

# PERCEPTIONS

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## **Turkey-Iran Relations in the 1990s and the Role of Ideology**

**Bayram Sinkaya\***

### **Abstract**

Turkey and Iran are key countries in the Middle East thanks to their strategic positions, natural resources, historical continuity, cultural roots/bases, demographic structures and international alliances. Their positions regarding the regional developments and their alliances with great powers have a deep impact not only in the flow of regional developments, but also closely affect international systems. For this reason, analysis of domestic developments in these countries and their impact on foreign political positioning have a great importance. As well as their foreign policies and their relations with great powers, the relations between these two states present a critical point.

The article discusses the role of ideology in Turkish-Iranian relations, internal developments in these countries and their effects on bilateral relations between the two states, as well as geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran over Iraq, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Reviewing the relations between Turkey and Iran since the 1979 revolution in Iran, one may identify an increase in ideological frictions between the two states in the 1990s in comparison to their relations in the 1980s. However, unlike in the 1980s, when ideology dominated Iranian politics and foreign policy, the role of ideology in Iranian politics gradually decreased throughout the 1990s. Ironically this period in Turkish-Iranian relations was dominated by ideological tensions. Hence, this article seeks answers to the question why and how ideological reasons led to severe frictions in the 1990s despite the declining role of ideology in Iran. It argues that geopolitical developments following the demise of the USSR and the Gulf War led to the eruption of Turco-Iran competition over Iraq and over the Caucasus and the Central Asia which created a “conflictual” atmosphere in Turkey-Iran relations. Moreover, internal developments in these two countries have added fuel to the fire, and

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ideological differences between the two states have become a source of further conflict/friction between Iran and Turkey.

### **Ideological Confrontation<sup>1</sup>**

Despite the prevalence of the ideological dimension of revolutionary Iran's foreign policy,<sup>2</sup> pragmatism determined Turco-Iranian relations during the 1980s. The pragmatism was set by revolutionary Iran's diversion of almost all of its revolutionary energy primarily to Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf. Turkey's desire to prevent Iran from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence just after the revolution, and its prioritization of economic transactions during the 1980s hindered the prevalence of ideology in bilateral relations between Iran and Turkey. On the other hand, due to the ongoing war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988, pragmatism in its relations with Turkey was compulsory for Iran, so that it could channel its urgent needs via Turkey and could keep Turkey neutral.<sup>3</sup> Despite the pragmatic policies of the two states towards each other throughout the 1980s and the declining importance of ideology in Iranian foreign policy in the 1990s, ideological confrontation between Turkey and Iran reached its peak in the 1990s and twice resulted in reciprocal withdrawals of ambassadors.<sup>4</sup>

There are several explanations for the escalation in the Turco-Iranian ideological confrontation in the 1990s. Firstly, radical Islamists in Turkey increased their violent activities in this period - sometimes, allegedly, in collaboration with Iranian intelligence service members - which increased the concern of the Turkish ruling elite towards Islamist groups and their links

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<sup>1</sup>“Ideological confrontation” between Iran and Turkey has an undeniable importance and long-enduring effect on the relations between these two countries, inherited from their predecessors, the Safavid Empire and the Ottoman Empire, representing different sects of Islam, Shiite and Sunni. Ideological confrontation as the Shiite versus Sunnism continued as republic vs monarchy during the Pahlavi Era in Iran and the Republican era in Turkey, and finally transformed into “secularism” vs “fundamentalism” after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Following the “Islamic” revolution in Iran, Iran's export of revolution policy in order to make the Iranian regional environment safe for Iran's power and for its revolutionary ideology increased the role of ideology both in Iranian foreign policy and in Turkey-Iran relations. See, Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Essential Friends and Natural Enemies: The Historic Root of Turkish-Iranian Relations”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol.7, no.3 (September 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Mahmood Sariolghalam, *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Theoretical Renewal and a Paradigm for Coalition* (Tehran: The Center for Strategic Research, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Süha Bölükbaşı, “Turkey Copes with Revolutionary Iran”, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.8, no. 1-2 (Fall/Winter 1989).; Ünal Gündoğan, “Islamist Iran and Turkey, 1979-1989: State Pragmatism and Ideological Influences”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol.7, no.1, (March 2003).

<sup>4</sup>Turkish Ambassador to Tehran, Ömer Akbel and his Iranian counterpart in Ankara, Manochehr Mottaki were recalled by their capitals for consultations in April 1989. Turkey and Iran withdrew their ambassadors Osman Korutürk and M. Reza Bagheri one more time in February 1997.

with Iran. Secondly, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, “radicals” in the Iranian State apparatus found opportunities to intensify their propaganda efforts in Turkey. In fact, Iran did not establish any Islamist organizations in Turkey to export its revolution. However, some people in Turkey - “who were inspired by the Iranian revolution”- founded organizations, and then applied to Iranian officials based in Turkey in order to receive financial and logistical support. Iran, initially, did not refuse their demands. Moreover, it kept in touch with them to gain leverage against Turkey, and to exploit them in its covert activities in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, as remarked upon by Turan Morali,<sup>6</sup> the former Turkish ambassador to Tehran, some officials in Iran wrongly evaluated the growth of the Welfare Party in Turkish politics and Islamism - as if Turkey was making progress towards “shariah” by “ballot”. This is why the statements of some Iranian diplomats, even ambassadors to Turkey, such as Manochehr Mottaki in April 1989, and M. Reza Bagheri in February 1997, were not couched in the traditional diplomatic language and were perceived as inflammatory, which led to the mutual withdrawal of the Turkish and Iranian ambassadors.

It is also important to note that in accordance with “global trends” in the post-cold war period, and due to internal developments, such as the rise of political Islam and the violent activities of radical Islamists, Turkey changed its threat evaluation and placed “fundamentalist Islam” at the top of its threats list. On the other hand, earlier fears expressed by the Turkish establishment, about a possible dissolution of Iran and its joining the Soviet sphere of influence, were no longer valid after the dissolution of the Eastern bloc.

Last but not least, it should be kept in mind that geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran, which will be discussed in the following pages, also intensified in the early 1990s. “Hawks” in both states attempted to use

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<sup>5</sup>See M. Ali Birand, “If Iran Is In The Right, Then It Should Convince Us As Well”, Turkish Daily News, 13 May 2000. See also Rusen Çakır and Sami Oguz, *Hatemi'nin Iran'ı* (Istanbul: İletişim Yay., 2000), pp. 272-77.; and see Ercan Citlioglu, *Tahran-Ankara Hattında Hizbullah* (Ankara: Umit Yay., 2001.; Ely Karmon, “Radical Islamic Political Groups in Turkey”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol.1, no.4 (December 1997), available in <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1997/issue4/jv1n4a2.html>.; and Iran's Policy on Terrorism in the 1990s, available in [www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=47](http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleid=47).

<sup>6</sup>Presentation at a seminar meeting in Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara, May 2002. For instance, Hashemi Rafsanjani following his visit to Turkey in December 1996, said: “Islam dominated here for centuries, and 98 percent of the Turkish people is Muslim, and we think that moving towards Islam in Turkey is serious”, Bahram Navazeni, *Gaahshomaare Seyaasete Khareceye Iran; Az Mordad Maah 1367 to Khordad Maah 1380*. Markaze Esnaade Enghalaabe Eslaame: Tehran, 2002, p. 255.

their ideological posture as leverage against each other in their struggle to gain influence in northern Iraq and the Caucasus and Central Asia. Nevertheless, Turkish Foreign Ministry officials were much more circumspect than the Interior Ministry, the military establishment, and the mainstream media. This exerted a constraining effect against further severance of the Turkish position. Similarly, official policies of the Iranian governments were far from supporting radical Islamist organizations in Turkey in the 1990s. That is why Hizbullah complained about the decrease of Iranian aid after the death of Khomeini. Similarly, the Turkish allegations that Iran was sheltering the Turkish radical Islamists and training them ceased in the mid- and late 1990s. Nonetheless, revelations of the early links between the Turkish radical Islamists and Iran in the 1990s greatly contributed to the escalation of ideological confrontation between Turkey and Iran. Yet, the cautious and moderate stance of foreign policy decision-makers in both countries prevented severe clashes between Turkey and Iran.

### **The Impact of Internal Developments**

Internal developments in Turkey and Iran during the period under consideration greatly affected foreign policies of these countries, particularly their bilateral relations. To begin with, political instability in Turkey throughout the 1990s prevented the formulation of consistent and long-lasting foreign policy strategies, which in turn caused ups and downs in Turkish-Iranian relations. Secondly, as previously indicated, the rise of political and radical Islam in Turkey in the 1990s increased the concerns of Turkish decision-makers regarding the shariah threat. This situation also sparked Turkish suspicions about the activities of Iran, alleged sponsor of political Islam. Thus, the ascendancy of political and radical Islam in Turkey emerged as a negative factor for relations between Turkey and Iran. Thirdly, increased Turkish nationalism in the 1990s caused a “fear of Pan-Turkism” in Iran which hosted nearly 25 million Turkish-speaking minorities, and which has new neighboring Turkic states on its northern borders. Moreover, the Iranian leaders were concerned about the growing influence of the Turkish military over civilian politics, because they saw the Turkish Army as “radical Kemalist” oppressing “Muslims” in Turkey. Iran was also displeased with the Turkish-Israeli partnership, in which the military played a leading role.

One of the leading arguments of this study that the role of ideology has decreased in the Iranian politics necessitates further emphasis on Iranian politics.

As to Iran,<sup>7</sup> two significant developments profoundly affected Iranian politics and foreign policy in the 1990s: the end of the eight-year long war with Iraq in July 1988, and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini on June 4, 1989. The Iranian government encountered two difficulties following these developments. In the first place, it had to manage the pressure, both from inside and outside, to transform revolutionary politics into the policies of any “normal state”. The domestic pressure for transformation extended to even questioning the legitimacy of “velayat-i fakih” rule, the main base of the Iranian regime. The outside pressure was exerted via the international isolation of revolutionary Iran to compel it to accept the existing regional and international system. Second, Iran had to overcome the problems stemming from deteriorating domestic economic and social conditions that further deepened due to the eight-year war with Iraq and the international isolation of Iran.<sup>8</sup> These difficulties led to the ascendancy of pragmatists/reformists in Iranian politics and the deepening of competition between the reformists and radicals/conservatives, which marked the 1990s in Iran.

Hashemi Rafsanjani's ascent to the presidency in 1989<sup>9</sup> raised expectations that Iran would adopt liberal policies and integrate into the international system.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the pace of reforms in Iran that had already started after the end of the Iran-Iraq war accelerated, encompassing almost all aspects of life in the country within the framework of reconstruction. The transformation was also visible in Iran's foreign relations, which could be seen in the context of the “thermidor”<sup>11</sup> of the Iranian revolution.<sup>12</sup> In the presidential elections held in May 1997, reformist Sayyed Mohammed Khatami, won 69 % of the eligible votes, pledging “reform at home, and peace abroad” to the Iranians.

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<sup>7</sup>One of the leading arguments of this study that the role of ideology has decreased in the Iranian politics necessitates further emphasis on Iranian politics.

<sup>8</sup>John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons, Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p.3.

<sup>9</sup>Jalil Roshandel, “Iran's Foreign and Security Policies; How the Decision Making Process Evolved”, *Security Dialogue*, vol.31, no.1 (2000), p.109.

<sup>10</sup>Adam Tarock, “The Muzzling of Liberal Press in Iran”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol.22, no.4 (2001), pp. 588-89.

<sup>11</sup>“Thermidor” is derived from French Revolution. In the French Revolution, the revolt initiated on 9 Thermidor (July 27) 1794 which resulted in the fall of Maximilian Robespierre and the collapse of revolutionary fervor and the reign of terror in France. See, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=73951>

<sup>12</sup>Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini; The Iranian Second Republic* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. XIII-XIV.

Khatami rejected the notion of the clash of civilizations, and embraced the principle of “dialogue among religions, cultures and nations”. He believed in the interdependence of societies, cultures and economies, and advocated a “pro-active and firm foreign policy”. This policy, he believed, should be “based on non-violence and friendly relations with all countries as long as they recognized Iran's independence and did not pursue ‘an aggressive policy’ toward it”.<sup>13</sup>

However, this transition did not mean a complete departure from revolutionary politics. It had to be compatible with “Khomeini's legacy”<sup>14</sup> to counter the criticisms of radicals. On the other hand, pragmatist/reformist foreign policy faced opposition and the sabotage of radicals and conservatives in Iran. They conducted “covert activities” outside the country's borders, particularly against the Iranian opposition leaders, for example as in the Mykonos affair.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, radicals in Iran maintained their support for Palestinian organizations resisting the Middle East peace process and conducting an armed struggle against Israel.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, during Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran experienced a flourishing of the decision-making processes, which went on during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. The Supreme Leader (velay-e faqih, the highest authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran), President, Speaker of the Parliament and various groups acted alone in adopting policies. Each faction had its preferences, allies and enemies. Therefore during the thermidorian era, Iranian foreign policy lacked coherence and clarity. For instance, “terror actions” were taken against exiled Iranian political activists and leaders,

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<sup>13</sup>For foreign policy implementation of president Khatami see, Shah Alam, “The Changing Paradigm of Iranian Foreign Policy under Khatami”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. XXIV, no.9 (December 2000), pp. 1669-1653.; R.K. Ramazani, “The Shifting Premise of Iran's Foreign Policy; towards a Democratic Peace?”, *Middle East Journal*, vol.52, no.2 (Spring, 1998); Moustafa Torkzahrani, “Iran After Khatami; Civil Society and Foreign Policy”, *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.9, no.4 (1997/98).

<sup>14</sup>Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy could be sum up as the supremacy and hegemony of the Shiite priesthood through possession and exercise of power -velayat-e mutlaqeh faqih (absolute rule of clergy)-, confrontational discourse with the West and strongly anti-American and anti-Israel line. Khomeini saw confrontation between the “West” and “Islam” unavoidable. According to him, for the installation of Islamic world system -the ultimate goal- all methods could be used. He urged an autarkic economic structure to pursue fully independent foreign policy. See Mehdi Mozaffari, “Revolutionary, Thermidorian and Enigmatic Foreign policy; President Khatami and the 'Fear of the Wave'”, *International Relations*, vol.14, no.5 (August 1999), pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup>In April 1997, a Berlin Court decided that the highest authority in Iran had direct responsibility for the assassination of the Kurdish leaders in Berlin.

<sup>16</sup>This case that seems as a contradiction, in fact, is a product of Iranian thermidor. Thermidorian regime keeps its affiliation with the revolution, because it draws its legitimacy from the revolution. However, it had to counter pressures to transform.

despite the government's official line of pursuing the normalization and improvement of relations with foreign states and respecting the rule of international law.<sup>17</sup> Hence, two essential tendencies appeared in Iranian foreign policy and internal politics. While the president led the government, which was mainly dominated by the pragmatist/reformist wing, representing the moderate and conciliatory face of the thermidorian Iran, the Leader, Revolutionary Guards, and the judiciary, which were dominated by radicals, tried to keep to the revolutionary line.

Indeed, Turkey was also among the targeted countries of evolutionary Iranian radicals for exporting the Iranian revolution. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the radicals who were part of the state apparatus did not refrain from operating against Turkey as well as in other areas contrary to the general policies of the government. They conducted covert activities against opponents of the Iranian regime who had fled into Turkey after the revolution, and got in touch with several radical Islamist organizations. According to reports, those arrested Islamist militants confessed that they had received training and support from the agents of Iranian intelligence in the “Jerusalem Warriors' Organization” (Qod's Force), attached to the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>18</sup>

The ascendancy of the pragmatist/reformist wing in Iranian politics and the thermidorising of Iran pleased Turkish leaders who anticipated that Iran would adopt moderate and constructive policies. In order to support the pragmatic-reformist wing, Turkey adopted a moderate and accommodative approach towards Iran, at least the foreign ministry and some statesmen kept their objectivity. For instance, when the Turkish minister of the interior, in a press conference, declared that members of radical Islamist organizations underwent months of military and theoretical training in Iranian security installations; traveled with Iranian real and forged documents, and participated in attacks on Turkish citizens and also Iranian regime opponents,<sup>19</sup> the (then) Prime Minister Demirel called for a “cool headed” approach to the Iranian links in order not to disrupt bilateral relations unnecessarily.

<sup>17</sup>Mozaffari, *op.cit.*, pp.14-16. For instance see Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam; Iran's Revolutionary Guard*

<sup>18</sup>Rusen Çakır and Sami Oguz, *Hatemi'nin İran'ı* (Istanbul: İletişim Yay., 2000), pp. 272-77.; and see Ercan Citlioglu, *Tahran-Ankara Hatında Hizbullah* (Ankara: Umit Yay., 2001).

<sup>19</sup>Atila Eralp, “Facing the Challenge; Post-Revolutionary Relations with Iran”, in Henry J. Barkey, ed., *Reluctant Neighbor; Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, (Washington DC.: US Institute of Peace Press, 1996), p.106.; See also *Demokrasiye Karsi Siyasi Cinayetler* (Istanbul: Tempo Kitapları, 1993), pp. 8-9.

Similarly, following the operations against Hizbullah, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit directed strong criticism at Iran,<sup>20</sup> seemingly in disagreement with foreign minister, Ismail Cem,<sup>21</sup> who advocated a moderate and pragmatist policy, as to the attitude to be taken towards Iran. Despite growing public pressure, Turkey continued to pursue a moderate and pragmatist policy towards Iran. Turkey avoided imposing visas on Iranian citizens and sustained its political and economic relations with Iran. Furthermore, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomatically refrained from accusing Iran of being involved in illegal activities in Turkey, arguing the lack of sufficient proof of such activities.

Besides the impact of ideology and internal developments in Turkey and Iran, their alliances and animosities with third parties also closely affected Turkish Iranian relations. To begin with, Iran's tense relations with the United States, and the dual containment policy directed against Iran hindered the improvement of bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran. While the United States opposed any initiative to cooperate with Iran, Iranian leaders denounced Turkey's close relations with the United States and Israel. Turkish-Israeli agreements were regarded by Iran as a new US strategy to contain Iran.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the new geopolitics of Iran and Turkey which emerged after the dissolution of the USSR and the Gulf War caused competition between the two countries in the Caucasus and northern Iraq.

### **Competition over Northern Iraq and the PKK Issue**

A power vacuum emerged in the north of Iraq after the mid-1980s because Iraq lost its authority there due to the ongoing Iran-Iraq war and the Kurdish uprising, which caused Turco-Iranian competition. Despite their agreement on the territorial integrity of Iraq, Turkey and Iran did not trust each other in respect to northern Iraq and they remained suspicious regarding the other, which made competition between the two countries inevitable. Turkey was uncomfortable with Iran's growing influence over the Kurdish

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<sup>20</sup>Hürriyet, 17 May 2000.; Inur Cevik, "Time to Talk About Concrete Evidence", Turkish Daily News, 18 May 2000.

<sup>21</sup>In fact, there was a disagreement among officials in Turkey about allegations of Iranian links to the aforementioned murders. In contrast to the Ministry of Interior, and the General Staff, Foreign Ministry of Turkey adopted a cautious stance. See, "Tahran Bilmecesi", Akşam, 25 May 2000.

<sup>22</sup>Mahmood Sariolghalam, "Israeli-Turkish Military Cooperation: Iranian Perceptions and Responses", *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, vol. 29 (Winter 2001), pp. 293-304.; Bülent Aras, "Turkish-Israeli-Iranian Relations in the Nineties: Impact on the Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 7, no.3 (June 2000), pp. 151-164.

leaders in northern Iraq and the Iraqi Shiites. Its main concern about Iran was that it sheltered the PKK militants in its sphere of influence in northern Iraq and this posed a major threat to Turkey.

The Iranian leaders viewed Turkey's military incursions in northern Iraq throughout the 1990s as activities aimed at capturing the oil-rich Mosul region, which would drastically alter the balance of power in the region to the detriment of Iran.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's presence in northern Iraq, near the sensitive Kurdish and Azeri regions of Iran would give Turkey an opportunity - possibly in collaboration with Israel and the US - to manipulate ethnic dissent in Iran, and would give it a stake in Gulf politics as well. This is why Iran strongly reacted to Turkish military operations in northern Iraq against the PKK, and that is why, besides its security considerations stemming from armed opposition near the Iran-Iraq border, Iran tried to get involved in northern Iraq by making alliances with Kurdish groups there which would have been detrimental to Turkey.

The mobility of PKK militants around the Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi border, posed enduring issues in Turkish-Iranian relations. Turkish allegations of Iranian support for the PKK further deepened these issues. Turkish Intelligence and security units have constantly alleged that Iran provides accommodation, training, health assistance and logistical support to the PKK, especially at the Western Azerbaijan province of Iran near the Turkey-Iran border. However, Iran always denied these allegations; furthermore it responded to the continuing Turkish complaints about PKK activities by arguing that Turkey should make more effort to stop the activities of Iranian opposition groups, especially the Mujahedeen-e Khalq Organization, on its territory.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Tschanguiz H. Pahlavan, "Turkish-Iranian Relations; An Iranian View", in Henry J. Barkey, ed., *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East* (Washington DC.: US Institute of Peace Press, 1996), pp.71-91.; Athari, Seyyed Asadollah Athari, "Bazkhaneh Ravaabete Do Keshvar pas az Cange Sard; Iran ve Torkeye", *Rakhbord*, no.27 (Spring 2003), pp.258-260.

<sup>24</sup>Ali Tekin, *The Place of Terrorism in Iran's Foreign Policy* (Ankara : Uluslararası Stratejik Arastirmalar Vakfı [1997]), pp. 65-69.

These mutual allegations created many tensions between Turkey and Iran throughout the 1990s. For instance, Turkey detained an Iranian flagged vessel, the *Cap Maleas*, in transit from Bulgaria, on suspicion that it was carrying arms for the PKK, in 1991. Similarly, some Turkish contingents went into Iranian territory in pursuit of PKK militants in August 1992 despite the absence of a hot-pursuit agreement between Turkey and Iran. In the same vein, a massive Turkish air force attack in January 1994 on a PKK camp deep in northern Iraq, which killed nine Iranian villagers were examples of friction between Turkey and Iran relating to the PKK.<sup>25</sup> Tension continued through Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq in May 1997 against the PKK, when about 7,000 PKK militants crossed into Iran.<sup>26</sup>

After the seizure of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, by Turkish security units in February 1999, Turkey-Iran relations entered a more difficult phase. Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit said in July 1999, “We have some complaints against Iran. The PKK's existence in Syria became nearly extinct, but Iran seems to take the place of Syria. Iran takes the PKK under her wing. This is an attitude that cannot be suitable for good neighborly and friendly relations”.<sup>27</sup> Soon after Ecevit's remarks, on July 18, 1999, Ankara was accused of violating Iranian airspace and bombing Iranian territory. Ankara denied any planned violation of Iranian airspace, but accepted that in pursuit of the PKK terrorists, such a violation might have occurred. Moreover, some officials in Iran accused Turkey of pursuing a new hostile strategy against Iran, which was encouraged by the West. On July 22, Iran arrested two Turkish soldiers charging them with unlawful border crossing and spying.<sup>28</sup> Following mutual allegations, in August 1999, the Turkish-Iranian High Security Commission eventually met in Ankara; and both Turkey and Iran admitted that the bombing incident was a mistake, and Turkey consented to pay compensation for damages.

<sup>25</sup>Henry J. Barkey, “Iran and Turkey, Confrontation Across An Ideological Divide”, in Alvin Z. Rubinstein and Oles Smolansky, eds., *Regional Power Rivalry in the New Eurasia: Russia, Turkey and Iran* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 67.; Pahlavan, op.cit., p.77.

<sup>26</sup>Atila Eralp and Ozlem Tur, “Iran'la Devrim Sonrası İlişkiler”, in M. Benli Altunisik, ed., *Türkiye ve Ortadoğu; Tarih, Kimlik, Güvenlik*. Istanbul: Boyut Yay., 1999, op.cit., pp.94-95.

<sup>27</sup>Aysegul Sever, “Turkey's Stance on 'Dual Containment'”, *Journal of South Asia and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.24., no.2., (Winter 2000), p.66.

<sup>28</sup>Robert Olson, “Turkey-Iran Relations, 1997 to 2000; the Kurdish and Islamist Questions”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol.21, no.5 (2000), pp. 877-880; Bahram Navazeni, *Ghaahshomaare Seyaasete Khareceye Iran; Az Mordad Maahe 1367 to Khordad Maahe 1380* (Tehran: Markaze Esnaade Enghalaabe Eslaame, 2002), pp.342-45. See also Alan Makovsky, “Turkish-Iranian Tension: A New Regional Flashpoint?”, *Policywatch*, no. 404 (9 August 1999), (available in [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org\\_watch/Policywatch1999/404.htm](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org_watch/Policywatch1999/404.htm)).

Despite the aforementioned conflicts between Turkey and Iran throughout the 1990s, the two states managed to cooperate on several occasions as well. Besides adopting identical postures towards the establishment of an independent Kurdish State and the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraq, Turkey and Iran established common security mechanisms such as the High Security Commission, the Joint Security Commission and Security Subcommittees, which meet regularly.<sup>29</sup>

One may say that Turkey was faced with two contradictory elements in Iran. While the government and foreign ministry adopted a conciliatory and collaborative stance towards Turkey regarding security issues, the radical wing in Iran embodied by the Revolutionary Guards took a confrontational line against Turkey.<sup>30</sup> Radicals in Iran viewed the PKK as a useful instrument to unbalance Turkey, especially in the competition between Turkey and Iran over northern Iraq and the Caucasus.

### **Competition over the Caucasus and Central Asia**

Both Turkey and Iran were surprised by the collapse of the USSR, because they did not anticipate such a development, and until that time, both of them had adopted Moscow-centred policies in their relations with the NIMS (newly independent Muslim states). The surprise quickly ended and was followed by “euphoria periods” both in Turkey and in Iran between late 1991 and 1993. Iran, when no longer faced with Soviet pressure in the north, had the opportunity to establish economic and political relations with the land-locked NIMS. In this way, Iran hoped to break its isolation, and possibly gain influence among the newly independent Muslim states that had lived under “atheist rule” for years. For its part, Turkey, which was worried about its diminishing strategic role to the West, became aware of a vast area in which it could gain influence thanks to religious, cultural and ethnic affinities, and thereby regain its strategic importance for the West. Moreover, Western encouragement of Turkey to serve as “a model” for the NIMS perpetuated Turkish euphoria. Both for the security considerations of the two countries' and for their political and economic interests, Iran and Turkey adopted ambitious

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<sup>29</sup>See Atay Akdevelioğlu and Ömer Kürkcüoğlu, “İran'la İlişkiler”, in Baskın Oran, ed., *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olaylar, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, vol.II. (Istanbul: İletişim Yay., 2001), pp.579-586.

<sup>30</sup>Taha Akyol, “Türkiye, İran ve PKK”, *Milliyet*, 5 April 2002.

policies towards these regions that led to competition between them, particularly over the Caucasus. This competition had two dimensions: firstly the two countries promoted their own models, i.e. the “Turkish Model” and “Iranian model”, for structuring and development of the NIMS. The second dimension of Turkish-Iranian competition was the economic rivalry between the two states, particularly represented by their rivalry for transportation routes for the Caspian hydrocarbon resources.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, Turkey soon found out that its capacity was not sufficient to undertake ambitious projects in the region. For their part, the NIMS maneuvered politically to avoid one dominant patron being replaced by another, whether it was Turkey or Iran. Nevertheless, it faced Western opposition, which wanted to keep Iranian influence in the region to a minimum. Within a few years, it was proved that both models were inadequate to meet the immediate needs of the NIMS. Furthermore, every state developed its own model. For this reason, competition between the Turkish and Iranian models has not been questioned since the mid-1990s.

However, geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran over the NIMS went on, especially in the Caucasus<sup>32</sup>. For Turkey, the Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan, was a gateway to the Caspian Sea, and the rest of Central Asia. Of all the NIMS, Azerbaijan was culturally and ethnically the closest country to Turkey. The ethnic dimension was compounded by the fact that the Azeris were locked in a conflict with Armenians, Turkey's age-old foe. In addition, Azeri oil and its potential transit through Turkey promised to be economically very rewarding for Turkey.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Azerbaijan shares a border with Iran, while its people have cultural affinities with Iran's Azeri population.

<sup>31</sup>Taha Akyol, “Turkiye, Iran ve PKK”, *Milliyet*, 5 April 2002.

<sup>32</sup>Nur-Mohammad Noruzi, “Contention of Iran and Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus”, *Amu Darya*, vol.4, no.5 (Summer 2000), pp.102-135.; Farhad Attaei, “Raghaabat der Mentegha: Barreseye Seyasathaaye Iran ve Torkeye, Faselnameye Motalaate Rakhbordyy, vol.3, no.3 (Autumn 2000), pp.47-59. In this competition, Turkey's advantages were as follows: Firstly, five of the six NIMS were Turkic speaking. Secondly, Turkey had a more dynamic and more competitive economy and access to Western capital and political support. The greatest advantage of Iran was its geographic proximity to the region. Indeed, the most important aspect of Iran to the NIMS was its role as the primary overland link to the Persian Gulf. Iran's good relations with Russia also provided another remarkable advantage.

<sup>33</sup>John Calabrese, “Turkey and Iran; Limits of a Stable Relationship”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.25, no.1 (May 1998).; Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethno political Conflict in the Caucasus* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), pp. 317-32. See also Tadeusz Swietochowski, “Azerbaijan's Triangular Relationship: the Land Between Russia, Turkey and Iran”, in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Werner, eds., *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 118-35.

Azerbaijan's importance for Iran derived from the large number of Azeris living in Iranian Azerbaijan, though creating the potential for a separatist movement in Iran. Moreover, Iran also stood to benefit from a pipeline crossing through its territory. Competition over Azerbaijan between Iran and Turkey manifested itself in the geopolitical and commercial areas, within the context of the Karabakh conflict and oil/gas production and transportation negotiations.

For instance, Iran opposed the projected pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), that would transport Caspian oil via Turkey, and insisted on the Iranian route. The Iranian route for Caspian oil would “give Iran more royalties and control over the outlet of Azeri oil, and thereby, an important leverage on Baku”.<sup>34</sup> For Iran, the completion of the BTC would mean that Iran would be bypassed for oil and gas pipelines. Moreover, in the view of the Iranian leaders, the BTC pipeline would “leave Azerbaijan free to support Iranian Azeris against Iran” in the absence of Iranian influence over Baku.<sup>35</sup> However, Iran neither managed to get a share in the international consortium for Azeri oil, nor succeeded in dividing the Caspian basin according to its wishes,<sup>36</sup> and nor did it prevent the adoption of the BTC for transporting Caspian oil. Moreover, Iran lost its main supporter in the Caspian issue-Russia, which favoured the delimitation of the Caspian, after Vladimir Putin came to power and established bilateral agreements with other littoral states. Furthermore, Russia wanted to participate in the BTC project.<sup>37</sup> At this juncture, Turkey and Iran confronted each other over Azerbaijan in July-August 2001.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Cornell, *op.cit.*, pp. 325-30.

<sup>35</sup>Robert Olson, “Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000-2001: The Caspian, Azerbaijan and the Kurds”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. IX, no.2 (June 2002), p. 120.

<sup>36</sup>That was “to declare the Caspian a closed sea jointly owned by its five littoral states. Under the Iranian plan the Caspian would be jointly managed as far as such issues protecting the environment, regulating commercial navigation, fixing quotas for fishing, and developing tourism are concerned. When it comes to oil and gas resources, however, the Iranian plan would give each of five littoral states 20 percent of the total”. See, Amir Taheri, “Iran Getting Isolated in the Caspian”, *Arab News*, 14 August 2002, <http://www.arabnews.com/Article.asp?ID=17675>

<sup>37</sup>Feruh Demirmen, “Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan: 2001 Yılı Öyküsü”, *Dünya Enerji*, vol.2, no.15 (January 2002), pp. 48-49; Erdal Güven, “Hazar Kiyilarında Ulusal Güvenlik”, *Radikal*, 25 August 2002.

<sup>38</sup>On July 23, two Iranian Air Force planes flew over a BP (British Petroleum)/Amoco oil exploration ship in the Caspian Sea. On the same evening, an Iranian warship entered Azerbaijan's territorial waters and threatened to fire on the research ship, unless it left the area called the Araz-Alov-Shargh field by Azerbaijan and named Alborz by Iran. After the July 23 incident, Azerbaijan constantly complained throughout August that Iran was violating its airspace. In this climate, an official in the Azerbaijan embassy in Turkey declared on August 13, “there was nothing more natural than our friend and brother Turkey to take a strong stance against Iran's aggressive position”. Meanwhile, the Turkish Chief of the Staff Hüseyin Kıvrıkcıoğlu visited Baku on August 25, accompanied by 10 F-5 fighter aircraft - the Turkish air force acrobatic team called the “Turkish Stars”, which caused unease in Iran. See, Olson, “Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000-2001; ...”, pp.118-120.

In general, Turkey and Iran did not admit the existence of competition between the two countries over the Caucasus and Central Asia. In regard to Turkish activities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, former Iranian foreign minister Velayati said, “This is not a threat. Every country has the right to pursue its own interests, and we do not see it as a threat. However, the Iranian government expressed disapproval of Turkey's involvement in concert with, or on behalf of the US to “contain Iran”.<sup>39</sup> Yet, when a 200-member Turkish delegation toured Central Asia with pledges of US \$ 1.2 billion in credits prior to the Askhabad Summit of ECO in May 1992, some irritation was detectable in Rafsanjani's remarks. Respecting Turkey's pre-summit maneuvering he said; “there is competition everywhere in the world ... but we are of the view that this competition should be honest and healthy”.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, as Gökhan Çetinsaya indicated, the Iran-Turkey competition over the NIMS mellowed in the mid-1990s for a number of reasons.<sup>41</sup> To begin with, Russia continued to exercise its influence in the region militarily and economically. Russian involvement in the Caucasus and Central Asia deterred both Turkey and Iran from playing more active roles in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Another factor facilitating the moderation was Turkey's dependence on Iran in order to have access to the Caucasus and Central Asia, because it did not possess a direct land corridor to Baku. For its part, Turkey served as a gateway to the West for Iran as well. Therefore, the two states refrained from alienating each other and escalating the conflicts. Finally, Turkey and Iran became aware of the fact that neither Turkey nor Iran had enough capacity individually to fill the vacuum in the Caucasus and Central Asia left by Russia; and that unmitigated competition for this purpose was detrimental to both countries. Having awakened to this fact, they managed to cooperate on economic and security issues, and improved their bilateral relations.

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<sup>39</sup>Calabrese, *Revolutionary* ....., p. 107.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>41</sup>Gokhan Cetinsaya, “Rafsanjani'den Hatemi'ye Iran Dis Politikasina Bakislar”, in Mustafa Turkes and Ilhan Uzgel, eds., *Turkiye'nin Komsulari* (Ankara: Imge Yay., 2002), pp. 293-329. See also Barkey, *op.cit.*, p.164.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the new geopolitics of Turkey and Iran, and the internal developments in these countries established a sense of competition and an atmosphere of conflict between the two countries. The infusion of ideological differences and tensions into the already conflictual process further exacerbated the friction in Turco-Iranian relations. Another cause that deepened the conflict between Turkey and Iran was the mutual distrust between the two countries. Despite many agreements, failure to prevent this friction - albeit on different levels - further perpetuated this mutual distrust. The solution to this mutual distrust will depend on a settled period of democratic culture and transparency in each country. The improving of cultural interactions between Turkey and Iran will also ease tension and help to eradicate mutual distrust.

Regarding the impact of ideology in Turco-Iranian relations, we should not expect to entirely see the disappearance of ideology's influence - due to the coincidence of shared national characteristics between Turkey and Iran with their sects/ideologies. Nevertheless, considering geopolitical competition as a leading factor for Turkish-Iranian conflict in the 1990s, developing joint projects towards the areas where the two states competed would considerably increase cooperation between Iran and Turkey. Increases in bilateral economic relations between Turkey and Iran would also encourage better Turkish-Iranian relations.

