

# The Strategic Interaction between Turkey and Iran in the Syrian Crisis: A Game Theoretical Analysis of the Time Frame from 2011 to 2015

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## Abstract

The Syrian crisis has revealed the clashing strategic interests of Turkey and Iran. The two states are pursuing opposite policies on the Syrian crisis to such an extent that Turkish regional policies concentrate on the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime, whereas Iran devotes its resources to helping the regime stay in power. The reasons of these clashing policies are important that they reflect regional objectives of Turkey and Iran. In this respect, this study investigates the causal relationship between the regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran, as the independent variable, and the contradictory policies of these two countries in the Syrian crisis, as the dependent variable. By doing so, it aims to articulate the role of Turkish and Iranian regional ambitions by taking into account their clashing policies towards the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2015, the time frame before the Astana Process. As of the methodology, this study applies game theoretical modeling because this methodology helps manifestation of a cause-and-effect relationship in a systematized way.

## Key Words

Turkey, Iran, Syrian Crisis, the Middle East, Game Theoretical Analysis, Preference Ordering, Nash Equilibrium

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## Introduction

Turkey and Iran have significant strategic importance in the Middle Eastern region, making the relationship between these two countries important for the region, as well. At first glance, there is relative stability in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. However, the Syrian crisis constitutes the main conflict area between Turkey and Iran. Although stability characterizes the Turkish-Iranian relationship, especially from 2011 to 2015 the Syrian crisis had revealed the clashing strategic interests of Turkey and Iran over the Middle East region. In this respect, having potentially detrimental effects on their relations, the two states have been pursuing policies on the Syrian crisis to such an extent that Turkish regional policies concentrate on the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime, whereas Iran devotes its resources to helping the regime stay in power. Therefore, an analysis of the Turkish-Iranian relationship within the context of the Syrian crisis becomes an important issue area.

As a result, this paper aims to articulate Turkish and Iranian regional ambitions by taking into account their clashing policies towards the Syrian crisis within time frame before the Astana Process from 2011 to 2015. To do so, it investigates the causal relationship between the regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran, as the independent variable, and the clashing policies of these two countries in the Syrian crisis, as the dependent variable. To conduct such an investigation, this study employs game theoretical modeling because it allows for the representation of a cause-and-effect relationship in a systematized way.

Hence, this study discusses methodology by clarifying the reasons behind the employment of game theoretical modeling. Then, it analyzes the history of the Turkish-Iranian relationship in order to bring a historical perspective to the study and to demonstrate that the rivalry between Turkey and Iran over regional supremacy goes back to the Ottoman and Safavid eras. This study also examines Turkey and Iran's policies on the Syrian crisis. Based on these policies, a game theoretical model will be built in order to clarify the nexus between the regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran and their policies on the Syrian crisis.

## The Methodology: Game Theoretical Modeling

Systematized analysis is important in studying intricate subjects such as the relationship between states, because there is a trap of ambiguity if one conducts

analysis in an unsystematic manner. For instance, there are both cooperative and problematic areas in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. These areas vary from nuclear issues to energy, from terrorism to economic interdependency, from regional rivalry to the Arab Spring, and many more. As a result of this complex relationship between Turkey and Iran, it is difficult to specify the causes of an event. Game theoretical models can be a remedy of this particular problem, because they help researchers demonstrate cause and effect in relationships. As Stein (1999: 198-99) stresses, this is due to the analytical strength, internal consistency and deductive understanding of the game theoretical approach as mathematical modeling.

Many scholars of international relations theory consider rational choice theory<sup>1</sup> to be methodology that is built upon a positivist understanding of science rather than a theory of international relations (Fearon et al. 2002: 52, Kurki et al.: 24). Although this methodology accepts complexity and diversity within the social world, it provides simplification. In this respect, advocates of rational choice theory, and in particular the game theoretical approach, avoid attempting to discover laws that make large scale and highly complex structural explanations. On the contrary, they tend make contextual observations and explanations by focusing on individual cases instead of structures (Lichbach 2006: 36). In parallel, in international politics, game theory generally examines the specific strategic interactions of states and their consequences through the language of mathematics (Güner 2003: 164).

Accordingly, game theoretical models, as a necessity of rational choice theory, fulfill the function of simplification (Martin 1978: 92). Complex state interactions are simplified systematically thanks to mathematical modeling, and models clearly indicate which causes lead to which consequences. Thus, they constitute an accounting standard that offers a language through which a scholarly community can communicate ideas and intuitions (Powell 1996: 97). This communication is a prerequisite of any scientific research, as emphasized by King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 7-9). Additionally, through game theoretical modeling, researchers are able to show details they put forward in answering their research questions. Here, one can raise a criticism that game theoretical models focus on certain points and ignore many aspects or details of interstate interactions. Although this criticism is just, simplification is a necessity. As Güner (2003: 165) stresses, detailed descriptions or portrayals,

made intensively, do not constitute an answer to specific questions on interstate interactions. Therefore, the causal link would be blurred. In this respect, the simplification function of models eradicates the problem of clarification. Aside from this function, game theoretical models help the verification of the foreseen consequences by simplifying complex relationship networks. Alternatively, if game theoretical analysis accords with a former explanation, the model becomes the game theoretical proof of that explanation (Güner 2003: 166).

For the sake of simplicity, game theoretical models are generally implemented based on the strategic interactions of two or more (if possible) actors. Each model shares the basic axioms of rational choice theory, such as the assumption of rationality, but their applied contexts differ. In this regard, as Stein (1999: 199) indicates, game theoretical models can be applied to any actor and any strategic interaction. This is an advantage of the game theoretical approach over other methods and results from the contextual feature of rational choice theory. Kaplan (1957: 170) and Sterling Folker's (2006: 94-5) ideas illustrate that models can be built in order to study both egoist and altruist actors. Moreover, while economists can build models based on individuals and firms, researchers of international relations can analyze the interactions of people within state bureaucracies.

So far, the game theoretical approach has been discussed in general terms. This was necessary because the game theoretical approach serves as the methodology of this study. As mentioned above, game theoretical models can demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships simply and clearly. Due to its methodological advantages, this study employs game theoretical modeling in order to analyze the Turkish-Iranian relationship. In this respect, the Syrian crisis is the test case because it has revealed the clashing interests of Turkey and Iran. Hence, the rest of this study will be devoted to a game theoretical analysis of the Turkish-Iranian relationship.

The model in the following section will be built in a simple fashion: *a strategic form*.<sup>2</sup> As Trocy and Von Stengel (2001: 3) indicate, "a game in strategic form, also called as normal form, is a compact representation of a game in which players simultaneously choose their strategies. The resulting payoffs are presented in a table with a cell for each strategy combination."

## **The Turkish-Iranian Relationship and The Syrian Crisis Model**

After giving an overview of the game theoretical approach, the remainder of this study will be dedicated to analysis of the Turkish-Iranian relationship. However, before proceeding with the analysis, a brief historical overview of Turkish-Iranian relations will be provided. This historical overview is necessary because the analysis will be built upon a historical perspective, since the rivalry between Turkey and Iran for regional supremacy goes back to the Ottoman and Safavid eras. Through a discussion of the historical rivalry between Turkey and Iran, these two countries' regional ambitions (the independent variable in this study) will be clarified.

### **An Overview of the History of The Turkish-Iranian Relationship**

Turkey and Iran were (and remain) two important powers in the history of the Middle East. In the historical perspective, Turkey denotes the Ottoman Empire and Iran the Safavid Empire. As Keskin (2009: 46) emphasizes, although the Ottoman and Safavid dynasties had Turkish origins, they had been rivals and hostile to each other within the region due to their different identity formations regarding the framework of Shi'ism and Sunnism. Thus, the Ottomans and Safavids had a religious sectarian clash. However, with the disintegration of the Safavid dynasty and the consolidation of the Qajar dynasty in Iran, the Turkish-Iranian relationship had entered a positive period in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this period, the two sides also engaged with their own problems as they came under mounting pressure from Russia and other European powers (Aras 2006: 62).

In the post-World War I period, both Turkey and Iran began a process of change. The Ottoman Empire had collapsed and the Republic of Turkey was established, while, in Iran, the Pahlavi replaced the Qajars. Meanwhile, nationalist and anti-imperialist soldiers became the rulers of both Turkey and Iran. In this period, Turkey abolished the caliphate, declared a republic and established a secular regime. At the same time, Iran established a monarchy and restored the role of ulema. Although these developments suggest contradictory government orientations, relations between the two continued in a positive direction (Çetinsaya 2003: 122-25).

Following World War II, Turkey and Iran perceived similar internal and external security threats concerning Soviet military presence. At the same

time, Soviet-sponsored domestic movements made Turkey and Iran pursue pro-Western policies (Calabrese 1998: 76). Throughout this period, Turkey and Iran had been the founding members of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 (in 1959, it became the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)), to contain Soviet influence or expansion into the Middle East as part of the U.S. containment policy in the Cold War (Larrabee et al. 1998: 76, Altunışık 2010: 154). Moreover, they established the Regional Cooperation and Development (RCD) Organization together with Pakistan (Aras 2006: 63).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Turkey and Iran became regional allies. However, the Shah's ambitions to make Iran a regional power and build up Iran's armament, which were encouraged by rising oil revenues in the mid-1970s, provoked suspicion in Turkey. Nevertheless, Iran was a pro-Western state and relations continued at a certain level until the 1979 Iran Islamic Revolution (Calabrese 1998: 77).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution was a turning point in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. It was a massive shock for secular-oriented Turkey (Larrabee et al. 1998: 1) because its pro-Western neighbor turned into an Islamist country. Following the revolution, Turkey perceived a threat in the rhetoric of Iran's Islamic Republic, which claimed to have a goal of exporting Islamic revolution outside the country (Altunışık 2010: 154). In addition, Turkey accused Iran of supporting militant Islamic organizations (Aras 2003: 184, Günter 1998). At the same time, Turkey had suspicions about Iran's relations with the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party/Partiya Kerkarani Kurdistan).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, relations had deteriorated in the mid-1990s (McCurdy 2008: 89, Altunışık 2010: 154, Günter 1998).

During the 2000s, there were considerable improvements in Turkish-Iranian relations. The change in the Turkish foreign policy vision with the ruling Justice and Development Party and the shared threat perceptions by Turkey and Iran after the U.S. invasion of Iraq have played important roles in this improvement (Altunışık 2010: 155). In this period, there were high-level visits between Turkish and Iranian officials and political leaders (Demiryol 2013: 114). In addition, trade volume increased to 21.9 billion dollars in 2013 (Turkey Statistics Institute/a). Moreover, Turkey supported Iran's right to develop a nuclear program for peaceful aims throughout the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (Sinkaya 2012: 146-47). Nevertheless, it is hard to say that the relations are non-problematic. For example, when Turkey dropped its objections to the

establishment of the NATO Missile Defense System in Eastern Anatolia in 2011, Iran raised harsh criticisms of the Turkish decision. The two countries are also in competition over Iraqi politics (Jenkins 2012: 43-5).

As mentioned above, although Turkish-Iranian relations have stability, there are still problematic areas. These arise mainly from the contradictory regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran, originating from the historical rivalry between the two states. Çağatay (2011) confirms this by calling it “the oldest power game in the Middle East” and sees it as the continuation of the struggle over regional dominion between Ottoman sultans and Persian shahs. The Arab revolutionary movements in general and the recent Syrian crisis in particular are the areas where this rivalry takes place most intensely (Stein et al. 2012: 146-48).

#### A Game Theoretical Model of Turkish-Iranian Relations: the Syrian Crisis Game

The Arab revolutionary movements, which started in December 2010, shed light on the differences in the Turkish and Iranian approaches towards the Middle East. In the beginning, the two countries supported demonstrations against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Nevertheless, speeches by leaders expressing their support demonstrate their different approaches. While Iran’s president at the time, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, stressed that the demonstrations were inspired by the Islamic revolution and were motivated by Islam (Uygur 2012: 11, CBN News 2011), the then Turkish Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan described the demonstrations as the struggle for freedom and democracy (Sabah 2011).

When the revolutionary movements spread to Syria, Turkey and Iran’s contradictory strategic interests appeared as the extension of the Turkish-Iranian rivalry for regional supremacy because Syria has a key strategic importance for both Turkey and Iran’s regional policies. In this regard, the rest of this study contains a game theoretical model built in to the framework of the Syrian crisis with respect to Turkey and Iran’s policies.

In order to build the model, it is first necessary to define the strategies of Turkey and Iran, the two players of the model. While Turkey’s strategies are *Helping the Opposition* and *Not Helping the Opposition*, Iran’s are *Helping Assad’s Regime* and *Not Helping Assad’s Regime*. These strategies are inferred

from the policies of Turkey and Iran towards the Syrian crisis, which will be examined in further parts of the study. The model based on these strategies is shown below:

**Table 1:** The Basics of the Syrian Crisis Game, Showing the Strategies of Players and Outcomes

	<i>IRAN</i>	
	<u>Helping Assad's Regime</u>	<u>Not Helping Assad's Regime</u>
<u>Helping the Opposition</u>	A	B
	<i>TURKEY</i>	
<u>Not Helping the Opposition</u>	C	D

Based on the strategies of Turkey and Iran, the set of possible outcomes of the model,<sup>5</sup> given consideration to all the combinations of strategies that the players can choose, are as follows:

**A:** Turkey helps the opposition and Iran helps Assad's regime. Therefore, the crisis escalates.

**B:** Turkey helps the opposition and Iran does not help the Assad's regime. Therefore, the overthrow of Assad's regime is more likely because it does not have any support.

**C:** Turkey does not help the opposition but Iran helps the Assad regime. Therefore, Assad's regime achieves an absolute victory because the opposition does not have support.

**D:** Turkey does not help the opposition and Iran does not help the Assad's regime. Therefore, the crisis continues. The possibility of an Assad regime victory is much more likely thanks to its material resources and state functioning capabilities. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the regime to achieve an absolute victory. In this respect, there is a possibility that the opposition can have a say in the government.

In order to proceed, it is necessary to identify Turkey and Iran's preference orderings over the possible outcomes in the model. To do this, this study employs the lexicographic method. In the lexicographic method, player arranges its objectives in a hierarchical order (Pappalardo 2008: 527). At the same



time, Turkey and Iran's primary and secondary objectives need to be clarified. These objectives are derived from Turkey and Iran's actual policies on Syria and the importance of Syria for their regional ambitions. In this respect, *the primary objective of Turkey is the overthrow of Assad's regime*. This study argues that Turkish foreign policy regarding Syria was the most successful policy area in the last decade. Accordingly, Turkey and Syria had entered a process that led to economic integration and strategic partnership (Tür 2010: 163-76). The two countries lifted visa requirements and established the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council. Moreover, they also managed to solve chronic problems such as water and the Alexandretta issue (Sarı 2012: 96-116). At the same time, their trade volume had increased to 2.29 billion dollars in 2010 with the help of the establishment of new free trade areas (Turkey Statistics Intitute/b).<sup>6</sup>Based on these improvements, the Turkish-Syrian relationship had come to be regarded as model for the whole Middle East region (Tür 2011: 33-9).

The negative effects of the chronic problems with Syria on Turkey's relations with the Arab world confirm the importance of Syria for Turkey. As Pope (2013: 5) emphasizes, before the 2000s "Syria had been the main obstacle blocking Turkey's progress in the Arab world." In this respect, Syria had always built up insuperable walls between Turkey and the Arab world during the problematic periods in their relationship in order to push Turkey to make concessions. In such an environment, Syria saw the solution of its problems with Turkey as a precondition for the improvement of Turkish-Arab relations (Sarı 2012: 65-6).

The then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu affirms the importance of Syria for Turkey and its regional ambitions in his book, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position)*. Davutoğlu (2001: 402) states that although Turkey and Syria are geographically close to each other, the two countries could not form a cooperative environment. This had a negative impact on both sides because Turkey is a gateway to the north and west for Syria and Syria is a gateway to the south for Turkey.

Based on Davutoğlu's ideas, through improved relations with Syria Turkey might more easily (and at less cost) reach Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and the

whole Middle East region. Parallel to this, Turkish-Syrian relations based on mutual trust and benefit in the last decade have helped Turkey to play an effective role in the Middle Eastern peace process. Turkey was a mediator between Syria and Israel (Miş 2011: 402) and played a mediator role between Iraq and Syria and Saudi Arabia and Syria (Aras et al. 2011: 33). Turkey's mediator role not only displayed but also reinforced its diplomatic value and reliability in the Middle East region. Thus, Turkey had been called a "problem solver" country and contributor to the security and stability of the region, rather than being a country that is passive and positions itself according to the developments in the region (Sarı 2012: 63-4). This image of Turkey was threatened by the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in the context of Arab revolutionary movements.

In addition, the outbreak of the Syrian crisis contained the risks of not only losing the gains from the last ten years of positive relations with Syria but also interrupting Turkey's whole Middle East policy. In such a risky environment, Turkey was faced with two options concerning the Syrian crisis: supporting Assad's regime, which used brutal force against demonstrations (NBC News 2011), or supporting the opposition in Syria. Consequently, Turkey chose the latter option. Through this choice, Turkey aimed to preserve its rising image as a democratic country before the people of the Middle East (Sandıklı and Semin 2014: 234-235). Moreover, it hoped to get along better with the newly established regimes than it had under the ousted dictators. Furthermore, as Mohammed (2011: 91) states, the Assad regime's rejection of Turkish reform calls in Syria was another reason for Turkey's support for the opposition. Indeed, Turkey called Assad regime to make reforms and hold elections. However, the regime chose to use violent measures to suppress demonstrations in Syria.

As a result, Turkey leaned on the opposition in order to develop its relations with the possible future regime in Syria. Accordingly, Turkey designates its policies in parallel with its objective of overthrowing of the Assad regime. Turkey hosts Syrian refugees in its own territories and allows the opposition to organize itself within its borders (Kardaş 2012: 2).

The primary objective of Turkey is consistent when the importance of Syria for Turkey and its regional ambitions, which rely on the overthrow of Assad's regime, are analyzed. As a matter of fact, this objective is often declared by Turkish high-level officials. Davutoğlu, for example, indicated that the estab-

ishment of stability and trust in the Middle East depends on the fall of Bashar al-Assad (Sabah 2013). In this respect, Turkey would choose the outcomes of A and B over C and D because it is possible for Assad's regime to have a victory over the opposition in the outcomes of C and D. Therefore, the preference ordering of Turkey is  $\{A, B\} > \{C, D\}$ . In such an ordering, *Helping the Opposition* is the dominant strategy for Turkey.

Contrary to the Turkish position, *the primary objective of Iran is to keep Assad's regime in power*. As discussed previously, Iran initially supported the revolutionary movements in the Arab world. However, when these movements spread to Syria, Iran changed its attitude (Uygur 2012: 19). In this respect, Iran began supporting the regime rather than the opposition once revolutions spread to Syria. The supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali H. Khamenei, who had supported demonstrations before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, characterized the demonstrations in Syria as a conspiracy of the United States of America and Zionists and declared Iran's support for the Assad's regime (Israel National News 2012). In parallel with Khamenei's statement, Iran provides moral and material support to the Assad's regime (Goodarzi 2013: 50).

The reasons behind the Iranian support for Assad's regime vary, but as in the case of Turkey, the main motivation is related to Iran's regional ambitions. Firstly, Syria and thus the Assad regime have been the most loyal and reliable ally to Iran in the region. Following the Islamic revolution, Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the provisional government in Iran (Goodarzi 2013: 40, Bartell 2012: 139). Moreover, Syria provided diplomatic and military support to Iran in the Iran-Iraq War between 1980-1988. Afterwards, Syria and Iran signed a number of oil, commercial and military agreements that made their relations even closer (Goodarzi 2013: 41). These two countries have been able to increase their influence in the region through their alliance. Therefore, the continuation of the Assad's regime means the continuation of the Syria-Iran axis in the region.

Secondly, Assad's regime has a Nusairi identity.<sup>7</sup> Iran regards this as a Shiite coalition (or Shiite Jihad) in the region that is important for the Shiite Crescent<sup>8</sup> (Smyth 2015: 13-21, Sandıklı and Semin 2014: 216-217). Because the opposition in Syria consists mainly of Sunnis, Iran sees the Syrian crisis as a struggle between Shi'ism and Sunnism (Satloff 2011; Smyth 2015: 13-21). To this end, Ayatollah Kadhimi al-Husseini al-Haeri gave a public fatwa calling

on Shiite fighters to fight in Syria in the name of defending the velayat-e faqih ideology (Smyth 2015: 16). Hence, defeat of Assad's regime may damage Iranian influence in the region with respect to the Shiite Crescent. Through this crescent, Iran is able to exert its influence in the Middle East region by keeping its control and close relationship with Shia populations.

The third reason for Iranian support to the Assad regime is due to the fact that Syria functions as a passage for Iran to reach organizations such as Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon to fight against Israel (Bartell 2011: 141). Through this passage, the strategic maneuver capability of Iran in the region increases. Iran also has huge economic investments in Syria. According to Gelbart (2010: 40), Iran established an automobile factory in Syria in order to meet 40% of automobile demand in the country before the outbreak of civil war. Moreover, the buses in Damascus have been imported from Iran. Iran also financed the first private sector power plant and numerous mosques around Syria. The fall of the Assad regime would damage these investments and narrow the maneuver capability of Iran in the region. Therefore, the continuation of the Assad regime is an existential matter for Iran and has priority. This priority had already been mentioned by the supreme leader of Iran, Khamenei, who said that that Iran will give full and unlimited support to the regime (Alakhbar English 2013) and the toppling of Assad is a red line for them (The Jerusalem Post 2013).

In this context, Iran would choose the outcomes of C and D to A and B because in the outcomes of A and B the Assad regime is toppled or the crisis escalates. It is obvious that the overthrow of the Assad regime is the most undesirable outcome for Iran. In addition, the escalation of the crisis creates uncertainty over the future of the Assad regime. At the same time, the Assad regime gets an absolute victory or stays in power with some opposition influence in the outcomes of C and D. Therefore, the outcomes of C and D correspond to the primary objectives of Iran. As a result, the preference ordering of Iran is  $\{C, D\} > \{A, B\}$ .

It is also necessary to identify the secondary objectives of Turkey and Iran in order to demonstrate their complete preference orderings. In this respect, *the secondary objective of Turkey* is to prevent an absolute defeat of the opposition, for an absolute victory of the Assad regime will wipe out Turkey's hopes to have good relations with Syria, which would prevent Turkey from pursuing

effective policies in Middle East. Accordingly, the best outcome for Turkey is the B outcome, in which Turkey helps the opposition and Iran does not help the Assad regime. Hence, the opposition may have a victory over the Assad regime. As a result, Turkey prefers the B outcome to the A outcome, which is the next best outcome.

Moreover, Turkey prefers the D outcome to the C outcome because the C outcome refers to the absolute defeat of the opposition while the D outcome points that the opposition may take part in the government even if the Assad regime wins. In this respect, the C outcome is the worst outcome and the D outcome is the next worst outcome for Turkey. Based on this, the preference ordering of Turkey with the payoffs is as follows:

Preference Ordering<sub>Turkey</sub>    B > A > D > C  
   4    3    2    1

*The secondary objective of Iran is to prevent Turkey from supporting the opposition.* Iranian officials already accuse Turkey of supporting the opposition and criticize for this reason. For instance, *Vahid Ahmadi*, the chair of Foreign Policy Committee of the *Iranian parliament*, *accused Turkey of being a puppet of the West because of its policies in the Syrian crisis (Star 2013)*. Moreover, *Hasan Firuzabadi*, the *Chief of Staff* of Iran, criticized Turkey’s negative attitude towards the Assad regime (*YeniŞafak 2012*). Accordingly, the best outcome for Iran is the C outcome, in which Turkey does not help the opposition and Iran helps the Assad regime, thus guaranteeing an absolute victory for the regime. As a result, Iran prefers the C outcome to the D outcome, the next best outcome for Iran, because the opposition may have a say in the government in the D outcome. This may happen because the opposition segments in the government will probably take a negative stand against Iran because it helped the Assad regime in the civil war. Similarly, Iran prefers the A outcome to the B outcome because the uncertainty over the future of the Assad regime is preferable to the absolute defeat of the Assad regime. Therefore, the B outcome is the worst outcome and the A outcome is the next worst outcome. In such an ordering, *Helping the Assad Regime* is the dominant strategy for Iran. The preference ordering of Iran, with payoffs, is as follows:

Preference Ordering<sub>Iran</sub>    C > D > A > B  
   4    3    2    1

Based on the preference orderings of Turkey and Iran and their payoffs, the existing model is as follows:

**Table 2:** The Syrian Crisis Game Matrix Consists of the Payoffs of Players

		<i>IRAN</i>	
		<u>Helping Assad's Regime</u>	<u>Not Helping Assad's Regime</u>
<u>Helping the Opposition</u>	3 , 2 ( $x_1$ , $y_1$ )	4 , 1 ( $x_2$ , $y_2$ )	
		<i>TURKEY</i>	
<u>Not Helping the Opposition</u>	1 , 4 ( $x_3$ , $y_3$ )	2 , 3 ( $x_4$ , $y_4$ )	

As an important point, the strategic interaction between Turkey and Iran in the context of the Syrian crisis from 2011 and 2015 gave the image of a zero-sum game in which one side's gain is another's loss.<sup>9</sup> The policies and primary and secondary objectives of Turkey and Iran confirm this image. This is because while Turkey built its regional and Syrian policies on the objective of overthrowing the Assad regime, Iran pursued strategies for the continuation of the regime. In such a situation, it seems like the gain of one side means the loss of the other. Therefore, this is a zero-sum situation.

Because the strategic interaction between Turkey and Iran turns out to be a zero-sum game, the zero-sum situation (for the logic of transactions that take the sensitivity to relative gains see Grieco 1998: 485-507) should be applied to the game. First, the sensitivities of players to relative gain should be identified. In zero-sum games, the sensitivities are at the highest level because the gain of one side means the loss of another. The symbol of sensitivity level to relative gains is  $r$ .  $r$  has to be between  $0 \leq r \leq 1$ .  $r$  is equal to 1 at the highest sensitivity level and 0 when there is no sensitivity (which means players care for absolute gains rather than relative gains). In this regard, the value of  $r$  depends on sensitivity level. It decreases when sensitivity is lower and it increases when sensitivity is higher.

$r$  is equal to 1 in the Syrian crisis game between Turkey and Iran because their sensitivities to relative gains are at the highest level as a result of the zero-sum situation in their strategic interaction. The effect of the highest sensitivity relative gains is shown below:

**Table 3:** The Zero-sum Relationship Equation in the Syrian Crisis Game

<i>IRAN</i>		
	<u>Helping Assad's Regime</u>	<u>Not Helping Assad's Regime</u>
<u>Helping the Opposition</u>	$X_1 - rY_1, Y_1 - rX_1$	$X_2 - rY_2, Y_2 - rX_2$
<i>TURKEY</i>		
<u>Not Helping the Opposition</u>	$X_3 - rY_3, Y_3 - rX_3$	$X_4 - rY_4, Y_4 - rX_4$

**Table 4:** The Application of the Zero-sum Relationship Equation to the Syrian Crisis Game

<i>IRAN</i>		
	<u>Helping Assad's Regime</u>	<u>Not Helping Assad's Regime</u>
<u>Helping the Opposition</u>	3 - 1.2, 2 - 1.3	4 - 1.1, 1 - 1.4
<i>TURKEY</i>		
<u>Not Helping the Opposition</u>	1 - 1.4, 4 - 1.1	2 - 1.3, 3 - 1.2

When the process is completed,

**Table 5:** The Payoffs of Players under the Zero-sum Relationship

<i>IRAN</i>		
	<u>Helping Assad's Regime</u>	<u>Not Helping Assad's Regime</u>
<u>Helping the Opposition</u>	1, -1	3, -3
↓ <i>NASH EQUILIBRIUM</i>		
<i>TURKEY</i>		
<u>Not Helping the Opposition</u>	-3, 3	-1, 1

### Discussion

The model above demonstrates that Iran obtains better payoffs by choosing Helping Assad's Regime regardless of Turkey's strategies. Iran gets -1 instead of -3 against Turkey's strategy *Helping the Opposition*, and 3 instead of 1 against Turkey's strategy *Not Helping the Opposition* by choosing *Helping Assad's Regime*. Similarly, Turkey obtains better payoffs by choosing *Helping the*

*Opposition* regardless of Iran's strategies. In this regard, Turkey gets 1 instead of -3 against Iran's strategy *Helping Assad's Regime*, and 3 instead of -1 against Iran's strategy *Not Helping Assad's Regime* by choosing *Helping the Opposition*. Accordingly, Turkey and Iran employ the strategies *Helping the Opposition* and *Helping Assad's Regime*. The dominant-strategy equilibrium<sup>10</sup> and the Nash Equilibrium<sup>11</sup> in the model emerge at the A outcome. At this point, Turkey and Iran have no incentive to change their strategies. This means that while Turkey obtains the next-best outcome, Iran obtains the next-worst outcome as a result of their strategic interaction in the Syrian crisis under assumed objectives, preference orderings and strategies of Turkey and Iran, which are derived from their policies, decision makers' speeches and historical background of their relationship.

The equilibrium in the model corresponds to the actual Turkish and Iranian situations in the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2015. In this regard, reflecting the status quo in the Syrian crisis between 2011 and 2015, the equilibrium occurs in the A outcome. It can be said that this status quo still exists in the course of the Syrian crisis as of the year 2018. Thus, this can be inferred as the verification of the logic on which the model is established. This logic is that, in the context of the Syrian crisis, Turkey and Iran desire different scenarios, which reflect their contradictory ambitions in the Middle East. Accordingly, Turkey helps the opposition and Iran supports the Assad regime in Syria. According to the model, both Turkey and Iran are aware that if they change their strategies from *Helping* to *Not Helping*, the other side will be in an advantageous position in shaping the course of the Syrian crisis, which will have detrimental consequences for their regional objectives. Therefore, one should not expect a change in Turkish and Iranian strategies concerning their policies in Syria. Such a change may occur if the future of Syria becomes a less important issue area for Turkey and Iran's regional objectives. However, this seems to a remote possibility. In addition, such a change may also occur if a new dynamic emerges in the Syrian crisis that has potential to affect Turkey or Iran's preferences in the crisis. Obviously, such a dynamic has emerged especially for Turkey when the USA, Turkey's NATO ally, has decided to align itself with the PKK, a terrorist organization targeting Turkey. As a result, Turkey started Astana Talks with Russia and Iran. Yet, in leaders level both Turkey and Iran has not stepped back from their strategies in the Syrian crisis, *Helping the Opposition* and *Helping Assad's Regime* even though Astana



process has been ongoing. This is because if Iran's objectives are realized in Syria, Turkey's southern borders may be under Iranian control. For Iran, if Turkey's objectives prevail in Syria, Iran's maneuver capability in the region may diminish dramatically. Moreover, Iran may lose its most loyal ally in the region. Therefore, as the model also indicates, it is difficult to assert that Turkey and Iran may change their strategies in the Syrian crisis.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzes the Turkish-Iranian relationship in the framework of the game theoretical approach. Similar analysis can be conducted on the same subject through another methodology. However, first, the game theoretical approach is employed as methodology in this study because it helps manifestation of cause and effect relations in a systematic way. Second, the conclusions reached can be tested and proved when they are analyzed through models. Therefore, the policies of Turkey and Iran in the Syrian crisis are injected in a model called the Syrian Crisis Game in order to investigate the causal relationship between the regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran, as the independent variable, and the clashing policies of these two countries in Syria, as the dependent variable. Because Syria has a significant strategic importance for both Turkish and Iranian designs on the Middle East, these two countries implement different and clashing policies in the Syrian crisis. These clashing interests have such a character that strategic interaction between Turkey and Iran in the context of the Syrian crisis turned out to be a zero-sum game especially between 2011-2015. In other words, the gain of one side becomes the loss of other. The model in this study is established in parallel to this strategic interaction between the two countries and their objectives, which are justified through their regional designs, historical relationship and the speeches of their high officials. As a result, the model confirms the causal relationship between the regional ambitions of Turkey and Iran and the contradictory policies of these two countries in Syria.

The equilibrium in the model demonstrates that Turkey helps the opposition in Syria while Iran helps the Assad regime. This corresponds to the actual positions of the two countries in the Syrian crisis. At the same time, the likelihood of change in their position is low because for Turkey, if Iran's objectives are realized in Syria, Turkey's southern borders may be under control of Iran. In addition, for Iran, if Turkey's objectives prevail in Syria, Iran's maneuver

capability in the region may diminish dramatically and Iran would lose its most reliable ally that is the Assad's regime. Hence, they do not step back in the Syrian crisis and this will likely to prevail unless a new dynamic occurs in the course of the crisis that would affect Turkey and Iran preference orderings. Regarding these points, the Nash equilibrium in the model constitutes proof for this conclusion. With this feature, this study differs from the other works on the subject matter. This means that this study not only draws conclusions based on speeches of leaders and actual policies of states, as other works do, but also transcends these works by providing proof of these conclusions through the analytical framework of game theoretical modeling.

## Notes

- 1 The game theoretical approach is a branch of rational choice theory. Therefore, the arguments surrounding rational choice theory are valid for the game theoretical approach.
- 2 A similar example of the model built in this study is available in Güner's work (2012) "A Short Note on the Use of Game Theory in Analyses of International Relations" (published in *E-International Relations*), which analyzes Iran and Israel's strategic interaction in the Nuclear Crisis (see <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/21/a-short-note-on-the-use-of-game-theory-in-analyses-of-international-relations/>).
- 3 The RCD was a multi- governmental organization between Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. It was established for the socio-economic development of the member states. In 1985, the Economic Cooperation Organization replaced it.
- 4 The PKK is a terrorist organization targeting Turkey. It aims to establish a Kurdish state in the southeastern part of Turkey. Turkey asserts that Islamic Republic supported the PKK in order to decrease Turkish influence in the region.
- 5 The game consists of only two players: Turkey and Iran. One possible criticism that there are many actors or players in the Syrian crisis, rather than just Turkey and Iran. In this respect, the game established in this study does not fully cover the issue of the Syrian crisis. For example, the Russian stances, the Saudi Arabian stance, the Gulf countries' stances, or the US stance are ignored. This criticism is valid. Nevertheless, the Syrian crisis game in this study is established simple to answer the specific question about the role of Turkish and Iranian regional ambitions in their contradictory policies in the Syrian crisis. As a matter of the fact, as has been emphasized in this study, game theoretical models focus on certain points by ignoring many aspects or

details of interstate interactions. This is true, in a way. Nevertheless, this is a necessity. As Güner (2003: 165) stresses, detailed descriptions or portrayals, made intensively, do not constitute an answer to the specific questions on interstate interactions. Nevertheless, this issue is the main limitation of this study. In order to answer our specific research question by using a game theoretical model, it is a necessity that we have to exclude other actor from the model.

- 6 The volume of trade was about 580 million dollars in 2002.
- 7 Nusairis are a prominent religious group centered in Syria. They follow a branch of the Twelver school of Shiite Islam.
- 8 A Shiite crescent is seen by Arab Sunni elites as an attempt by Iran, first, to engage the masses in the region and, second, to build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shiite governments and political factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region; and, third, to expand its regional role and power (for more information see Barzegar 2008: 87-99).
- 9 As stated above, there are cooperation and conflict areas between Turkey and Iran. In this respect, the Syrian Crisis constitutes the main conflict area. The zero-sum situation is valid only for the strategic interaction between Turkey and Iran concerning their interests in Syria. The actual relations between the two countries confirm this, as Turkey and Iran continue pursuing their contradictory policies in Syria while cooperating on some other areas such as energy. This is to say that they tend to isolate their policies in Syria from other areas. At the same time, they do not step back in the Syrian Crisis for the sake of potential benefits in other areas of cooperation.
- 10 Dominant strategy refers to an action or strategy that is optimal regardless of other player's strategies. If both players have dominant strategies, the model ends up with dominant strategy equilibrium.
- 11 'Pure-strategy Nash equilibrium is an action profile with the property that no single player can obtain a higher payoff by deviating unilaterally from this profile (for more information see Sethi 2008: 374-75).

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# Suriye Krizi'nde Türkiye ve İran Arasındaki Stratejik Etkileşim: 2011-2015 Zaman Diliminin Oyun Kuramsal Analizi

Buğra SARI\*

## Özet

Suriye Krizi, Türkiye ve İran'ın Ortadoğu bölgesine dair çatışan stratejik çıkarlarını gün yüzüne çıkarmıştır. Nitekim Türkiye Suriye Krizi'ne dair Beşar Esad rejimine dair politikalar izlerken; İran Esad rejiminin iktidarda kalması için kaynaklarını seferber etmiştir. Türkiye ve İran'ın Suriye Krizi minvalinde çatışan bu politikaları iki ülkenin bölgesel hedefleriyle yakından ilişkilidir. Bu argüman temelinden yola çıkarak, eldeki çalışma Türkiye ve İran'ın bölgesel ihtiraslarını bağımsız değişken ve bu iki ülkenin Suriye Krizi'nde çatışan politikalarını bağımlı değişken olarak ele alarak bu iki değişken arasındaki neden-sonuç ilişkisini araştırmaktadır. Bundaki amaç Astana Süreci öncesi zaman dilimi olan 2011-2015 yılları arasında Türkiye ve İran'ın Suriye Krizi'nde izledikleri politikaların içerisinde bu iki ülkenin birbirleriyle çatışan bölgesel ihtirasların rolünü ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma bunu yaparken, neden-sonuç ilişkilerini sistematik biçimde gösterme imkânı sağlaması hasebiyle oyun kuramsal yaklaşımı araştırma yöntemi olarak kullanmaktadır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Türkiye, İran, Suriye Krizi, Ortadoğu, Oyun Kuramsal Analiz, Tercih Sıralaması, Nash Dengesi

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# Стратегическое взаимодействие Турции и Ирана в сирийском кризисе: теоретический анализ игрового времени с 2011 по 2015 год

**Бугра Сары\***

## **Аннотация**

Сирийский кризис выявил столкновение стратегических интересов Турции и Ирана. Оба государства преследуют противоположную политику в отношении сирийского кризиса: турецкая региональная политика концентрируется на свержении режима Башара Асада, тогда как Иран выделяет ресурсы на то, чтобы помочь режиму оставаться у власти. Причины такого конфликта следует искать, анализируя региональные цели Турции и Ирана. В этой связи в данной работе исследуется причинно-следственная связь между региональными амбициями Турции и Ирана как независимой переменной и противоречивой политикой этих двух стран в сирийском кризисе в качестве зависимой переменной. Исходя из этого, автор стремится сформулировать роль турецких и иранских региональных амбиций, принимая во внимание их конфликтную политику в отношении сирийского кризиса с 2011 по 2015 год, вплоть до Астанинского процесса. По методологии в этом исследовании применяется теоретическое моделирование игры, так как эта методология помогает системно выявлять причинно-следственные связи.

## **Ключевые слова**

Турция, Иран, сирийский кризис, Ближний Восток, теоретический анализ игры, предпочтение, равновесие Нэша

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