

Turkey on Iran: Gains, Risks, and Strategic Restraint

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Turkey's normally spirited President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been uncharacteristically reserved in response to the war in Iran. This reflects Erdoğan's focus on maintaining good relations with the Trump administration, but also a genuine ambiguity in Turkish thinking regarding the opportunities and risks involved with the war. While Turkey would not mind a weakened Iran, the war also brings back memories of the fallout of earlier American forays in the Middle East.

Turkey's Reaction

Over the past several decades, President Erdoğan has made a name for himself through his demagoguery. He has lashed out numerous times at both the United States and Israel, with [accusations and statements](#) that frequently cross the line into outright anti-Semitism. Yet in regard to the U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran, Erdoğan has been relatively cautious. Needless to say, Erdoğan has not been silent: he has [made it clear](#) that in his view, the war is a violation of international law. But that view is hardly surprising: it is shared by many European leaders. More true to form, perhaps, have been Erdoğan's allegations that the war was a result of "[Netanyahu's provocations](#)." But Turkey has also called out Iran's retaliatory attacks on its neighbors, terming them unacceptable, and reacted strongly to Iranian ballistic missiles fired at Turkey.

Turkey's Incirlik base, which has a strong American military presence, is not involved in the attack on Iran as a result of Turkey's neutrality in the conflict. Yet several Iranian missiles have targeted the base, but were shot down by NATO missile defense systems. Turkey has sought to downplay these incidents, while [stressing](#) in its public messaging that Incirlik is a Turkish base and not a purely American one.

Turkey has also sought to take on the role of a [mediator](#), along with [Pakistan](#). It is unclear whether Turkish leaders think they have the clout to bring about an end to the conflict. But taking a role in mediation raises the importance of Turkey for both Iran and the United States, and thus serves to manage the process, keep an active channel of communication with Washington, and seek to avoid adverse consequences from the ongoing war spilling over into Turkey.

Seen against the background of recent Turkish policies, this cautious stance on Iran is indicative of several factors. It reflects a gradual change in Turkish foreign policy approaches that are a result of the changing nature of the country's ruling coalition. Beyond an effort to maintain good ties with President Donald Trump, it also suggests a true ambivalence regarding the Iran operation.

Shifting Policies on Iran

Since Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power almost a quarter century ago, Turkish approaches to Iran have shifted considerably, going over three distinct phases. An initial pan-Islamic approach gave way to a more hostile, sectarian view of Iran, which in turn was quickly supplanted

by a more nationalist-oriented Turkish stance on regional affairs as the nature of the ruling regime in Ankara changed.

Turkey and Iran have been rivals for centuries, and the Turkish Islamist movement that emerged in the 1960s was originally quite hostile to the Shi'a in Iran. But much like the Muslim Brotherhood, which strongly inspired it, the Turkish Islamist movement was enthused by the Iranian revolution, which succeeded in establishing an Islamic state. From that time, many [Turkish Islamists](#) became increasingly favorably disposed to Iran. This led them to adopt a [pan-Islamist](#) approach that glossed over sectarian differences in an attempt to embrace all significant Muslim powers. Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, tried to reach out to Tehran in the mid-1990s, and in the 2000s, Erdoğan and his new prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, adopted a similar approach. When the question of Iran's nuclear weapons program came to the forefront in 2009-2010, Erdoğan defended the Iranian program as purely peaceful in nature and effectively became Iran's most significant international spokesman on nuclear matters. Together with Brazilian President Lula da Silva, Erdoğan [negotiated](#) a nuclear deal with Iran that even the Obama administration found toothless.

Not staying at that, members of Erdoğan's inner circle were active in helping Iran [circumvent U.S. sanctions](#), a scheme that was revealed in the oil-for-gold scandal involving Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab. Against this background, Erdoğan's ringing [endorsement](#) of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009 was a result of both ideological and material reasons.

But tensions between the countries were always present, not least because Iran hardly returned the favor: Tehran appeared unfazed by Turkish protestations of pan-Islamism and forged ahead with the building of its Shi'a-dominated "axis of resistance" across the region. Following the Arab Upheavals, Turkey was taken aback when Iran doubled down on its support for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, and took an [active part](#) in the massive crackdown on Sunni rebels that kept the regime in power. This led to a significant change in Turkey's approach. While Turkey itself doubled down on its support for Sunni Islamist forces across the region, it came to view Iran once again in a more sectarian and negative light.

But at the same time, Turkey's own regime dissolved into an internecine fight within the Islamist movement. From 2012 through 2016, Erdoğan's supporters [faced off](#) with the followers of the exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen, who had ensconced themselves in the administration and sought to challenge Erdoğan's control over the state. This culminated in the [failed coup](#) of July 2016. While Erdoğan came out victorious, the need to purge the state from the most-organized Islamist grouping in the country led to a remake of the ruling coalition. To remain in power, Erdoğan [allied](#) with the traditional Turkish nationalist forces in the security apparatus, who now rapidly gained influence over the making of foreign and security policy.

Proxy Wars

Turkey's approach to Iran has since become increasingly confrontational. Turkey and Iran effectively fought a proxy war in Syria, with Turkish-aligned forces like the Syrian National Army and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) [facing off](#) against Iran-supported Shi'a militias and Hezbollah. Similarly, in the South Caucasus, Turkey took an [active part](#) on Azerbaijan's side in the 2020 Second Karabakh War, helping the country overpower Iran-aligned Armenia and restore control over Azerbaijani territories that Armenia had controlled since the mid-1990s. In 2022, Turkey countered [large](#) Iranian military exercises on the Azerbaijani border by [staging](#) even larger joint exercises with the Azerbaijani military.

Meanwhile, Turkey was beginning to crack down on Iranian intelligence operations on its soil. Over many years, numerous Iranian dissidents, including high-profile figures, had been abducted or attacked in Turkey. In earlier times, Ankara handled such incidents discreetly, but it has now begun to televise busts of Iranian

spy rings. Turkish intelligence even proceeded to [public media briefings](#) on Iranian intelligence activity and its efforts to thwart it. It appeared clear that Turkey was no longer willing to tolerate Iranian encroachment on its sovereignty. Meanwhile, Turkey embarked on initiatives that directly threatened Iranian interests—such as the “[Development Road](#)” through Iraq, a \$17 billion-dollar plan to build a transportation corridor linking Europe and Turkey to the Persian Gulf. Turkey’s ringing endorsement of cooperation among Turkic States and the creation of the Organization of Turkic States was also viewed with great alarm in Tehran.

Is Iran’s Loss Turkey’s Gain?

In the past several years, Turkey has emerged as the primary beneficiary (outside Israel) of Iran’s declining regional power. In both Syria and the South Caucasus, Turkey has emerged as a decisive external power, displacing the influence of Iran as well as Russia. Syria stands out as the most significant turning of the tables. Turkey is the most significant foreign partner to the new Syrian government, having supported it militarily for years against the Assad regime. This, in turn, undid decades of effort by Iran to build an outlet to the Mediterranean through Iraq and Syria.

On Iran’s northern border, the mutual defense treaty [signed](#) by Turkey and Azerbaijan in June 2021 has revolutionized the South Caucasus. Ever since its signing—and with renewed swagger after victory in the Second Karabakh War—Azerbaijan has taken on a much more assertive stance against both Iran and Russia, refusing to tolerate the bullying tactics it was forced to endure in the past. Building on this, the [Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity](#) (TRIPP) places an American imprimatur on the long-standing effort to connect Turkey through Azerbaijan to the Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia. This project has also moved forward in spite of Iranian objections.

The American-Israeli attack on Iran, if successful, would therefore seem to strengthen Turkey’s position in the region. This could happen most immediately in Iraq, where Turkey has sought to contest Iran’s dominant role. Turkey has already established itself as the most significant external economic partner of Iraq, but has yet to translate that into the political influence of the kind Iran has exerted. Should Iran’s regime fall or be reduced to a shadow of its former self, it would seem obvious that Turkey, along with Saudi Arabia, would gain influence in Iraq.

Fear of Unrest and the Kurdish Factor

While the current war could provide important opportunities for Turkey, it also comes with significant dangers. Turkey’s experience of American military operations in the Middle East is, to put it mildly, underwhelming. Since the first war with Iraq in 1990–1991, Turkey has [suffered economically](#) from the unrest in the region, while this unrest has also empowered Kurdish separatist groups in Turkey.

The economic toll of the U.S. interventions in the Middle East has been significant. Turkey has consistently sought to expand its economic ties with the Middle East. Turkey’s relations with Syria had been [poor](#) for decades, something that made Iraq a priority for Turkey in the late 1980s. The oil fields of Kirkuk were a key source of energy for Turkey, with a [pipeline built](#) in the 1970s. In return, Turkey provided manufactured goods, pharmaceuticals, and food products to Iraq. This trade was disturbed by the first Iraq war, which cost Turkey billions of dollars.

More importantly, perhaps, the U.S. military operations have seen Middle Eastern instability spread to Turkey. Both in 1991 and 2003, the U.S. war against Iraq led Baghdad to lose control over the northern parts of the country bordering Turkey. This in turn [allowed](#) the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a separatist Kurdish outfit considered a terrorist group by the United States and European Union, to establish itself in northern Iraq’s mountains. From there, it [mounted campaigns](#) against Turkish soil that posed an existential threat to Turkey and cost thousands of lives.

Turkey eventually [learned to live](#) with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, not least because that territory came under the control of traditional and conservative Kurdish forces led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Barzani family. Matters were different in Syria: there, the Kurdish entity that the United States has endorsed and supported since the 2010s is controlled by Kurdish forces that are essentially a subsidiary of the PKK. This contributed to a resurgence of Kurdish separatism in Turkey that the government managed to stamp out only with [great difficulty and brutality](#).

Against this background, Turkey harbors strong concerns that America—particularly under an unpredictable leader like President Trump—may effectively destroy Iran, leaving behind chaos for regional countries to handle. And while Turkey would prefer a weakened Iran, it certainly does not want a collapsed state and chaos on its border. The first Iraq war led to a massive [flow of refugees](#) from northern Iraq into Turkey; chaos in Iran could lead to the flight of millions, and most would head toward Turkey given the dearth of options. Reeling from the experience of several million Syrian refugees, this is hardly something Turkey can afford.

On top of this, the United States has actively [flirted](#) with the notion of arming Kurdish forces inside Iran in an effort to further weaken the regime without having to put American boots on the ground. While President Trump has [denied](#) such plans after they were leaked to the press, to Turkish ears, it only adds to the alarm and feeds fears that Israel and its allies in the United States are actively working through Kurdish groups to weaken Turkey.

Turkey and Israel

It is a paradox that while Israel has been the driving force in weakening Iran, Turkey has been a major beneficiary, yet relations between the two remain at a low point. This is the case despite their common interests—for example, both [contributed](#) heavily to Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War. Indeed, the mutual suspicion is rampant: Turkish leaders [fear](#) alleged Israeli plots to undermine and destroy Turkey through the Kurds. Conversely, leading Israeli politicians appear [convinced](#) that Turkey is building a “Sunni axis” at best and planning to invade the Jewish state at worst.

In reality, the fears on both sides appear overblown. October 7 taught Israelis to never be complacent and take their adversaries and enemies at face value. It should come as no surprise that Israelis take every hostile statement by Turkish leaders seriously. But within Turkey, leading analysts view Erdoğan’s statements as mere bluster, intended to feed his Islamist base. Conversely, Turkish leaders appear to be letting their fears of alleged Jewish conspiracies get the best of them.

There is no question that, however the Iran war ends, Israel and Turkey will remain as two key military powers in the Middle East, and as the major beneficiaries of the demise of the Islamic Republic. For American interests in the region, it will be a decisive question whether these two powers will be able to overcome their mutual suspicion of each other and work out ways to coexist in the new Middle East that will emerge when the smoke has cleared.

Looking Ahead

Many U.S. allies in the Gulf have been hit hard by Iranian missiles, including Oman, which served as a mediator before the conflict broke out. Turkey has so far avoided this and managed to prevent any significant Iranian hostile action against it. That must be termed a political success. But it is much too early to say whether Turkey will manage to avoid significant fallout from the Iran war. Aside from possible Iranian strikes, future refugee flows toward Turkey are a key immediate concern.

Turkey’s relations with the United States have improved considerably under the Trump administration, but considerable distrust remains from dustups over Syria and Iraq. Turkish leaders no doubt welcome a

weakened Iran, as it would enable Turkey to further establish its influence in the Middle East at Iran's expense. But by the same token, Turkey would be alarmed by the collapse of the Iranian regime. This reaction is similar to Turkey's reaction to the Ukraine war: it welcomed the weakening of Russia, but did not want to take part in American actions that would effectively seek the economic collapse of Russia. In both cases, Turkey is balancing its relationship with regional powers against its desire for true multipolarity. In other words, Turkey does not want to see an international order that is once again dominated by the United States, but one where regional powers maintain a level of balance against American interests.

Turkey will be a key building block in shaping the post-war Middle East once the Iran war is over. So will Saudi Arabia and Israel, as key regional powers. This will make the trilateral relationship among these three American allies the key to regional stability. Ankara and Riyadh have developed a common understanding on regional affairs, and Jerusalem and Riyadh have come a long way toward normalizing their relationship. The tensions between Turkey and Israel are likely to be a key matter for the United States to address in the aftermath of the Iran war.