

The “Arab Spring” and Its Effect on Turkish-Iranian Relations*

Özüm S. UZUN*

Abstract

Turkish-Iranian relations became more cooperative in the first decade of the 2000s to such a degree that, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP rule was questioned whether its Western orientation has shifted. Despite the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement in the last decade, they are still regional competitors. One of the hints of the ongoing regional competition between Turkey and Iran emerged with the difference in perception between them about the revolutionary wave of uprisings, known as the “Arab Spring.” This paper attempts to answer the following research questions: What are the differences in perception between Turkey and Iran about the recent developments in the Arab streets? How do they define these developments? What are the underlying reasons behind the different stance of Turkey and Iran towards the Arab Spring? And finally, how would their different stances affect the bilateral relations? This paper argues that the main competition between Turkey and Iran has been ongoing over exercising their soft power to attract newly emerging regimes to their models of governance.

Keywords: Turkey, Iran, Arab Spring, Turkish-Iranian relations

“Arap Baharı” ve Türkiye-İran İlişkilerine Etkisi

Özet

2000’li yılların ilk on yılında Türkiye-İran ilişkilerinde işbirliği öyle bir seviyeye ulaştı ki, AKP döneminde Türk dış politikasının Batı ekseninden kayıp kaymadığı dahi sorgulanır oldu. Son on yılda Türkiye-İran ilişkilerindeki yakınlaşmaya rağmen, her iki ülke birbiri için bölgesel rakip olmaya devam etmektedir. Türkiye ve İran arasında devam eden

* Shorter and a different version of this paper was presented at the Middle Eastern Congress on Politics and Society in Sakarya University, on 9 October 2012.

** Dr. Uzun has completed her PhD at Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Her PhD thesis is titled: “Turkish-Iranian Relations in the 2000s: Rapprochement or Beyond?”

bölgesel rekabetin göstergelerinden bir tanesi, “Arap Baharı” olarak tanımlanan devrimci halk ayaklanmalarına karşı iki ülkenin farklı bakış açılarıdır. Bu makale şu sorulara yanıt bulmaya çalışmaktadır: Arap sokaklarındaki gelişmelere karşı İran ve Türkiye algısının farklılıkları nelerdir? Söz konusu iki ülke, bu gelişmeleri nasıl tanımlamaktadır? Arap Baharına karşı Türkiye ve İran’ın farklı tutumlarının arkasındaki nedenler nedir? İki ülkenin farklı tutumları ikili ilişkilerini nasıl etkilemektedir? Bu makale, Türkiye ve İran arasındaki esas rekabetin, kendi yönetim modellerini bölgede yeni kurulan rejimlere kabul ettirebilmek için sürdürdükleri yumuşak güç üzerinden devam ettiğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, İran, Arap Baharı, Türkiye-İran ilişkileri

« الربيع العربي » وأثره على العلاقات التركية الإيرانية

اوزوم اس. اوزوم

خلاصة:

أصبحت العلاقات التركية الإيرانية أكثر تعاوناً في بداية العقد ٢٠٠٠ إلى درجة أن السياسة الخارجية التركية تحت حكم حزب العدالة والتنمية أثارت التساؤلات فيما إذا كانت قد تغيرت تجاه الغرب. وبالرغم من التقارب التركي الإيراني في العقد الماضي، فما يزال البلدان منافسين إقليميين. وأدى الإشارات إلى استمرار التنافس الإقليمي بين تركيا وإيران ظهرت في الاختلاف في الفهم بينها حول الموجة الثورية للانتفاضات، المعروفة باسم « الربيع العربي ». وتحاول هذه الدراسة أن تجيب على استفسارات البحث التالي: ما هي الاختلافات في الفهم بين تركيا وإيران حول التطورات الأخيرة في الشارع العربي؟ وكيف يعرفان هذه التطورات؟ وما هي الأسباب الكامنة وراء الموقف المختلف لكل من تركيا وإيران نحو الربيع العربي؟ وأخيراً، كيف تؤثر مواقفهما على العلاقات الثنائية؟ تناقش هذه الدراسة التنافس الرئيسي بين تركيا وإيران المستمر حول ممارسة القوة الناعمة لاجتذاب أنظمة جديدة صاعدة إلى نماذجها في الحكم.

الكلمات الدالة: تركيا، إيران، الربيع العربي، العلاقات التركية الإيرانية.

Turkish-Iranian Rapprochement Prior to the “Arab Spring”

For most of their histories, Turkey and Iran have had a friendly but competitive relationship in ideological and geopolitical venues. When this competition reached its peak in the 1990s, conventional wisdom foresaw prospects for cooperation between Turkey and Iran would gradually decrease. Instead, bilateral relations began to be enhanced in the early 2000s, which is commonly labeled as *rapprochement*.¹ Regarding Turkish-Iranian relations, it is seen that bilateral relations became more cooperative in the last decade that started a new rapprochement phase.² This rapprochement spread to the political, economic and security arenas and had accelerated, especially after the Iraqi War of 2003.

The Kurdish issue became significant to the rapprochement process especially following the Iraqi War of 2003. Although the Kurdish issue had been a source of serious tension between Turkey and Iran in the 1990s, by the 2000s, it had become an issue by which the rapprochement process could be measured. While each country accused the other of harboring terrorists in the 1990s, they have cooperated on the Kurdish issue in the 2000s, from coordinating their foreign policies towards Iraq to cooperating in counterterrorism efforts.

The nuclear issue also became a significant factor in the rapprochement process. Although it became an issue in the bilateral relations after the revelation of Iran’s clandestine nuclear activities in 2002, it seems that Iranian nuclear policy in the 1980s and 1990s would have been expected to cause serious tension in bilateral relations due to high level of mutual suspicion. However, the Iranian nuclear program has not appeared as a conflictual issue in bilateral relations in the first decade of the 2000s. Moreover, Turkey and Iran are viewed internationally as being on the same side of the controversy, with Turkey supporting Iran’s right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and with its criticisms of double standards in US nonproliferation policies towards Iran and Israel. In addition, Turkey’s efforts to build confidence between Iran and the international community, its emphasis on diplo-

1 In International Relations literature, *rapprochement*, which comes from the French word *rapprocher*, is used to define “the renewal of normal relations.” Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *Dictionary of International Relations*, (USA: The Penguin Books, 1998), p. 462.

2 Özüm S. Uzun “Turkish-Iranian Relations in the 2000s: Rapprochement or Beyond?” Unpublished PhD Dissertation (Ankara: Middle East Technical Universtiy), 8 March 2012.

matic solutions and rejection of military attacks against Iran, as well as its opposition to further economic sanctions – especially the unilateral sanctions led by the United States – are perceived as significant elements in the rapprochement process.

The improvement of bilateral economic relations in the last decade has been another reflection of rapprochement. It is noteworthy that economic relations between Turkey and Iran had never been severed, despite political problems between the two states in the 1980s and 1990s. However, mutual efforts towards further bilateral economic relations through increased trade, investments and cooperation in the energy sector have worked in favor of the rapprochement process in the 2000s. For Turkey, the improvement of economic relations with Iran was mainly determined by its need for oil and natural gas resources. In addition, Turkey's economic growth that made it necessary to improve its trade relations with neighbors and its acting as a "trading state" under the AKP rule as a result of its foreign policy vision that highlights the necessity of economic interdependence for regional stability contributed to the improvement of bilateral economic relations. For Iran, on the other hand, the improvement of economic relations with Turkey was mainly meant as a means of breaking out of its international isolation due to the US and UN economic sanctions.

Even though the conflictual issues of previous decades are no longer a source of tension in the first decade of the 2000s in the bilateral relations, it is observed that this rapprochement process started to slow down in 2011. When revolutionary wave of uprisings have spread to Syria in January 2011, diverging stances of Turkey and Iran placed them explicitly on the opposite position. Therefore, the perspectives of Turkey and Iran about the "Arab Spring" are important to understand its impact on the bilateral relations.

The "Arab Spring" from the Perspectives of Turkey and Iran

By the late 2010, the Middle Eastern and North African dictatorships encountered with the challenges posed by the demands of their own citizens. The first uprising began in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 and resulted with the collapse of 23 years long Ben Ali's regime. On 25 January 2011, Egyptians toppled the Mubarak's regime. Then, these uprisings spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria and led to NATO operations against Qaddafi's regime. It seems that these popular up-

risings in the Middle East and North Africa do not only change the internal politics of these countries, but have also had consequences on regional geopolitics in which political systems, national interests, alliances and rivalries have been reassessing. In this new environment, Turkey and Iran, which are important political and economic powers in the region, seek to fill the power vacuum created and advance their regional influence. Therefore, their perspectives about the “Arab Spring” are important not only for the future of regional politics, but also for the bilateral relations.

The policies of Turkey and Iran that compete for expanding their regional influence have differentiated from each other during the “Arab Spring” era. From the Turkish perspective, Middle Eastern countries will inevitably orient themselves towards democracy, even if it will take long time. Moreover, Turkey rejects any foreign interventions in this process. Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu explained Turkish foreign policy on the popular uprisings, referring to the first days of the protests. Davutoğlu stated:

At that time, the question of what we attempted to find out an answer was: What is the ordinary course of history? Who stands on the right side of the history? Are the protesters in Tunisia or Ben Ali? Is Mobarak or youngs in the Tahrir Square? Kind of these questions came out. We decided that this is a natural order and there is not any conspiracy. The Arab Spring was started by the young Arab generation which should be respected.³

As understood from this statement, Turkey sees the democratic demands of Arabs as the main determinant of the Arab Spring. Therefore, it perceives itself as an important model in the Arab world by presenting a good example of being a democratic Muslim country. In accordance with this self-perception, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay stated that Turkey influenced the democratic demands in the Arab countries. Turkey became a party of this process and if it is needed Turkey is ready to share its experiences with those countries.⁴

From the Iranian perspective, however, the Arab Spring is an extension of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, making the recent developments

3 “Davutoğlu: Arap Baharı Bu Yeni Neslin, Olayı Sahiplenmesinin Bölgesel Bir Sonucudur,” *Zaman*, 5 June 2012.

4 “Başbakan Yardımcısı Atalay ‘Arap Baharını’ Anlattı,” *Zaman*, 7 July 2012.

on Arab streets were the outcome of an “Arab Islamic Awakening” led by the values of the Iranian Islamic Revolution.⁵ For Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution appeared to have been successfully exported. Iran claimed that the protests are rooted in the 1979 revolution as if to assume responsibility for their rise and development, advocating “this Islamic awakening (...) was created by the victory of the great Revolution of the Iranian nation.”⁶ According to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, “Islam has become the guiding principle of [the] popular movements.”⁷ Supreme Leader Khamenei also stated:

During the last decades, arrogant powers, led by the United States, had reduced regional states to a state of subjugation through their political and security ploys (...) But now, they are the primary target of disgust and hatred of the region’s nations.⁸

In addition to frame the “Arab Spring” in Islamic terms, Iran has defined it as a movement against the US and Israel. The Supreme Leader stated, “the essence of the Islamic awakening in the countries of the region is an anti-Zionist and anti-US movement.”⁹ Khamenei also added:

The Islamic awakening of the regional nations is a movement on the path of the prophets; and through vigilance, Muslim nations and Iran’s great nation will not allow the Americans and the Zionists to derail or hijack this magnificent movement by sowing discord and other plots.¹⁰

The different stances of Turkey and Iran were not only caused by their perception about the roots of the protests, but also their views about whether these protests were shaped by internal dynamics or by foreign interventions. As mentioned earlier, Turkey sees the Arab Spring as an outcome of internal dynamics caused by undemocratic and corrupted regimes, while Iran mentions foreign interventions in some protests of opposition groups. In that regard, the different approaches of Turkey

5 “Assoc. Prof. Hassan-Khani: Iran and Turkey Can Adopt a Cooperative Competition,” in an interview with ORSAM Middle East Advisor Pınar Arıkan, *ORSAM*, ORSAM Guest, 19 December 2011, <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showOrsamGuest.aspx?ID=263> (Accessed 11 January 2012).

6 “Iranians’ voice echoed in Muslim world”, *Press TV*, February 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/163526.html>

7 “Leader calls for ‘Islamic power bloc’”, *Press TV*, November 5, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/208487.html> (Accessed 20 August 2012)

8 Ibid.

9 “Leader: Regional revolts anti-US in core”, *Press TV*, July 1, 2011 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/186935.html>

10 *ibid.*

and Iran to the demonstrations in Syria made more apparent that these two countries place themselves at the opposite sides. For Iran, Syrian demonstrations are the product of Western policies, making Syria the victim of Western-backed plans and Syrian demonstrators that are the agents of foreign powers wanting to overthrow the Assad regime.¹¹ The Supreme Leader stated “(...) the nature of developments in Syria is different from events in other regional countries,” noting the involvement of US and Israel in the unrests in Syria.¹² As seen, unlike the protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which represent an “Islamic Awakening,” the protests in Syria were viewed as “a mischievous act of Westerners, particularly Americans and Zionists” by Iran.¹³ Iran’s President Ahmedinejad, for instance, stated:

We are going to make greater efforts to encourage both the government of Syria and the other side, all parties to reach an understanding. But I think and we believe that there should be no interference from outside. The positions of the United States are not going to help. They have never helped. They could do things better in Libya, for example. From the beginning, we said there should be an international team to mediate in order to encourage all parties to reach an understanding. But NATO had ambitions in Libya. They wanted the oil resources in Libya. There was no need to kill so many people. This is the situation in Syria, too.¹⁴

For Turkey, however, demonstrations in Syria are not different from other countries whose regimes are challenged by the democratic demands of their citizens. According to Turkey, if Syrians are demanding greater freedoms and democracy, the Assad regime should quickly conduct reforms.¹⁵ In fact, Turkey, which has been very friendly to Syria

11 “(Turkish-Iranian Diplomacy in the Arab Spring), *Khabarnet*, 11 مرداد 1390 (September 2011) <http://www.khabarnet.info/index.php/article/inter/86-international/5287-1390-05-11-14-51-16.html> (Accessed 29 September 2011).

12 “Leader: Regional revolts anti-US in core”, *Press TV*, July 1, 2011 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/186935.html>

13 “Iran calls Syrian protests a Western plot”, *Reuters*, April 12, 2011 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/12/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE73B22V20110412>

14 Fareed Zakaria, Interview with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, *CNN*, 23 October 2011 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1110/23/fzgps.01.html> (Accessed 25 September 2012).

15 Ali Hussein Bakeer, “Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Revolutions: A Vision of the Present and the Future,” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, (5 July 2011) http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_supreme_leader_makes_ambiguous_fatwa_on_facebook/24360256.html (Accessed 20 October 2011).

and to the Assad regime, has publicly called for President Assad to step down. In a speech at the fourth ordinary congress of the AKP, Turkey's President Erdoğan stated:

The Syrian regime is massacring its own people and 250,000 Syrians have so far fled to neighboring countries, with approximately 90,000 taking refuge in Turkey.” He also called Russia, China and Iran to change their stance on the crisis in Syria and said history won't forgive those who allow a massacre to go on unabated.¹⁶

The different perception of Turkey and Iran on the Syrian issue influenced their policy behaviors in response to the resistance of Assad's regime. While Turkey has becoming more aggressive towards the Assad regime that partly brought two countries to the brink of the war, Iran has appeared as making efforts to conduct a more balanced policy on the Syrian issue. The reason of this new appearance in Iranian foreign policy is partly caused by its concerns. Initially, the Iranian regime viewed the uprising with enthusiasm since they collapsed pro-Western Arab dictatorships. A year later, however, Iranian enthusiasm transformed to concern and uncertainty. Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi cautioned, “A vacuum in the Syrian regime would have an unpredictable impact on the region and its neighbors.” This Iranian concern about the future of Syria inevitably led Iran to conduct more balanced policy, at least ostensibly, in order to gain the benefits of being accepted as a reliable actor for regional disputes without losing Syria. Therefore, Iran recently appeared as adopting a more balanced public stance towards Syria. Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, for instance, stated “The government should answer to the demands of its people, be it Syria, Yemen or other countries (...) The people of these nations have legitimate demands, and the governments should answer these demands as soon as possible.”¹⁷ President Ahmedinejad also signaled this more balanced stance towards Syria. He stated that that Iran would “encourage both the government of Syria and the other side, all parties to reach an understanding.”¹⁸

16 “Erdoğan Slams Russia, China, Iran over Syria in Key Party Congress”, *Today's Zaman*, 30 September 2012.

17 Nada Bakri, “Iran Calls on Syria to Recognize Citizens' Demands”, *New York Times*, August 21, 2011 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html?_r=1

18 Fareed Zakaria, Interview with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, *CNN*, 23 October 2011 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/11110/23/fzgps.01.html> (Accessed 25 September 2012).

Contrary to Iran, the opposition of Turkey to Assad’s regime in Syria furthered and the two countries came to the brink of war. Turkish-Syrian diplomatic relations ruptured, months after the Syrian uprising began. Last March, Turkey shuttered its embassy in Damascus and the Syrian government declared Turkey’s ambassador, Ömer Onhon, *persona non grata*. Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan has repeatedly denounced Syrian President Assad, publicly calling on him to step down after accusing him of massacring his own people. The Syrian government, meanwhile, has accused Turkey of arming and funding Syrian rebels. On June Turkey claimed that Syria had shot down a Turkish F-4 unarmed jet over international airspace without warning. This development escalated already tense relations into a new level. On 3 October, a Syrian attack on the Turkish town of Akçakale killed five civilians. A day later, Turkey retaliated against the Syrian government targets. In addition, Ankara took a series of measures, such as calling for an emergency UN Security Council meeting and securing parliament’s approval for a military response to any Syrian “act of aggression.” As Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war, Iran reiterated its balanced policy, calling for both sides to reduce the tension. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast stated, “Such incidents have no other objective but to disrupt the friendship and brotherhood of neighboring states and to escalate tensions between countries to regional and international levels.” He also added that Tehran would continue its “goodwill” measures to solve the Syrian crisis through diplomatic channels within framework of the Quartet Committee on Syria, which comprises Iran, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

Impacts of the “Arab Spring” on Turkish-Iranian Relations

Contrary to the rapprochement process in the bilateral relations between 2003 and 2011, Turkey and Iran are now evolving towards a more controversial stance and they are openly at odds over several issues. Turkey’s agreement to deploy NATO early-warning radar system on its territory, Iran’s reluctance towards Turkey’s mediating role in nuclear talks and rising competition for influence in the Middle East has also contributed to deepen this controversial stances of the two countries. What is important here is to understand what happened with the Arab Spring that the rapprochement process in the bilateral

¹⁹ “Iran Foreign Ministry Urges Turkey, Syria to Show Restraint”, *Press TV*, 4 October 2012, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/10/04/264936/iran-urges-turkey-syria-to-show-restraint/>

relations lost its momentum? It seems that the Arab Spring has not only highlighted the ideological differences between Turkey and Iran, but also their competitive geopolitical interests throughout the Middle East. The debate over “Turkish model” vs. “Iranian model” became an issue at the reconstruction process of Middle Eastern politics. In addition, the competition between Turkey and Iran over expanding their own regional influence triggered the debate on “neo-Ottomanist” vision of Turkish foreign policy and the possibility of regional sectarian conflict in the name of Sunnis vs. Shias in which Turkey and Iran take a leading role. Lastly, it is seen that the relations of two countries with the United States still have been influencing their bilateral relations.

Regarding the competitive ideological and geopolitical interests of the two countries, Iran’s doubts about Turkey follow two lines. The first concern is over the *Turkish model*, which represents a country that has Muslim majority, but at the same time implements Western values. The second concern includes the question of whether the AKP’s foreign policy really has a neo-Ottomanist vision. Regarding the first concern, Iran perceives the *Turkish model* as a challenge against its Islamist model to the Muslim world. Although Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi asserted that “Islam is one and concepts such as ‘Iranian Islam’ and ‘Turkish Islam’ do not exist,”²⁰ recently published Iranian sources focus largely on the differences between “Turkish Islamists” and “Iranian Islamists.”²¹ Former Court of Appeals Chief Ayotollah Sahroudi cited this difference, accusing the AKP of spreading liberal Islam.²² From the Iranian perspective, the *Turkish model*, in the name of “moderate Islam” or “liberal Islam,” is a product of the Western powers, and contradicts the *Iranian model*.²³

Iran’s second concern relates to the question of whether AKP foreign policy includes a neo-Ottomanist vision. Despite rejection by AKP

20 “There is no Iranian or Turkish Islam: Salehi”, *Mehr News Agency*, 15 March 2011

21 هشهای مجلس شورای اسلامی (Foreign Policies of Turkey’s Islamists), سیاست خارجی اسلامگرایان ترکیه مرکز پژوهش‌ها (The Report of the Research Commission of Iranian Parliament), 260:کد موضوعی، 1386، تیر ماه 8403، شماره مسلسل (Accessed 31 May 2011)

22 “ایران و ترکیه پس از بهار عربی” (Turkey and Iran After the Arab Spring) <http://www.mardomak.net/story/65005۱۳۹۰> شهریور ۲۴ شنبه ۲۰۱۱ (Accessed 29 September 2011).

23 شورای اسلامی (Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Turkey), مرکز پژوهش‌های مجلس شورای اسلامی (The Report of the Research Commission of Iranian Parliament), 260: کد موضوعی، 1389 بهمن ماه 10635: مطالعات سیاسی، دفتر (February 2010), pp. 60-61, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/785826> (Accessed 31 May 2011).

leaders,²⁴ it is widely argued that the increasing of Turkey’s involvement in Middle Eastern or Islamic affairs is partly the result of a neo-Ottomanism in Turkish foreign policy.²⁵ Despite common use of the concept of neo-Ottomanism, it has various definitions.²⁶ The following are appropriate to understand the Iranian concern over the neo-Ottomanist vision of AKP foreign policy. Hakan Yavuz, for instance, argues,

Neo-Ottomanists hope to construct a new Turkey where loyalty is determined not by any exclusivist form of racial and linguistic characteristics, but rather by a shared Ottoman historical experience and broad and diffuse attachment to Islam. Neo-Ottomanism, as a signifier of a cognitive framework, is a code for evoking rather than denoting a reified identity or a territory.²⁷

Parallel to this argument, Ömer Taşpınar argues “neo-Ottomanism does not call for Islamic governance in Turkey or Turkish imperialism in the Middle East and the Balkans. Instead, it seeks a less militant understanding of secularism at home and ‘soft’ Turkish influence in formerly Ottoman territories.”²⁸

24 “Erdoğan: Yeni Osmanlılığı Kabul Etmeyiz”, *Radikal*, 20 March 2011; President Abdullah Gül gave a seminar at Chatham House where he characterized the idea of neo-Ottomanism as unrealistic, <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/170/77922/cumhurbaskani-Gul-chatham-housedasorulari-cevapladi.html>, 8 December 2010 (Accessed 11 January 2011); Sami Kohen, “Yeni Osmanlılık mı?” *Milliyet*, 25 November 2009 (Accessed 25 November 2009); In an interview, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu emphasized that he never used the concept “neo-Ottomanism”: Ceyda Karan, “Bati’nin Emperyal Perspektifinden Yeni Osmanlılık,” *Radikal*, 7 December 2009. (Accessed 7 December 2009)

25 Philip Robins, “Between the EU and the Middle East: Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Government, 2002-2007”, *ISPI Working Papers*, 2007; Kemal Kirişçi, “Between Europe and the Middle East: The Transformation of Turkish Policy,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, No. 1, March 2004; Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies*, 10, No. 1, March 2009; Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, November 2006, pp. 950-951; Tarık Oğuzlu, “Middle Easternization of Turkey’s Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, March 2008; “عثمانی نو سیاستهای و ترکیه,” (Turkey and Its Policies of Neo-Ottomanism), *Iran Diplomacy*, 27 October 2009 (Accessed in 17 November 2009).

26 For a different usage of neo-Ottomanism, see Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, November 2006; Reşat Kasaba and Sibel Bozdoğan, “Turkey at a Crossroad”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000, p. 14.

27 M. Hakan Yavuz, “Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism,” *Middle East Critique*, Spring 1998, p. 23.

28 Ömer Taşpınar, “Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalist Foreign Policy,” Today’s Zaman, 22 September 2008. For detailed analysis, see Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey’s Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism”, *Carnegie Papers*, Number 10 (September 2008).

As can be understood from these definitions, *neo-Ottomanism* would expand Turkey's influence in countries with Ottoman legacies. Given the geopolitical competition between Turkey and Iran throughout history, Iran would be the most affected by *neo-Ottomanism* in Turkish foreign policy, which would diminish Iranian efforts to take leadership in the Islamic world.²⁹

In fact, the core issue in the competition between Turkey and Iran with reference to the "Arab Spring" relates to the ability of each to impose its model to the post-revolutionary Arab states. Turkey espouses a model based on democracy, Islamic moderation and integration with the international community. Iran, on the other hand, supports its Islamic model, which is based on anti-Western and anti-Israel approach, to be implemented. The last visit of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to Egypt deepened this competition. Prior to the visit, the prime minister sat for an interview with an Egyptian private satellite TV channel, wherein he addressed Egyptians, saying, "Do not be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt."³⁰ This was perceived in Iran as an intervention in Egyptian internal affairs.³¹ Iranian Major General Yahya Safavi, former commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and currently serving as senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader, called Erdoğan's pronouncement in Egypt a mistake. He asserted,

Ankara wants to convey a message to regional countries, where massive uprisings have been taking place, that their revolutions are similar to Turkey's not to those occurred in other countries like Iran. (...) Turkey's secular system is not 'a good model.'³²

As the debate over the Turkish model vs. the Iranian model, the allegations about the Shia crescent vs. an allied Sunni bloc, leading by

29 "استراتژی همکاری ایران و ترکیه" (Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Turkey), مرکز پژوهش‌های مجلس شورای اسلامی (The Report of the Research Commission of the Iranian Parliament), دفتر مطالعات سیاسی، کد موضوعی 1389 بهمن ماه 10635: شماره مسلسل، p. 39, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/785826> (Accessed 31 May 2011).

30 "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Criticizes Erdoğan's Call for a Secular State", *Al Arabiya News*, 14 September 2011.

31 دیدار باشارون تا سامانه موشکی ناتو؛ ترکیه به کجا خواهد رفت؟" (Mochtabi Daneshtalab) مجتبی دانشطلب (Where is Turkey going?) Raja News, <http://www.rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=102411>, 29 September 2011 (Accesses 29 September 2011).

32 "Turkey Made a Strategic Mistake by Agreeing to Host the NATO Shield", *Mehr News*, 10 September 2011 <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1428696> (Accessed 11 September 2011).

Iran and Turkey, re-emerged as an issue in the bilateral relations during the "Arab Spring" process. The officials of both Turkey and Iran have criticized the idea of a possible Turkish-Iranian confrontation on the basis of sectarianism, which came out in the aftermath of the Iraqi War of 2003. Turkish leaders, for instance, rejected this possibility, emphasizing that it would only cause regional instability and contradict the "zero-problems with neighbors" principle of Turkish foreign policy. In addition, these scenarios were seen as an American plan or at least as in favor of the US policies in the Middle East. Like Turkey, Iran perceived this debate as speculation created by external powers. Iran's ex-President Khatami, for instance, called the Shia crescent as a factitious concept that was created in order to destabilize the region. Iranian diplomats also emphasized that Iran has no interest in promoting pan-Shia sectarian movements, since it believes in "one Islam." Haji-Yousefi characterized this situation as a "Shiaphobia" that was created by the United States and the Arab world in favor of their own interests, since fragmentation in the Islamic world was against Iran's pan-Islamic ideals. However, this debate once again revitalized because most commonly argued that the foreign policies of Turkey and Iran towards the countries that have been experiencing uprisings in accordance with the religious motivations. Therefore, the emphasis of the possibility of division among regional countries along sectarian lines under the informal leadership of Turkey and Iran once again appeared as an issue in the bilateral relations.

The last issue in the bilateral relations with reference to the "Arab Spring" relates to Turkey's close relations with the West, namely the United States. It is perceived with suspicion by Iran, which has been experiencing political tension with Western countries, especially with the United States. Zibakalam, for instance, argues that despite the Islamist political victory, Turkey was not estranged from its Western-oriented policies. Rather, it seeks to act as a bridge between Western and Islamic countries.³³ Moreover, the continuing partnership between Turkey and the United States is perceived by Iran as being contrary to its interests and its anti-imperialist and anti-Western foreign policies.³⁴

33 "Zibakalam: Türkiye İran'ın Şekerini Yiyor" (Zibakalam: Turkey is Eating Iran's Crumbs, Bon Appetit!), *Khabar Online*, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-75524.aspx> 1389 24 July 2010 (Accessed 2 June 2011).

34 "Stratejik İşbirliği ve Ortaklık" (Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Turkey), *Merkezî Araştırma Komisyonu Raporu* (The Report of the Research Commission of Iranian Parliament), 260, February 1389, *Şehir* 10635.

Erdoğan's visit to Arab countries in September 2011 had been interpreted as propaganda in the interest of the United States.³⁵ Turkey's policies with the United States on the Syrian issue have also been criticized by Iran. Furthermore, Iran warned Turkey that if Turkey provides assistance to the United States in helping the protesters in Syria, then all NATO and US bases in Turkey would become targets for the Iranian missiles.³⁶ In addition, Iran's top general Hassan Firouzabadi blamed Turkey for the bloodshed in Syria and accused Ankara, alongside Saudi Arabia and Qatar, of helping the "war-raging goals of America."³⁷

As a result of the competition between Turkey and Iran for increasing regional influence, both of them attempt to determine the reconstruction process of the region. According to Ali Hussein Bakeer, "the Arab revolutions are likely to disrupt this balance [the balance between Turkey and Iran] in a way that will favor one of the countries, and bring their conflicting interests, visions and projects to the fore."³⁸ Parallel to this argument, Nuray Mert advocated,

If there is going to be a regime change in Syria, the whole power balance will change. If Iran loses Syria, they will lose an important base of power in the Middle East. So it will be a major defeat for Iran and within this framework, Turkey sides with the dissidents and supports some sort of regime change. Iran will take it directly against itself.³⁹

Therefore, aiming to consolidate their own regional influence, both Turkey and Iran attempted to take a leading role to find peaceful solutions for regional conflicts. Turkey hosted the second meeting of Friends of

ary 2010, pp. 61-62, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/785826> (Accessed 31 May 2011); محمود صدري "ایران و ترکیه؛ رفاقت و رقابت"، 26 بهمن 1389(2010), http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/Default_view.asp?@=243656 (Accessed 3 June 2011)

35 "تور تبلیغاتی اردوغان علیه اسرائیل یا به نفع امریکا" (The Propaganda Tour of Erdoğan, Is It against Israel or for US Interests?), *Raja News*, <http://rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=101650> 1390 شهر یور 21 (September 2011) (Accessed 29 September 2011).

36 "Iran Warns Turkey to Butt out of Syria", *IR Diplomacy*, 26 July 2012, <http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/14882/Iran+Warns+Turkey+to+Butt+Out+of+Syria.html> (Accessed 25 August 2012).

37 "Dozen Countries to Attend Iran Meeting on Syria as Turkey Warns Iran", *Al Arabiya News*, 8 August 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/08/231163.html> (Accessed 5 September 2012)

38 *ibid.*

39 Dorian Jones, "Turkey and Iran: The End of the Affair", *Radio Free Europe*, 19 October 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/turkey_iran_end_of_the_affair/24364900.html (Accessed 21 October 2011).

Syria Group, which is an international diplomatic initiative created to condemn the Assad regime, on 1 April 2012 in Istanbul. Iran, on the other hand, hosted an international conference on Syria, with the participation of Russia and China, on August 2012.⁴⁰

As seen from the attempts of Turkey and Iran to be more active on the Syrian issue, so far they excluded each other from this process, as a result of partly their different approaches and partly their geopolitical competition. Paradoxically, however, each recently observed that the cooperation to some extent is needed for regional stability and their own interests. In accordance with that, the prospect of the regional initiatives, including Turkey and Iran, started to be considered. Attempting to initialize such a regional establishment to solve the Syrian crisis, Turkey and Iran are making efforts to find ways to cooperate. According to *Tehran Times*, Ankara has proposed to Iran establishing a set of trilateral mechanisms involving key regional players to solve the Syrian crisis. Prime Minister Erdoğan stated, “This (trilateral) mechanism might involve Turkey, Egypt and Iran. (...) A second mechanism could involve Turkey, Russia, Iran. (...) A third could be made up of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.”⁴¹ Such attempts are noteworthy for Turkish-Iranian relations. Firstly, they highlight the political competition of Turkey and Iran over regional issues. Secondly, they mention the need of Turkish-Iranian cooperation for regional stability. In fact, while Turkey and Iran have maintained their opposite stances, their efforts to find a peaceful solution for regional crisis would obviously have positive impact on their bilateral relations and would keep their geopolitical competition in check.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is seen that the rapprochement process in Turkish-Iranian relations that was experienced between 2003 and 2011 lost its momentum. The “Arab Spring” made this more apparent due to the different stances of Turkey and Iran. As mentioned, the Arab Spring has not only highlighted the ideological differences between Turkey and Iran, but also their competitive geopolitical interests throughout

40 “Dozen Countries to Attend Iran Meeting on Syria as Turkey Warns Iran”, *Al Arabiya News*, 8 August 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/08/231163.html> (Accessed 5 September 2012).

41 “Turkey Turning to Iran, Russia to Tackle Syrian Crisis: Analysts”, *Tehran Times*, 24 October 2012.

the Middle East. The debate over “Turkish model” vs. “Iranian model”, the speculation over the allegations of “neo-Ottomanist” vision of Turkish foreign policy and the possibility of regional sectarian conflict in the name of Sunnis vs. Shias, in which Turkey and Iran would take a leading role, led Turkish-Iranian rapprochement process to lose its momentum. Lastly, it is also observed that the relations of two countries with the United States still have been influencing their bilateral relations.

As the time of this writing, “Turkey and Iran have managed to keep their differences in check,” preventing a triggering of tensions.⁴² In that regard, the mutual efforts to ensure a regional initiative to find a peaceful solution for regional crisis would contribute Turkish-Iranian relations under the shadow of the “Arab Spring.” However, if they would not compromise at the table, the uprisings in the Arab countries would turn into a regional conflict in which Turkey and Iran would participate in the opposite side.

42 Ali Hussein Bakeer, “Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Revolutions: A Vision of the Present and the Future”, *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 5 July 2011. http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_supreme_leader_makes_ambiguous_fatwa_on_facebook/24360256.html (Accessed 20 October 2011).

Bibliography

"ایران و ترکیه پس از بهار عربی" (Arsi, Kiyan Mahmoud) ارثی کیان محمود (Turkish-Iranian Diplomacy in the Arab Spring), *Khabarnet*, ۱۱ مرداد ۱۳۹۰ (September ۲۰۱۱) <http://www.khabarnet.info/index.php/article/inter/۸۶-international/۱۶-۵۱-۱۴-۱۱-۰۵-۱۳۹۰-۵۲۸۷.html> (Accessed ۲۹ September ۲۰۱۱).

"Tu - key and Iran After the Arab Spring" (Arsi, Kiyan Mahmoud) ارثی کیان محمود (Tu - key and Iran After the Arab Spring) <http://www.mardomak.net/story/65005> ۲۴ شهریور ۱۳۹۰ (2011) (Accessed 29 September 2011).

"Assoc. Prof. Hassan-Khani: Iran and Turkey Can Adopt a Cooperative Competition," in an interview with ORSAM Middle East Advisor Pınar Arıkan, ORSAM, ORSAM Guest, 19 December 2011, <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showOrsamGuest.aspx?ID=263> (Accessed 11 January 2012).

Bakeer, Ali Hussein "Turkish-Iranian Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Revolutions: A Vision of the Present and the Future", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 5 July 2011. http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_supreme_leader_makes_ambiguous_fatwa_on_facebook/24360256.html (Accessed 20 October 2011).

Bakrı, Nada, "Iran Calls on Syria to Recognize Citizens' Demands", *New York Times*, August 21, 2011 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html?_r=1

"Başbakan Yardımcısı Atalay 'Arap Baharını' Anlattı," *Zaman*, 7 July 2012.

"Cumhurbaşkanı Gül Chatham House'da Soruları Cevapladı", <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/170/77922/cumhurbaskani-Gul-chatham-houseda-sorulari-cevapladi.html>, 8 December 2010 (Accessed 11 January 2011)

ترکیه ناتو؛ موشکی سامانه تا باثارون دیدار از "Daneshtalab, Mochtabi" دانشطلب مجتبی (Where is Turkey going?) Raja News, <http://www.rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=102411>, 29 شهریور 1390, September 2011 (Accesses 29 September 2011).

"Davutoğlu: Arap Baharı Bu Yeni Neslin, Olayı Sahiplenmesinin Bölgesel Bir Sonucudur," *Zaman*, 5 June 2012.

“Dozen Countries to Attend Iran Meeting on Syria as Turkey Warns Iran”, *Al Arabiya News*, 8 August 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/08/231163.html> (Accessed 5 September 2012)

“Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Criticizes Erdoğan’s Call for a Secular State”, *Al Arabiya News*, 14 September 2011.

“Erdoğan Slams Russia, China, Iran over Syria in Key Party Congress”, *Today’s Zaman*, 30 September 2012.

“Erdoğan: Yeni Osmanlılığı Kabul Etmeyiz,” *Radikal*, 20 March 2011

سیاست خارجی اسلامگرایان ترکیه (Foreign Policies of Turkey’s Islamists), مرکز پژوهش‌های مجلس شورای اسلامی (The Report of the Research Commission of Iranian Parliament), شماره ۲۶۰، کد موضوعی: ۱۳۸۶، تیر ماه ۱۳۸۶، مسلسل ۸۴۰۳، July 2007, Vol. 31, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/732450> (Accessed 31 May 2011)

“ایران و ترکیه؛ رفاقت و رقابت”، محمود صدیقی (Iran and Turkey: Ally and Competitor), بهمن ۱۳۸۹، ۲۶(2010), http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/Default_view.asp?@=243656 (Accessed 3 June 2011)

“Iran calls Syrian protests a Western plot”, *Reuters*, April 12, 2011 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/12/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE73B22V20110412>

“Iran Foreign Ministry Urges Turkey, Syria to Show Restraint”, *Press TV*, 4 October 2012, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/10/04/264936/iran-urges-turkey-syria-to-show-restraint/>

“Iran Warns Turkey to Butt out of Syria”, *IR Diplomacy*, 26 July 2012, <http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/14882/Iran+Warns+Turkey+to+Butt+Out+of+Syria.html> (Accessed 25 August 2012).

“Iranians’ voice echoed in Muslim world”, *Press TV*, February 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/163526.html>

“Leader calls for <Islamic power bloc>”, *Press TV*, November 5, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/208487.html> (Accessed 20 August 2012)

“Leader: Regional revolts anti-US in core”, *Press TV*, July 1, 2011 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/186935.html>

"There is no Iranian or Turkish Islam: Salehi", *Mehr News Agency*, 15 March 2011

"عثمانی نئو سیاستهای و ترکیه" (Turkey and Its Policies of Neo-Ottomanism), *Iran Diplomacy*, 27 October 2009 (Accessed in 17 November 2009).

"Turkey Made a Strategic Mistake by Agreeing to Host the NATO Shield", *Mehr News*, 10 September 2011 <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1428696> (Accessed 11 September 2011).

"Turkey Turning to Iran, Russia to Tackle Syrian Crisis: Analysts", *Tehran Times*, 24 October 2012.

"استراتژی همکاری ایران و ترکیه" (Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Turkey), مرکز پژوهشهای مجلس شورای اسلامی, (The Report of the Research Commission of Iranian Parliament), مطالعات, دهمین ماه ۱۳۸۹, دفتر: شماره مسلسل: ۱۰۶۳۵, ۲۶۰: ۲۶۰ (February 2010), pp. 60-61, <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/785826> (Accessed 31 May 2011).

"تور تبلیغاتی اردوغان علیه اسرائیل یا به نفع امریکا" (The Propaganda Tour of Erdoğan, Is It against Israel or for US Interests?), *Raja News*, <http://rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=101650> ۲۱ شهریور ۱۳۹۰ (September 2011) (Accessed 29 September 2011).

"زیباکلام: ترکیه نان شکست های ایران را می خورد که نوش جانش!" (Zibakalam: Turkey is Eating Iran's Crumbs, Bon Appetit!), *Khabar Online*, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-75524.aspx> ۲۴ تیر ۱۳۸۹ (24 July 2010) (Accessed 2 June 2011).

Evans, Graham and Jeffrey Newnham, *Dictionary of International Relations*, (USA: The Penguin Books, 1998), p. 462.

Jones, Dorian "Turkey and Iran: The End of the Affair", *Radio Free Europe*, 19 October 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/turkey_iran_end_of_the_affair/24364900.html (Accessed 21 October 2011).

Karan, Ceyda, "Batı'nın Emperyal Perspektifinden Yeni Osmanlılık", *Radikal*, 7 December 2009. (Accessed 7 December 2009).

Kasaba, Reşat and Sibel Bozdoğan, "Turkey at a Crossroad", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000.

Kirişçi, Kemal, "Between Europe and the Middle East: The Transformation of Turkish Policy," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2004

Kohen, Sami, “Yeni Osmanlılık mı?,” *Milliyet*, 25 November 2009 (Accessed 25 November 2009);

Murinson, Alexander, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, November 2006

Oğuzlu, Tarık, “Middle Easternization of Turkey’s Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?” *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, March 2008

Öniş, Ziya and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2009

Robins, Philip, “Between the EU and the Middle East: Turkish Foreign Policy under the AKP Government, 2002-2007”, *ISPI Working Papers*, 2007.

Taşpınar, Ömer, “Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalist Foreign Policy”, *Today’s Zaman*, 22 September 2008.

Taşpınar, Ömer, “Turkey’s Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism”, *Carnegie Papers*, Number 10, September 2008.

Uzun, Özüm S., “Turkish-Iranian Relations in the 2000s: Rapprochement or Beyond?” Unpublished PhD Dissertation (Ankara: Middle East Technical University), 8 March 2012.

Yavuz, M. Hakan, “Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism”, *Middle East Critique*, Spring 1998.

Zakaria, Fareed Interview with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, CNN, 23 October 2011 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1110/23/fzgps.01.html> (Accessed 25 September 2012).