

## **The Kurdish Question and Iranian-Turkish Relations: 1991-2015**

*Prof. Dr. Elaheh Koolaee \**

*Faculty of Law & Political Sciences, University of Tehran,  
Tehran, Iran.*

*Prof. Dr. Hossein Hafezian \*\**

*Department of Political Science, Montclair State University,  
Montclair, New Jersey, US.*

### **Abstract**

The Kurdish question has caused ups and downs in Iran-Turkey relations. Geopolitical and geostrategic considerations of Iran and Turkey since the 1990s onwards have coupled with the economic needs of the two countries; needs that have led the two nations to geopolitical cooperation. None of the two has threatened the legitimacy and structure of the other government system by influencing the Kurdish movement in the other country. Their rivalries in the Iraqi Kurdistan and making efforts at influencing the developments in the Kurdish regions of Syria after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, as well as ISIS attacks on Kobani brought the two sides on a collision course. This article seeks to examine Iran-Turkey relations as related to the Kurdish question between 1991 and 2015. The authors conclude that the Kurdish question has not affected their overall geopolitical and geostrategic policies.

**Keywords:** Kurdish Question, Foreign Relations, Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, National Security.

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\* Professor of Political Science at University of Tehran, [ekolaee@ut.ac.ir](mailto:ekolaee@ut.ac.ir).

\*\* Dr. Hossein Hafezian is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University.

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## **The Kurdish Question and Iranian-Turkish Relations: 1991-2015**

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**Elaheh Koolaee** \*

**Hossein Hafezian** \*\*

The Kurdish question has been a source of both tension and cooperation in Iranian-Turkish relations. Geopolitical and geostrategic considerations in both Iran and Turkey since the 1990s, coupled with the economic needs of the two countries, have resulted in geopolitical cooperation between the two. Neither has threatened the legitimacy and governing structure of the other through its influence over Kurdish communities across the border. Both, nevertheless, have had rivalries in Iraqi Kurdistan and have tried to influence developments in the Kurdish regions of Syria. The outbreak of the Syrian crisis and attacks by the forces of the Islamic State (ISIS), also known as ISIS, has especially put the two sides on a collision course. This article examines Iranian-Turkish relations as related to the Kurdish question between 1991 and 2015. As the article will demonstrate, despite its great geopolitical significance for both countries, the Kurdish question has not significantly affected their overall geostrategic calculations.

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\* Professor of Political Science at University of Tehran, ekolaee@ut.ac.ir.

\*\* Dr. Hossein Hafezian is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and major geopolitical shifts in the Middle East beginning in the 1990s, Iranian-Turkish relations also underwent a number of significant changes. These relations have been affected by the Shia and Sunni beliefs of political leaders in the two countries, their often markedly different positions toward Israel, their relations with Russia and the Western powers, and by the Kurdish question. A quick glance at Iranian-Turkish ties in recent years indicates that although the two have sought to increase their influence in the immediate region, the Kurdish question has made them cooperate in order to further enhance their own domestic and regional security. Iran and Turkey's relative geopolitical location has further complicated their relationships, particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union.

This article examines Iranian-Turkish relations as related to the Kurdish question between 1991 and 2015. We test the hypothesis that although the Kurdish question and Kurdish nationalism in Kurdish areas of the Middle East especially in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria's Kurdish region have caused tension in Iranian-Turkish relations, affecting their national security, they have not influenced the two states' grand geopolitical and geostrategic policies and regional balance of power. This study demonstrates that Turkish and Iranian attention to the management of the Kurdish question takes place within the context of challenges that threaten their broader regional and international concerns. To explain the two states' policies and the extraterritorial aspect of the Kurdish question, we adopt the "balance of power and comprehensive balance" model. This model emphasizes that given the significance of foreign threats, priority should be given to such threats over domestic threats (Waltz, 1967: 215–231). This model has been considered in relation to the Kurdish question in examining Iranian-Turkish ties after the end of the First World War.

Iranian and Turkish geopolitical and geostrategic concerns have been consistently guided by the two countries' economic needs and priorities since the 1990s. The consequences of the 1991 Persian Gulf War have been influential in this respect, exacerbating the challenge posed by Kurdish nationalism. In response, both Iran and Turkey, in their relations with each other and with other states, have had to pay careful attention to the Kurdish question. Foreign policy, it is often said, is local. For Iran and Turkey, insofar as Kurdistan is concerned, it can also be regional.

Iran and Turkey have been involved in a new ‘great game’ in the Caucasus and Central Asia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union (See Koolae, 2010). The issue of transfer of energy from the Caspian Sea has become one of the most visible areas of competition between the two states. For Ankara, putting down the Kurdish rebellion, as spearheaded by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), has been equally important in ensuring security in areas where gas and oil pipelines are laid. By and large, Turkey has managed to resolve the Kurdish question by attracting international support, especially from the United States, for putting down the PKK-led insurgency (Koolae, 2008: 47-70).

If Iran and Turkey wish to remain regional middle powers, their interests would dictate handling the Kurdish question in such a way that it would not threaten their broader geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic interests (Gülden, 2012: 85-114). Given the complexities and the unfolding nature of regional dynamics, however, this has not always been easy. Both Iran and Turkey have sought to further their own, often competing and conflicting, interests in Iraqi Kurdistan, which in recent years has been able to assert increasingly greater levels of autonomy from the central government in Baghdad. ISIS attacks on and advances against Kurdish areas in Syria, especially the city of Kobani, have also emerged as a potential source of tension between Tehran and Ankara. Tehran sees the ISIS as a mortal enemy, whereas for Ankara hastening the demise of Bashar Assad’s regime—not defeating ISIS—is the top priority.

Despite its significance, the impact of the Kurdish question on Iranian-Turkish relations has not been extensively studied before. Much of the existing literature related to the topic has instead focused on the Kurdish communities in Turkey, and some on Iraqi Kurds, and how the central governments in Ankara and Baghdad have dealt with the national and political aspirations of their Kurdish populations. A number of works have examined the overall regional challenges and opportunities inherent in Iranian-Turkish relations, among which the Kurdish question has been analyzed as only one factor. Much of this literature has only scantily dealt with the impact of the Kurdish question on Iranian-Turkish relations independently. In this respect, our work fills an important gap in the available scholarship.

## Significance of Kurdish Areas in the Middle East

Approximately thirty million Kurds are scattered in West Asian countries, mostly in Turkey (Gabbay, 2014: 15). Regional and international actors have often used Kurdish national aspirations to further their own political and diplomatic purposes. None of the states with sizeable Kurdish populations—Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria—have acquiesced to Kurdish demands for a national homeland. Up until relatively recently, in fact, the Turkish state often referred to its Kurdish population as ‘mountain Turks’. The Kurdish population in Turkey is the largest in the region, both numerically and in terms of the percentage of the overall population (Yildiz, 2005: 6). This has forced many of Turkey’s Kurds to immigrate to Istanbul, thus turning it into the largest Kurdish-inhabited city in Turkey.

Poverty, unemployment, and deprivation in Turkey’s eastern and southeastern areas, especially in the 1970s, provided a fertile breeding ground for the formation of the PKK. The Kurds also rebelled against Turkish rule earlier, during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres stipulated not only the disbanding of the Ottoman Empire but also the establishment of a State of Kurdistan. But the Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, precluded the establishment of Kurdistan within the former Ottoman Empire territory. In fact, from 1924 to 1939 Kemal Ataturk’s Turkish Republic imposed bans on most symbols of Kurdish identity such as language and clothing. The series of revolts that took place among Kurds against the central government were all brutally suppressed. Today, the European Union, encouraged by the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, is pressing the Ankara government to recognize Kurdish political and cultural rights.

For their part, Iranian Kurds live in Iran’s four northwestern and western provinces as well as in the country’s larger cities such as Tehran and Mashad. Immediately following the advent of the 1978-79 revolution, at a time when the central government in Tehran was weak and wracked by turmoil and instability, Iranian Kurds rose up in rebellion to further their independence. But their efforts ultimately bore little success and their independence campaign was put down by the post-revolutionary authorities. A remnant of that campaign still lingers on today in the form of a guerrilla organization called the

PEJAK, which still on occasion engages in cat-and-mouse attacks on government targets.

Iraq's Kurdish population numbers approximately six million and lives mostly in the country's mountainous area in the north. Following the ejection of the Iraqi army from Kuwait and the U.S. imposition of a no-fly-zone in the northern and southern parts of the country, the Kurds gained considerable autonomy from Baghdad. This autonomy was further enhanced following the 2003 U.S. invasion.

The Kurdish areas in Syria include the north and northeastern region. Constituting some 18 percent of the Syrian population, Syrian Kurds also live in large cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. As in the case of Turkey and Iraq, Kurds comprise the largest ethnic minority in Syria. After the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011, Kurds erected local governments in three separate regions run by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union, which is an offshoot of the PKK. The ISIS attack on Kobani in June 2015 attracted the attention of world public opinion and brought mass media coverage to Syrian Kurds.

With Iraq and Syria embroiled in civil wars and having large swaths of their Kurdish territories hived either off or constantly threatened by ISIS, and both having become battlegrounds for regional and extra-regional actors, the potential for collision between Iran and Turkey has become proportionately greater. Both Iran and Turkey are aspiring middle powers and try to balance the regional impact of great powers. Each has a different motive for aspiring to become a middle power. For Iran, the primary motive appears to be leadership of the Muslim World (Cetinsaya 2003: 162). Turkey's chief motivations seem to revolve around enhanced influence, soft and hard power projection, and economic development. Whatever their motivations, in places like Syria and Iraq, where the influence of great powers has become disproportionately large since 2003, Iran and Turkey try to become more active in order to balance the influence of great powers. The Kurds, in the meanwhile, are caught in-between.

### **Turkish-Iranian Relations**

After the collapse of the monarchical regime in Iran, Turkey had two major concerns toward the Islamic Republic. First, Ankara feared that a similar, religiously-inspired revolution may also break out in

Turkey. Second, given the chaos that initially followed the revolution in Iran, Turkey feared that the weakness of the central government in Tehran might result in a successful secession of Iranian Kurdistan and the creation of a Kurdish state, thus prompting Turkey's Kurds toward the same objective. Not surprisingly, Ankara adopted a cautionary policy toward Iran (Özcan, and Özgür Özdamar, 2010: 101-105). The policy had three main pillars: coexistence and good-neighborly relations with Iran; neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war; and exploiting the opportunity created by the Iran-Iraq war to increase economic ties and trade with Iran. At the same time, Turkey's military government (1980-1983) stepped up its campaign against both the country's own Islamist movements and the PKK. Ankara's virulent secularism notwithstanding, Turkish-Iranian relations continued to expand throughout the 1980s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 a new dimension—namely competition in the South Caucasus and Central Asia—was added to the relations between the two countries. But their relations continued to expand nonetheless.

Throughout this period, Ankara was busily putting down a Kurdish rebellion in the southeastern parts of the country. On occasion, the Turkish campaign spilled over into northern Iraq, the Iranian reaction to which was silence. There was a common understanding between the two states that they had to prevent the flight of Kurdish populations into their respective borders. Neither of them wanted Iraqi Kurds to become so weak that Saddam Hussein would be able to effectively suppress them. But Ankara also wanted to make certain that the predicament of Iraqi Kurds would not spur Turkish Kurds into action. For this reason, Turkish President Turgut Ozal was the first leader to propose the creation of a Kurdish safe haven in north Iraq. The Iranians, however, were not optimistic about the safe zone and opposed the use of military force and the launching by the U.S. of Operation Provide Comfort. Iran was concerned that the no-fly zone would turn into a safe zone for various opposition groups operating out of northern Iraq, especially Iran's Kurdistan Democratic Party. Between 1993 and 1995 Ankara was ready to provide support to Iran's Kurdistan Democratic Party as leverage to Iran's generally positive policy toward the PKK. For the next several years, both states saw it as beneficial to handle the trans-border Kurdish questions in northern Iraq in ways that would insulate their own Kurdish

populations. Establishing regional government in northern Iraq highlighted the possibility of the rise of an independent state. So Iran and Turkey were forced to work with each other on this issue.

One of the reasons why Turkey dealt with its own Kurdish question and avoided involvement in Iran's Kurds and Azeris was the growth of Islamist movement in the country. In 1991, Turkish armed forces were concerned about the collaboration between Islamists and the PKK, leading to a relatively tense period of relations between the two countries. In April 1991, a safe zone was created in northern Iraq for the Kurds by the U.S.-led forces, providing the ground for the activities of Turkey's Kurds in the region. In 1995, the Turkish army launched a massive campaign in northern Iraq in order to pursue and suppress PKK guerrillas, deploying some 35,000 troops. In 1996 and 1997, Turkish security forces inflicted similarly heavy losses on the PKK, especially in northern Iraq.

Throughout this period, Turkey was not seriously concerned about the breakup of Iraq and the potential for a Kurdish succession that would lead to collaboration between Turkish and Iraqi Kurds. However, Kurdish activities after the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003, following the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, were of serious concerns for the Turkish leaders. Israel's activities in northern Iraq and its support for Kurdish independence also exacerbated Turkey's concerns about the Kurdish question, especially given Turkey's weariness about foreign support for Kurds (Hersch, 2004, in: Freedman, 2009).

With Prime Minister Erbakan and his Refah Party coming to office in 1996, Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations improved. Erbakan visited Iran and signed the agreement on export of Iranian gas to Turkey, which represented a significant milestone in the two countries' relations (Oktav, 2003: 105). After the Turkish military forced Erbakan to step down because of his Islamist tendencies, bilateral relations did not worsen, but neither did they improve. During the rising tensions between Turkey and Syria over the extradition to Turkey of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Iran successfully diffused tensions between the two countries through mediation (Olson, 2000: 5-9).

Iranian-Turkish relations deteriorated in 1997 when Turkey's Defense Minister and Chief of Staff visited Israel to discuss military refurbishment projects and possible joint military maneuvers



(Calabrese, 1998). The Israel-Turkey alliance since 1996 led to speculations and suspicions in the Middle East about this new pivot of power. Ankara wanted to gain the American Jewish community's support for removing the Kurdish separatists, to end criticisms of Armenian genocide, to increase pressures on Syria, and to emphasize Turkey's importance for the West after the fall of the Soviet Union. Turkey's closeness to Israel appeared to balance the Iran-Syria alliance and their implicit support for the PKK.

### **Iran-Turkey Cooperation on Prevention of a Kurdish State**

Domestic dynamics have influenced Turkish foreign policy toward Iran and Syria in the past, as policymakers have successfully externalized the sources of Turkish political Islam and Kurdish separatism (Aras and Polat, 2008: 496). While both Ankara and Tehran have agreed on the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, both states have also agreed that it would not serve their interests if an independent Kurdish state were to emerge from this entity (Lenore and Keridis, 2004: 84-91). In spite of all significant disagreements between Ankara and Damascus on various Kurdish issues and division of the Euphrates water, before 2011 the two states worked together to preclude the emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which, all the three states believed, was an objective pursued by the United States and Europe.

Some of the agreements signed by Turkey and Iran to remove the possibility of the creation of a Kurdish state took shape in 1995 during meetings between President Demirel and President Rafsanjani. These agreements are important for several reasons: they indicated the threat of Kurdish nationalism for both, particularly the PKK's for Turkey. Turkey and Iran were ready to cooperate on the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the Azerbaijan Republic and the rising influence of Russia in northern Iraq. The agreements meant that Iran and Turkey were ready to coordinate their Kurdish policies in northern Iraq, which both regarded as threats to their national interests. Such coordination, while significant, did not completely alleviate mistrust between the two neighboring states.

Iranian Kurds, meanwhile, experienced a period of relative progress and prosperity in the late 1980s and the 1990s as Iran

underwent reconstruction from the war with Iraq. Ethnic tensions continued nonetheless. With the election of reformist president Khatami in 1997, a number of political and civil institutions took shape for the expression of ethnic symbols and identity, and more attention was paid to political, economic, and social issues. General improvement of conditions in Kurdish areas was a priority for the government. In the sixth Parliament (2000-2004), in fact, representatives from Kurdish regions formed a faction to devise and pursue their ethnic demands, an endeavor which was followed in the next parliaments (Maghsoudi and Darbandi, 2010: 155-177).

### **Kurdish Autonomy before the Fall of Saddam**

Before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, Turkey and Iraq cooperated in efforts to keep their Kurdish populations in check (Hale, 2007: 32-34). Turkish cooperation with the coalition forces in attacking Iraq and kicking Saddam out of Kuwait, however, worsened their bilateral relations. In the 1990s, Turkish relations with the Iraqi Kurds were based largely on the internal disputes between the Iraqi Kurdish parties, particularly the two major parties, the Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union. In the 1990s, PKK's activities influenced Turkish relations with the Iraqi Kurds (Lundgren, 2007: 85-86). PKK's use of Iraqi Kurdistan's territory to conduct military operations on Turkish soil raised Turkish protest, and on certain occasions was answered with aerial attacks. One of the reasons why Turkey became closer to the Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s was cooperation between PKK and the Patriotic Union against Turkey (Lundgren, 2007: 86). In return, Iran established closer ties with the Patriotic Union. In some ways, this represented an Iranian-Turkish proxy war in northern Iraq in the mid-1990s (Oktav, 2003: 108). Nonetheless, Iran and Turkey cooperated on the prevention of the rise of an independent Kurdish state.

In late 1990s, as tensions between the two countries over the PKK receded, for a time it appeared that Iraqi Kurdistan might emerge as a new area of friction between them. The implementation of the "Oil for Food" program in Iraq brought about significant benefits for Turkey and the Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan. In exchange for Turkey's support, the Party frequently entered military clashes with the PKK (Stein and Bleek, 2012: 143-150).

Iran and Syria were suspicious of Turkey's objectives and policies in the Kurdistan region, worried that Turkey may make the Iraqi Kurdistan its own protectorate. Both states opposed Turkey's call for a change in international boundaries. In trilateral meetings among Iran, Turkey and Syria, priority was given to the protection of Iraqi territorial integrity (Girisci and Winrow, 1997: 167). But in 1999 Iranian-Turkish relations deteriorated, when Turkey engaged in two military operations with the aim of suppressing PKK forces along the Iranian borders. Nevertheless, the two countries never put aside their economic cooperation even during periods of tension. The coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the deepening of the Iraqi crisis, and the fear of the partition of Iraq with a Kurdish state in the north brought Turkey closer to Syria and Iran, countries that also have significant Kurdish populations (Aras and Polat, 2008: 496). In 2005, Prime Minister Erdogan was the first Turkish leader to acknowledge that "the state made mistakes about the Kurdish issue" (Aljazeera, 2011). Admitting mistakes is one thing; rectifying them is quite another. More than a decade later, the prime minister's party, the AKP, has yet to devise a clear strategy toward the Kurds (Tokmajyan, 2012).

### **Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government**

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a convergence of Iranian, Turkish and Syrian interests in their resisting Kurdish demands for autonomy. Apart from other territorial disputes between Syria and Turkey, the PKK has often used Syrian territory as a base for its attacks on Turkish targets, thus heightening tensions in Turkish-Syrian relations. The U.S. occupation of Iraq resulted in closer cooperation between Iran and Turkey out of concern for their own territorial integrity and in the hope of countering a further expansion of American and even Israeli influence in northern Iraq. Iran and Turkey declared solidarity in fighting terrorism, and, during Erdogan's visit to Tehran in 2004, Iran recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization (Bas, 2013: 118). This improved Iran's image in Turkey and served as a springboard for enhanced bilateral ties.

It was around this same time in 2004 that the Iranian offshoot of PKK, known as the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK), was

created. Soon thereafter Iran and Turkey convened a joint meeting to discuss border security issues and coordinate their efforts against Kurdish rebels. As a result of a signed memorandum, the two states agreed to share intelligence on Kurdish activities and to coordinate military operations against the PKK and PEJAK (Bas, 2013: 118). Beginning in 2007 the two countries conducted joint military operations inside Iraqi territory, leading up to major attacks on the Qandil region in 2009. Another factor in Tehran-Ankara convergence was a change in Turkish outlook on Syria whose bilateral relations had improved since 2004 when President Assad visited Turkey for the first time. The two countries even conducted joint military exercises.

There are conflicting viewpoints among the Turkish political parties and elites concerning the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Turkey's Kemalists, including the military, secular parties and extremist nationalists see the existence of an autonomous Kurdish political entity as a security threat. The country's Islamists and Kurdish political elites, however, hold the belief that the KRG has no other option but to rely on Turkey due to its geopolitical constraints. Thus, not only can it serve as a good market for Turkish products, but it also has the potential of turning into a reliable regional partner. As the Syrian crisis deepened, the positions of each of the Turkish camps hardened.

In the meantime, in Iraq a coalition was forged between the Shia and the Kurds through Iran's mediation, paving the way for the emergence of a federal system. The Kurdish-Shia collaboration has managed to maintain political balance in Iraq. In response to Tehran's support for Baghdad, Ankara supported the Erbil government. The KRG wanted Baghdad to remain weak in order to capitalize on its increasing autonomy. It pursued separate policies in its actions in disputed areas, conducting foreign relations, and concluding agreements with foreign oil companies (Weitz, 2014).

Changes in the Iraqi body politic after the U.S. invasion have made Iranian and Turkish leaders highly sensitive to the political and security repercussions of such an upheaval (Lerner, 2010). The Turkish parliament rejected cooperation between the country's armed forces and the United States in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam's regime in March 2003 (Yeşiltaş, 2009: 34). Turkey insisted on political settlement of Saddam's fate and saw military action in Iraq as a threat to its national security (Yeşiltaş,

2009: 34). The Turkish and Iranian governments were both concerned that political instability in Iraq and the country's possible break-up would lead to Kurdish separatism in their own countries. They considered Kurdish separatism a serious threat to their security (Derakhshah and Divsalar, 2011: 111-112). Thus the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the rise of AK Party in Turkey laid the groundwork for increasing expansion of bilateral relations (Ayman, 2012: 11).

The political ascent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led to significant changes in Turkey's domestic sphere as well as its regional and global roles. The AKP's vision of Turkish foreign policy, as developed by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, initially put great emphasis on improving relations with all of Turkey's neighbors, particularly in the Middle East (Habibi, 2012: 7). Turkey gained enormous economic growth in this period and the AKP leaders integrated the country into the world economy, speeding up economic reforms in their efforts to join the European Union. Reducing the role of the military in the government was also on top of the AKP leaders' agenda. Davutoglu called Turkey the bridge linking the Muslim countries and the advanced Christian nations, a role arising from Turkey's geopolitical necessities. He pursued the policy of ending problems with Turkey's neighboring countries. In 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly acknowledged while in Diyarbakır, the largest city in the Kurdish region, that Turkey has a Kurdish question. The AKP government also introduced an unprecedented reconciliation campaign in 2009, which involved a program to better integrate PKK militants into the society (Bilgin, 2012: 67).

In this period, Turkey recognized Iraqi Kurdistan and opened up its consulate in Erbil. From late 2008 onward, relations between Ankara and Erbil expanded, culminating in Davutoglu's visit to Kurdistan region in 2009 and Masoud Barzani's visit to Turkey in 2012. This fundamental change in Ankara-Erbil ties was affected by the AKP's new policy toward Turkey's Kurds. This also led to better economic relations, particularly in the field of energy, resulting in the Regional Government exporting up to three million barrels of oil to Turkey's Ceyhan port daily (Dov and Salih, 2014). Ankara pursued these energy interests in Iraqi Kurdistan while continuing to favor a more powerful central government in Baghdad (İseri and Dilek, 2013: 26). Ankara, moreover, was concerned about Iran's increasing influence in

Iraq. Iran, in turn, decided to continue with its balance-of-power approach and to support the status quo, therefore supporting Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in the city of Sulaymaniyah. Despite its energy imports, Turkey adopted a less friendly and at times even aggressive posture toward the increasingly autonomous Kurdish region to its south.

The Iraqi market is vital to Turkey's economy. In 2011, the volume of transactions of Turkish companies with the region reached \$12 billion, half of which were conducted with the Kurdistan Government (Jozel, 2014: 3-10). Turkey hoped that the improvement in its relations with Iraqi Kurdistan would help improve its relations with the PKK, which had sabotaged the oil and gas terminals in Kurdish areas several times. This would also enhance the prosperity of less developed areas in Turkey's southeast region (Jozel, 2014: 76).

### **Arab Spring and Change in Turkey's Relations with Iran and Syria**

Although Turkey and Iran were cooperating in their security and economic policies, their different foreign policy approaches reappeared with the Arab Spring (Bas, 2013: 120). Turkey's long border with Syria has made the country's leaders very sensitive to developments in its neighbor to the south. The likelihood of the break-up and collapse of Syrian political system and the wave of refugees would have extensive implications for Turkey. The revival of the question of Hatay province and disputes over water may exacerbate these concerns (Oktav, 2003: 91-117). For Iran, the Assad regime is of strategic significance because it provides a bridge to Lebanon's Hezbollah movement. The Arab Spring "securitized" Turkey's relations with Iran and Syria, whereas Turkey's pursuance of the policy of accession to the European Union influenced the de-securitization process in Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy (Aras and Polat, 2008: 496).

Prior to the uprisings, Turkey's soft power had seen a precipitous rise across the Arab world. But the outbreak of the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian civil war confronted Turkey with serious strategic challenges (Philips, 2013: 2-10). AKP leaders' tacit and implicit support for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seriously affected the process of their expanding presence. With the Arab World developments, Iranian-Turkish relations also entered a new phase of

competition (Bas, 2013: 120). While Turkey attempted to present itself as a role model for the establishment of Islamic political systems, Iran described the 2011 developments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as Islamic Awakening and viewed Syrian unrest as a result of Western intervention (Bas, 2013: 120).

As Iran moved to strengthen its support for the Bashar Assad government, Turkey sponsored Assad's opposition groups, including those with ties to the al-Qaeda and al-Nusra groups. Syria is currently entangled in a protracted crisis, a civil war that is fuelled by intensive rivalry among the regional and trans-regional powers (Philips, 2013: 2-10). The Turkish government's primary objective has been the overthrow of Bashar Assad. Indeed, Erdogan has pursued a policy some have called 'neo-Ottoman', although its success so far has been elusive (Nasser, 2013). Syria is also of paramount strategic importance for Iran. Some analysts think that the "Syrian case has almost become a Turkey-Iran proxy war" (Bas, 2013: 121).

Not surprisingly, a confluence of interests has taken place involving Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the PKK, and the Syrian regime. One of the consequences of this has been the intensification of differences between Iran and Turkey over the question of Iraqi Kurdistan (Noi, 2012: 26). By some estimates, Syrian Kurds compose 20 percent of PKK fighters (Tokmajyan, 2012). Barzani's Democratic Party leaned toward Turkey and Saudi Arabia from the onset of the Syrian crisis, calling for the overthrow of Assad's government. In response, Jalal Talabani called on the Kurds to work with the Assad government. Turkish officials had repeatedly talked about the possibility of attacking the PKK inside Syrian territory.

The course of the Syrian civil war has also affected the Kurds' relations with the Assad government. Military retreats by the Syrian regime forces prompted the Democratic Union Party of Syria (PYD), which is very close to the PKK (Middle East Briefing, 2015), to declare autonomy. Since November 2013, in fact, the PYD has consolidated its local self-rule based on the PKK model (Orhan, 2015: 3). Confronting the Iranian policy of strengthening the Assad regime, Turkey has made efforts at taking advantage of Kurdistan Regional Government's influence on Syrian Kurds. Turkish leaders see the influence wielded by Masoud Barzani on Syrian Kurds as essential in the peace process with the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

Iran has also attempted to expand its relations with the PYD, affecting Turkey's policy toward the Kurdistan region for its own benefit. The Syrian Kurds are influential in the political balance in the country, acting as forces loyal to Assad. Syria's ethnic heterogeneity is one of the reasons that the country's 2011 uprising has had a different outcome than those in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (Bilgin, 2012: 67). Nonetheless, Kurdish autonomy in Syria is not consistent with either Iranian or Turkish strategic objectives. For Turkey, the fate of Syrian Kurds is even more consequential for the aspirations of its own Kurdish populations, and therefore more closely linked with its policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan. In the event of a confrontation between Erbil and Baghdad, it is very unlikely that Turkey will lend its military support to Kurdistan.

Before the Syrian uprising erupted, Davutoglu had met with the Syrian authorities more than sixty times (Mohammed, 2011: 69). For the AKP, good-neighborly relations were a strategic priority, having prior to 2011 resulted in the expansion of Turkey's relations with both Iran and Syria (Ahmadi and Ghorbani, 2014: 67). But once the uprising broke out, Turkey threw its support entirely with the Syrian opposition, hoping in the process to counter Iran's rising influence in Iraq. United by their concerns over developments involving the Kurds and their drive for autonomy, Iran and Turkey nevertheless stood against each other in supporting and mobilizing forces loyal and opposed to Assad (Mohammed, 2011: 71-72). Turkey, in fact, has at time gone so far as to view the rise of ISIS as a useful counterstrategy in checking the influence and powers of the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq (Maleki, 2015).

### **Iran and the Kurdistan Regional Government**

Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, as the central government in Baghdad experienced more pressures from the United States, developments in Iraqi Kurdistan became increasingly more important in Iranian-Kurdish relations (Zulal, 2012: 141). The Kurdistan Regional Government prioritized its economic ties with Turkey because, under the pressure of international sanctions, Iran lacked the necessary potential to meet KRG's needs. Since Turkey purchased gas from Iran at world market prices (Kinnanderm, 2010:



10-11), Turkey's agreement with KRG would give Ankara a free hand in bargaining with Iran.

Beginning in 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, until 2011, when the Arab uprisings broke out, Iranian-Turkish relations expanded significantly. Increasing international pressures on Iran and Ahmadinejad's aggressive foreign policy ensured the continuation of such ties. Davutoglu's Eurasianist foreign policy also facilitated the expansion of Turkish relations with Iran (Grigoriadis, 2010). Iran saw in Turkey a useful strategic and economic partner that could facilitate ties with the European Union and to also alleviate some of the pressures arising from West-imposed sanctions (Habibi, 2012, 5-7). In 2009, the leaders of the two countries announced that they planned to increase the volume of bilateral trade from \$10 billion to \$30 billion per year. This was followed by the signing of a new security memorandum that stipulated fighting the PKK (Zulal, 2012: 169-174). Turkey's military attack on PKK militants in 2011 was accompanied with Iran's support, marking a fundamental change in their reciprocal relations (Arsu, 2011). The Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stressed their countries' determination to fight both PKK and PEJAK guerrillas (BBC, 2011). In the meanwhile, for their part the Kurds saw the dawn of the Arab Spring as an opportunity to expand their autonomy and influence (Noi, 2013: 23). But the Turkish-Iranian security cooperation did not last long. The Turkish government had little liking for Iran's Iraqi ally, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. When the Syrian civil war broke out, Turkey began courting the KRG in an effort to forge an anti-Assad bloc. Turkey even extended its support to Salafi groups inside Syria, enabling passage for some from Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **United States and the KRG**

U.S. policy toward the KRG has been contradictory. The United States has, on the one hand, backed autonomy for the KRG while, on the other, it has emphasized Iraqi territorial integrity. Although in the 1970s the U.S. pointedly withheld support for Kurdish expressions of autonomy, by the early 2000s many high-ranking American officials had endorsed the creation of a sovereign Kurdish state (Zulal, 2012: 169-174 and Migdalovitz, 2002: 5). The post-Saddam Iraqi government

established close ties with Iran, and the KRG also tried to design its relations with Iran in such a way so as not to provoke the U.S. Sharing a border with Iran and Iran's role in meeting the KRG's needs have been important factors in shaping KRG-Iran relations. With Iran's growing influence in the Iraqi government, the U.S. paid more attention to its Kurdish allies. The conclusion of Exxon-Mobil agreement with KRG as backed by the U.S. government sent a clear message to Baghdad and Tehran. A visit to Washington by the KRG President Masoud Barzani further solidified U.S.-KRG ties (Zulal, 2012: 156).

### **Turkey, Post-Sanctions Iran and the Kurdish Question**

Unlike tense Tehran-Washington relations, Turkey always stood with the United States both during and after the Cold War. One of the main strategies of Turkish foreign policy has been to secure the country's accession to the European Union, an integral part of which have been promotion of the rights of the country's Kurdish population (Aras and Polat: 2008, 517). In spite of recent challenges between Tel Aviv and Ankara, Turkey does not seem eager to rupture its relations with Israel, because it seriously needs the Israel lobby in the United States and European Union. The Turkish military still believes it owes Israel for its contribution in Ocalan's arrest, and that Turkey needs Israel to enhance its military capacity.

Iran and Turkey both share common security concerns, such as the Kurdish insurgency, and, as their work together on Iran's nuclear file has shown, they have proven track record of cooperation on difficult issues (Bas, 2013: 122-123). Nuclear diplomacy has been the main area of Iranian-Turkish cooperation within the past decade. Turkey voted against one of the United Nations Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran, and, in fact, has largely ignored international sanctions against the Islamic Republic. In the meantime, Ankara has made efforts to introduce a semblance of balance vis-à-vis the United States by maintaining friendly relations with Iran. In spite of international sanctions against Iran, Turkey expanded its trade with the country particularly on oil and gas, by 2010 having become one of the country's biggest trading partners alongside the European Union, China, Japan and South Korea.

As a result of nuclear agreement between Iran and the Permanent

5+1 and the possibility of having international sanctions against Iran lifted starting in 2016, there is a prospect of change in power equations in West Asia with an end to Iran's international isolation.

In July 2015, high-level meetings between Iraqi and Turkish officials resulted in mutual pledges of cooperation on a host of political, economic, and security issues, especially combatting ISIS (Orhan, 2015). In July 2015 Turkish policy toward both ISIS and the Kurds underwent a dramatic shift when an explosion in the Kurdish-inhabited town of Suruc resulted in the deaths of many Kurdish youngsters who had intended to travel to Kobani to help Syrian and Kurdish refugees. While Turkey has been frequently criticized for its support for ISIS forces inside and outside the county, after the July attack Turkey began attacking ISIS and PKK positions inside Syrian territory. Turkey's actions were largely motivated by efforts to prevent the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. The United States had already endorsed the action (Middle East Briefing, 2015), and it had also received permission to use the Incirlik air base to launch airstrikes against targets in Syria. Turkey called on NATO to meet in an emergency session to provide additional security to Turkey against the PKK and ISIS (Aljazeera, 2015). But Iran refused to endorse Turkey's unilateral military action in Syria and instead called for regional cooperation in combatting ISIS. As some analysts suggest, Turkey and Iran are competing on several accounts in the region, but because of common economic and security interests, they are forced to stay close to each other (Bas, 2013: 123).

### **Conclusion**

Iranian-Turkish relations between 1991 and 2015 have seen numerous ups and downs due to domestic developments as well as regional and global changes. The Kurdish question has been one of the most important issues for the two states as regional and transregional actors have tried to take advantage of the Kurds' activities in order to secure their own benefits. The Kurdish question has affected Iranian and Turkish relations with Syria as well. Developments in Iraq since the early 1990s and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have further complicated ties between Iran and Turkey, influencing their approach to the Kurdish question.

The two states have shared concerns about the progress of a Kurdish separatist movement and the threat it can pose to their territorial integrity. As middle powers, Iran and Turkey have tried to increase their leeway by balancing the regional influence of great powers. With increase in influence wielded by the United States and its allies in Iraq, Iranian and Turkish efforts at limiting the scope of such influence have expanded. The U.S. occupation of Iraq expanded Iranian-Turkish cooperation, in spite of their continued rivalries in the region. Both Iran and Turkey employ a bureaucratic policy-making approach in which foreign policy is constructed by the elites who are in competition with other stakeholders and have differing concerns and interests. The government needs the support of domestic social actors while also taking into account the role and importance of public opinion. In such a model, foreign policy is an instrument in domestic political struggles. The role that the Kurdish question has played in Turkish policies after the Persian Gulf War is an example of this model. Turkey's incursions into northern Iraq after the fall of Saddam and its disputes with the Iraqi Kurdistan government have increased Iran's concerns.

After the AK Party came to power, Iran-Turkey collaboration entered a new stage as manifested in dealing with the militant groups in Kurdish areas inside their territories as well as in Syria. In Turkey's domestic politics, changes to the Kurdish question were shaped by the imperative of joining the European Union. Iran has also changed its policy toward the PKK over time. Ankara has sought to balance its relations with Iran with that of the U.S. support for the Kurdish cause. Beginning in the 1990s, therefore, Turkey entered into a number of strategic agreements with regional actors, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and even Qatar.

The future of U.S.-Iranian relations will also affect Iran's relations with Turkey since Ankara, like many other regional actors, has benefited significantly from tensions between Iran and the United States. By expanding its ties with Iran, Turkey has tried to exert pressure on the United States to enhance its own security concerns. If Washington guarantees Iraqi stability and territorial integrity and pressures the PKK, this is likely to result in greater competition instead of cooperation between Iran and Turkey. Ankara and Damascus represent two important regional capitals for Iran and are

situated firmly within the Iranian national security framework. In the past, the three states have coordinated their interests in their encounter with the Kurdish question. Iran's benefits with regard to Syria take precedence over Iran's benefits with respect to Turkey as Tehran-Damascus ties are of strategic significance.

Although the two countries saw expansion of their relations under the Justice and Development Party in Turkey and President Ahmadinejad in Iran, especially in trade, Turkey's position toward Syria has posed serious challenges for Iran. Tehran warned that Ankara's attitude would benefit the United States and Israel vis-à-vis Syria and suggested that the fallout of the Syrian crisis would adversely affect Turkey as well. Indeed, any unrest in Syria would lead the Kurds and Alawites to forge a coalition against Turkey. Iran has also sought to encourage the Syrian government to resolve its issues with its Kurdish populations.

As two of the Middle East's most active and consequential players, Iran and Turkey are likely to maintain high profiles in regional developments, especially in the weak and fragile polities of Syria and Iraq. In the process, competition between the two regional middle powers over the spoils of the Arab Spring, and especially the fate of the Kurds, is likely only to intensify rather than abate.

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