Summary

Turkey and Iran as the two neighbouring countries can be described as relatively comparable with regard to the geographical, demographic and socio-economic dimension. Yet, next to the numerous similarities and levels, on which they can be assessed as comparable states, there are also multiple significant differences and dissimilarities between these two countries. These factors, both similarities and differences, account for the nature of relations between Turkey and Iran, which can be briefly described as characterised by great dynamics. The aim of the paper is to provide for the historical background of Turkish-Iranian relations, outline most important issues affecting these relations and attempt to draw conclusions on the basis of the historical and current trends in these mutual relations to forecast the possible continuation of cooperation between the two states in question as well as the nature of the future of Turkish-Iranian relations.

Key words: Turkey, Iran, Sunni, Shiite, AKP, Middle East.

JEL codes: F5

Introduction

Turkey and Iran as the two neighbouring countries can be described as relatively comparable with regard to the geographical, demographic and socio-economic dimension. Yet, next to the numerous similarities and levels, on which they can be assessed as comparable states, there are also multiple significant differences and dissimilarities between these two countries. These factors, both similarities and differences, account for the nature of relations between Turkey and Iran, which can be briefly described as characterised by great dynamics both regional and global.

The aim of the paper is to provide an outlook of the historical background of Turkish-Iranian relations, outline most important issues affecting mutual relations and attempt to draw conclusions on the basis of the historical and current trends in these mutual relations to forecast the possible continuation of cooperation between both states in question as well as the nature of the future of Turkish-Iranian relations.

The Origins of Turkish-Iranian Relations

It is generally believed that the initial contacts between Persians and Turks took place before both nations conversion to Islam (Sykes 1921, p. 523). Besides, it is an undeniable
reality that many initial scientific data regarding Turks while they were living as nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes in Central Asia may be found in Iranian sources. Nonetheless the interaction between Persians and Turks get a more tense character after the expanse of Islam in the region. Turks performed crucial roles in the state construction period and military organisation in Iran, whereas Turkish language and culture was deeply influenced by Persian language and traditions (Kafesoğlu, 1984, p. 83). Regardless of the fact that both Persians and Turks had converted to Islam, as a natural consequence of sectarian distinctions (Turks are Sunnis while Persians are Shiites in majority) throughout the history, a close affinity did not take place between Iran and Turkey in terms of politics (Donaldson 1976, p. 283).

Therefore, the current relationship between Turkey and Iran is loaded with historical legacy which has a significant influence on the mutual perception, both among the public and the elites of both states. This historical legacy can be dated back to a century-old rivalry between the two countries, which has its origins in the period of Ottoman and Persian empires. One can also comment Ottoman-Persian rivalry as Sunni-Shiite campaign in the Middle East. The dynamics of relations between these two entities was characterised by constant competition in terms of territorial claims, politics, culture as well as religion:

Turkey and Iran, the two non-Arab states in the Middle East, are key countries in the region. Neither has suffered from border violations or similar problems since 1639 – which marked the signing of the Qasr-i Shirin treaty, which brought an end to 150 years of intermittent warfare between the Ottomans and Safavids and established a boundary between the two empires that has remained unchanged until today. Relations have been dominated by alternating phases of imperial and religious rivalry and cooperation, with a steady underlying competitive streak for regional dominance (Today’s Zaman 2007).

At the same time, the two empires had something in common, especially in the period of the parallel decline of both Constantinople and Tehran, as they had to face a shared struggle against outside powers, in particular the Western countries and Russia. This century-long rivalry and the complicated nature of the Turkish-Iranian relationship were best summarised by the authors of RAND Report:

The political destiny of the Middle East has been significantly shaped by the rivalry for regional power and influence between Turkey and Iran. While dormant for much of modern times, this rivalry has led to great conflict and bloodshed throughout history. But Turkey and Iran are more than just historical and strategic rivals. They are also the source of each other’s deep-seated fears and anxieties (Larrabee & Nader 2013, nd).

After the dissolution of Ottoman Empire both states provided for deepening their relations in order to facilitate both states’ transition into modernity in the face of superior
The year 1934 marks the only visit abroad made by the Iranian king Reza Shah, which brought him to Turkey with the aim to observe the political and social reforms which his western neighbour was undergoing at that time (Hentov 2011).

The relationship was amicable after World War II when both countries remained allied with the Western world bound by the provisions of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). However, Iran was rich in natural resources which enabled the country’s rapid development exceeding the one of Turkey.

Iran Islamic Revolution

With Iran’s growing stronger and more and more influential, the historical memory of the threat posed by the eastern neighbour was awakening in Turkey. Those attitudes were visible in the face of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to a great extent. The mutual relationship at that time was characterised by relatively rapid shifts between cooperation and tension which was dependent on the changing priorities of Iran’s foreign policy.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a major turning point in relations. Until then Iran was friendly with the U.S. and Israel, on the side of the West, which was in line with Turkey’s position during the Cold War. After the revolution Turkey feared the export of this ideology into the country. Iran, as an Islamic theocracy, represented an ideological opposite to Turkey’s secular democracy. Iran became hostile to the U.S. and Israel, further making it an adversarial neighbour for Turkey (Kaya 2001, nd).

Initially Turkey recognised the Iranian Revolution in the face of the country’s internal problems due to political and economic weakness. On the one hand Ankara – mostly dominated by Kemalist foreign policy decision makers – was striving Iran’s integrity to international community while, on the other hand, was developing receipts Iran’s exportation of regime which would be highly welcomed by Turkey’s Islamists.

Nevertheless, the contrast between the two states became more and more visible with the tensions gaining in force and leading to the 1980 military coup in Turkey. This crisis in relations was held off by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War which provided for a reason to warm up the mutual relationship. Both sides benefited from this situation with the economic crisis and political weakness of Turkey which gained time to recover and Iranian needs for a reliable trade and transport route that Turkey had to offer. Numerous trade agreements were made and provided for a stable and cooperative relationship between the two states. On the other hand, the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) took the opportunity to start insurgency inside Turkey. As Turkey responded militarily, the tensions began to grow again. At the same time, world oil prices collapsed and the significance of economic relations between Turkey and Iran decreased putting the stability in the region at risk once again (Hentov 2011).
The 1990s

In the 1990s, with the growing international importance of Turkey, which posed a threat for Iran, an attempt was undertaken to destabilise the Turkish political system by Iran’s backing the PKK and Islamic fundamentalists in Turkey. The tensions culminated in 1997 leading to another coup and militarisation of Turkey’s foreign policy that continued until the victory over the PKK in 1998–1999. The tensions dominating the Turkish-Iranian relations in the late 1990s were best summarised in Insight Turkey:

Despite some progress, tensions still marred the relationship. Turkey continued to claim that Iran supported the PKK and a violent and far more radical group known as the Turkish Hezbollah. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, flare-ups and high tensions were common. At one point, Iranian officials claimed that the Turkish air force bombed a village in northwest Iran. Turkey countered with claims that members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) and their alleged allies in the Turkish Hezbollah were responsible for a series of assassinations of prominent Turkish secularists (Stein 2012, p. 25).

Nevertheless, as the account continues, “[…] despite these difficult times, Iran and Turkey managed to avoid escalation and instead took steps to try to ameliorate, or at least manage, tensions” (Stein 2012, p. 25). At the turn of centuries, the mutual relationship between Turkey and Iran was mainly focused on energy trade. The economic crisis of 2000-2001 in Turkey was another factor responsible for weakening the relations with Iran as the country concentrated on solving internal problems. The crisis led to a complete change of Turkish authorities in the 2002 election, which meant new policies and a new era of Turkish foreign relations, including those with Iran.

JDP and Turkish-Iranian Relations

With the beginning of a more amicable period in the relations between the two states in 2000, the rapprochement proceeded much faster only after 2002. The change in Turkey’s domestic policies resulting from the election made the ideological gap between the two states significantly narrower:

[…] due to the 10% electoral threshold, only two parties managed to enter the parliament: the moderate Islamist AKP with 34.5% of the vote and the staunchly Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) with 19.5% of the vote. In light of the quirks of the electoral system, 45% of the electorate remained unrepresented in the parliament, and the AKP received 363 seats, four short of the two-thirds majority. This new constellation was akin to regime change. Turkish columnist Mehmet Ali Birand called it ‘a civil coup’, and the Turkish daily Milliyet summed up the seismic shakeup of the elite with
the football metaphor ‘Red Card’ posted above the faces of the political leaders ousted from the parliament. Viewed from Iran, the previous elite had stood for a security-oriented, ossified Kemalist worldview, which was deeply hostile to Turkish engagement with the Islamic world, particularly Iran. In this regard, Tehran struggled to hide its pleasure of the Turkish public’s wholesale rejection of the old elite (Hentov 2011).

Another significant factor, which contributed to the improvement of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, was undoubtedly the American invasion on Iraq. As Turkey rejected to support the United States in this invasion and in the parliamentary vote denied to offer its territory for stationing American troops, the country’s mutual relations with the USA worsened, which, in turn, improved the perception of Turkey by Iran. The vote confirmed that, by limiting the US influence in the region, the newly elected authorities were in the position to reshape Turkish foreign policy. These changes were welcomed by Iran, which additionally supported the country’s democratisation, confident that the public would incline towards favouring the eastern neighbour due to the religious and cultural factors. With Iran confronting US troops on two of its borders, deterioration in Turkey’s relations with the USA and a common threat to the Turkish-Iranian border posed by the possibility of creation of an independent Kurdish state, the common interests prevailed and another rapprochement in Turkish-Iranian relations took place. Nevertheless, this was a short-lived shift as a struggle for power and influence in Iraq and the Middle East was soon to begin anew.

During that time, a significant boom in Turkish-Iranian trade relations was the prevailing trend. Turkey exported significant amounts of manufactured goods and highly specialised services to Iran return for growing energy supplies coming from the eastern neighbour. The new tendencies were explained by the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2007:

[…] here all our allies should take into consideration Turkey’s unique position. As a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey’s energy agreements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries (Poyraz 2009).

The Turkish-Iranian mutual trade exchange increased impressively from 600 million USD in 1998 to as much as 10 billion USD in 2008. The following chart illustrates the trends in Turkish-Iranian economic cooperation during that time:

Subsequently to the deterioration of Turkish relations with the United States, the state of relationship with the European Union worsened. Initial enthusiasm after the vote to launch Turkey’s EU accession process was soon followed by disputes over Cyprus, which led to putting the Turkish EU accession process on hold, turning the public opinion in Turkey against the integration with the West and EU accession. At the same time, the internal instability in Iran provided for the ground for the PKK insurgency to thrive. With the sudden outbreak of the Israel-Hezbollah war in July 2006, all attention in the region was drawn to the
new conflict and Iran stabilised its position once again through the rapprochement with the United States as well as Turkey which was allowed to station its army on the Iranian territory to later assault the Qandil Valley. In August of that year, the two countries coordinated their operations and conducted bombardments on the PKK posts together. This had a profound influence on the public opinion in Turkey which now perceived Iran as an ally in their struggle against terrorism and the United States and European Union, in turn, as enemies and posing a direct threat to the state. Thus, ruling Justice and Development Party pursued a foreign policy which was consistent with the attitudes in the society and a period of much warmer relations with Iran was in the full swing. Another reason for this rapprochement was the heated debate and much tension between the United States and Iran, which was connected to the Iranian nuclear programme and in which Turkey played an important role of mediating between the parties to the conflict.

Chart 1

Turkish-Iranian trade between 2002 and 2010 (in USD millions)

![Bar chart showing Turkish Imports from Iran and Turkish Exports to Iran from 2002 to 2010.](chart1.png)


Nevertheless, despite Turkey’s mediating position, the country was endangered with the Iranian nuclear programme and this threat provided for a source of much worries in Turkey as the possibility of yet another regional war was looming with all the expenses connected to it, on the one hand, and the eventual shift of power in the mutual relations with Iran was
posing a serious threat, on the other. As Turkey was balancing this fragile situation trying to avoid war but maintain amicable relations with Iran at the same it, it gradually drifted further and further away from the West. Still this situation brought Turkey certain benefits with Iran promoting Turkey’s image as the leading regional power, making the country an important energy transit corridor and providing for military support in the Turkish struggle for solving the burning Kurdish problem. This period in the Turkey’s foreign relations is known as the “zero problems with our neighbours” policy:

Basically, Turkey’s new foreign policy, called “zero problems with our neighbours,” was geared towards the goal of emerging as a regional leader in the Middle East and playing an important role as a mediator in some of the region’s toughest conflicts. The Arab Spring and subsequent developments changed all this, and brought relations with Iran to the hostile point they are today (Kaya, 2001, nd).

The most important current issues shaping the mutual Turkish-Iranian relationship at present include the events of the Arab Spring and the regional competition for influence connected to and resulting from these events, the NATO radar facilities in Turkey, the nuclear debate and the mediating role of Turkey in it, the Kurdish militants in Turkey (the PKK) and Iran (the PJAK), trade relations between the two states as well as the internal divisions within Iran.

In February 2011, Iran’s leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei referred to the revolts in the Arab world as “Islamic” and in line with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979:

The enemies try to say that the popular movements in Egypt, Tunisia, and other nations are un-Islamic, but certainly these popular movements are Islamic and must be consolidated (Khamenei 2002).

The reference to the Iranian origin of the Arab revolts was supported by the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: “The final move has begun...a great awakening is unfolding. One can witness the hand of Imam in managing it.”(CBN, 2007). Contrary to these claims, leaders of Tunisian and Egyptian Islamist parties tend to officially support the Turkish model rather than the “Iranian-style theocracy”. For this reason once again the ideological gap between Turkey and Iran is being emphasised. This time, however, the Turkish models tend to enjoy significantly bigger popularity which is a source of concern for Iran:

Turkey represents a model of Muslim democracy, a legitimate political system, and a popular actor in the Middle East, and stands out as a source of inspiration to the people (Kaya 2001).

The difference in values between Turkey and Iran with regard to democracy, freedom, human rights and secularism is also particularly visible in the light of the events in Syria as Turkey strongly opposed the Bashar Assad regime and provided for a safe haven for twenty five thousand members of the Syrian opposition and refugees and the Free Syrian Army.
This stance of Turkey was met with a strong opposition in Iran issuing warnings that the Turkish position may strongly affect the mutual relationship:

Iran’s efforts to ensure the continuation of the Shi’ite regime of Assad is indicative of its goal of having Shi’ite regimes in the region stay in power. Syria is Iran’s channel to Hezbollah and Hamas. The collapse of the Shi’ite regime in Syria would mean the end of Iran’s ability to exert influence in Lebanon and Jordan through Syria. In contrast, Turkey has taken the side of the people of the Arab Spring, participated in NATO’s mission in Libya, condemned the Syrian regime’s barbarism and supported the opposition, hosting the rebels and army in exile (Gazete Vatan 2003).

The ideological gap is also visible in the light of the questions over the future of Iraq:

The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq is re-ordering the political dynamics not only in Iraq, but also in the broader Middle East. Nature abhors a vacuum, and a number of actors are seeking to fill the outsized role that America has played in Iraq over the last eight years… The two rising powers in the region, Iran and Turkey, share borders with Iraq and are rapidly becoming the most influential actors within the country (USIP 2011).

Iran’s position in this regard is also characterised by support and hope for the Shi’ite domination as this would broaden the Iranian sphere of influence in the country after the withdrawal of the US troops. For this reason Iran advocates the establishment of the so-called “Shi’ite Crescent”, as a strategic belt that would extend from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean via Iraq (where Shi’ites would, according to the Iranian hopes, dominate most of the country) to Syria. Turkey’s stance in this regard, however, supports territorial integrity and pluralism in Iraq.

Another issue determining the Turkish-Iranian relationship at present is the fact that Turkey, next to Spain, Portugal, Poland and Romania, hosts NATO radar facilities on its territory. The NATO’s early warning defence system located 435 miles west from the Turkey’s border with Iran is viewed by the eastern neighbour as a protection to Israel in case of an Iranian potential counterattack in the event of an Israeli attempt to target the Iranian nuclear facilities. Although Turkey denies targeting the facilities located within its borders against any particular country, the system was met with a strong opposition in Iran yet again and threats aimed at Turkey to abandon the policies regarding the NATO missile system:

We have prepared ourselves. If there is an attack on Iran, our first target will be the missile shield systems in Turkey, and then we’ll turn to other targets… The missile shield to be placed in Turkey is there not because NATO wants it to be, but because the U.S. wants to protect Israel. They are trying to deceive the entire international community, starting with the Turks, into thinking that NATO wants to do this. In today’s world, the Zionist regime (Israel) conducts its acts with the U.S., and the U.S. conducts its acts as NATO. However, we believe that the Turks are knowledgeable enough to prevent such a conspiracy. The Muslim Turkish people will destroy this system when it’s time (Segall 2011).
Further issues underlying the Turkish-Iranian relationship are posed by the Turkey’s mediating role in the nuclear debate between the United States and Iran. Turkey expressed the willingness to take the role of a mediator in 2008 due to its good relations and strong trade ties with the eastern neighbour. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called for a nuclear-free zone in all countries of the region, implicitly emphasising Israel. Despite of the lack of progress in the negotiations and Iran facing the threat of sanctions, Turkey managed to maintain a stable position between parties to the conflict:

Turkey did not want new tensions, particularly military ones, in its neighbourhood. In addition, it wanted to play a bigger role as a regional actor. Highlighting its Muslim identity, it argued that it could provide Iran with a dignified disengagement plan, because if Iran were to make any concessions it would more likely make them to a fellow Muslim-majority state with which it had long and friendly relations (Kaya 2001).

In 2010, Turkey went so far as risking tensions with the United Stated by voting against placing United Nations sanctions on Iran. In 2012, in the light of deteriorating relationship with the eastern neighbour, Turkey still attempted to make the negotiations last and offered to host them in Istanbul, which was turned down by Iran due to the decline in Turkish-Iranian relations caused by Turkey’s stance on the Syrian problem. Iran insisted on moving talks to the territory of one of its allies and in this way emphasised that it no longer considered Turkey its ally and a credible mediator in the conflict. In the end, negotiations took place as originally planned in Istanbul with Iran’s provision for the next round to be held in Baghdad. This led to attitudes in the Turkish public opinion that:

[…] Iran has not sufficiently appreciated Turkey taking so many risks for Iran’s sake, some of which have caused a lot of negative perceptions about Turkey across the world (Kaya 2001).

Despite the deteriorating relations between Turkey and Iran, both countries have been cooperating closely in terms of suppressing Kurdish separatism which poses an equal threat for both neighbours. In the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey was involved in the struggle against the PKK which was supported by Iran to pressure Turkey. As in the middle of the decade Iran had to face its own version of the struggle with the PJAK, both countries joined their efforts to fight the Kurdish militants. As the attacks grew more and more violent in 2007 and 2008, both countries intensified efforts to maintain domestic security:

In what appeared to be an attempt to leverage Ankara’s long-standing frustration with the PKK into Turkish support for its fight against the PJAK, Iran stepped up its efforts to confront the resurgent PKK. In August 2007, the then Turkish Foreign Minister (now President) Abdullah Gül said that Tehran had the right to defend its borders and that he would support Iran launching attacks on PJAK bases in northern Iraq.
In turn, the then Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki expressed understanding for Turkey’s position on attacking the PKK in remarks he made at the November 2007 Istanbul Conference on Iraq (Today’s Zaman 2007).

As of 2011 both parties reassured their engagement in a shared struggle against the common enemy:

Our joint determination against the PKK and PJAK will continue. We will work together […] until the terror threat is completely eradicated. This terror organisation threatens all the countries in the region and we must act with solidarity to fight against it. We view the PKK and PJAK as a common threat against regional stability, the Kurdish, Turkish and Iranian people (Haberturk 2006).

Economic relations of Turkey and Iran account for a continuous cooperation and maintaining the mutual relationship even in the periods of its deterioration. Trade volume between the two countries was around $15 billion as of February 2012 and natural gas constitutes most of the mutual economic relationship. In 2007, an agreement was signed to facilitate the export of natural gas from Iran to Europe via Turkey but it met with objections on the part of the United States due to the sanctions the US was aiming to put on Iran. As a result of the American pressure, Turkey backed off from the deal. Nevertheless, strong economic ties between the two countries continue to prevail and are assessed to reach the level of thirty billion US dollars in 2015.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the historical background of the mutual Turkish-Iranian relationship and current issues underlying and determining the bilateral relationship of the two neighbours it is evident that the Turkish-Iranian relations have never been an example of a simple matter in the field of the international relations. In the light of the current deterioration of relations between the two neighbours and open adverse attitudes in Iran towards Turkey it is difficult to predict the future of the Turkish-Iranian relations. Due to the diversity of underlying factors, however, it can be assumed that the possible scenario for the future is not an easy one. With Turkey losing its influential position in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, a decline in the relations is to be expected. Nevertheless, strong economic ties between the two countries continue to prevail and no abrupt collapse of bilateral relations seems probable. It is, however, to be predicted that the most possible prospects for Turkey and Iran are those already known from history that is those full of threats, mutual mistrust and suspicions. These prevailing trends will most probably be subject to shifts determined by changing priorities of both states’ foreign policies.

Turkey benefits from this deterioration in relations making its rapprochement with the United States and thus reinforcing its internal security and perception in the Western world.
On the other hand, Iran is losing an important ally in the dispute over its nuclear programme. This makes the country search for allies and will determine Iranian support for the Assad regime in Syria. In the event of the fall of the Syrian regime, Iran will lose its importance and sphere of influence in the region, which would change the game of the Arab Spring and solve the most burning problem in the Middle East.

Last but not least, the ongoing civil war in Syria and the current situation in Iraq also play a crucial role in the future determination of mutual relations with an impact on regional politics of the Middle East.

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Stosunki turecko-irańskie. Przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość

Streszczenie

Turcja i Iran, jako dwa sąsiednie kraje, są stosunkowo porównywalne, jeżeli chodzi o wymiar geograficzny, demograficzny i społeczno-gospodarczy. Tym niemniej, obok licznych podobieństw i poziomów, na których można je oceniać, istnieje między nimi również wiele istotnych różnic i rozbieżności. Czynniki te, zarówno podobieństwa, jak i różnice, składają się na charakter relacji między Turcją a Iranem, które można określić jako dynamiczne. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie historycznego tła stosunków turecko-irańskich, nakreślenie najważniejszych kwestii wpływających na te stosunki oraz próba wyciągnięcia wniosków na podstawie historycznych i bieżących trendów w tych wzajemnych stosunkach w celu dokonania prognozy możliwej kontynuacji współpracy dwu omawianych państw, jak również charakteru przyszłości stosunków turecko-irańskich.

Słowa kluczowe: Turcja, Iran, sunnici, szyici, AKP, Bliski Wschód.

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Afiliacja:
dr Davut Han Aslan
Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula
ul. Stokłosy 3
02-787 Warszawa
tel. 22 457 23 00
e-mail: d.aslan@vistula.edu.pl