

# TÜRKİYE-İRAN RELATIONS: A NEW ERA?

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## TÜRKIYE-IRAN RELATIONS: A NEW ERA?

A cordial and positive atmosphere marked the long-awaited visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara on January 24, 2024. There were many topics on the table: bilateral relations, trade, and regional stability, and above all, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Raisi's meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reflects the nature of the intricate and multidimensional relationship between the parties. Iran and Türkiye have had a mixed history woven with imperial legacies, regional frictions, and economic cooperation. Their clashing interests in Syria, Iraq, and Azerbaijan sit in stark contrast to the fact that their borders have not changed for 400 years since the Ottoman-Safevid Treaty of Kasr-ı Şirin (Zuhab) in 1639. Iranians with Turkic origin, including Ali Khamanay (the Supreme Leader of Iran) himself, make up 40% of the population, and carry a cultural bond with their cousins in Türkiye and Azerbaijan. As heir to imperial civilizations with deep roots, the two countries co-exist in difficult borderlands fraught with armed insurgencies and failed states but see interest in economic partnership. More recently, the cooperative spirit was demonstrated by the signing of ten agreements in commercial, energy and logistical fields. Added to these is the creation of a Free Trade Zone (FTZ), intended to act as a driving force in strengthening political ties and as a catalyst in regional dispute resolution.

### Iran and Türkiye: A multidimensional relationship

Despite the respective domestic dynamics and the regional turmoil, mainly related to the war in Gaza, but also to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the escalation in the Red Sea, Türkiye-Iran relations confirm some historical regularity and skilled diplomacy in navigating the complexities. Structurally, both countries aim for regional leadership, hence to some extent they are direct competitors. In this regard, Tehran and Ankara invest a lot in terms of raising their credibility through proxy logics. This is an endemic factor pivoting on the peculiarity of their bilateral ties, which experience collaboration and friction. Distrust, solidarity, cooperation are all structural elements of it, leading to competing but also complementary

regional stance and aspirations as they are justified by their strategic interests.

In this context, Iran-Türkiye cooperation is compartmentalized and built upon complementary competition. The reasons are found also through the history and are grounded on their mutual imperial legacies and aspirations as Persians (Safevids) and Ottomans have opposed each other between 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Iranian and Turkish identities both have their own strong sense of belonging to nation-states, marking a difference in comparison to, for instance, Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, both are republics; on the one hand, Islamic Republic of Iran has a deep religious connotation, on the other, the modern Republic of Türkiye, as founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, pursued a modernization and democracy project

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<sup>1</sup> V. Giannotta, 'Le relazioni internazionali con l'Iran. Turchia', in *Scommessa Iran/Betting on Iran*, e-book, CIPMO, 2016, <https://www.cipmo.it/wp->

<content/uploads/2018/11/ebook-Scommessa Iran-2016.pdf>

upon secular principles. Knowing that Iranian-style revolutionary Islamism would not take hold in Türkiye, Turkish governments have cleverly joined pluralism of moderate Islam with pragmatism of embracing democracy, modernity, and liberal global economy for the past forty years.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Iran is isolated from the international community, while genetically Türkiye has had an organic connection with Europe for a millennium a long-lasting international imprint due to its Western vision and to its membership to prominent organizations, such as NATO, OECD, and the Council of Europe.

Along important domestic reforms, Türkiye ranks among the top twenty largest economies in the world and has global ambitions.<sup>3</sup> More than half of its trade is with the EU, and its army is the second largest in NATO after the U.S. By contrast, Iran's economy is heavily tilted toward the Eurasian landscape such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS+ as well as its advantageous geo-economic position in the north-south (Russia-Iran) and east-west (China-Iran) trade corridors. China is Iran's number one oil customer and trading partner; it has also assisted in the development of Iran's nuclear program via the transfer of technology and machinery.<sup>4</sup> Despite such differences, the Iranian-Turkish relations have continued uninterrupted. Quite the

contrary, especially since Erdoğan's rise to power in early 2000s, Türkiye has warmed up to and engaged with Tehran more closely.

Upon the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Türkiye, Syria, and Iran felt the need to contain the risk of a separatist Kurdish insurgency and independence within their borders. As joint efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking continued, collaboration against the outlawed PKK in Türkiye and its sister organization PJAK in Iran have been a defining feature of their quest for collective security.<sup>5</sup> A further turning point was the so-called "nuclear agreement" signed in August 2010 on the sidelines of the UN resolution on sanctions against Tehran. Along with Brazil, Türkiye encouraged the recognition of Iran's uranium enrichment plan to end Tehran's international isolation<sup>6</sup> and grown the economic partnership with its neighbor. However, some frictions arose along the Arab uprisings as Ankara supported regional re-shuffling for its political convenience, while Tehran stranded for the status-quo.

In addition to military clashes, a strong ideological polarization characterized the Syrian chessboard: in this fractured environment, Iran has arisen as the leader of Shia factions, while Ankara supported the Sunni groups.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in a logic of balance of power and containment of

<sup>2</sup> Murat Somer, "Moderate Islam and Secularist Opposition in Turkey: Implications for the World, Muslims and Secular Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 7 (2007): 1271-89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20454998>.

<sup>3</sup> E. Çeviker Gürakar & E. Köksal, 'Institutional Evolution and economic development in Iran and Turkey', in *Middle East Development Journal*, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, "China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations," Research & Commentary (RAND Corporation, May

2, 2012), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP351.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html).

<sup>5</sup> M. Wuntrich, 'Conflict Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria', in *Turkish Studies*, 16:2, 285-290, 2015

<sup>6</sup> A. Eteshami & S. Elik, 'Turkey's Growing Relations with Iran and Arab Middle East', in *Turkish Studies*, 12:4, 643-662, 2011

<sup>7</sup> E. F. Keyman & O. Sazak, 'Turkey and Iran: The Two Modes of Engagement in the Middle East', in *Journal*

threats, Ankara and Tehran on the one hand aimed to contain the expansion of mutual spheres of influence; but on the other hand, they have been able to create an *ad hoc* alliance for high-level diplomatic talks together with Russia within the so called “Astana Group” in 2022 to find a permanent solution to the Syrian quagmire. Although the group succeeded to coordinate cases such as deconfliction, de-escalation, and prevention of large-scale humanitarian crisis in Syria,<sup>8</sup> it hit roadblocks in Türkiye-Syria normalization process due to latter’s request from Ankara for assurances to withdraw its troops stationed in northern Syria.<sup>9</sup>

In the Caucasus, the distrust between Ankara and Tehran, along the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, did not erupt in an open confrontation. Iran grew increasingly anxious over Turkish support to Azerbaijan against the Armenian separatists in Karabagh, fearing the resurgence of its own Azerbaijani minority in the north of the country.<sup>10</sup> Deterring separatist ambitions and enhancing collective security is the main shared regional goal between the two countries, despite some political and ideological disagreements due to the evolving political landscape in the wider context. Their assertiveness is a defensive move against what they perceive as the West’s imperialist designs on the region. Neither Türkiye nor Iran lay any territorial

claims on Armenia or Azerbaijan. To the contrary, they recently agreed to let Azerbaijan’s land transport corridor with Nakhichevan to pass through Iran instead of Armenia.<sup>11</sup> What brings Türkiye and Iran together in this context is not their inability to exert total control individually over the region but their shared threat perception against the U.S./EU. They are more concerned with survival in an anarchic world order rather than dominating the region through coercion. They promote regionalism not solely to balance against one another but primarily to pool their forces against external, non-regional actors. Ironically, it was along the escalation in Syria and Azerbaijan that Iran and Türkiye have compartmentalized their relations and shifted the focus on economic cooperation rather than geopolitical friction.

### The impact of the Gaza War

The war in Gaza is another crucial topic in the Iran-Türkiye relations. As the recent Gaza crisis has great impact on regional stability, cooperation and de-escalation is much needed. Both Türkiye and Iran condemn the Israeli attack on Gaza by urging to stop the humanitarian catastrophe by leveraging multilateral diplomacy as well on their direct contacts with Hamas. During January 24 meeting in Ankara, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed with his Iranian

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of Balkans and Near Eastern Studies, 17:3, 321-336,2015

<sup>8</sup> Aruzhan Ualikhanova, “Kazakhstan Ends Astana Process After 20th Round,” *The Astana Times*, June 23, 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/06/kazakhstan-ends-astana-process-after-20th-round/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Astana Platform to Get Syria-Turkey Relations Back on Track — Journalist,” TASS, January 31, 2024, <https://tass.com/world/1739725>.

<sup>10</sup>Iranian leader heads to Turkey to talk Gaza war with Erdoğan’, *The times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-leader-heads-to-turkey-to-talk-gaza-war-with-erdogan/> ‘Iran’s Raisi in Turkey to forge joint response to the Israel war on Gaza’, *AhramOnline*, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/513012.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> “Azerbaijan Shifts Focus To Iran For Land Corridor Amid Armenia Impasse,” *Iran International*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310263268>.

counterpart to avoid steps that could further destabilize Middle East. He said, "Israel attacks on Gaza are inhumane... Therefore, the need for a fair and lasting peace in the region. Hence, cooperation between Türkiye and Iran will continue against cross-border threats.<sup>12</sup> Thus, containing escalation and avoiding further regional spillovers is a shared imperative.

In this regard, Türkiye has been vocal in condemning Israel's attacks on Gaza by calling for immediate ceasefire and providing materials collected on the field by the Turkish News Agency *Anadolu* to back the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s South Africa dossier to charge Israel of committing genocide.<sup>13</sup> Last October, during a UN General Assembly extraordinary meeting, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amirabdollahian, explained that Tehran was ready to fulfill a role with Türkiye and Qatar in the release of hostages held by Hamas. To this, in November he added that Iran appreciates Ankara's guarantorship proposal and called for a permanent ceasefire along with his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan.<sup>14</sup> As regional stability is the main objective for both countries, which share a 535 km-long land border and face similar challenges and opportunities, the unity of intent and the common goal to reach an immediate ceasefire and

sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are a further element cementing their bilateral collaboration.

### Pivoting on Economic Cooperation

In this regional turmoil, trade plays a crucial role to de-escalate tensions. Currently, Iran-Türkiye trade volume stands at around US\$7 billion, but they both agreed to increase it to US\$30 billion.<sup>15</sup> This an ambitious goal aiming at pivoting further on the main economic exchange of energy imports from Iran and Turkish exports on industry, food, cloths. The trade balance in Türkiye's favor where exports to Iran between January and October 2023 reached US\$2.55 billion, with 3% increase compared to 2022, whereas imports from Iran registered a 34 % decline and fell from US\$2.81 billion in January-October 2022 to US\$1.85 billion in the first 10 months of 2023.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Iran's economic difficulties and sanctions, trade has continued, and economic partnerships have been discussed in Ankara also within the scope of the 8. Türkiye-Iran High-Level Cooperation Council. The primary focus was energy, as some of the current bilateral agreements will expire soon, but also border region trade, customs legislation, and mutual investment to

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401252720> Turkey Iran agreed on need for regional stability amid israel's war on Gaza', *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/turkey-iran-agree-on-need-for-regional-stability-amid-israel-s-war-on-gaza>.

<sup>13</sup> Z. Demirci and S. Aksunger, *Turkish parliament delegation urges swift resolution in South Africa's genocide case against Israel at ICJ, AA, January 2024*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-parliament-delegation-urges-swift-resolution-in-south-africas-genocide-case-against-israel-at-icj/3107012>.

<sup>14</sup>D. Aslan Özer, 'Türkiye Iran consensus won't translate to greater co-op', *Daily Sabah*, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/turkiye-iran-consensus-on-gaza-wont-translate-to-greater-co-op>.

<sup>15</sup> "President: Iran Eyes \$30bln in Trade with Turkey," Farsnews Agency, January 24, 2024, [https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14021104000610/President-Iran-Eyes-\\$30bln-in-Trade-wih-Trkey](https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14021104000610/President-Iran-Eyes-$30bln-in-Trade-wih-Trkey).

<sup>16</sup> "Iran-Turkey Trade Reach \$4.4b in 10 Months," *Tehran Times*, December 3, 2023, sec. Economy, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/492090/Iran-Turkey-trade-reach-4-4b-in-10-months>.

boost trade volume. In this frame, 10 agreements were signed touching upon some other specific sectors such as transport, communication, culture, industry, technology, security.<sup>17</sup> This provides further evidence that economic cooperation is seen as a leverage to promote development and stability in the region. “We have not terminated and will not terminate our economic and trade relations with our neighbor Iran due to sanctions,” Erdoğan said shortly after their meeting with Raisi by stressing that improving bilateral relations would not only benefit the two countries, but the entire region.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, he also emphasized the issue of opening new border crossings with Iran and creating a FTZ area, paving the way for more mutual investments.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of these achievements and intentions, Türkiye and Iran prove the need of a new perspective in coping with regional crisis, which inevitably passes through cooperation and solidarity, despite a margin of friction and competition. Although some mutual distrust may persist, their evolving relations signal a continued effort to navigate complex ties, focusing on economic cooperation and potential areas of convergence in regional policies.

### Conclusion

The multifaceted relationship between Iran and Türkiye underscores a complex

interplay of historical legacies, regional dynamics, and economic interests. Despite occasional friction stemming from conflicting geopolitical aspirations and ideological differences, both nations have exhibited a remarkable capacity for cooperation and strategic alignment, particularly in the face of shared challenges and opportunities. The recent visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Ankara exemplifies a renewed commitment to enhancing bilateral ties and addressing pressing regional issues. From trade agreements to collaborative efforts in combatting terrorism and promoting regional stability, Iran and Türkiye have demonstrated a willingness to overcome differences in pursuit of mutual benefits.

Central to their evolving relationship is a recognition of the importance of economic cooperation as a catalyst for development and stability in the region. The ambitious goal of increasing trade volume to US\$30 billion underscores a shared commitment to leveraging economic interdependence as a tool for fostering peace and prosperity. Moreover, both nations have reaffirmed their solidarity in condemning the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, advocating for a fair and lasting peace in the region. By leveraging multilateral diplomacy and direct engagement with stakeholders, Iran and Türkiye aim to contain escalation and prevent further regional destabilization. While challenges and uncertainties persist, the trajectory of Iran-Türkiye relations points towards a growing recognition of

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<sup>17</sup> İletişim, ‘Türkiye ile İran arasında 10 anlaşma imzalandı’, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/turkiye-ile-iran-arasinda-10-anlasma-imzalandi>

<sup>18</sup> M. Beker, ‘President Erdoğan stresses Türkiye-Iran cooperation to promote development, stability in the region’, *Anadolu Ajansı*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/president-erdogan-stresses-turkiye-iran-cooperation-to->

[promote-development-stability-in-region/3117906](https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/turkiye-ile-iran-arasinda-10-anlasma-imzalandi).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Iran Türkiye agree to establish free trade zone in Khoy border crossing’, *Qatar news agency*, <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2024-01/28/0025-iran,%C2%A0turkiye%C2%A0agree-to-establish-free-trade-zone-in%C2%A0khoy%C2%A0border-crossing>.

the imperative for cooperation and solidarity in navigating the complexities of the contemporary geopolitical landscape. As they continue to navigate a delicate balance of competition and collaboration, Iran and Türkiye stand poised to shape the future of the region through pragmatic engagement and strategic partnership.



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