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Research Report

Turkish and Iranian involvement in Iraq and Syria: Competing strategies, rising threat perceptions, and potentials for conflict

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SWP Comment

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Turkish and Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Syria

Competing strategies, rising threat perceptions, and potentials for conflict

Hamidreza Azizi and Salim Çevik

It has become cliché to argue that Turkish-Iranian relations oscillate between a controlled rivalry and limited cooperation. However, in Iraq and Syria, rising tensions between Turkey and Turkey-affiliated groups on the one hand and Iran and Iran-backed groups on the other, have put the two countries on a collision course. Conflictual relations between Turkey and Iran have the potential to destabilise the Middle East and the South Caucasus, spawning additional security risks as well as waves of migration towards Europe. Such a situation could also complicate matters related to European energy security. Europe should remain alert and help to ease tensions through de-escalation mechanisms. In this regard, efforts to strengthen Iraqi sovereignty may serve as a pre-emptive measure.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, relations between Tehran and Ankara have been a mix of cooperation and competition. Over the past four decades, the transnational messianic aspirations embedded in the Iranian narrative of revolutionary Islam have been a source of concern for governments in Muslim-majority countries like Turkey. In turn, Iranian leaders, for whom opposing the West constitutes an integral part of the Islamic Republic's identity, have seen Turkey, a rather secular state allied with the West and a member of NATO, as a potential challenge. At the same time, social and historical ties between the two neighbours, along with the benefits of economic and – sometimes – security cooperation, have helped

to balance bilateral relations and pre-empt tensions. That said, over the past decade, competition and mutual scepticism between Iran and Turkey have taken on an increasingly evident geopolitical feature in that tensions are no longer just ideological or a mere side-effect of Iran-West disputes, rather they can now be seen as a competition for regional influence. Iraq and Syria have become the main theatres in which this new competition has been playing out, increasing the potential for rising tension – or even conflict – between Iran and Turkey.

This growing competition between Ankara and Tehran is occurring at a time when their shared interests should align, particularly as it relates to combating Kurdish insurgency and preventing a rise in separatism in Iraq

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and Syria. However, overlooking practical interests, the two have increasingly come to see one another as threats.

Background

Iran and Turkey have assumed opposing stances in Syria since the outbreak of the uprising there in 2011. But in 2017, the two countries, along with Russia, managed to establish the Astana peace process to resolve the conflict in Syria. In practice, however, this format has proven to be nothing more than a framework for preventing conflict between Iran, Russia, and Turkey while also dividing their spheres of influence. Over the past four years, as the Assad regime gradually restored its territorial control, Iran's political and security influence in Syria has increased. At the same time, in large part due to its four military operations in the country over the past six years, Turkey has brought significant parts of northern Syria under its direct and indirect control. Although Ankara states that the purpose of these operations has been to counter the threat of cross-border terrorism, their actual outcome has been the transformation of northern Syria into a de-facto zone of Turkish influence. Tehran and Ankara's apparent desire to expand their respective zones of influence to the other's detriment has increased the potential for tension.

Turkey began to militarily intervene in Iraq in the 1990s as it sought to confront insurgents from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) based there. Iran, on the other hand, first began to exert concrete influence in Iraq in 2003 when its long-time enemy Saddam Hussein was toppled as a result of the American-led military invasion. Former US President Barak Obama's decision to withdraw US forces from Iraq in 2011 and the emergence of the 'Islamic State' (ISIS) in 2014 were both major turning points that helped Iran to solidify its influence in the country. Also in 2014, Iran supported the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to fight ISIS. These

Forces, an umbrella organisation that consisted of several armed Shiite groups loyal to Tehran, soon became the backbone of Iran's influence in Iraq's security and political spheres. That said, since late 2019, public outrage and popular protests against Iran's role in Iraq have increased while Tehran simultaneously experiences difficulties in managing its non-state allies in the country. For instance, in late 2020, Iran-backed militias in Iraq ignored Tehran's instructions to avoid targeting American interests so as to prevent escalations with Washington. As for Turkey, it has not only expanded the scope of its military presence in northern Iraq but also, as discussed below, managed to enhance its influence over Iraqi politics.

Turkey and Iran's mutual threat perceptions

Iran's rising threat perception of Turkey in Syria is primarily influenced by geopolitical considerations, while in Iraq it is a bit more complex as it exhibits political and economic dimensions as well. At a broader level, Tehran is extremely worried about the recent rapprochement between Turkey and Israel, fearing that it may eventually lead to joint Turkish-Israeli initiatives to undermine Iran's influence in the region. Also, some political elites in Iran believe that Ankara's involvement in Iraq and Syria is part of an expansionist foreign policy aimed at reviving Turkish control over the former Ottoman territories. As such, this perception of a so-called "neo-Ottoman" element within Turkish foreign policy inevitably sets the scene for a zero-sum game between Iran and Turkey in Iraq and Syria.

In turn, Turkey's threat perception of Iran stems from two primary circumstances. First of all, Turkey, like most Sunni Arab states including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Jordan, considers Iran primarily as a sectarian power. The fact that Iran stood by the Assad regime instead of supporting an insurgency that involved Sunni Islamic movements strength-

ens Turkey's convictions of Iranian sectarianism.

Second, Turkey's threat perceptions are closely intertwined with the Kurdish question and the Turkish assumption that Iran is using Kurdish militias as leverage vis-à-vis Turkey. In reality, both countries share a common opposition to Kurdish statehood as they both face Kurdish separatist movements within their own borders. In 2017, Tehran and Ankara allied themselves with Baghdad in an effort to suppress and annul the Kurdish independence referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq. However, the Kurdish question doesn't carry the same weight for both countries. While Turkey considers Kurdish separatism to be a primary existential threat, Iran views it as a less serious security threat. Ankara believes that Iran was among the backers of the PKK throughout the 1990s, and now it perceives Iran as resorting to the same policy: supporting the People's Defense Units (YPG) in northern Syria and the PKK in Iraq. Both questions of Iranian sectarianism and the Kurds have different geopolitical implications in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey and Iran in Syria

In mid-2016, after failing to oust Bashar al-Assad and — probably — helping its affiliates seize power in Syria, Ankara turned its attention to a more achievable goal: preventing the establishment of a Kurdish-dominated entity in northern Syria or the accumulation of PKK-affiliated militants close to the Turkish border. Until 2020, Turkish military operations in northern Syria did not receive any serious negative reactions from Tehran. This is largely because northern Syria held much less military and geopolitical value in Iran's long-term plans for Syria when compared to the centre and south of the country. In fact, just as Turkey's influence was expanding in the north, Iran was pursuing its own expansionist ambitions in the south and southeast, obviously aimed at reaching the

Israeli border. Furthermore, as Syria's Kurdish militias made an alliance with the US within the framework of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Iran hoped that Turkey's military operations would lead to friction between Ankara and Washington. Ideally for Iran, Turkish pressure would eventually force the Kurds to compromise with Assad and accept Damascus' rule.

But from early 2020, the situation began to change. At that time, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield in the north-western governorate of Idlib, Syria. Simultaneously, the Syrian military was engaged in an operation in Idlib to wrest control of the M5 highway between Damascus and Aleppo from rebel groups. Iran's proxy forces, particularly the Afghan and Pakistani militias of the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades, were deployed to Idlib in support of the Syrian military. This marked the first time in which Iran-backed militias were deployed to Turkey's de-facto zone of influence in Syria's northwest. In late February 2020, the Turkish military clashed with Syrian forces and their allies, resulting in the deaths of 33 Turkish soldiers by way of airstrikes. During the same clashes, 21 Iran-backed militants were killed by Turkish forces. This effectively brought Ankara and Tehran to the brink of a direct conflict in Syria. These events had a profound impact on Iran's assessment of Turkey's goals and plans and their implications for Iranian interests in Syria. According to the new assessment, Turkey's goals would go beyond the PKK issue; instead Ankara sought to establish a permanent sphere of influence, for which it would even be prepared to go to war with Syria and its allies. Tehran also concluded that Turkey, by expanding the territory under its control, was trying to prevent the restoration of the main east-west and north-south transit routes within Syria, which are of logistical importance to Iran and its allies.

More recently, Turkey's plans for a new military operation in Syria have raised alarms in Iran. From Iran's point of view, Turkey plans to expand the areas under its control further south well into Aleppo,

thus threatening Iran's sphere of influence there. Aleppo may also function as a strategic gateway to central Syria from which — Iran believes — Ankara could more easily provide logistical support to a potential renewed insurgency against Assad, reversing what Damascus and Tehran have gained over the past decade. What furthers Iran's suspicions is the fact that Turkey unveiled its plans for a new operation in Syria at the same time it initiated its rapprochement with Israel. Therefore, Iran speculates over the possibility of a "joint Turkish-Israeli plan" for Syria, according to which Turkey and Israel would pressure Iran and its allies simultaneously from the north and the south, forcing Tehran to reconsider its Syria policy. At the same time, Iran continues to be dubious of a normalisation in Turkish-Syrian relations. Despite Ankara's apparent movement in this direction, Iran supports the Assad government's position that any meaningful normalisation will only take place if Turkey agrees to hand over the territories under its control in northern Syria back to Assad — which seems very unlikely, at the least in the short to medium term.

As for Turkey's strategy in Syria, sectarianism can be said to be taking a back seat as Turkey was forced to give up its policy preference for regime change. Instead, Turkey has two main priorities: preventing the emergence of a structured Kurdish polity in Syrian territory and preventing new waves of migration to Turkey while repatriating some Syrian migrants currently living in Turkey. Nonetheless, beyond the Kurdish and migration issues, Turkish leaders may have also calculated that controlling parts of northern Syria and creating a zone of influence there would provide them with the leverage to extract concessions from other actors involved in Syria, including Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime. To achieve these goals, Turkey is demanding that it retain and gain control of a 30 km-deep safe zone along the entirety of the Turkish-Syrian border.

To this end, Turkey has carried out a total of four major military operations in northern Syria, resulting in around ten

per cent of all Syrian territory now being under the control of Turkey and its affiliated groups. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently declared that Turkey is considering a fifth military operation as it aims to expand the areas under its control, this time targeting the cities of Tel Rifaat, north of Aleppo, and Manbij. From the Turkish perspective, an operation in Tel Rifaat makes sense as it would unite the two regions of Afrin and al-Bab that are already under Turkish control. Pushing the YPG/SDF from Tel Rifaat would also improve the volatile security situation in Afrin. Combined with another operation in Manbij, this would enable Turkey to control the entirety of north-western Syria and to push YPG militants east of the Euphrates River. Iran, however, for the aforementioned geopolitical reasons, has seriously objected to this military operation. Ankara considers this objection as further evidence of an Iranian desire to leverage Kurdish militants against Turkish interests.

Turkey and Iran in Iraq

The strategic region of Sinjar in northern Iraq has been at the heart of the Iran-Turkey rivalry. Turkey's military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq have increasingly pursued the goal of gaining control over Sinjar, which is a vital crossing point between Iraq and Syria. Here, Ankara aims to sever the land connection between the Kurdish militias in northern Iraq and northern Syria, thus halting their logistical and military support of one another. Nonetheless, it is not only Kurdish militants that are eyeing strategic use of the crossing; Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi groups would gain a significant advantage if they were to secure Sinjar and hence easier access to Syria — and then Lebanon. Currently, the only land connection linking Iran's Iraqi and Syrian allies is the southern Al-Qa'im — Al-Bukamal border crossing, which has increasingly become the target of Israeli air and missile strikes.

In 2020, Ankara reached an agreement with Baghdad and the KRG to remove PKK

elements from Sinjar. The agreement raised suspicions in Iran that a conspiracy might be underway to exclude Iran from security arrangements in northern Iraq. As a result, Iran-backed Iraqi militias operating under the PMF banner strengthened their positions in Sinjar, practically leading to the establishment of an alliance between the PKK and Iran-affiliated groups. Iran has also expressed its opposition to Turkey's military activities in Iraq, as its presence there, as well as in Syria, has led some in Iran to believe that Ankara may eventually seek to link the territories it controls in the two countries. This is part of a narrative in Iran that perceives a threat in Turkey's so-called neo-Ottomanism.

Meanwhile, Turkey has also increased its political and economic influence in Iraq just as Iran is experiencing a continuing decline in its own influence there. For several months beginning in October 2019, Iraq experienced widespread public protests against the central government. One of the main grievances aired by the protestors was foreign – particularly Iranian – intervention in Iraqi affairs. This particular frustration manifested itself in attacks on Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala. Moreover, anti-Iran sentiments played a role in the November 2021 parliamentary elections as Iran-allied Shiite factions lost a considerable number of seats, demonstrating how shifting attitudes in Iraq have translated into setbacks for Iranian strategy in the country. Interestingly, it is precisely since then that Ankara started working to facilitate closer coordination between Iraq's Sunni factions, thereby increasing its political clout in the country. At the same time, the KRG has been moving toward close alignment with Ankara in recent years. From the Iranian perspective, this is a Turkish attempt to form a unified Sunni front against Iran's Shiite allies, which would provide Ankara with the necessary ideological and political tools to advance its aforementioned neo-Ottoman policies.

Finally, Turkey's increasing economic role in Iraq is another factor that, albeit not directly related to Iran's threat perception,

has contributed to growing concerns in Iran. Over the past few years, Turkey has consistently surpassed Iran as an exporter of goods to Iraq. In addition, Turkish companies have invested in hundreds of construction and infrastructure projects, including energy, water, and petrochemical industries, in various Iraqi cities. Iran is also worried that Turkey may take advantage of its geographical location at the juncture of Eastern Europe and West Asia to monopolise transit routes to neighbouring regions. This would challenge Iran's plans to play a more serious role in East-West transit by way of its participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In any case, despite increasing tensions in Syria, the main fault line in Turkish-Iranian relations is found in Iraq. Both sectarian tensions and the Kurdish issue loom large in Iraq and there are no influential external actors to constrain the activities of Turkey or Iran in the country. For years, Turkey's overall policy toward Iraq oscillated between two positions, namely, pushing for a non-sectarian government in Baghdad and supporting the Sunnis. While contradicting one another, both policies were united in their explicitly anti-Iranian agenda. Due to this approach, Turkey and Iran have consistently supported different and rival political actors and groups in the Iraqi political and election landscape. As the Shiite bloc in Iraq shows signs of division and Iran's grip on Shiite politics weakens, Turkey sees an opportunity to increase its influence.

Turkey's increasing political clout in Iraq is paralleled by its increased military presence in the region. Turkey has a long history of conducting military operations against the PKK in Iraq, however, since 2019, these operations entered a new phase; they became less ad hoc in nature and instead sought to establish permanent control in certain areas. To this end, Turkey has built several military bases that would enable its military to control the entire Turkish-Iraqi border from the Iraqi side. With these bases and its continual military and surveillance activities, Turkey has

managed to push the PKK further from its border.

As Turkey's military footprint and economic and political influence increases in the KRG, this adds another layer to Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraq. Ankara and Tehran support rival Kurdish factions. Turkey supports the Barzani family-controlled Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Iran supports the Talabani family-controlled Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This divide is also expressed geographically, as the KDP controls the parts of the KRG that are close to the Turkish border while the PUK controls the regions along the Iranian border. Therefore, Turkey and Iran's support of rival factions in Kurdish politics has not created significant problems in their bilateral relations, at least so far. Nonetheless, two factors are aggravating tensions. First, as Iraqi politics descend into chaos and a bitter rivalry emerges in Baghdad, the two Kurdish factions are also positioning themselves into rival camps, adding another layer to the Turkish-Iranian competition. Second, and more importantly, the presence of the PKK as the third Kurdish force in Northern Iraq complicates the overall picture.

While Turkey has no difficulty in enlisting the support of the KDP in its fight against the PKK, the PUK has traditionally been on better terms with the group, as both the PUK and the PKK identify as leftist movements. In fact, the PKK's main headquarters are in the Qandil Mountains, which are found in the PUK's territory near the Iranian border. This alliance between the pro-Iranian PUK and the PKK increases Turkey's perception that Iran is using the PKK to gain leverage over it. At the same time, Erdogan has recently declared that Turkey will establish a 30 km safe zone along its *entire* southern border, not just in Syria, as mentioned above, but also in Iraq. While establishing such a zone is not feasible in the short run, this statement reflects Turkey's desire to be militarily present in northern Iraq and to expand the scope and area of its presence there. This reinforces Iranian fears of Turkish expansionism.

Furthermore, Turkey's military presence in Iraq is not confined to areas administered by the KRG. It also has a military base in Bashiqa, a region near Mosul. Since this is not a region where the PKK is active, the *raison d'être* of this military base is obviously to support Sunni groups in opposing the PMF. The Bashiqa base has drawn criticism from Iraq's Shiite politicians close to Iran, but Turkey claims that it was established at the request of the KRG. As expected, both sides accuse one another of pursuing sectarian policies and violating Iraqi sovereignty.

In attempts to limit or oppose Turkish expansion, PMF militias regularly target Turkish military bases. Turkey, on the other hand, considers Iranian objections to its military presence as well as the alliance between the PMF and PKK-affiliated groups as further evidence of Iran's use of the PKK against Turkey. As already mentioned, these conflicts generally revolve around the strategic Sinjar region that links Syria and Iraq. Notably, Sinjar is also the region where the PKK-PMF alliance is most evident and thus of annoyance to Ankara.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is safe to say that the geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran in Iraq and Syria is entering a new phase. Yet the tensions between the two in Syria are more manageable when compared to Iraq. The presence of the US and Russia on the ground in Syria means that neither Iran nor Turkey can play a unilaterally decisive role there as multiple international stakeholders and varied interests restrict the Turkish-Iranian competition. However, as Russia is dragged further into its occupation of Ukraine, Turkey and Iran are eager to fill the expected vacuum that could be left behind. This has the potential to spark new conflicts, particularly if Turkey tries to gain control of the strategic Tel Rifaat region. In contrast to Syria, in Iraq, Turkey and Iran are now the main external actors. Furthermore,

both countries are pointing to the other's presence within Iraqi territory to justify increasing their own presence there.

Region-wide realignments are also coinciding with the rising tensions between Turkey and Iran. While it may still be premature to interpret Turkey's attempts at reconciling its relations with Arab rivals and Israel as the beginnings of an anti-Iranian bloc, these attempts nonetheless certainly impact Turkish-Iranian relations. In previous years, aggressive Saudi-UAE policies culminated in the 2017 Qatar blockade and ushered in a period of exceptionally warm relations between Turkey and Iran. But as the Saudi-UAE bloc began to act with more restraint toward Turkey and Qatar since 2020, Iran and Turkey seem to have less use for the "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" approach.

Under such pressure, it can no longer be taken for granted that Turkish-Iranian tensions will remain in the realm of limited rivalry. The current situation is qualitatively different from traditional Turkish-Iranian competition in the Middle East. This is the first time in centuries that both countries are vying for military control over the same regions, which involve not only Iraq and Syria but also the South Caucasus, where Iran has witnessed a growing Turkish presence along its northern border. Another novel situation that multiplies the risk of conflict is the involvement of proxies in nearly every conflict zone. Iran has a long history of employing proxies in the region, but there are growing indications that it may be losing its strict control over the variety of militias it supports, with the Iraqi armed groups showing considerable signs of autonomous agency, especially in choosing their targets and conducting operations. Turkey, on the other hand, has only recently started to establish proxy groups in Syria and to deploy them in various conflict zones. It should be noted that Turkey lacks the historical experience as well as the ideological bond with the proxies that Iran typically enjoys. Both countries' deployment of weakly controlled proxies combined with the necessity to support them in

order to preserve credibility sets the stage for a perfect storm.

A Turkish-Iranian rivalry that turns violent could severely destabilise the entire region. Such instability would certainly spill over to Europe in the form of heightened security risks and new waves of refugees. Furthermore, instability in the Middle East and the South Caucasus would make it harder for Europe to maintain energy security. The EU needs to monitor the situation closely and be ready to step in and de-escalate.

Certain steps could also pre-empt conflict. As mentioned before, Iran's rising threat perception of Turkey is related to the broader geopolitical scene in the region and the emergence of new alignments that might threaten Tehran's interests. Here, the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) could mitigate Iran's concerns regarding a potential Western-led initiative to harm its interests. It could thereby positively impact Tehran's relations with Ankara as well. Also, the revival of the JCPOA may facilitate trade and economic relations between Iran and Turkey, convincing the neighbours to limit their rivalries. With this in mind, the EU should continue to support the revival of the JCPOA. But even if the agreement is not revived, the EU should still put its diplomatic weight behind the establishment of a format for regional dialogue that would include not only Iran and Turkey, but also their Arab neighbours. The Iraqi government's initiative to convene the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in August 2021 was a good step in this direction that should be promoted and supported by the EU.

Finally, the EU should support political initiatives that would diminish the role of Iran and Turkey within Syrian and Iraqi territory. To this end, it should advocate for the inclusion of Kurdish groups in Syrian reconciliation processes and promote rapprochement between Erbil and Baghdad. Simultaneously, the EU should work to raise the political standards in the KRG in terms of transparency and governmental efficiency. This would lessen the KRG's

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dependence on external actors and help it to reclaim its status as the legitimate representative of the Iraqi Kurds. The EU also needs to work to strengthen Iraqi sovereignty. Initiatives such as the aforementioned Baghdad Conference can help the Iraqi government reclaim its position as an independent – and indispensable – regional actor, and therefore, should be supported by the EU. In Syria, the EU faces a dilemma: normalisation of Turkish-Syrian relations could decrease tensions between Tehran and Ankara but would also increase the Assad regime's legitimacy. Therefore, the EU should adopt a "wait and see" approach on the issue, refraining from expressing either support or opposition to normalisation. Instead, it should stick with its "more for more" approach that attaches political concessions to changes in the regime's behaviour.

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