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The Iranian-Turkish struggle for Syria

By Sami Moubayed

3/10/2012

One of the aftershocks of the Syrian uprising is an abrupt end to a Turkish-Iranian honeymoon, which started shortly after the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey almost 10 years ago. For many years Turkey and Iran - heirs to two strong empires - found plenty in common thanks to Syria. They now have a million reasons to disagree, also because of Syria.

The countries cooperated on post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, worked side-by-side to crush Kurdish separatists, and united efforts on Lebanon and Gaza after the wars of 2006 and 2008 respectively.

That marriage of convenience began to fall apart - rather rapidly - when the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took a radically anti-Damascus stance, calling for the regime's downfall, whereas Iran stood firmly behind its Syrian ally, with whom it has held strategic relations since 1979. It all boils down now to a Persian-Turkish struggle for Syria.

Historical background

According to Daphne McCurdy, a senior researcher associate with the Project on Middle East Democracy: "Turkey has traditionally viewed Iran, unlike how it has viewed other Middle East countries, as a large and important nation-state that must be managed, rather than confronted."

Back in 1979, for example, the Turks were among the very few regional heavyweights who did not panic when the Islamic Revolution took place in Tehran. It also became one of the first countries in the world to recognize the Khomeini government, and to refuse to impose sanctions upon it, after the 1979-1981 US hostage crisis at the American Embassy in Tehran.

Turkey did this, it must be noted, despite a systematic Iranian campaign to tarnish the image of the Turkish Republic's founder, president Kamal Ataturk, and his strong brand of secularism. In the 1990s, the two countries signed a US\$24 billion gas deal, despite mutual accusations of backing the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

After the Israeli war of 2006, Prime Minister Erdogan saw to it that \$50 million worth of aid was provided for the reconstruction of south Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold, which was music to the ears of Iranian officialdom.

In June 2010, Turkey voted against a US-backed UN Security Council resolution imposing further sanctions on Iran. Despite the slump in political relations since mid-2011, Turkey still relies on Iran for one-third of its oil supply.

Differences surface

One view says that Tehran and Ankara soon realized that apart from short-term political issues, the two countries had very little in common, thanks to Syria. Another view, of course, speaks the exact opposite, claiming that economic interests overshadow political differences between Ankara and Tehran.

The truth, of course, lies somewhere in-between. Turkey's AKP was indeed a religious party that marketed a strong brand of moderate Sunni Islam, whereas Iran was a Shi'ite theocracy bent on marketing radical political Shi'ite Islam to the world, automatically challenging countries like Turkey.

Last November, Turkey agreed to host an early warning radar as part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's missile defense system, infuriating the Iranians, who saw it as a direct threat to their security. The Europe Missile Shield, after all, was originally created to intercept Iranian missiles.

Turkey of course only agreed to host the defense shield in September 2011 after tensions had begun to mount between the two countries over Syria. The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's aerospace division, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, snapped that, "should we be threatened, we will target NATO's missile defense shield in Turkey and then hit the next targets."

Then came a statement by Ali Akbar, senior advisor to Iran's Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who said that Turkey's model of "secular Islam" was actually a "version of Western liberal democracy that is unacceptable for countries going through an Islamic awakening". In response, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc said: "I am addressing the Islamic Republic of Iran: I do not know if you are worthy of being called Islamic; have you said a single thing about what is happening in Syria?"

Iran realizes that although it has the ear of top Syrian officials, its popularity on the Syrian street is very thin when compared with that of Turkey.

It has tried non-stop since 1979 to boost people-to-people relations through tourism, cultural exchange, and investment projects in Syria. Religious tourism did indeed flourish, for example, but it was one-sided, from Iran to Syria and not vice-versa. Few Syrian tourists went to Tehran for sightseeing.

However, in Turkey's case, where Syrian tourists visiting Turkey jumped from 332,847 in 2007, for example, into almost 900,000 in 2010. In Iran's case, 800,000 Iranians came to Syria in 2010, for example, but the Iranian Ministry of Tourism refrained from mentioning how many Syrian tourists visit Iran per year.

Turkish soap operas have been translated into Arabic and are very popular in Syria, but the same cannot be said for the numerous Iranian works translated into Arabic - and an entire Iranian channel dedicated to broadcasting Iranian works dubbed from Persian into Arabic. This of course is namely due to joint Syrian-Turkish history, intermarriage, and the fact that Turks are Muslim Sunnis while Iranians are Muslim Shi'ites, creating an invisible religious barrier that is very difficult to transcend.

Iran feels outsmarted by Turkey at a grassroots level, although Tehran has been trying to win affection of the Syrian people for over 30-years, while the Turks have been doing it only since 2003.

The Turks managed to win affection of ordinary Syrians - regardless of politics - despite 80 years of indoctrination in Syrian media against the Ottoman Empire and its legacy in the Arab world. There was no such indoctrination ever against Iran - and yet, Syrians prefer to do business with Ankara and to go sightseeing in Turkey rather than Iran. This is noteworthy, although Iran is a breathtaking country with magnificent history, breathtaking tourist attractions and plenty of wealth.

The crux of the struggle today, therefore, is Syria. Relations will continue cooperating on bilateral trade, regardless of how much politics divides them, but Syria remains a sticking point in Iranian-Turkish relations.

Iran is worried that regime change in Syria would give the Turks unlimited access to Syria, excluding Tehran from all political, military, cultural, and economic influence. The Turks after all, are strongly allied to the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), which was established in Istanbul last summer, and currently host the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

All talk about a no-fly zone on the Syrian-Turkish border raises red sirens in Tehran, but at the end of the day, the Iranians are unable to go to war for Syria. If the Syrian Army ventures into the northern Syrian city of Idlib, as it did in Homs, then this would place it dangerously near the Turkish border, and the Turks are ready to act, invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter, being "self-defense".

In fact, Erdogan might even see it as a blessing in disguise, giving him the pretext to put his loud words into action. That explains why Iran is very worried. They realize that contrary to what they believed, there is an entire street in Syria, being the majority, that doesn't like them, and has little affection anymore, for Hezbollah.

That doesn't mean the Syrian street likes Erdogan any better. On the contrary, ordinary Syrians are beginning to view him also with plenty of suspicion and scrutiny for saying nothing but loud words since the Syrian uprising began in mid-2011.

Supporting the resistance in Lebanon, however, is no longer enough for Iran to win the minds and hearts of the Syrian people. Also, loud words in favor of the Syrian rebels are also no longer enough for Erdogan to score points with ordinary Syrians.

The two countries - and both Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Recep Tayyip Erdogan - will have to do things differently from now on to win over ordinary Syrians. Otherwise, both will be viewed as nothing but hot air balloons. Turkey may have the upper hand at a grassroots level, but politically speaking, both countries are losing ground within Syria, both with ordinary Syrians, and against each other, rather rapidly.