The Impact of Syrian Developments on the National Security of Neighboring Countries

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the political-security relations between Iran and Turkey in the context of developments in Syria from 2010 to 2019. Using a descriptive-analytical method and the theory of defensive realism (threat balance), this study shows that the developments in Syria during these years have profoundly affected the political-security relations between the two countries. Following the Syrian crisis and the emergence of extremist groups, the relationship between Iran and Turkey, which had moved towards competition and mild interaction from 2002 to 2010, shifted to a threat-oriented approach after 2010. Iran's support for Iranian-backed rebels and Turkey's position in the Western-Arab front aimed at overthrowing the Syrian regime have intensified the differences in viewpoints and approaches between the two countries.

I. Introduction

In recent years, Iran and Turkey have adopted different approaches in response to regional developments, particularly regarding the Syrian crisis, which has been influenced by external variables. Syria, as a key ally of Iran in Iranian-backed insurgencies, is of particular concern to Iran, which views this crisis as a Western and Arab plot to weaken the axis of resistance. The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that the resolution of the Syrian crisis must occur solely through diplomatic dialogues and continues to support its strategic allies. In contrast, Turkey has supported opponents of the Syrian government, considering this movement a part of the Arab Spring. Turkey's overt policy to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's government has placed it in a position opposed to Iran, which also supports extremist forces.

This research explores the impacts of the political-security developments in Syria (2010-2019) on Iran-Turkey relations using the defensive realism theory. The main question is: What impact have these developments had on the political-security relations between the two countries? The answer to this question indicates that the developments in Syria have significantly altered the relationship between Iran and Turkey.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Background of the Research

Previous research in this field includes various studies addressing the impacts of developments in Syria and Iraq on the regional policies of Iran and Turkey. For instance, Fathi et al. (2018) examined how developments in Syria and Iraq led to changes in the regional policies of both countries. Rabiei (2016) also discussed the role of Iran and

Turkey as regional rivals in the Syrian crisis and analyzed the impacts of this rivalry on the national security of both countries.

Ultimately, this research focuses on the impacts of the political-security developments in Syria (2010-2019) on Iran-Turkey relations, addressing the relationship between these variables and choosing the defensive realism approach as a theoretical framework. This approach contributes to a more comprehensive analysis of the current situation and examines the complex relations between Iran and Turkey in the context of the Syrian crisis.

2.2 Regionalism as a Theoretical Framework

Stephen Walt, a scholar of structural realism, refers to the principle of threat balance in discussions of power and has sought to refine the theory of power balance. He believes that countries do not seek to balance against any power but only against those they perceive as threats (Walt, 1998: 116). In this context, Walt identifies four components as factors of threat: a state's aggressive power, military capabilities, geographical proximity, and aggressive intentions (Little, 2009: 33-37). Thus, in relations among states, their perceptions of each other as threats are more significant than their actual power levels.

According to Walt, states resort to balancing for two reasons: first, to ensure their survival before a potential threat arises; and second, to enhance their influence in alliance with a weaker party that requires assistance. Consequently, the search for security emerges as a key issue in threat balancing. States seek to increase their relative security against threatening powers. Therefore, they are primarily focused on increasing security (Hamayatiyan et al., 2015: 57) and only engage in balancing against states when there is an immediate threat to their existence or interests. As a result, balance can be pursued from within (mobilizing internal forces) and from without (forming temporary alliances) to counteract concentrated threatening power (Sifi et al., 2018: 43; Sun, 2009: 67).

Based on these points, threat balancing combines a state's aggressive power, military capabilities, geographical proximity, and potential aggressive intentions. Threat is a perception that states have of each other. In this regard, the level of threat felt by countries leads them to move toward balancing. When a threat is perceived, countries will either seek to create balance against it or align with the threatening state. This perception of threat seems to have motivated both Iran and Turkey toward threat balancing.

2.3 Political Relations between Iran and Turkey

To analyze the regional policies and rivalry between Iran and Turkey, various approaches can be employed. The factors influencing the political relations between Iran and Turkey include:

a. Increased Diplomatic Meetings

The growing relations between Turkey and Iran during the Justice and Development Party era were largely based on shared concerns regarding the Kurdish minority and economic interests. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Turkey sought to expand its influence in Iraq by strengthening ties with Kurds and Sunni Arabs. Additionally, as one of the countries that did not accept the election results in Iraq favoring the Shiites, Turkey has attempted to mitigate the differences between Iran and the U.S., positioning itself as a mediator. Notably, in May 2010, Turkey endeavored to bridge the gap between Iran and the U.S., but this effort failed due to U.S. obstruction. Nevertheless, these actions brought Ankara closer to Tehran (Sanger & Slackman, 2010: 6). Human Resources (HR) is the most important component in a company or organization to run the business it does.

Organization must have a goal to be achieved by the organizational members (Niati et al., 2021). Development is a change towards improvement. Changes towards improvement require the mobilization of all human resources and reason to realize what is aspired (Shah et al, 2020). The development of human resources is a process of changing the human resources who belong to an organization, from one situation to another, which is better to prepare a future responsibility in achieving organizational goals (Werdhiastutie et al, 2020).

While Turkey and Iran remain political rivals in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Caucasus, they have managed to expand their trade and economic relations independently of political tensions, with these relations increasing to nearly $20 billion annually (Demirtaş, 2016: 3). The regional rivalry between the two countries began in Syria in 2011, where Turkey attempted to prevent Iranian influence with its "Muslim Brotherhood belt" proposal. As a result, political tensions between Iran and Turkey have increased in recent years.

b. Iran's Nuclear Issue

The nuclear issue of Iran is one of the most important political topics between the two countries (Aras & Polat, 2007: 67). In recent years, despite Western efforts to portray Iran's nuclear program as a threat to regional countries, Turkish officials have consistently sought to adopt a position independent of the U.S. (Dehghan & Hosseini, 2011: 109-110). Turkish officials have emphasized Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear energy while opposing the existence of nuclear weapons in the Middle East (Dehghan & Hosseini, 2011: 37).

Turkey's support for Iran's nuclear program has created a rift in Western efforts to garner international support (Stein & Bleek, 2012: 142). The joint statement of Iran, Turkey, and Brazil in May 2010, during the G15 summit, demonstrated Turkey's willingness to play a positive role regarding Iran's nuclear issue. This role was reinforced by Turkey's negative vote on the Security Council resolution concerning sanctions against Iran (Hajimineh, 2012: 88). Overall, Turkey's support for Iran's nuclear program in international forums has improved the political relations between the two countries (Bani Hashemi, 2012: 112).

2.4 Security Relations between Iran and Turkey

In security conflicts, states act as players seeking security by increasing their relative power. In this context, the factors influencing Iran-Turkey security relations include:

a. Iranian-Backed Insurgents and Their Role in Bilateral Relations

One of the main obstacles in Iran-Turkey relations is Turkey's connection with Israel. There is a perception in Iran that Israel has significant influence in Turkey and that political and security agreements between them are anti-Iranian.

b. Approval of NATO Missile Defense System Deployment in Turkey

Turkey's decision in 2011 to cooperate in the NATO missile defense program, while not publicly perceived as an anti-Iranian action, has been evaluated by Iran as a serious security threat. Iran views this move as support for Israel in any potential conflict. This crisis occurred while Turkey was trying to remove Iran's name from NATO's strategic documents (Islam, 2015: 8).

2.5 Removal of Iranian Missile Capabilities from Turkey's National Security Document

In Turkey's 2005 National Security Strategy document, Iran's Shahab-3 missiles were identified as a threat to Turkey's national security. However, due to the expansion of bilateral relations, Turkey removed the issue of Iran's missile threat from its national security document in 2010, indicating that it no longer perceives it as a threat to its security (Masoudnia et al., 2011: 156).

2.6 The Kurdish Issue and Its Impact on Iran-Turkey Relations

Iran and Turkey have generally collaborated on Kurdish nationalist issues; however, since 2011, this cooperation has been influenced by the Syrian crisis. In northern Syria, each country has supported different Kurdish groups. While the rise of the PKK and its affiliated groups poses a threat to both countries, the significant territorial gains by the Syrian Democratic Party (PYD), linked to the PKK, and its military branch, the People's Protection Units (YPG), directly contradict Turkey's interests and have led Ankara to criticize Iran. In this context, Russia plays a central role by openly supporting the federalization of the Syrian government. Nevertheless, Turkey has remained silent regarding Russian interventions, instead framing Iran as a factor in sectarian conflict, which clearly reflects Turkey's attempts to stir public sentiment through religious and historical propaganda.

Turkey's battle against the YPG and PKK undoubtedly influences regional balances, especially since these groups resist ISIS and its affiliates. Since 2011, Turkey has exacerbated the latent capacities of these groups through aggressive policies in Syria. Ankara believes such developments could not have occurred without Iran's approval. Media supportive of the Justice and Development Party claim that Iran hosts three PKK headquarters on its soil and supplies weapons to Kurds through armed organizations like the Popular Mobilization Units. However, Iran has denied these allegations, calling them false.

Turkey believes that alongside combating the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), Iran has maintained dubious relations with Kurds in Iraq and Syria. Nonetheless, Tehran views the PYD's efforts to create a contiguous Kurdish territory with suspicion, worrying that this could become a base for Western powers. Therefore, collaboration with the Kurds is deemed essential to secure a corridor to the Mediterranean and connect Tehran to the port of Latakia in Syria. Key cities like Kobani and Qamishli in northern Syria and Sinjar in Iraq are critical points in this corridor. Even if the Turkish government could militarily occupy these cities, establishing sustainable governance there would not be feasible. Thus, it makes sense for Iran to help peacefully stabilize the presence of the Kurds.

In Kurdish media, there are two main approaches: some believe the Kurds are being sacrificed in the Cold War between Turkey and Iran, while others assert that the Kurds can influence Iran and Turkey's plans and determine their own fate. The latter option could benefit all parties, but as long as Turkey and Iran pursue their specific policies in northern Iraq and Syria, the relationship between Iran and the Kurds will remain contentious for Ankara.

2.7 The Emergence of ISIS in Syria

With the emergence of ISIS in Syria and the announcement of the establishment of the "Islamic State" by this group, a new era of terrorist movements began in the history of international relations. The developments in Syria, particularly the presence of ISIS, challenged Iran's national security. Although ISIS lacked the military capability to confront Iran, social, ethnic, and economic grievances in western Iran provided a space for its activities. ISIS attempts to divide true Islam into good and bad Muslims in front of Western media, jeopardizing the security of Muslims in the West and Europe.

As the conflicts in Syria grew more complex and the crimes of terrorist groups expanded, Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, requested military intervention from Russia. Iran and Iraq's support for this intervention led to the formation of a new coalition in Syria, which faced strong reactions from the U.S., Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. This coalition represented strong support for the Syrian government and its people against terrorist groups.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Political-Security Developments in Syria since 2011

The political developments in Syria since 2011 began with widespread protests in the country's periphery. While the protests initially focused on reform and freedom-seeking, they gradually led to bloodshed. There are various interpretations of these developments; some see them as an extension of popular movements in the Middle East and North Africa, while others believe this crisis is more a result of international rivalries than internal origins.

3.2 Iran-Turkey Relations after the Syrian Developments

Iran and Turkey had differing positions regarding the Syrian crisis. The disagreements between the two countries stem from factors such as competition over governance structures, differing roles and regional goals, and the struggle for regional leadership. Iran seeks to protect Syria's political structure from revolutionary changes, while Turkey aims to change the governmental system in Syria to increase its influence in the region.

IV. Conclusion

The Syrian crisis has had a profound impact on the political and security relations between Iran and Turkey. This crisis has shifted the relationship between the two countries, which was previously characterized by cooperation and competition, towards heightened tension and rivalry. Overall, differing viewpoints on Syria's future have posed challenges for bilateral relations. Despite tensions, political relations between Iran and Turkey continue, indicating that mutual cooperation and shared interests in other areas prevent a complete rupture in ties.

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