

# Changing Security Perceptions in Turkish-Iranian Relations

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## Introduction

Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism, which were allegedly backed by Iran throughout the 1990s, were the two main factors which brought about the deterioration in bilateral relations. This article mainly focuses on the reasons for the great shift in current relations between Turkey and Iran. As the article shows, with the 11 September terrorist attack, the changing security perceptions of Iran stemming from American threats concerning Tehran's building of nuclear weapons and sponsoring terrorism, pushed Tehran to develop better ties with Turkey. Similarly, Ankara wanted to strengthen its ties with the Iranian administration at a time when the PKK wished to be recognised as a political organisation of Kurds living in Turkey. Most important of all, the common objection of both countries, to the foundation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, has cemented relations. The study also seeks to analyse the current relationship between Iran and the United States in respect to understanding its impact on Turkey's policies toward Iran.

From Turkey's perspective, Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism, which were allegedly backed by Iran throughout the 1990s, were the two main issues which hindered positive relations between the two countries. Despite many rivalries, conflicts, and different regimes, Ankara has always governed its relations with Tehran diplomatically and avoided confrontation, even during the time when the two countries were on the brink of war. Moreover, in the last few years, Turkish-Iranian relations have undergone a dramatic change, which does not compare to anything in the past.

This study will attempt to describe the evolving relations with Iran throughout the second half of the 1990s, within the context of Turkey's changing security perceptions, and will seek to examine the reasons for the progressive developments in bilateral relations on the basis of two important issues; Kurdish Separatism and Islamic fundamentalism. In addition, Iran-US relations are also a concern of this study, in respect to understanding the reasons for changing security perceptions of Iran.

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## Background

For Turkey, the advent of the Islamic revolution in Iran was a profound shock, and the mutual hostility emanating from an ideological divide led to the respective regimes' suspicion of each other.

From Turkey's perspective, Iran, whose revolutionary regime has increased the level of instability in the region, has been a threatening neighbour, allowing Kurdish separatists, the PKK (Workers Party of Kurdistan), to use its territory to launch attacks on Turkey. The fact that Iran, Syria and Iraq used the PKK as leverage against Turkey, by supporting it in various ways, was the main reason why Turkey sought new alliances. In this context, the US supported alignment with Israel, indicated an important shift from Turkey's traditional policy of balancing the Arabs with Israel and led to Turkey playing a leading role in the region.

Throughout the 1990s, Turkey witnessed the emergence of new identities based on ethnic and cultural diversity. The juxtaposition of the rising tide of political Islam and Kurdish separatism was perceived as a twin threat to Turkey by bureaucracy and the military, and they led to the increase in the Turkish military's role of protecting the democratic, secular and unitarian regime of the country.

### The Welfare-True Path Parties Coalition Government and Turkish-Iranian Relations

The advent of the Welfare-True Path parties coalition,<sup>2</sup> which coincided with the beginning of rumblings in society with regard to two sensitive issues; political Islam and the Kurds, challenged the delicate balance between the regime and society in Turkey.

The Islamist Prime Minister Erbakan's pro-Iranian policies led to the split between the politicians and the military. For example, he made his first foreign trip

1 Ofra Bengio and Gencer Özcan, "Old Grievances New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and its Alignment with Israel", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.15, No. 2, (2000), p. 68.

2 "For the first time since 1923, a party with a religious orientation led the Turkish republic. Necmettin Erbakan, head of the Islamic Welfare Party took over as prime minister in a coalition government. His party's primary partner was the centre-right True Path Party, whose leader, Tansu Ciller, was named deputy premier and foreign minister. The new government passed a vote of confidence in the national parliament on July 8 1996. Turkish military submitted a text with eighteen points of recommendations to the government during the National Security Council meeting in February 28, 1997. This led to the resignation of the coalition government in June 1997." Hürriyet, 'Tepki Yağıyor', 3 February 1997 and Hürriyet, 'Tahrik Bitmiyor', 4 February 1997. For the text containing these eighteen points, see Turkish Daily News, 'Government Due to Receive MGK (National Security Council) Recommendations Today', 3 March 1997. Alan Makovsky, "Islamists Take power in Turkish Coalition", Policy Watch, June 28, 1996 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch1996/206.htm>

to Tehran and denied the allegations that Iran and Syria were sponsoring terrorism carried out by the separatist PKK, in spite of intelligence reports stating otherwise, given to him by the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT).<sup>3</sup> The new government also became the object of Washington's critical thunderbolts by declaring a probable Defence - Industry Cooperation agreement between Iran and Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

Although the signing of a \$23 billion gas deal with Iran on 11 August had nothing to do with ideology, and although it reflected Turkey's increasing need to secure new sources of energy imports, the accord<sup>5</sup> was described by Washington as Erbakan's fraternisation with a rogue state because the gas deal came exactly a week after President Clinton had signed into law the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act.<sup>6</sup>

Developments such as the Sincan incident, which took place during the coalition government, were viewed with alarm by the Turkish military as well as the bureaucracy. During the meeting, described as, "A night for Jerusalem", which was held by the Mayor of Sincan, (a district of Ankara) whose municipality was in the Welfare Party's control, the Iranian Ambassador Muhammed Riza Bagheri, spoke in a large tent, standing under posters of Hizbullah and Hamas. He stated that 'those who signed agreements with the United States and Israel would, sooner or later, be penalised by Turkish youths.'<sup>7</sup> Bagheri's speech, which strengthened the contention that Iran was attempting to influence Turkish domestic affairs, led to his expulsion from his post in Ankara, and to the military coup in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

The Islamist members of the Welfare-True Path coalition government were accused of not only trying to fuse Turkey and Iran into a single Islamic state, by being in collaboration with Iranian Ayatollahs, but also of being in collusion with

3 Cumhuriyet, (Turkish Daily), 'Dış Politikada Skandal', August 19, 1996 and Hürriyet, (Turkish Daily), 'Hoca'nın MIT Gafi', August 18, 1996.

4 "The U.S. ambassador Marc Grossman stated that Iran was among the countries supporting terrorism therefore it was impossible to approve any military or economic cooperation of Turkey with Iran", Cumhuriyet, 'ABD'den Erbakan'a Uyarı', December 14, 1996.

5 Sami Kohen, 'Dış Politikada Değişiklik mi?', Milliyet, (Turkish Daily), August 7, 1996.

6 "The Iran-Libya Act gave President Clinton power to penalize non-U.S. companies that invest \$ 40 million or more a year in two states' oil and natural gas sectors. Therefore, although Turkish officials insisted that the agreement did not violate U.S. law because it involved trade and no Turkish investment, the natural gas accord marred Turkey's relations with Washington. The Clinton administration opposed the gas deal and sought to persuade Turkey not to go ahead with it.", Wall Street Journal, 'Iran-Turkey Gas Deal to Test New U.S. Law', August 13, 1996.

7 Hürriyet, 'Tepki Yağıyor', February 3, 1997 and Hürriyet, 'Tahrik Bitmiyor', February 4, 1997 in Özcan & Bengio, International Journal of Turkish Studies, p. 25. For further information see: Robert Olson, The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations From World War I to 1998, California, Mazda Publishers, 1998, p. 56-57-58.

8 For the text of 18 points, see, Turkish Daily News, 'Government Due to Receive MGK (National Security Council) Recommendations Today', March 3, 1997.

Iran regarding Turkey's war with the PKK's Kurdish separatism movement.<sup>9</sup> This view, legitimised the military's decision to bring down the Islamist government in order to preserve Turkish integrity.

Irrespective of whether it is politicians or the military who have conducted relations with Iran, Turkish diplomacy towards Iran has always avoided assertive policies,<sup>10</sup> even during crises such as the Sincan incident, and during the expulsion of four Iranian diplomats who allegedly backed the Islamist Action Organization<sup>11</sup> financially, when Çetin Emeç and Turan Dursun were killed by the above-mentioned organisation. However, Turkey could not prevent<sup>12</sup> Tehran from harbouring PKK camps over the border, which the Tehran government consistently denied,<sup>13</sup> and could not obtain Iran's collaboration in hunting down PKK militants.

It was mainly due to Tehran's objection both to the protected zone, and to Turkish military operations in northern Iraq,<sup>14</sup> on the grounds that Turkey violated Iraqi territorial integrity.

Another factor was that Tehran's sense of vulnerability was reinforced by Turkey's cooperation with Israel on security issues such as manoeuvres and joint military exercises in Turkish airspace, thus helping Israel reach the edge of the Iranian border. For example, although they had been given prior information about the Turkish military operation in May-June 1997,<sup>15</sup> Iranian officials remained

9 'Erbakan's reluctance to give a note to Iran led to another governmental crisis and it also indicated the military's rightfulness which had refrained from giving Erbakan early information on the operation, its timing and scope, for security reasons.' 'The Decade of the Military in Turkey: The Case of the Alignment with Israel in the 1990s', International Journal of Turkish Studies, Spring 2001, volume 7, nos. 1 and 2, pp. 27-28.

10 Cumhuriyet, 'Dört İranlı Diplomat Türkiye'den Ayrıldı', April 18, 1996 and Cumhuriyet, 'Iran ile Diplomat Pazarlığı', April 10, 1996.

11 Milliyet, 'Parayı İran'dan Aldık', March 10, 1996.

12 'President Demirel sent Iran a message saying that they should not interfere Turkey's domestic issues, should not back PKK and should not escalate the existing tension between the two countries.', Cumhuriyet, 'Demirel'den Tahran'a "İyi Komşu Ol Çağrısı", March 3, 1997.

13 "In the reports prepared by the chief of general staff and the MIT it was noted that some PKK guerrillas in the guise of Iranian military officers, were transferred to Turkish frontier and cured by Iranian doctors. Some PKK assaults were planned by Iranian military officials. The PKK guerrillas' leakage to Turkey from Iran were reported in detail by giving information about the dates and the places., Cumhuriyet, 'Terör Desteği Kanıtlandı', March 17, 1997.

14 'Especially after the 1983 elections in Turkey, there was a gradual escalation in guerilla activity by the PKK conducted from the border areas in northern Iraq. This prompted Ankara and Baghdad to conclude an agreement allowing 'hot pursuit' operations to be carried out by either side in each other's territory. From 1983 onward, Turkey's air force conducted bombing raids against guerrilla groups and hide-outs in northern Iraq, often in joint operations with ground troops. The first operation was held on May 26, 1983. Tehran did not publicly oppose this action', Ünal Gündoğan, 'Islamist Iran and Turkey, 1979-1989: State Pragmatism and Ideological Influences', Middle East Review of International Affairs MERIA, Vol. 7, No.3, (2003), p.5,

15 "Chargé d'affaires of Turkey was summoned to Iranian Foreign Ministry and warned to put an end to the operation conducted in northern Iraq by Turkey without condition.", Türkiye, (Turkish Daily), 'İran'la Operasyon Gerginliği', May 26, 1997.

indifferent to the escaping Kurdish separatists over the Iranian frontier. This paved the way for the declaration of the retaliation action plan by the Turkish general staff.<sup>16</sup> The capture of two Turkish soldiers by Iran on the grounds that they crossed the border in July 1999<sup>17</sup> and

the death of five people caused by the alleged bombardment<sup>18</sup> of Turkish planes brought the two countries to the brink of war.<sup>19</sup>

### Khatemi's Period

Khatemi's overtures to build bridges with the west and to move towards greater moderation and democratisation, created the impression in Turkey that Khatemi would turn over a new leaf in Turkish-Iranian relations. However, it soon became apparent to Turkey that the existing issues between both countries would not be resolved.<sup>20</sup> From Turkey's point of view, Khatemi's Presidency was first of all a liberal facade for the fundamentalist regime, while the real power in Iran was held not by the liberal Khatemi, but by the Ayatollahs, who took quite a different view of the country's future and its relationship with the outside world. Khatemi's modernisation efforts to overcome Iran's isolation in the international arena, were not sufficient to ease Turkey's fears.

Apart from the security issue, the most critical Turkish fear was that a populist Islamic movement, deriving encouragement from the model already established in Iran, might pose a challenge to the Kemalist state. Iranian women's demonstrations at Tehran University, protesting<sup>21</sup> against the Turkish parliament's stance towards a female Islamist deputy, who wanted to enter Parliament wearing a

16 'In accordance with this plan, Turkey would warn Tehran after every attempt to mar the relations and if it remained indifferent towards Turkey's claims, Ankara would retaliate in the same way. In case of Iran's insistence on continuing to follow its policies, Ankara would stop its economic relations with Iran.' Cumhuriyet, 'Iran'a Misilleme Politikası', May 2, 1997. For example Ankara openly declared that it will back the Azeri organisations as a trump card as long as Iran continues supporting the Kurds to weaken Turkey economically and politically' Cumhuriyet, 'Ekonomik Yaptırım ve Azeri Kozu', June 9, 1997.

17 Cumhuriyet, 'Türkiye'den İşbirliği Önerisi', July 28, 1999 and Focus, 'Turkey Wants More Iranian help Against PKK', July 28, 1999.

18 "The commander of the Turkish Air Force, İlhan Kılınç, confirmed the information of the Turkish intelligence service that the five Iranian officials, who were killed during the bombing of the PKK camps, were in charge of training the PKK militants.", Cumhuriyet, 'Tahran'da Tutuklanan Askerler Bırakılıyor', July 27, 1999.

19 "By 1 August, both countries sent large military delegations to the bombed sites, they thought that it was no longer in their interests to pursue the matter much further. On 9 August Iran turned over the two captured soldiers to Turkey", Robert Olson, 'Turkey-Iran Relations, 1997 to 2000: the Kurdish and Islamist Questions', Third World Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 5, (2001), p. 880, "Turkey consented to pay some amount of money as humanitarian aid but did not accept to make official amends", Cumhuriyet, 'PKK'ya Karşı Ortak Denetim', August 14, 1999.

20 Bülent Aras, "Turkish-Israeli-Iranian Relations in the Nineties: Impact on the Middle East", Middle East Policy, Vol. 7, No.3, (2000), p.2,

21 Turkish Probe, 'Iran Interferes With Kavakçı Affair', May 16, 1999 and Cumhuriyet, 'Iran'la Merve Kavakçı Bunalımı', May 9, 1999, Milliyet, 'IranTahririki Sürdürüyor', May 12, 1999.

headscarf, indicated that a cultural and ideological rift continued to be a source of friction.<sup>22</sup>

The alleged Iranian involvement in the bombing assassinations<sup>23</sup> of Kemalist intellectuals, Iran's granting permission to hold the PKK's seventh meeting on Iranian territory<sup>24</sup> and Osman Öcalan's (the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's brother) sheltering in Iran after the October crisis<sup>25</sup> strengthened the contention that Tehran put its raw ideological venom against Turkey ahead of Iran's state interests. Turkey, whose anger reached boiling point towards the end of Khatemi's first four years of office, rebuffed, for example, Iran's attempts to initiate the trio meetings.<sup>26</sup> The President, A. Necdet Sezer, did not accept<sup>27</sup> Khatemi's invitation to the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) meeting on 10 June 2000.<sup>28</sup>

Khatemi's efforts to integrate with the rest of the world in order to improve the government's credibility and attract trade and loans, remained fruitless because developments, such as the Palestinian uprising, El Aqsa intifada, in September 2000,<sup>29</sup> and the election of Ariel Sharon

to the Israeli Presidency in February 2001, strengthened the hardliners' anti-western discourse, which blocked Khatemi at every turn.

22 'While Turkey reacted to the Iranians' interference in Turkey's domestic issue, the Merve Kavakçı incident, Turkish Foreign Minister Bülent Ecevit's words, which labelled the above mentioned demonstrations in Iran as "a natural" reaction against an outdated regime of oppression, led to another crisis in bilateral relations.' Cumhuriyet, 'İran Türkiye'yi Suçladı', July 19, 1999.

23 'Ferhan Özmen, one of the leaders of the Jerusalem Warriors Organisation, (Kudüs savaşçıları) part of Pasdaran, which was founded in 1979 to protect the Iranian revolution and those arrested confessed that they were sponsored by the operatives and agents of Iranian Intelligence in the Jerusalem Warriors Organisation and they had received training.', Cumhuriyet, 'Emirleri İran Verdi', May 20, 2000. Hürriyet, 'Devlet, Devlet Oldu', May 18, 2000

24 Milliyet, 'İran'dan PKK'ya Kongre İzni', October 28, 1999, Radikal, 'Tahran'ın PKK'yla İlişkileri İnceleniyor', March 6, 1999.

25 'For the first time Damascus consented to negotiate security question without reaching a political compromise on water problem. Adana agreement, signed after the October crisis resulted in the expulsion of Öcalan and brought about a constructive rapprochement between the two countries.', Özden Zeynep Oktav (Alantar), "The October 1998 Crisis: The Change of Heart of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Syria?", CEMOTI, No.31(June 2001) , pp.142-163 and Yüksel Sezgin, "The October 1998 Crisis in Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Prospect Theory Approach", Turkish Studies, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Autumn 2002), p.62 and Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View", Middle East Policy, (June 1999), Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 177.

26 'The two countries held an ad hoc series of tripartite conferences with Syria beginning in 1992 to prevent a Kurdish state from forming in northern Iraq. They also established a joint security committee through which they exchanged information, carried out inspections relating to border security, and during Khatemi's period, agreed on the necessity of fighting against terrorism in northern Iraq.', Cumhuriyet, 'Üçlü Toplantıyı Canlandırma Girişimleri', 3 February 1999 and Hürriyet, 'Türkiye ile Diyalog Koşulları Hazır', 1 February 1998. Cumhuriyet, 'Tahran'ın Üçlü Toplantı Önerisine Ret', February 8, 1999.

27 Milliyet, 'İran'a Gitmeyeceğim', May 16, 2000.

28 'Foreign Minister İsmail Cem wrote a letter in which he demanded that Iran halt sponsoring the terrorist activities towards Turkey.', Milliyet, 'Cem'den İran'a Güvenlik İşlemiyor', May 9, 2000, Cumhuriyet, 'Tahran'a Karşı İnkna Politikası', May 31, 2000

29 "The leader of the Likud party, Ariel Sharon's visit to Masjid-i Aqsa led to Palestinian uprising and more than 800 Palestinians were killed by the end of 2001. Many Israeli soldiers were also killed by the Palestinian suicide bombers.", Ç. Erhan, Ö. Kürkçüoğlu, "Türkiye-İsrail İşbirliği", in Baskın Oran, Türk Dış Politikası cilt II, İstanbul, İletişim, 2001, p. 577. p. 100.

By the time these events took place, Khatami had toned down Iran's opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, had taken steps to halt the murders of Iranian dissidents abroad and had made some feeble efforts to launch social reforms. In response, Washington lifted the embargo on certain Iranian exports, and allowed Secretary of State Albright to speak almost apologetically about American influence during the years of the Shah.<sup>30</sup> These developments reinforced hopes that the existing conflict between Iran and the US would be solved. However, it was not sufficient to change the American view, and Tehran was included in the 'axis of evil', together with Iraq and North Korea in February 2002.

### The Changing Threat, Perceptions and Reasons for Better Ties

Iran found itself in an uneasy position with the 11 September terrorist attack. Tehran had already faced serious internal security threats on several of its borders-including political instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, nuclear armed Pakistan and India to the east, and nuclear armed Israel to the west. In addition, the demonising of Iran by the Bush administration, as a member of the 'axis of evil', and that the administration's calls for pre-empting would-be, WMD proliferators, further heightened Iranian feelings of insecurity.<sup>31</sup> In such an environment, Iran would look at a multiplicity of options to safeguard its security.

In the context of Turkish-Iranian relations, Tehran, whose sense of vulnerability was reinforced by being squeezed between two pro-US governments, one in Kabul and the other in Baghdad,<sup>32</sup> felt the urgency to develop better economic and political ties with Turkey. Not surprisingly, Turkey responded to Tehran's initiatives positively. For example, while Turkey, only a few years ago, felt threatened by the signing of the agreement of economic and commercial cooperation between Greece, Armenia and Iran,<sup>33</sup> the agreement on cooperation between the Iranian-Greek natural gas sectors, signed in March 2002 was perceived by Turkey as an opportunity to sell any surplus Iranian gas.<sup>34</sup>

30 International Herald Tribune, 'U.S. Easing Curbs In Overture to Iran', March 18, 2000.

31 Jeffrey Boutwell, Middle East Security and Iran, 6-8 September 2003 in

32 "The Iranian government has promised support for the political process under way in Afghanistan. But for the hardline elements, the American move against the Taleban was a cynical act of strategic encirclement carried out under the guise of a campaign to uproot terrorism.", BBC News, 'Uncertainty in Iran Over Afghan Assembly', June 9, 2002,

33 Ergun Balci, 'Türkiye'yi Kuşatma Çabaları', Cumhuriyet, September 15, 1998.

34 "The agreement provided the completion of a natural-gas pipeline from Iran to Greece via Turkey", Milliyet, 'Türkiye-Yunanistan Doğalgaz Hattı Tamam', March 29, 2002.

Much more realistic, was the fact that it would no longer be possible for Ankara to ignore Tehran's developing commercial relationship with EU countries and, perhaps more significantly, in terms of further reducing Iran's international isolation.<sup>35</sup> Turkey, therefore, developed its policy towards Iran in a way similar to that of the EU, which had long favoured a 'critical dialogue' rather than adopting the dual containment policy of the United States.<sup>36</sup> Ankara, thus, supported the reformists in Iran who had been trying to cope with the problem of a deteriorating image<sup>37</sup> and hoped to improve trade relations with Iran.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, Ankara wanted to strengthen its ties with the Iranian administration at a time when the PKK, in an effort to be recognised as a political organisation of Kurds living in Turkey, changed its name to 'the Congress for Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan' in April 2002.<sup>39</sup> For example, during Sezer's groundbreaking visit, both countries took significant steps in developing ties, when they agreed to mutually recognise the separatist PKK in Turkey and the Iranian Mujahadin Khalq, as terrorist groups.<sup>40</sup> Khatemi's declaration that 'a strong Turkey in the EU would have a positive impact on both Turkey and the regional countries'<sup>41</sup> indicated Tehran's enthusiasm to come into line with Turkey, who has always encouraged Iran to adopt more liberal foreign policies.<sup>42</sup>

The bilateral relations with Iran changed so dramatically that, for example, the general secretary of the National Security Council Tuncer Kilinç, openly stated in March 2002, that as an alternative to the European Union, relations with Iran and Russia had to be improved.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Turkey adopted a milder stance

35 "Khatemi went from Vienne to Athens and met with Greek Prime Minister, Simitis. In his meeting with Simitis, Khatami said Iran would welcome any expansion of ties with Greece and European Union. This trip was meaningful for Iran because Greece would soon take over the leadership of the European Union. Khatemi also met with European Union foreign policy chief.", Iran Report, 'Highly Significant Presidential Trip to Greece', Vol. 5, No.10,2002. "Khatemi's visit to the Pope in Vatican is of vital importance since he is the first Iranian leader who has visited the Pope", Sami Kohen, 'Iran'ın Roma Yolu Açılımı', Milliyet, March 12, 1999.

36 "The critical dialogue" policy of the European Union countries aimed to influence Iran to refrain from human-rights abuses and thus to strengthen the reformists' hand", Michael Rubin, 'Europe's Critical Dialogue With Iran: An Assessment' Policywatch, January 10, 2000.,

37 "Since 1984, Iran has been on the U.S. Department of State's list of states sponsoring terrorism. In its 1996 report on global terrorism, the Department of State describes Iran as the premier state sponsor of international terrorism", Payvand's Iran News, Overview of States-Sponsored Terrorism, April 30, 2001, US State Department issued its annual report on Patterns of Global Terrorism on April 29, 2004. The report maintained the State Department's designation of Iran, Libya and Syria as state sponsors of terrorism.

38 'For example, bilateral trade stood at \$ 1.4 billion in 2001. In January 2002, Iran began natural gas exports to Turkey via a 2.557 kilometer (1598 mile) pipeline as part of a \$ 30 billion project' Turkish Daily News, " Sezer: No One Prevents Improvement of Turkish-Iranian Ties' ,June 19, 2002.

39 Iran Report, "PKK Changes Name Only", vol 5 (14), 2002.

40 Turkish Daily News, 'Sezer: No One Prevents Improvement of Turkish-Iranian Ties', June 19, 2002.

41 Turkish Daily News, 'Sezer: No One Prevents Improvement of Turkish-Iranian Ties', June 19, 2002.

42 Cumhuriyet, 'Ankara'dan Tahran'a Mesaj: Liberalleşin', February 12, 2001 and Sami kohen, 'Iran ile yeni Bir başlangıç', Milliyet , February 15, 2001. " During the visit, the Turkish officials and the Foreign Minister, Cem were very surprised when the positive comments about Atatürk and the Speech were made in Iranian press.", Milliyet, 'Iran'dan Atatürk Jesti', February 14, 2001.

43 "The chief of general staff, Kıvrıkoğlu stated that the declaration of Orgeneral Kılınç would not reflect the views of Turkish military and added that none of the members of the Turkish military could not give up integrating with the civilization", Sabah, 'Genelkurmay'dan Mesaj: İran'la Kolkola Girmeyiz!', March 18, 2002.

than previously, when PKK Chairmanship Council members, Cemil Bayik and Halil Ataç, escaped to Urumiye with \$ 1.4 million in their possession.<sup>44</sup> In the Turkish press, it was emphasised that the Bayik incident would be a good opportunity for Iran to clarify its stance on Turkey's PKK issue.<sup>45</sup>

Most important of all, both countries' common stance against the forcible removal of Iraq's Saddam Hussein by the United States, which, from both Turkey's and Iran's point of view, could result in the foundation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, facilitated the process of reconciliation between the two countries. The utilisation of Iraqi natural resources, equally, by all the Iraqi people<sup>46</sup> was also another concern of both countries.

Curiously enough, 'although Iran's leaders publicly criticised the American-led war to topple Saddam Hussein in Iraq, in practice Iran remained neutral, turned a blind eye to American violations of their airspace and coastal waters and the war has encouraged both the hardliners and the reformists to continue seeking a détente with America.'<sup>47</sup> This was partly due to the Tehran administration's antagonistic feelings toward Saddam's autocratic regime<sup>48</sup> and partly due to the fact that Tehran wanted to avoid giving the United States any cause for confrontation.<sup>49</sup>

For example, M.Reza Khatemi, the deputy parliament speaker, spoke for many, when he declared that 'the day Saddam Hussein is ousted will be among the happiest days for the Iranian people, no matter how this occurs'.<sup>50</sup> Abbas Maleki, a former deputy foreign minister, went further, telling a British newspaper that 'a pro-US government in Baghdad would not be worse than Saddam Hussein'<sup>51</sup>

44 "After some initial denials, Iranian officials acknowledged that Bayik and his men were in Urumiyeh and subsequently detained them. Nonetheless, extradition of the PKK members to Turkey remained uncertain. Then Iranian Interior Ministry spokesman, Jahanbaksh Khanjani said the reports about Bayik were baseless and Tehran had demanded documentary evidence", Iran Report, 'Tehran-Ankara Ties Survive Terrorism Flaps', April 15, 2002.

45 Milliyet, 'İranın Terörden Aklanma Fırsatı', April 4, 2002.

46 Milliyet, 'Silahsız Çözüm İçin Hala Umut Var', January 13, 2003.

47 Economist, 'Befriending the Great Satan', May 12, 2003

48 Hürriyet, 'Gül'den Saddam'a Aklını Başına Al Durum Vahim', January 13, 2003.

49 'American officials revealed that the two countries had 'very recently' held secret negotiations in Geneva under the auspices of the United Nations; and it was notable that Iran, in its official denial that it was seeking to restore relations, stopped short of denying that these talks had taken place', Economist, 'Befriending the Great Satan', May 12, 2003 in

50 Mojahed, No. 592, 2 July 2002 in Mahan Abedin, 'Iranian Views On Regime Change in Iraq', The Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, Vol.4, No.11, 2002, p.4

51 The New York Times, November 3, 2002 in Mahan Abedin, 'Iranian Views on Regime Change in Iraq', Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, Vol.4, No. 11, 2002, p. 4.

The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq may have removed one security threat to Iran, but this has been more than replaced by the greatly increased American military presence in the region. As a result, a central tenet of Iranian policy is the early withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq and a greater role for the United Nations in facilitating a return to Iraqi self-government.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Iranian officials and politicians have been increasingly wary of any appearance of favouring détente with the United States because of the almost daily accusations from Washington that Iran is harbouring al-Qaida leaders and seeking a nuclear capability.<sup>53</sup>

While Washington expected the Tehran government to pressure the Iranian-backed Hizbollah guerillas to scale down their military operations, Tehran accused Washington of not extraditing the armed, Iraq-based Iranian opposition, Mujahedin Khalq. Nevertheless, in terms of regional security, there has been tacit cooperation between the United States and Iran, whose security has been enhanced by the removal of Saddam in Iraq and the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan. For example, Washington's view, that Iran, having an influence over some Iraqi Shia groups, is in a position either to help or hinder the creation of a stable Iraqi government. Its links to Hizbollah and other Middle Eastern groups means that it might also be of use in achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Viewed from Washington, however, Iranian progress on dealing with international terrorism and nuclear proliferation so far, has been minimal,<sup>54</sup> more specifically, the reformist wing in the Iranian Majlis has not lived up to expectations in the United States. Besides pressing Iran over its harbouring of al-Qaida leaders, Washington has been urging Tehran to stop its nuclear weapons production. The United Nations, the European Union and Russia all pressurised Iran to sign an additional protocol under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would allow the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspectors to make more thorough checks at its nuclear sites.<sup>55</sup> Finally, on 21 October, Tehran was persuaded to suspend its programme to enrich uranium. However, Tehran has still been unable to restore mutual trust with the western world. Sceptics warn that it could be a temporary respite, on the grounds that, with so much technology at its fingertips, and with its hardliners so influential, Iran's nuclear ambition will continue to be a problem between Iran and the west.<sup>56</sup>

52 Jeffrey Boutwell, Middle East Security and Iran, 6-8 September 2003

53 Iran Report, 'Iran Responds to US On Al-Qaeda', May 26, 2003 vol: 6, No.22

54 Iran Report, 'Bush Identifies Iran As Captive Nation', Vol. 5, No.27, 2002. "Washington extended the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act for another five years in June 2001" Iran Report, 'Sanctions Renewal Advances', Vol. 4, No.24, 2001.

55 Economist, 'ElBaradei's Critical Mission', July 8, 2003 and Economist, 'Apocalypse Soon', July 21, 2003 in

54 Economist, 'Coming Clean or Playing for Time', October 23 rd, 2003

When it comes to Turkey's stance towards Iran regarding these issues, Turkey urges Iran to comply with the United Nations and feels threatened by news that Iranian missiles currently have a range sufficient to hit not only Baghdad but also Israel.<sup>57</sup> However, Ankara acknowledges that the Iranian regime no longer sets out to murder its exiled dissidents in western cities and that it is less interested than it once was in stirring up trouble among Shia Muslims in Sunni-run countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In addition, some efforts of the reformists, such as Khatemi's visit to Lebanon to ask Hizbollah to be a political rather than a military force<sup>58</sup> and the letter signed by a majority of Iranian Majlis, calling for an investigation into reports that al-Qaida and Taliban leaders are hiding in Iran,<sup>59</sup> are noteworthy for Ankara as it has always encouraged Tehran to move towards moderation.

Therefore, pointing to Iranian progress in international politics, as well as in bilateral relations with Turkey, it is the view of Turkish officials that it is in Turkey's interests to promote a moderate Iran. Ankara believes it necessary to oversee the regional balance, whilst still maintaining its relationship with Tehran which is not under the yoke of relations with other countries.<sup>60</sup>

With the outbreak of the Iraqi war in March 2003, the Turkish government initiated a rapprochement with Iran and Syria, both of which have been marked as targets by the United States. Despite Turkey's efforts not to give the impression of forming an alliance with these countries,<sup>61</sup> the busy diplomatic relations with Syria and Iran signal, in a way, that the mutual objection to the foundation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, has brought the three countries closer together. On an official visit to Turkey, for example, Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, stating that there are not only Turkomans in northern Iraq, but also Shiites, proposed a trilateral meeting between Turkey, Syria and Iran to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in the region.<sup>62</sup>

57 BBC News, 'Iran Missile Move Alarms Israel, July 21, 2003 and Milliyet, 'İstanbul İran'ın Menziline Girdi', September 23, 2003.

58 A. William Sami and Nasser Hadian, 'Iraq and Iran: Crosswinds?', Policy Watch, May 30, 2003

59 Ray Takeyh and Patrick Clawson, 'Iran's Place In the Axis: Signs of Movement?', Policy Watch, May 17, 2002, number 625.

60 "Turkish Foreign Minister İsmail Cem told the Iranian officials that Turkey would not keep their relations with Arabs and Iran at low level for the sake of the improvement of its relations with Israel and drew attention to the point that some Arabs and Israelis tried to exaggerate Turkey's relations with Israel in order to isolate Turkey in the Arab world.", Milliyet, 'Iran'a Güvence', July 16, 1998

61 Cumhuriyet, 'ABD'li Heyetten İnce Mesajlar', April 29, 2003.

62 Turkish Pres Review, 'Kharrazi: Iran Also Stands Opposed To Any Kurdish State', April 7, 2003

Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that, despite the cooperative attitude of Tehran towards the issue of Kurdish separatism,<sup>63</sup> Turkey has been sceptical about the true intentions of the Tehran government, which still has not included KADEK on the list of terrorist organisations. Therefore, for example, Turkish Prime Minister, R Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Iran, which was to have taken place in September 2003, was shelved.<sup>64</sup> The cancellation of the visit was partly due to the fact that Ankara did not want to further improve its relations with Tehran, at the cost of its relations with Washington, at a time when it was trying to mend fences with the United States, after the Turkish Parliament's rejection on 1 March, of the deployment of American forces on its soil. In order not to offend the Americans, Ankara did not want to be seen as participating in a pact<sup>65</sup> of cooperation in security issues, which was being offered by Iran. The Americans hold the sword of Damocles over Turkey's head, as America is the sole power exercising de facto authority in northern Iraq, where the PKK/KADEK still continues to exist.

Another important reason for a slowdown in Turkish diplomatic moves towards Iran is the fact that reformers in Iran have proved no more effective since the municipal elections in February 2003,<sup>66</sup> and the parliamentary Majlis elections in February 2004, also ended in the victory of the conservatives, which strengthened the cleric's rule, notably the political isolation it brought to Iran. The long, slow process of Iran's emergence from its isolation: one step forward and two steps backward, has been the main reason for not restoring relations with Turkey, as well as with the western world.

## Conclusion

When analysing bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran, the latent rivalry between the two comes first to mind. Iran, an important gate way to the energy-rich Central Asia region, with a population approaching 70 million, and holding 8.7% of proven world oil reserves, is too important for Turkey to ignore.

63 'For example, Khatemi offered to establish a telephone hot line between the two countries and to conduct spontaneous inspections jointly by the Turkish-Iranian military authorities to prevent the outlawed PKK groups engaging on Iranian soil in terrorist activities directed against Turkey', Zaman, 'Khatemi's Four Warm Messages for Sezer', June 18, 2002.

64 Cumhuriyet, 'Iran Gezisi Ertelendi', September 12, 2003 and Democracy for Iran, 'Iran Visit Crisis Deepens' 'During the Turkish Foreign Minister A. Gül's visit to Tehran, Khatemi ensured that the terrorist groups engaging on Iranian soil in terrorist activities directed against Turkey would never be permitted but he did not make clear statement concerning the inclusion of the PKK into the list of terrorist organizations.', Cumhuriyet, 'Iran Türkiye'ye Güvence Verdi', January 12, 2004.

65 Cumhuriyet, 'Tahran'dan Pakt Önerisi', October 1, 2003

66 Economist, 'Countdown to Counter-Revolution', January 12th, 2003

Similarly, Iran perceives Turkey, which has a large, modern army and a secular administration, as a neighbour which is threatening and hostile to its existence.

Secular Turkey and religious (Islamic) Iran have repeatedly traded charges. The primary Turkish charge has concerned Iran's revisionist aspirations, whereas Turkey's western orientation, and its eagerness to be considered western, has been a divisive factor in relations between the two countries. For example, during their visits to Turkey, Iranian officials' repeated refusals to visit Atatürk's mausoleum (Anıtkabir) have always led to crises. During the Welfare-True Path coalition period, the Sincan incident, which resulted in a military

decree, broke up the relationship between the Refah members (the Islamists) of the government and Iranian official circles.

While Turkey accuses Iran of supporting the PKK logistically, Tehran says Turkey harbours an armed Iranian opposition group, the Mujahadin Khalq. The reports from Turkish Intelligence on the murders of Turkish intellectuals, which were allegedly sponsored by Iran and the alleged Iran-sponsored, Hizbollah terrorist activities in Turkey, hindered neighbourly relations.

Another thorny issue affecting bilateral relations has been the strategic relationship between Israel and Turkey. Viewing Turkey as 'westoxicated', Iran has always denounced Turkey's extensive cooperation with Israel on security issues- such as manoeuvres and joint military exercises in Turkish airspace, through which Israel has reached the edge of the Iranian border. Tehran's immediate reaction to the signing of Turkish-Israeli strategic cooperation in 1996, was that it realised an important shift in its foreign policy, it was the transition from an ideologically-based foreign policy to one favouring national interests. Iran, which was alarmed by the agreement and perceived it as a new US conspiracy, felt the necessity to enhance its relations, especially with European Union countries, and of integrating into the global system. It was, in actual fact, not due to the prevailing full democracy in Iran's Islamist regime but to the worsening economic conditions and the necessity of preserving the clerical regime.

The foremost reason for the progressive change in bilateral relations is the strong opposition of both countries, which share a Kurdish minority issue, to the removal of Saddam Hussein by a military attack of the United States, which could lead to the foundation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and to the disintegration of Iraq. In this context Turkey and Iran mutually recognised the separatist PKK in Turkey, and the Mujahadin Khalq, as terrorist groups. In addition, it was of crucial importance for Ankara to obtain Tehran's collaboration in its struggle against the separatist PKK, at a time when it changed its name to the 'Congress for Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan' in April 2002, with the purpose of being recognised as a political organisation for the Kurds living in Turkey.

Not surprisingly, Tehran's attitude towards Ankara's pro-western orientation and alliances has softened, since Khatemi has been trying to build bridges with the west and his support of Turkey's membership of the EU. Ankara developed its foreign policy along similar lines to those of the EU countries, not to those of the U.S, and has always been against the containment policy of Washington, hoping to enhance its trade volume with its neighbour. Pointing to the Iranian reformist's enthusiasm to cope with image deterioration, Ankara did its best to bring about a thaw in bilateral relations, especially with the reformist wing of Iranian officials. For example, neither President Sezer, nor Minister of Foreign Affairs Gül, established any contact with Iran's religious leader Khamanei during their visits to Iran. Iran also made a strategic decision not to interfere in the internal issues of Turkey. For example, it remained silent when the Turkish Constitutional Court banned the largest Islamist Party, the Virtue Party, which had replaced another banned Islamist party, the Welfare Party.<sup>67</sup>

After the removal of Saddam Hussein, the fact that the process of the founding of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq gained momentum set the alarm bells of Turkey, as well as of Iran and Syria, ringing. Ankara, thus, initiated diplomatic relations with these two countries. However, a newly emerged situation, which was the American strategy to redesign the region, where Ankara should have learned to live with 'Pax Americana', urged Turkey to

keep Iran at a distance. Iran still dragged its feet over including KADEK on the list of terrorist organisations. Ankara, whose priority is the preservation of the status quo in the region, wishes Tehran to tone down its opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and to stop its improvement of weapons of mass destruction.

At present, despite the fact that a fully enhanced relationship between Turkey and Iran has not yet developed, some factors have played a role in the ongoing improvement of the relationship. First of all, although Iran's reform movement has been stymied by a determined conservative backlash, at present, political debate in Iran is lively. Writers, journalists, academics, lawyers and liberal members of the clergy continue to speak out. Public opinion tries to constrain the actions of the religious leaders who wield judicial and military power.

67 Robert Olson, "Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000-2001: The Caspian, Azerbaijan and the Kurds", Middle East Policy, Vol.9, No.2, (June 2002), p.14.

Turkey's western orientation, for this reason, no longer creates problems between the two countries. On the contrary, Turkey, a candidate for European Union membership, stands as a neighbour, who will help Iran cope with its isolation and economic backwardness. Most important of all, Turkey has become a potential ally, who will help Iran remove the sense of being contained after the settlement of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In total, changing security perceptions after the US attack on Iraq, and the deteriorating economy stemming from the existing system in Iran, urge reformist administrative cadres in Tehran to make some changes both domestically and internationally and to further develop relations with Ankara. Currently, Iran is at a crossroads. Therefore, in order to cope with mutual distrust and to encourage the Iranians to make rooted changes in the existing clerical system, Ankara should formulate its policies toward Iran on a multidimensional basis, including cultural, economic and social relations, instead of formulating the policies only in terms of security.