

Is the Syrian Conflict a Battleground for Turkish-Iranian Rivalry?

Shereen Fatima*

Introduction

The relationship between Türkiye and Iran, key players in the Middle East, has been competitive since the 16th century. The origins of the relationship date back centuries, involving periods of cooperation and rivalry. Moreover, the factors driving the rivalry have been shaped throughout history, however, power struggle over Syria has always been a bone of contention between the two states. Turkey-Iranian ties have been characterised by territorial disputes and the domination of Kurdish tribes on both sides of the border. Both the states have historically competed for the loyalty of their respective Kurdish populations. Even so, it is possible to argue that Iran-Türkiye rivalry or competition is not hostile as they maintained largely peaceful relations since the last full-scale Ottoman-Persia war in 1823.¹

The Essence of Turkey-Iran Relations

Turkish-Iranian relations stand out for their stability, which can be described as the probability of the two countries' continued political independence and territorial integrity without any significant likelihood of becoming engaged in a war for survival. Karl Deutsch and J. David Singer define stability at system level as "the probability that the system retains all of its essential characteristics; that no single nation becomes dominant; that most of its members continue to survive; and that large-scale war does not occur."²

Throughout history, both states realised that they could not eradicate each other. Therefore, the rough power balance between the two states is due to their stability and non-violent interactions. The Kasr-i-sirin treaty drew a long demarcation line in 1639 that established the eastern border between Türkiye and Iran. This treaty stabilised the region's political landscape and remained intact despite several wars. By the mid of the 1980s, Iran's participation in the PKK's insurgency was the main source of tension between the two states. PKK units had started operating in the mountains along the Turkish-Iranian border, despite an agreement signed between the states in 1988 that outlawed any activity within their borders that was detrimental to the security of the other.

The historical study of the Turkey-Iranian relations reveals two major aspects. The Sadabad Pact followed by the Baghdad pact, ECO, CENTO, and RCD strengthened economic, political, and military cooperation. On the other hand, conflicts concerning the minorities (Azeris, Kurd and, Armenians) have contributed to disagreements and strife.³ The Arab Spring marks an important point in the history of Turkey-Iranian relations, during which the policies of each respective state differentiated from each other to compete for regional influence.⁴

* Shireen Fatima is an intern working with the Iran Program at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS).

Syrian Conflict as a Battleground for Turkish-Iranian Hegemony

Iran and Türkiye have competed for years, for influence in the Levant region. Iran had backed Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria's long civil war, as it needed Assad to remain in power so that it could use Syria as a transit for financing and arming its proxy partners like Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The country had a large military presence in Syria in the capacity of advisory and training roles for the coordination with its partners. On the contrary, Türkiye wanted a government in Syria that was more aligned with its vision and policies regarding restraining Kurdish groups in Northern and Eastern Syria. During the Syrian civil war, Türkiye backed the opposition forces and demanded an end to the Assad regime.⁵

On the matter of the Syrian crisis, Türkiye and Iran had a differing perspective that shaped their policy responses towards Assad's regime. Turkey's regional strategy of "neo-Ottomanism" aims at enhancing its influence in the former Ottoman territories that include Syria and parts of Iraq as well. Iran also aims to expand its influence beyond borders as a part of its forward defense strategy. In this regard, during the Syrian civil war, Iran took the opportunity of supporting regional armed groups against the policies of the US by supporting Al-Assad during the war.

Exploring the Syrian Issue through International Historical Sociological Theory (IHST)

Most academic works analysing contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations trace back relation to the Ottoman-Safavi struggles during the early 16th century, creating the image of the two countries as enemies, however in reality the relationship between

these states has been shaped by many factors that also includes the US Middle East policy. Understanding the competing interests of both Iran and Türkiye over the Syrian crisis reveals that both powers compete for regional power projection in Syria. Most scholarly research focuses on the analyses of the war and reduces the conflict to a proxy war, neglecting the deep-seated historical and sociological factors that contributed to this rivalry.

For this reason, a new approach such as the International Historical Sociological Theory (IHST) can help explain the contradictory nature of the relationship between these two actors. The IHST approach provides building blocks for scholars to explore analytical methods to understand why competition and cooperation between these regional rivals are more complicated than expected.⁶ IHST aims to explore the intricate relationship between social actions and structures and is a reaction to neorealism. This approach not only allows scholars to question the roles of both state and non-state actors in shaping the structures of international relations but also allows them to move beyond fixed views and instead focus on the dynamic nature of social action and changes.

The combination of the IHS and relationality approach offers a flexible theory of state for understanding the Turkey-Iran relations.⁷ This combined perspective views the state as an institution of coercion that functions on two levels, i.e., the internal state-society and external state-state dimension. Türkiye and Iran's colonial and modern eras have been influenced by their structure, and historical roots in the international system.

Iran, Turkey, and the end of Assad's rule

Iran's strategic position in the region was already weakening and the fall of Assad's regime has put it in further jeopardy. Following the downfall of the Assad government, it appears that the Turks are now reconsidering their approach towards the regime. A significant role for Türkiye in post-Assad Syria would assist the Turks in dealing with the issue of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. It would also help facilitate the return of millions of Kurdish refugees who fled to Türkiye over the last 12 years seeking safety from war.

Despite Erdogan's objective of establishing and supporting the new regime in Syria without Assad, Türkiye's military intervention in Syria remained limited to Kurdish areas, creating a buffer zone. Concerning this, both Iran and Türkiye have never engaged in a direct military conflict. The costs of military involvement places a strain on the parties' fragile economies, as military expenditures are multidimensional, encompassing training, and equipment.⁸ Instead, the parties identified more significant gains in commercial cooperation. Several factors, including shared borders, cooperation in diverse issues, common threat perceptions and Türkiye's reliance on Iran for oil prevents the parties from transforming their competition into rivalry.

At this stage, predicting the prospects of who will hold the key to Syria's destiny or whether both these countries can find a common ground in Syria, or if they are destined to compete, remains unclear. Russia on the one hand is consumed by the Ukrainian war, while on the other hand, Hezbollah remains in shelf following its confrontations with Israel. Therefore, Iran has adopted the approach of

strategic retreat while maintaining some of its core objectives intact inside Syria like the protection of holy shrines and functioning of its embassy.

Iran-Türkiye Rivalry: An RSCT Perspective

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver provides a framework to analyse and assess regional conflicts and dynamics. This theory provides a relatively new theoretical perspective in understanding regional and international relations, and develops an analytical framework of Middle Eastern security from the regional point of view, while also highlighting the role of external actors. According to this theory, the security of countries within a region is deeply influenced and connected and plays a significant role in shaping the security dynamics of the region. Iran, Türkiye, and Syria are part of the Middle Eastern security complex, in which Syria serves as a battlefield within the regional security complex making it central to the Iran-Türkiye rivalry.

The US on the other hand can use this situation to strengthen its ties with Türkiye and contain Iran's influence in the region. There is a presence of US military personnel in Syria around Al-Tanf primarily deployed to contain the Islamic State and protect the Kurds. However, the question remains whether these forces will remain after the inauguration of Donald Trump or he may opt to withdraw them.⁹ On the other hand, Russia backed the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war along with Iran and Hezbollah which turned instrumental in helping the regime survive the civil war back in 2011. Russia projected power from Syria into Libya, and beyond, serving as the foundation for its larger Middle East

strategy. However, now while being engaged in its fight with Ukraine, and with the unraveling of Assad's regime, the extent of its influence in the Mediterranean is debatable.

For now, Türkiye is coordinating with the new administration in Syria to disarm the YPG and give them a chance to integrate into the country. However, the situation also depends on how the policy of the new President-Elect Donald Trump unfolds and whether it continues to support the YPG or gradually decrease the military footprints of the US, thus effectively handing over the supervisory position to Türkiye in the case of

Syria.¹⁰ Another risk for Türkiye is Israel's advancing encroachment into Syrian territory, which it sees as a threat to both Syria's sovereignty and Turkish national security. Iran on the flip side, has lost one of its members of the Axis of Resistance. It seems that it would be too soon to judge Syria's future and the extent of Turco-Iranian competition that might unfold. To avoid worse, Türkiye and Iran must overcome mistrust and establish a channel for continuous negotiations. Moreover, the governments should take confidence-building steps as it could pave the way for better relations.

Notes and References

- ¹ Walter Emil Kaegi *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Stephen Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- ² Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964): 390–406.
- ³ Gokhan Cetinsaya, "Essential Friends and Natural Enemies: The Historic Roots of Turkish-Iranian Relations," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (September 2003).
- ⁴ Özüm S Uzun, "The 'Arab Spring' and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations," *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies / Ortadoğu Etütleri* 4, no. 2 (2013): 145.
- ⁵ Kian Sharifi, "Türkiye Replacing Iran As The Dominant Foreign Player In Syria," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 December 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-replacing-iran-dominant-syria/1234567.html>.
- ⁶ Iain William MacGillivray, "The Paradox of Turkish–Iranian Relations in the Syrian Crisis," *Third World Quarterly*, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1730692>.
- ⁷ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ⁸ P. Asadzade, "Iran's Involvement in Syria Is Costly. Here's Why Most Iranians Still Support It," *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/19/irans-involvement-in-syria-is-costly-heres-why-most-iranians-still-support-it>.
- ⁹ Steven A. Cook, "What Syria's Revived Civil War Means for the Region," *Foreign Affairs*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-syrias-revived-civil-war-means-region>.
- ¹⁰ "Türkiye's Road Ahead in a Post-Assad Syria," *Al Jazeera*, 7 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/analysis/turkiyes-road-ahead-in-a-post-assad-syria>.