



How the Iranian Revolution Inspired Turkish Islamism

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The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 had important implications throughout the Islamic world, and Turkey has been no exception. The two countries' long-standing rivalry dates back to the sixteenth century, and Iran and Turkey have long had a profound impact on one another, not only geopolitically but ideologically. The historical consolidation of a Sunni identity in Turkey and a Shi'a identity in Iran had very much to do with their rivalry. And it played out between two Turkic dynasties, the Ottomans and the Safavids.

In the early twentieth century, the Pahlavi dynasty was heavily inspired by the modernization and westernization process in Turkey launched by Kemal Atatürk. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, turned the tables. Influence began to flow in the opposite direction, as Iranian Islamists became pacesetters and examples for Turkish Islamists.

Closer than Appearances Suggest

The sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shi'as is very real. But it has tended to avert attention from the commonalities between political Islamists in the Sunni world and in Iran, and the mutual inspiration they have drawn from each other. The theological differences between the Shi'a and Sunni are deep. These have been accentuated at times when political or religious authorities have sought to promote or apply particular interpretations of Islamic law. This has inevitably been sectarian in nature, and has led to social friction and conflict.

For example, when Pakistan's Sunni-dominated government implemented Sharia law during its "Islamization" reforms of the 1980s, the country's minority Shi'a population was increasingly marginalized, which led to large-scale unrest.¹ The inverse has been the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Sunni minorities like Kurds and Baloch have been marginalized, along with ethnic minorities that are Shi'a, like the Azerbaijanis.

That being said, Sunni-Shia theological disputes have not prevented many of the Islamist political movements that emerged within modern Sunni and Shia Islam from striving to cooperate.² Among other things, these movements have tried to reduce religious differences by emphasizing pan-Islamic political unity. They have also opportunistically defined outsiders—mainly Western nations—as the enemy of all Muslims. In doing so, they have sought to build a united world of Islam as a geopolitical counterweight to the "infidel" West.

The ideological ties between the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement and Iranian Shiite Islamism has been stronger than is often acknowledged.³ In fact, the Brotherhood and its leading thinkers like Sayyid Qutb had a significant impact on the Iranian radicals who shaped the revolutionary project led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. So, also, did South Asian Islamist Abu Ala Mawdudi.⁴ As Mehdi Khalaji has noted, the Brotherhood played an important role in "directly stimulating the emergence of a unique form of Shiite Islamism in Iran in the 1950s."⁵ The founder of Iran's extremist Fada'iyan e Islam movement, Navvab Safavi, played a key role in this as he traveled to Egypt to meet Qutb in 1954. Safavi is credited with introducing Qutb's seminal ideas about Islamic government to Khomeini.⁶ Subsequently, Ali Khamene'i, Iran's current Supreme Leader and Khomeini's successor, translated several of Qutb's works into Persian.

Similarly, the Brotherhood-inspired Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, led by Mawdudi, was in close touch with the Iranian revolutionaries. Mawdudi met Khomeini in 1963, and the Jamaat's overt criticism of the Shah landed it in trouble in Pakistan. Mawdudi backed the Iranian revolutionary movement early, in 1978, and sent a delegation to Tehran to congratulate Ayatollah Khomeini after the revolution.⁷ Khomeini likewise expressed his admiration for Mawdudi, whom he termed a religious leader "not just for Pakistan but for the world."⁸

Thus the Brotherhood's ideology played a significant role in the development of the Shi'a clerical rule's unorthodox political doctrine (*velayat al-faqih*), which Khomeini famously outlined in his treatise on Islamic government. Both the Brotherhood and the Khomeinist movement emphasized political matters, and specifically the institution of an Islamic state. This helped to suppress the theological-legal differences between them that lay under the surface. Similarly, the Brotherhood's strongly anti-Western and anti-Semitic program deeply influenced the revolutionary Islamist movement in Iran. Traditionally, most Iranians had not been particularly hostile to or even interested in Israel; they considered the Jewish State and the Israel-Palestinian conflict as an "Arab" matter. But this changed demonstrably after the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran had, in turn, a far-reaching impact on Sunni Islamism and its subsequent development. Whereas Sunni Islamist movements in the Arabic-speaking world had tended to see the Shi'a and Iranians as inferior, and in many ways schismatic, the success of the Khomeinist Revolution transformed these perceptions. In fact, many Sunni Islamists were inspired by and in awe of what Khomeini had achieved. This did not mean they sought to replicate either the Iranian revolution or the form of clerical government that the Khomeinists created. But the revolution did inspire many Sunni Islamists to believe that they, too, could seize power and establish an Islamic state of their own.

Of course, the revolution did not end the differences between the Brotherhood and Iran. They had many disagreements, including in Syria. This was already the case in 1982, when Tehran supported the Damascus regime's brutal crackdown on the Brotherhood-led revolt in Hama. In fact, Turkish Islamists strongly counseled the Brotherhood against the revolt. This would also be the case after 2003, as Brotherhood networks throughout the Middle East came to support their Sunni brethren in Iraq; likewise in Syria against Iranian-backed regimes and militias.

Still, it is noteworthy that the Sunni-Shi'a division is not the only factor shaping ideological and geopolitical relations in the Middle East. In fact, there is today a triangular rivalry involving three main contenders. The first is Iran and its aligned Shi'a militias and regimes. The second is a Sunni conservative group led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE including, with various levels of enthusiasm, countries like Kuwait, Egypt, and Jordan. The third is a Sunni Islamist group, which comprises the ruling regimes of Turkey and Qatar as well as Muslim Brotherhood networks, including those in Europe. (This group is, in turn, in the process of developing closer ties with politically ascendant Sunni Islamists in Malaysia and Pakistan.)⁹

While the animosity between Iran and Saudi Arabia is well-known, the Sunni Islamist grouping now helmed by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party is far more ambivalent toward Iran. Instead, it sees the conservative Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia as its chief enemy and rival. In other words, the intra-Sunni divide between conservative or "status quo" powers and political Islamists is, at times, far more consequential than the Sunni-Shi'a split. This dynamic is key to understanding today's Middle East, including the relations between Turkish Islamism and revolutionary Iran.

Turkish Islamists and Iran

The impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution on Turkish political Islam must be seen in this broader context. Indeed, there continue to be close ideological connections between the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Milli Görüş* movement. This is the dominant force in Turkish Islamism, which fundamentally shapes the worldview of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), its ambivalence to revolutionary Iran and its pan-Islamic agenda.

The roots of pan-Islamic thinking in Turkey goes back to the Ottoman era. At the time, pan-Islamic identity was seen as a tool to keep the Muslim parts of the empire together following the independence of its European and mainly Christian possessions. However, the politicization of Islam took place with the spread of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi Sufi Order. Its Istanbul-based Iskender Paşa lodge engineered the creation of the country's first Islamist political party in the late 1960s.¹⁰

At the time, Turkish Islamism was largely focused on adherence to traditional Sunni Islamic customs, along with opposition to modernity and emphasis on spiritual and moral issues. In the course of the Cold War, Turkish Islamists were increasingly influenced by the Islamist revivalist ideology of the Brotherhood, while they remained ambivalent toward the idea of a revolution. Turkish Islamists, furthermore, were closely connected to state institutions in the Ottoman era and, contrary to general belief, also in the republican era. Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk closed the Dervish orders and lodges, as well as madrasas, a significant portion of the clergy found a home in the newly established Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet. There they became employees of the central government and provincial muftis or imams in mosques.

As a result, there was a powerful incentive for the Islamist movement to work inside the system rather than outside, as a revolutionary force. This state of affairs particularly crystallized after 1946, when the Soviet threat led the Turkish state—even under the leadership of Atatürk's Republican People's Party—to liberalize its regulations on religion. From 1950 onward, center-right parties dominated political life, and they presided over a gradual resurgence of religion, both in state and society. This culminated in the so-called Turkish-Islamic synthesis ushered in by the military junta ruling from 1980-83, which elevated Sunni Islam to a key position in Turkish national identity.

In the eyes of Turkish Islamists, the revolution in Iran strengthened the idea that the creation of a new "Islamic" order in Turkey was possible. Aside from some small sectarian Sunni groups, this notion was met with enthusiasm by Turkish Islamists who followed Iran's post-1979 political evolution closely. Prominent Turkish supporters of the Iranian revolution—including Ali Bulaç, Ercüment Özkan, Kenan Çamurcu, Nurettin İyir, and Atasoy Müftüoğlu—expressed and debated their views in various publishing outlets. These ideologists contributed to the spread of Khomeini's ideas and to interpreting the Iranian regime's policies for a Turkish audience. But, contrary to popular opinion, most were not agents of the Iranian regime, but rather organic Turkish sympathizers who embraced the view that an Islamic revolution could take place in Turkey as well.

During Khomeini's lifetime in particular, Tehran's efforts to export the revolution had a wide-ranging impact on Turkish Islamism. Although traditional Turkish Islamic milieus typically viewed the Iranian Shi'a as deviant and schismatic, Islamist thinkers countered this. They emphasized and repeated the Khomeini regime's pan-Islamist rhetoric. Khomeini preached the political importance of *Ummah*—the worldwide community of Muslims irrespective of sect—and *Tawhid*—the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as the sole source of authority. This contrasted with modern notions of popular sovereignty and the primacy of man-made law. Both beliefs demand unity among Muslims in order to impose divine will on the world. Khomeini's message was consistent with the ideas of Said Qutb, Mawdudi, and other Sunni revivalist thinkers of the time. And given the Brotherhood's aforementioned connections with the *Milli Görüş*, in Turkey it found fertile ground in which to grow.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, the pro-Iranian movement within Turkish Islamism lost its ideological unity, but it had already begun to raise a new generation of Islamist youth. As a result, when Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party grew to prominence in the 1990s, a large number of its cadres had been profoundly influenced by the ideological defenders of the Iranian revolution. By 2001, when the AKP was formed as the successor to the Welfare Party, pro-Islamic Revolution leaders were of an age that allowed them to exercise greater political and ideological influence over Turkish Islamist and Islamic thought as a whole.

Hostility to the United States

One major effect of the Iranian revolution on Turkish Islamism was to accelerate a shift in Turkish perceptions of the United States. Traditionally, Turkish political Islamists had been motivated primarily by anti-communism, which led them—along with Turkish nationalists—to support Turkey's alliance with the U.S. In fact, Islamists and nationalists were united in the National Turkish Student Association, which came out on the streets in 1969 to oppose leftist demonstrations against the U.S. Sixth Fleet's visit to Istanbul.¹¹ But Khomeini indicated that world politics were not binary: opposition to Soviet communism did not have to mean a pro-American stance.

Like Qutb, Khomeini had set his sight on the United States as the "Great Devil." He infused a powerful anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-American rhetoric with clearly identifiable left-wing origins into his revolutionary Islamist program. He also embraced anti-American regimes in the developing world regardless of their religious identity. The 154th article of the Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution emphasizes that it "supports the struggles of the dispossessed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world." Thus, in practice, Tehran has pursued close relations with anti-American regimes, including in Venezuela, Cuba and Brazil.

The Islamic Republic's anti-Americanism, and its affinity for other ruling regimes that resisted "American hegemony," began to take hold among Turkish Islamist groups in the 1980s, gripping their imagination. Later, the end of the Cold War removed the geopolitical rationale for the Islamist's tactical embrace of the United States all together. Hostility to America rapidly became mainstream within most of the Islamist movement.¹²

This was clearly visible in 1996-97, during the brief premiership of Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's legendary Islamist leader. Erbakan ruled in a coalition government with a secular center-right party, and did not control the foreign ministry. But he did develop his own separate "pro-Islamic"—and anti-Western—foreign policy agenda. Notably, this included making Tehran the destination of his first foreign trip. Along similar lines, Erbakan's most important international initiative was to launch the Developing Eight (D-8) group of Muslim countries in opposition to the western-dominated G-7.¹³ He envisioned the D-8 as the embryo of a future union of Muslim countries in which Turkey would be the natural leader. He also believed that Turkey should pursue this initiative instead of its quest for membership in the European Union. Symptomatic of Turkish Islamists' approach, Erbakan took Turkish leadership in the D8 for granted, and appeared to assume Iran and other states would enthusiastically support the initiative.

During the Cold War, Turkey's secular republican establishment had tacitly supported rising Islamist activism and Islamic societal consciousness against the political Left. However, with the ascent of Erbakan, it suddenly came to fear that it would lose control of political Islam and that a revolutionary scenario à la Iran in 1979 was also possible in Turkey. Erbakan's public embrace of Iran, following his first foreign visit to Tehran, raised these concerns to alarming levels. In fact, Erbakan's downfall was strongly tied to Iran.

In late December 1996, the Welfare Party-controlled township of Sincan outside Ankara held a commemoration known as "Jerusalem Night," which included overtly pro-Hezbollah propaganda. The event included an incendiary speech by the Iranian Ambassador to Turkey, Muhammad Reza Bagheri, in which he supported the introduction of Sharia law in Turkey. Iran's consul general in Istanbul went further, warning that the spread of Islam could not be stopped.¹⁴ While the consul spoke only about "Islam" in generic terms, there is little doubt he meant the growth of political Islam.

This, along with popular counter-demonstrations by secularists, triggered the establishment's move against Erbakan. Following the military-controlled National Security Council's imposition of a far-reaching set of reforms on the government in February 1997, Erbakan's parliamentary majority eroded. He was forced to resign in June 1997.¹⁵ The Welfare Party was subsequently closed down by the Constitutional Court and Erbakan was banned from politics. These developments led to a sharp deterioration of relations between Ankara and Tehran, and the two governments went on to spar over Turkey's relations with Israel, Iran's ties to the PKK, and broader geopolitical differences.

The resumption of Turkish-Iranian enmity had three major implications for Turkish Islamism. The first was a distinct shift in the relationship between the Islamist movement and the state. Before 1997, Islamists had sought to work in symbiosis with the state to secure power and advance their agenda. After 1997, they cultivated a sense of having been victimized by the secularist establishment that strengthened their determination to stage, essentially, a hostile takeover of the state.

Second, enmity with Iran deepened the split in the Islamist movement between a traditionalist, pro-Erbakan wing and a reformist wing led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. This wing no longer opposed EU membership or the market economy. It based its argument for change on a rhetoric of human rights rather than Islamic principles.¹⁶ This division was embodied by Erdoğan and Gül's creation, in 2001, of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an alternative to the Welfare Party. This enabled the Islamist movement to broaden its constituency and attract wider groups of voters, who were keen on supporting new political forces untainted by corruption and mismanagement, but also fearful of Erbakan's ideological radicalism.

Third was a change in tactics to go along with the shift in Islamists' objectives. It led to the formation of a tactical alliance between Erdoğan's political movement and Fethullah Gülen's network, which had strong representation within state institutions. That alliance fell apart in 2011. Five years later, the Gülen movement was credibly implicated in the abortive 2016 military coup against Erdoğan's government.

Amid the newer generation of Turkish Islamists, the sum effect of these shifts in objective, style, and partnership was the rise of a new strategy. Erbakan's generation was focused on the long-term process of advancing the Islamist cause both at home and abroad. Erdo?an, by contrast, has been much more impatient in pursuit of these goals, and thus far more willing to take risks with large implications.¹⁷ This determination and impetuosity is not symptomatic of the movement as a whole: other leaders like Abdullah G?l, in particular, have been considerably more cautious than Erdo?an, but not necessarily because they disagree with his end goal. Instead, they may see his rashness as unnecessarily generating opposition to the movement.

Islamist writer Ali Bulaç recalled in 2015 how Erbakan, during the 1997 military intervention, kept his cool throughout the process and urged calm among his many followers. Some came to him and said they were “about to explode.” Erbakan told them to “go scream in the forest,” adding that their movement's setbacks were minor impediments in their historical mission. Bulaç credits Erbakan with having prevented a civil conflict that could have turned Turkey into an Algeria or a Syria.¹⁸ Erdo?an takes a different approach. Based no doubt on Erbakan's fate—being persecuted by state prosecutors and barred from politics for life—at each instance Erdo?an has fought back hard against the secularist establishment, also known as the “deep state.”

In foreign policy, Erbakan also took a cautious approach. The scholar Behl?l ?zkan details how Erbakan strongly counseled the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood against an uprising in 1982, warning that they would only cause a massacre to transpire. Bulaç, likewise, recalls Erbakan's position on tyrannical rulers that oppressed Muslims: “They are surely tyrants, but if we confront them, they will oppress Muslims even more. Whatever we do, we must do with these rulers.”¹⁹ This approach conforms to the traditional Hanafi Sunni doctrine, which prohibits rebellion against Muslim rulers even if they are considered unjust.²⁰

Erdo?an, of course, has taken a different approach, choosing to promote Islamism at a hurried pace against established rulers, even when this entails great risk. This helps to explain Ankara's adventurist policies since 2011, which have contributed to the exacerbation of the wars in Syria and Libya. Erdo?an has also adopted policies toward anti-American states—Venezuela, Cuba, and Brazil among them—that are eerily similar to Iran's. While the Iranian revolution was not the sole cause of the differences between Erbakan-era Islamism and the trend that is shaping the Erdo?an regime today, the impact of its radicalism is certainly a contributing factor. Ironically, it is Erdo?an's embrace of the Iranian revolution's radical nature, and the impatient policies that have followed, that have pushed Turkish-Iranian relations to a new breaking point.

Turkey and Iran in the Erdo?an Era

During the AKP's years in power, its leadership has shown considerable deference to Iran, and, at times, has actively worked to court Tehran. Initially, in its first term, the AKP set about to gradually improve ties with Tehran. Then, from 2007 to 2011—after the party consolidated power but before the Arab upheavals—it significantly enlarged these efforts.

Erdo?an's political ability to move Turkey into closer relations to Iran was unintentionally abetted by America's war in Iraq. This, in turn, led to a sharp deterioration of U.S.-Turkish relations. In 2003, Washington was frustrated when the Turkish parliament failed to approve U.S. use of Turkish territory to open a second, northern front in the war. Meanwhile, Ankara grew alarmed when the U.S. invasion created conditions that permitted the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to resume its operations against Turkey from within Iraq, violating a 1999 ceasefire.

For Turkey, it became clear that halting PKK activities was not on Washington's list of priorities. Worse, this provided powerful ammunition to conspiracy-minded forces in Turkey that have long-suspected the United States of having ulterior motives, including efforts to divide Turkey along the lines of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which provided for separate Armenian and Kurdish entities. Such conspiratorial thinking about the U.S.'s motives runs deep in Turkey; it has shaped the worldview of Erdo?an and many of his Islamist allies, as well as left-wing secularists that have long opposed America. Erdo?an has fully capitalized on this paranoia in recent years. He has spoken with increasing frequency against modern-day “Lawrences of Arabia” and “Sykes-Picot Agreements,” while he and AKP officials have obstructed or opposed U.S. interests, arguing that Middle Eastern affairs should be left entirely to Muslim powers, not to foreigners. This rhetoric indicates how the worldview of Turkey's rulers has become increasingly aligned with Iran's Islamist rulers.

In any case, Iran has seen this as an opportunity to step forward and ingratiate itself to Turkey by intensifying its intelligence cooperation with Ankara and stepping up its own armed struggle against the PKK's Iranian affiliate, PJAK.²¹ This, in turn, led Turks of all stripes to see Iran as a better partner against Kurdish terrorist threats than the United States. This, despite past Iranian covert support for the PKK against Turkey in the 1990s, and regardless of consistent American support for Turkey in its anti-terror struggle. By the mid-2000s, more than 50 percent of Turks viewed Iran favorably, while percentages of those who held positive views of the U.S. were in the single digits.²²

These shifts gave Erdo?an a freer hand to take the relationship with Iran to another level, while he gradually dismantled Turkey's historically close relationship with Israel. Remarkably, in this period Turkey became a defender of Iran's nuclear program as well as an apologist for the Iran regime's brutal suppression of the 2009 “Green Revolution.”²³

In 2008, Ankara first offered to mediate between Iran and the international community on the Iranian nuclear issue. However, Erdo?an and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davuto?lu, soon became increasingly outspoken defenders of Iran's nuclear program rather than go-betweens. Erdo?an urged world powers possessing nuclear weapons to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran. In October 2009, Erdogan declared, “those who ... want these arrogant sanctions, need to first give these [weapons] up. We shared this opinion with our Iranian friends, our brothers.” He thus lent legitimacy to the Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions.

AKP leaders have frequently castigated Western powers for focusing on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program while ignoring Israel's assumed possession of nuclear weapons. Following a 2012 nuclear summit, for example, Erdo?an noted that “nobody asks Israel to account for its nuclear weapons. The West should do this. Otherwise it does not appear honest.”²⁴ As Gareth Jenkins has observed, “Erdo?an appeared sincerely convinced that Iran was solely interested in acquiring nuclear energy and had no weapons ambitions.”²⁵

Another possibility is that Erdoğan saw the Iranian nuclear program as a precedent that would allow Turkey to develop such weapons as well. In mid-2010, Erdoğan and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva appeared in Tehran on the eve of a U.N. Security Council vote on a new round of sanctions. They were photographed holding hands with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad while announcing an alternative diplomatic proposal to forestall sanctions.²⁶ Ankara had become Tehran's most valuable international supporter.

Earlier, in June 2009, Turkey had endorsed Ahmadinejad's highly suspicious re-election.²⁷ Both Gül and Erdoğan called to congratulate Ahmadinejad within days of his reelection, making them among the first, and few, world leaders to do so.²⁸ Turkish leaders maintained their support even after the contested election turned into bloody suppression of peaceful protests against electoral fraud. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Davutoğlu called the Iranian political process "very healthy," and suggested that an "intervention from the outside" would be unacceptable.²⁹ According to Erdoğan, any criticism of Iran would imply "interference" in Iran's internal affairs.³⁰

Turkey's direct endorsement of Ahmadinejad, of course, stands in sharp contrast to its approach to the Arab upheavals two years later. Ankara's swift calls for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down, for example, suggest that Turkish Islamists' concerns about interfering in other countries' affairs were highly selective. When protesters targeted Islamist rulers, Turkey spoke of non-interference; when they targeted secularist leaders, Turkey egged them on. They did so both out of ideological conviction and out of a desire to advance Turkey's regional influence.

This approach is best explained by the ideological baggage that leading Turkish Islamists like Erdoğan and Davutoğlu carry. While their foreign policy has often been termed "Neo-Ottoman," this is a misnomer. It's true that Turkish Islamists have a modicum of Ottoman nostalgia. But far from harking back to the tolerant and pragmatic ways of the Ottoman Empire, their policy from the 2011 Arab upheavals onward is best understood as pan-Islamist.³¹

Davutoğlu's long academic record provides ample evidence of this. His early work is colored by a deep conviction that the "conflicts and contrasts between Western and Islamic political thought originate mainly from their philosophical, methodological and theoretical background rather than from mere institutional and historical differences."³² For Davutoğlu, this means Turkey's long-standing effort to become part of Europe or the "West" is both undesirable and impossible. Indeed, he terms making Turkish society western a "utopian" project. Davutoğlu further concludes that Turkey and other Muslim societies should work instead for Islamic unity: "The core issue for [the] Islamic polity seems to be to reinterpret its political tradition and theory as an alternative world-system rather than merely as a program for the Islamization of nation-states."³³

Davutoğlu's writings matter. He is, as Behlül Özkan puts it, "the first intellectual to devise a rationalistic and pragmatic Islamist foreign policy."³⁴ He did so through hundreds of articles in Islamist publications, which Özkan has painstakingly assembled and analyzed.³⁵ Subsequently, of course, Davutoğlu was highly influential in implementing foreign policy, first as an advisor to Erdoğan and then later as Foreign Minister. And even following his 2016 resignation, Erdoğan's foreign policy has continued along the same lines, as Turkey's growing interventions in Syria and Libya suggest.

It is the AKP's approach to Iran, crucially, that reveals its pan-Islamist rather than Ottomanist character. Rather than perceive Iran as an adversary or rival (as it was during Ottoman times), Erdoğan and Davutoğlu viewed Iran as a partner that should be brought on board with Turkey's efforts to build Islamic solidarity and reshape the Middle East. Going further, it is difficult not to conclude that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu approached Iran with romantic notions of Islamic solidarity. This must have startled their Iranian counterparts. Indeed, before falling out with Syria's Assad in 2011, Ankara sought to cultivate the Assad regime and effectively replace Iran's role as Assad's chief external supporter. In doing so, they seemed oblivious to the possibility that this would irk Tehran and challenge its geopolitical interests.

The expectation that Turkey could build a partnership with Tehran while usurping its position in Syria makes little sense unless one considers that the Turkish leadership believed much of its own pan-Islamic propaganda. Similarly, when Turkey's relations with Israel deteriorated in 2009, none other than Bashar al-Assad publicly announced that Turkey needed to have good relations with Israel to serve as an effective mediator. This indicated Arab leaderships' surprise that Erdoğan's anti-Israeli rhetoric was genuine and not just for public consumption.³⁶ Iran's rulers, in turn, certainly welcomed this Turkish approach and saw it as an opportunity to single-mindedly build its Shi'a crescent reaching from Yemen to the Mediterranean.

Although Davutoğlu is now in opposition to Erdoğan, he is not the only influential figure in Turkey to harbor such ideas. For example, retired General Adnan Tanrıverdi founded the Justice Defenders Strategic Studies Center (ASSAM) and is presently the Chairman of the Turkish military contractor SADAT. A close advisor to Erdoğan, Tanrıverdi has hosted several large-scale conferences dedicated to advancing the vision of an Islamic superstate based on Sharia law consisting of over 60 countries, with Istanbul as its capital.³⁷ Speaking at one such event, Tanrıverdi stated that "the Mahdi will come and we should prepare for this," indicating a millenarianism rivaling that of the Iranian revolutionaries. Tanrıverdi was forced to resign from his position as presidential adviser following these comments, but he still wields considerable influence; his company continues to be a key instrument for Turkish proxy warfare in Syria and Libya.³⁸

Of course, more material considerations have also been at play. Turkish-Iranian commercial relations have roots that stretch deeply into Turkish Islamist movement, including senior figures who are close to Erdoğan. While hard evidence is not generally publicly available, it is well-known in Turkey that senior figures in Erdoğan's entourage have large investments in Iran. One example is Ihsan and Mücahit Arslan, a father-son pair that have both served as AKP parliamentarians and presidential advisers, and who have significant interests in the Razi Petrokimya fertilizer plant in Iran.³⁹

The reach of Iran's tentacles into Turkey are evident in the major Iran-Turkey oil-for-gold scandal involving Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab. An indictment in the United States District Court for the Second District of New York alleges that Iranian efforts to circumvent and violate U.S. sanctions, spearheaded by Zarrab, involved multi-million dollar bribes to several key members of Erdoğan's cabinet and extended to influential officials in Turkish state-owned banks.⁴⁰ Given the nature of the Turkish political system, and particularly the president's personal involvement in all matters of importance, it is inconceivable that this scheme would have been possible without Erdoğan's knowledge.

Given Erdoğan's earlier rejection of "arrogant" U.S. sanctions against Tehran, it is not surprising that Turkish Islamists would be comfortable helping Iran evade those sanctions. Where they diverge may be in their view of whether it is appropriate for high Turkish officials to grease their pockets in the process. On one side is a group loyal to Erdoğan. These seem to have accepted and partaken in the clientelist business practices that have come to dominate the Turkish economy. On the other side is a group, to which Davutoğlu and Gül (to their credit) belong, that appear to have found these practices utterly immoral.

Syria, Turkey and Disillusionment with Iran

Despite Erdoğan's outreach to Tehran, the growing sectarian violence in the Middle East from 2011 onwards dealt a significant blow to the Turkish Islamist movement's view of Iran. The AKP's pan-Islamic approach to regional politics—built on seeking consensus among Muslims against western influence and "colonialism"—was confronted with Iran's resolute, uncompromising and Shi'a sectarian approach. An underlying problem is the rivaling leadership ambitions between Ankara and Tehran. Because of Turkey's Ottoman history and Sunni identity, Turkish leaders appear to take it for granted that the Muslim world, which is overwhelmingly Sunni, will never accept Iranian leadership but will fall in line behind Turkey. Unsurprisingly, Tehran begs to differ.

This tension was already on display during the sectarian conflict in Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion. At that time, Iran moved to assert its influence over Iraq through Shi'a militias and political parties. From the Turkish point of view, however, Iran's ambitions were overshadowed by Ankara's troubled and increasingly confrontational relations with the United States, alongside the resurgence of a Kurdish uprising.

Turkey's reckoning with Iran would, instead, unfold in Syria. The Turkish leadership committed a series of serious errors in the Syrian conflict's early phases, for which it has paid a high price. This relates to confusion over Turkish goals, which initially involved securing influence over the government of Syria. That ambition rapidly shifted to the more limited goal of countering Kurdish autonomy on its southern border—a problem Turkish leaders appeared not to have seen coming.

Before 2011, Erdoğan had famously courted Bashar al-Assad, seeking to build a strong partnership with the Syrian regime that he envisioned as Turkey's gateway to the Middle East. In the initial phases of the uprising, therefore, they sought to impose upon al-Assad the need to institute reforms, and in particular to legalize the Muslim Brotherhood and share political power with it. Because Syria is majority Sunni, Turkish leaders after 2011 saw the Sunni majority's rise to power (represented by the Brotherhood) as both unavoidable and desirable, and focused on getting al-Assad to accept this development. The problem, of course, was that Iran provided the regime with another option: full-scale repression.

When Assad chose to follow Iranian rather than Turkish advice, Turkey committed its second mistake: breaking with Assad and openly endorsing the Sunni opposition to the regime. To make matters worse, Turkish efforts to sponsor the Brotherhood faction within the Syrian opposition led to serious friction with Hillary Clinton's State Department, which was working for a more broad-based opposition alternative.⁴¹ More importantly, Assad retaliated by simply withdrawing from large areas of northern Syria, which the regime left to the YPG—the Syrian wing of the PKK. Meanwhile, Iran not only endorsed but participated in the Syrian regime's brutal repression, leading to the flight of several million Syrians to Turkey. This had profoundly adverse implications for Turkey's economic and social balances—and, by 2015, for Europe's security, too.

The Iranian regime and its client militias have since established a corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, Turkish-supported Brotherhood-led forces proved incompetent on the battlefield, forcing Ankara to rely increasingly on radical militias, including Al Qaeda-aligned groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. And, for a time, Turkey paid little attention to Islamic State fighters' use of its territory to access their caliphate in Syria and Iraq.⁴² The rise of ISIS, in turn, shifted Western perceptions of the conflict, and led most Western powers to grudgingly accept the survival of the Assad regime as a lesser evil.

Turkey was thus effectively isolated. But, beginning in 2018, Ankara doubled down on its involvements in Syria by inserting its own troops into the country's north. This further deepened its relationship with radical Islamist militias, which now function as Turkish proxies. Since 2019, Turkey has become increasingly involved in fighting against the Assad regime. As a result, the Turkish Islamist government has, in practice, found itself in a proxy war against Iran's Islamist government.

Still, Erdoğan and the AKP leadership have yet to speak up in a serious manner against Tehran, while their criticism of Moscow's actions has remained measured. Caught in a confrontation with the West, Turkish Islamists appear unwilling to escalate tensions with neighboring Iran, which they seem to see as a lesser threat than the status-quo Sunni powers. This ignores the fact that Iranian policies have been tremendously detrimental to Turkish security, far more than America's limited relationship with Syrian Kurds in combating the Islamic State. But Erdoğan and his associates seem to see Iran as a balance against Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—an alignment that Ankara views as both an extended arm of the United States, and as a direct threat to its own ambitions. Indeed, an overview of Turkish reactions to recent crises in the region is suggestive.

In July 2013, Turkey went into alarm mode after the ouster of Muhammad Morsi in Egypt. Erdoğan and his advisors linked this event to the Gezi Park protests two months earlier, and saw both as part and parcel of an American or Jewish plan to unseat his government.⁴³ Turkish officials have similarly pointed fingers at America for the failed 2016 coup against Erdoğan,⁴⁴ and pulled out all stops to support its ally Qatar when a Saudi-led coalition (which Ankara saw as boosted by Washington) sought to bring the small Emirate to heel in 2017.⁴⁵ Turkish Islamists also viewed Saudi Arabia's announcement of social reforms and "return to moderate Islam" with great alarm—a mouthpiece for the Turkish government interpreted these reforms as an American plan to "defeat the Muslim world" by "targeting Mecca and Medina."⁴⁶

Erdoğan then went so far as to state that the 2019 coup in Sudan was "against Turkey." Senior advisors were happy to explain to reporters that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, under Israeli and American direction, had triggered the coup because of growing military cooperation between Turkey and Sudan.⁴⁷ In sum, Erdoğan and his entourage appear to see their greatest geopolitical threat in a perceived alignment between Sunni Arab powers, Israel, and the United States.

In this worldview, Iran becomes a partner and potential ally rather than an adversary. Thus, Turkey's political leadership is silent even where Iran is countering Turkish interests in Syria. Still, there is little doubt that the rank and file of the Turkish Islamist movement has experienced serious disillusionment with Iran. Open supporters of the Iranian regime, who proliferated just a few years ago, have gone almost completely silent in Turkey.

Conclusion

Iran's 1979 revolution had an profound impact on Turkey's Islamists, which continues to affect Turkish politics today. The revolution generated a seemingly bottomless pit of goodwill on their part, representing an entire generation that viewed Iran as an example to emulate. This allowed Tehran's pan-Islamic pronouncements to outweigh the clear evidence of Iran's pursuit of narrow sectarian interests, often at Turkey's expense.

Now, Turkish Islamists are realizing that their appreciation of the Islamic Republic might be unrequited. The confrontation over Syria, and Tehran's uncompromising embrace of the Assad regime, appears to have seriously dented Iran's positive image among the broader rank and file of the Turkish Islamist movement. It is unclear how long this might last. A similar Turkish disillusionment occurred in 1982, when Damascus bloodily suppressed a Muslim Brotherhood revolt. The question today is whether Turkish Islamists will allow their ideological blinders to once again block their sight to evidence of Iran's actions in Syria, or whether a deeper reappraisal of Iran's role will take place. However, because Turkish Islamists see themselves as part of an epic battle between the Muslim world and a Western or "Zionist-American" alliance, it is plausible that Turkish concerns over revolutionary Iran and its ambitions will continue to be relegated to the background.

The Turkish regime, meanwhile, is preoccupied elsewhere. It is busy fueling its confrontation with the West and with conservative Sunni regimes from Riyadh to Cairo. It is picking battles that it is unlikely to win. And all the while it is ignoring the fact that its own decisions have allowed Tehran's regional influence to grow precipitously at Turkey's own expense.

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