. This vision must be the one where you have good governance, transparency, and accountability. It must be a vision by which fundamental rights and freedoms as well as gender equality are upheld, devoid of blunt rhetoric and useless slogans. In short, we need to take care of our home first." ⁴ The AK Party government has always sustained this critical tone in its relations with Iran as well as with the Islamic world.

The Rise of Iran in The Region

The positive developments in Turkish-Iran relations were unquestionably affected by regional and international crises and conflicts. This made the Washington-Ankara-Tehran line more vulnerable and critical. The US invasion of Iraq and subsequent arms-wrestling with Iran in that country presented a new phase of struggle in a large area from Syria and Lebanon to Afghanistan. Iran augmented its influence in regions and countries where sizeable Shiite populations lived, leading to accusations that Iran was creating a "Shiite crescent."⁵ Supporting these accusations were the military and political success of Hezbollah in Lebanon and

⁴ The Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Countries (OIC), 28 May 2003, Tehran.

⁵ For a detailed assessment in this regard, please see Nasuhi Güngör, "Şii Hilalinin Geleceği", *Eski Yeni Dergisi*, 2008, Issue 9, p.50.



Iran's amassing of power in Iraq at such a level that it could sit at the negotiation table with the US.

While obviously important for Iran, these developments also imply a special role for Turkey, which is now portrayed as the leader of the Sunni block against the rising Shiite crescent. Although the AK Party government and the establishment in Turkey are trying to stay away from such a competition, major powers are eyeing on Turkey with every step that Iran takes in Shiite politics.

Iran and Its Nuclear Program

The single most important issue that carried Tehran to the center of a hot debate is, of course, its nuclear program. Iran claims that the program is pacific, yet the

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US is using all its power to persuade the world that Iran is actually running a secret nuclear program. The reports by the IAEA suggest that Iran’s

uranium enrichment activities are directed toward the production of arms rather than nuclear fuel. Despite increasing international pressure, Iran asserts that it will continue with its nuclear program.⁶ Turkey has become the centerpiece of pressure policies against Iran, and a critical player in a possible assault on Iran. Needless to say, Washington knows that the Ankara government does not harbor any sympathy towards a limited or a broad military intervention against Iran.⁷ A long crisis of trust took place between Turkey and the US when the US failed to gain permission to station US troops on Turkish territory in preparation for war against Iraq on 1 March 2003. Has the time that has passed since then produced a rapprochement by which Washington can now ask for support from Turkey on critical issues? The Iran crisis will determine whether this question can be answered positively.

The American administration is closely watching the rise of Turkey in the region under the AKP government, as well as Turkey’s involvement as a mediator in the region. Concrete examples are Ankara’s role in the recent Lebanese elections and its ongoing mediation in indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel in Istanbul. It is crucial to see what direction Turkey will take in continuing the sanctions on Iran and forcing Iran to take a step back. The US certainly does not want Iran to

⁶ Most recently in July, Iran declared that it will not terminate its nuclear program under any circumstances even though it gave positive messages during the Geneva talks.

⁷ According to unconfirmed reports, Dick Cheney, the US vice president returned with empty hands in this matter from his most recent visit in Ankara on 24 March 2008.



find a breathing hole through Turkey, breaking that embargo. Therefore it is concerned over Turkey's deepening relations with Iran, especially its increasing energy dependence on Iran. The critical visit by Ahmedinejad took place against such a background and in the shadow of hidden American messages whispering "we keep an eye on you."⁸

The Contours of Ahmedinejad's Visit

Just prior to the visit by Ahmedinejad, a debate arose in Turkey which could almost be considered a hallmark of domestic politics. The secular circles began to ask whether Ahmedinejad would pay a visit to the mausoleum (*Anıtkabir*) of Atatürk, the founder of the Republic in Ankara. The government, however, put an end to these ruminations by declaring that the visit would take place in Istanbul. The most urgent issue in Ahmedinejad's visit was, of course, whether an agreement could be reached on energy issues, especially natural gas. The international media speculated that the US had warned Turkey against signing any such agreement. For instance, *Financial Times* pointed out that in visiting Turkey, Ahmedinejad was visiting a NATO country for the first time; the *Times* argued that "Mr. Erdoğan is seeking to strengthen energy ties with Tehran, step up co-operation against Kurdish separatists and intensify Turkey's efforts to defuse the dispute over Iran's nuclear programme."⁹

The meetings in Istanbul proved that relations between the two countries were positioned in warm yet turbulent waters. Questions were raised whether there had been a disagreement between Abdullah Gül and Ahmedinejad as the meeting lasted longer than planned and they met the press late. But both leaders gave positive messages to the media, emphasizing friendship and cooperation between the two countries. Still, a new energy agreement was not signed during the visit. The Iranian president shed light on the reason in his press conference: "As you know, natural gas and energy require investments. Therefore such negotiations may take quite some time. But we agreed on the possibility of making new agreements on natural gas and energy."¹⁰ Agreements were signed in such fields as drug smuggling, organized crime and anti-terror measures.

Under the terms of the agreement signed between Turkey and Iran on 13 July 2007, natural gas amounting to 30 billion m³ would be pumped from Iran and Turkmenistan to Europe via Turkey. More importantly, Turkey would exploit three large gas reserves in the Southern Pars region without any bid. The signing of

⁸ There was no public statement regarding the alleged warnings of the US administration to Turkey not to enter into large-scale energy agreements with Iran. However some Turkish columnists wrote before the visit that the US was concerned about Turkey signing energy deals with Iran. See Murat Yetkin, "ABD ile İran sıkıntısı kapıda," *Radikal*, 9 August 2008.

⁹ *Financial Times*, 13 August 2008.

¹⁰ *BBC*, "Ahmedinejad umutlu", 15 August 2008.



these agreements will undoubtedly lead to very important changes in Turkey's energy policy and contribute to a significant rapprochement with Iran.

Following the visit by Ahmedinejad, the British daily *The Guardian* suggested that "the US torpedoed the gas agreement between Turkey and Iran"¹¹: "A western diplomatic source told the *Guardian* that Turkey had pledged not to sign any major energy deals with Iran in return for Washington's blessing for Ahmadinejad's visit after the Bush administration officials had privately criticized it." The paper also claimed that "Steve Hadley (the US national security adviser) voiced objections to Ahmadinejad's trip when he visited Ankara a month ago".

The Turkish government officially denied the allegations of US pressure. But Turkey does not deny that it is indeed using its improving relations with Washington to persuade Iran to reach reconciliation on the subject of its nuclear program. This bargaining chip in the hands of Ankara surely helps to ease American pressure but cannot remove US concerns altogether on these relations. Ankara does not rule out the possibility that Washington is taking seriously negotiations with Tehran. The US would not want to see Iran included in a Russia-centered block, especially in a time of mounting tensions with Russia.

Following the visit by Ahmedinejad, President Abdullah Gül and the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that the problem of Iran's nuclear program

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needs to be resolved through diplomatic efforts – but they also underlined that Iran must adopt a more constructive approach to this end. President

Gül argued that “the solution should take into consideration the uneasiness of the international community, and that it should protect Iran's legitimate rights within the scope of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.”¹² One of the important aspects of the meeting between Gül and Ahmedinejad was that both leaders considered the questions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the crisis in Georgia. Ahmedinejad also asserted that Iran supports Turkey's membership in the EU.

A Near Future Perspective

The visit by the Iranian president, although concluded short of signing energy agreements, seems to have produced important outcomes. Turkish energy minister Güler announced right after the visit that “energy agreements will be signed with

¹¹ *The Guardian*, 15 August 2008.

¹² *CNN Türk*, 15 August 2008.



Iran,” implying that the momentum is still on. However it is also clear that relations between the two countries cannot go on solely on the grounds of domestic balances. The crisis in the Caucasus has shifted US attention towards the north of Iran, yet the Iranian question remains at Turkey’s eastern borders. Even if the US government expresses concerns, Washington is aware that the only channel it can use talk to Iran is Turkey. Besides, they also know that Turkey is not a country that obeys US interests in all issues, and that Turkey has an increasing self-esteem in determining the color of the relations. Also the possibility of a serious energy crisis as a result of the conflict between Russia and Georgia makes Iran a more valuable and even indispensable actor in terms of energy. The security hazards in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, and bottlenecks in the Nabucco project are some of the other reasons that encourage Turkey to think over its relations with Iran.

Energy is the breaking point of the Turkish-Iranian relations that were enhanced on the premises of security and an increased trade volume. But when considered from a larger perspective, possible developments involving the triad of US-Israel-Iran will influence the entire region, including Turkey. The Turkish government had gained an unexpected boost of prestige in the region and the Muslim World, to its surprise, following the refusal of its Parliament to let US troops station in Turkey on 1 March 2003. The Ankara government is conscious of the fact that a policy that co-opts, and even support an intervention in Iran will pose huge risks. We can say that difficult times are ahead for Turkey in the Iran conundrum when we consider the new calculations of power between Russia and Turkey that will emerge as a result of the recent developments in the Caucasus.

The Tehran government is surely aware of Turkey’s energy problem and is therefore seeking ways to reap benefits from it. However, it is also aware that Turkey is the only country that can provide Iran an exit and a space for dialogue. Turkey and Iran do not have enough time to play their respective advantages against each other. The level that has been achieved so far forces both countries to enter a difficult, yet achievable and balanced cooperation.

