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Iran-Turkey Relations in Post 9/11 Era

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In contemporary Middle East politics, Iran and Turkey are the two important countries. The two countries are among the ancient civilisations and are also old competitors for playing a dominant role in the Middle East power structure as well. Further the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 added extra fuel to their competition by created a power vacuum in the power structure of the region. However despite ideological differences between the two countries maintained peaceful relations as there are certain concerns like geopolitical realities and economic interests, energy, Iran's isolation in world politics due to US led sanctions etc that compelled the two nations to work together. Even Turkey played very active role in mediating between Iran and US for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue peacefully. However the upspring in Middles Eastern countries once again brought their difference to forefront particularly with respect to ongoing Syrian crisis. Both the countries alleged one another for adding fuel to the crises in the region in order to safeguard their national interests. In this situation of uncertainties, this paper would try to look into the changing nature of Iran-Turkey relationship in post 9/11 era and try to analyse and pinpoint the areas of competition between the two countries and its effects on regional peace and stability.

Keywords: *Iran, Turkey, sanctions, the political situation in the Middle East.*

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Research area: *sociology, politology.*

Introduction

The Middle East has been one of the most vital and strategically important regions in the World politics. Throughout its history it has remained the bone of contention among the World powers. The issues which have been the bone of contention throughout its history are oil, strategic influence and market. The United States invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 attack set alarm bells ringing in several countries in the Middle East. The Key regional countries like Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia

interpreted the invasion as the first major step in a process of enforcing “regime change” in the region. The US invasion was also interpreted in larger parts of West Asia as a reinforcement of Washington’s alliance with Israel¹. The invasion also caused structural changes in the regional configuration of the Middle East. No doubt Iran experienced its encirclement and threat to its survival because of its relations with US and by the presence of the western forces in Iran’s neighbouring countries Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia and in the strategically important

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Persian gulf. But the invasion also eliminated it's the most serious enemies (Taliban and Saddam Hussain). Further in post 9/11 era the two countries Iran and Turkey emerged as crucial actors in maintaining the regional prosperity and stability. The invasion of Iraq paved the way towards a growing strategic alignment between Iran and Turkey as both the countries viewed the developments in Iraq from security angle. Iran was determined to prevent the United States from using Iraq as a base of operation to eliminate Iran and sought to avert Iraq appearing as a unitary and strong state hostile to Tehran. Turkey's primary concern was also related to its own security needs as turkey was fearful of the emergence of US-Kurdish alliance².

Both the governments and people of the two countries were strongly opposed to the invasion of Iraq. Even being an ally of US Ankara opposed the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, when parliament did not endorse joining the war. the another reason which remarkably improved the Iran-Turkey relationship is the coming of the Islamist party Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power in Turkey in 2002. The Justice and Development Party not only changed the course of Turkey foreign policy but also its relations with Iran which were under the constant crisis in the last decade of 20th century³. It was the Turkish foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu who worked out a doctrine that enabled Ankara to deepen its ties with the regional countries. In the doctrine Turkey decided to follow a pro-active rather than a crisis oriented approach armed with foreign policy while keeping focus on peace diplomacy and having zero problems with neighbouring states⁴. Iran on the other hand because of its antagonistic relations with the United States had been going through a very difficult phase of economic sanctions and faces the isolation from the World. So the bilateral relations between the two countries have grown at a rapid pace

during the past decade. In addition, the Turkey-Iran relations are not only important for the two countries, but have assumed a geopolitical significance for Western Powers and Middle Eastern countries alike because of the impact that they might have on the success or failure of Western sanctions against Iran⁵. Even the Turkey's last Prime Minister Mr. Erdogan have played a role of mediator in defusing the US-Iran tension on Iranian nuclear issue in 2010 and also defended the Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear technology in first few years. In May 2010 as a non-permanent member of UNSC, the Turkish Government voted against the sanctions on Iran and emphasized the importance of nuclear agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil earlier that month and claimed that sanctions will not resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. With the subsequent improvement in the bilateral relations between the two countries resulted in rapid increase in high level exchange of diplomatic officials⁶. However in contemporary period Iran-Turkey relations remained venerable to occasional tensions and disagreements on different issues like the Iraq crisis, Kurdish issue and Syrian crisis which not only halted the process of strengthening and providing concrete base to their bilateral relations but also in the process of strengthening and maintenance of security, peace and stability in the region.

Iraq Crisis

The US withdrawal from Iraq created an area of fierce competition between the two countries and pushed the two countries in opposition to each other. Both the countries tried their best to increase their area of influence in the war torn country on the basis sectarian affinities. In Iranian prospective it is important to maintain good and friendly relationship with Shia Iraqi leadership which will provide security to the Iranian national interests besides securing the

two religious sites located in Najaf and Karbala⁷. Therefore Iran supported the domination of Nouri Al-Maliki government and on the other hand it established its trade relations particularly with the Shia dominated area of Basra⁸. Turkey on the other hand also built its ties with different segments of Iraq society particularly in the Kurdish areas. Despite huge security and safety concerns for the foreign companies operating in Iraq, Turkey is the country which is having largest number of companies operating in Iraq. In October 2012 out of 2,241 foreign companies from 78 countries, 1,085 were from Turkey. Turkey views economic investment in Kurdish region not only important for increasing its influence in the region but also for securing the energy resources of the region. It was assumed that establishing special relationship with the KRG having 40-50 billion barrels of oil and 3-6 trillion cubic meters of natural gas would not only decrease Turkey's dependence on supplies from Russia and Iran but also provide Turkey an opportunity for becoming one of the important oil and gas transportation/export hub for Europe. This competition not only created rift in Iran between the central government and KRG of Iraq but also between Turkey and Iran. Turkey was strongly against the second term of Nouri Al-Maliki as Prime Minister while Iran on the other hand fully supported Maliki government. Even former Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his displeasure over Iran's growing influence in Iraq after the US withdrawal from Iraq⁹. Also with the emergence of ISIS the crisis in Iraq deepened further because ISIS not only threaten the security and integrity of Iraq but also security of Turkey and Iran as well. On the one hand ISIS's control over the areas near the border of Turkey makes Turkey more vulnerable for ISIS attacks while on the other hand Turkey is also facing multi-dimensional security threats to her national interests as ISIS is fighting against the allies of Turkey in both Syria as well as in Iraq.

For example, forces Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front and the Kurdish militia are all supported by Turkey and ISIS is involved in clashes with the forces in Syria. While Iraq which is considered the birth place of ISIS ranks second in Turkish foreign trade and Turkey enjoyed extensive relationship with Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in respect of trade, energy and security. It is through KRG the Turkish goods are transported to different regions of Iraq but ISIS's invasion has shattered these opportunities for Turkey as well. The Iraqi political leaders with whom Turkey had good relations fled the cities e.g. the governor of Mosul Mr. Ethil al Nujaifi and former spokesman of Iraqi parliament Mr. Usamah al Nujaifi. Even the construction projects which were undertaken by Turkish companies in Arbil also came under threat of ISIS. It is due to these reasons the ISIS has also become a threat to the security of Turkey and its strategic interests as well¹⁰. Iran on the other hand is also determined to protect and strengthen the sovereignty of the Iraq by preventing ISIS from taking over the Iraq. Iran has provided every kind of help to Iraqi government in the fight against the ISIS. Tehran is determined to prevent an ISIS victory in Iraq since this would have major security implications for Iran. Such a development would pose a direct threat to Iran's national security and to the vital interests of Iran. It would also enable ISIS to encourage unrest in the Sunni-inhabited regions of Iran, leading to the destabilization of the Iranian state. The Islamic Republic is also concerned that developments may lead to the disintegration of Iraq, and could lead negative political and strategic consequences for Iran in terms of a knock-on effect on Iranian Kurdistan¹¹.

Kurdish Issue

The second important issue between Turkey and Iran is the problem of Kurdish insurgency which not only is a threat to the unity of the

two countries but also becomes an obstacle in the process of strengthening their bilateral relationship. Turkey wanted to curb the activities of the PKK (Kurdish Working Party), which found safe haven in northern Iraq. While Iran on the other side is fighting the Kurdish insurgency led by Free Life in Kurdistan which has affiliated with the PKK. However both the countries from time to time blamed each other for inciting the Kurdish insurgent groups for creating problems and weakening one another. However both the countries had taken various initiatives from time to time and both the countries publicly pledged to suppress all the Kurdish insurgency activities on their respective territories. The US invasion of Iraq also brought Turkey and Iran closer to each other as both the countries were fearful of the disintegration of Iraq and establishment of independent Kurdistan by the support of US. In response to this concern, in 2004 during Erdogan's first official visit to Iran signed a MOU on security cooperation, for sharing intelligence and carrying out joint operation against Kurdish militants¹². On the other hand Turkey also started negotiation with the KKP leaders in order to find out a peaceful solution of the problem. But the initiatives between Iran and Turkey did not last long with the start of uprising against the Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Both Turkey and Iran adopted antagonistic policies regarding the Syrian Issue which lead them to fighting proxy war against each other. Turkey claimed that Iran provided supported not only the Assad regime but also facilitated unimaginable logistic support, refuge and passage to the Kurdish fighters for increasing Kurdish insurgency in Turkey¹³. However, it is definite that if Kurdish insurgents got any part as Independent Kurdistan out the three countries Iran, Iraq and Turkey then they will start a new and more strong movement in other countries. So the policy makers and think tanks of all

the three countries must took this thing into their consideration before getting involved in providing support and safe haven to the Kurdish fighters in respective countries. Also fighting with the Kurdish insurgents together not only reduces economic and military expenditures but also will be the end of the insurgency. As well as will provide an effective atmosphere and strong base for developing long term strategic partnership among the three countries and ultimately will lead to the regional stability and strong relationship between these countries.

Syrian Crisis

The third important issue of Turkey-Iran relations is the prevailing crisis in Syria as both the countries once again has adopted policy which is opposing to each other. No doubt initially Turkish diplomats tried to find out quick solution to the Syrian crisis by supporting radical reforms. However, the incidents like the shooting down of Turkish F-4 warplane by Syrian Military in June 2012, then the Syrian fighter jet by Turkish military in September 2013 and then the exchange of artillery shells for several days between Turkey and Syria in the same year further escalated tension between Turkey and Syria¹⁴. Later in January NATO began deploying the Patriot missile air defence system with four hundred military personnel, inside Turkey along its Syrian border, presumably to deter future such incidents (accidents) between the two countries¹⁵. The increase in Akara's criticism against Assad and allowing the anti-Assad parties to organise and hold meetings on Turkish soil increased anxiety with in Tehran. Because the relationship Tehran and Syria dates back to the beginning of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and since then Syria has remained Iran's main ally in the region. Both the countries share many geopolitical interests like both are anti-Israeli and anti-US as well as both are the patrons and supports of Hezbollah.

Therefore fall of the Assad's regime would not only make Iran suffer from the loss of a strong ally but also endanger stability of the Iranian regime as well. Regime change in Syria may induce Iranians for public demonstrations for changing the Iranian regime. So for securing the national interests Iran extended unconditional military and political support to Syria for suppressing the anti-regime demonstrations¹⁶. Iran has severely criticised Turkish policy on Syrian. An article that entitled "Iran's serious stance in the face of Syrian events" that was published in one of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards media outlets warned that,

"Should Turkish officials insist on their contradictory behaviour and if they continue on their present path, serious issues are sure to follow. We will be put in the position of having to choose between Turkey and Syria. Syria's justification in defending herself along with mirroring ideological perceptions would sway Iran towards choosing Syria¹⁷."

Turkey on the other hand criticized Iran on its failure to object the growing civilian death toll in Syria the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Prime Minister Bulent Aric said:

"I am addressing you, the Islamic Republic of Iran, you bear the word Islamic but don't know how deserving you are of it. Over the last two days have you uttered one sentence about what is happening in Syria¹⁸."

The contradictory policy of both the countries leads them into fighting a proxy war in Syria. As Turkey supported opposition groups particularly the Free Syrian Army which composed largely of Sunni Muslims fighting against the Assad's

regime. Iran on the other hand provided Assad every kind of help needed particularly in supplying arms and military support to Assad's regime. That led to deepen the Syrian crisis as well as in their bilateral relations.

Conclusion/ Way out

The conflicts in Kurdish region, Iraq and Syrian have caused huge damage on almost all aspects of life of the people living in these areas irrespective of sex, age and religious sect. The conflicts not only affected the population of the two conflict ridden countries but also the social, economic and culture of other neighbouring countries of Iraq and Syria because of the refugees of the two countries. In Syrian crisis AS per reports more than 2,50,000 people lost their lives in the conflict from lost four and a half years. More than 11 million people have been forced to leave their homes of which four million were taken refuge in neighbouring like Lebanon, Jordon and Turkey¹⁹. In Iraq during the US invasion it was estimated that 6,55,000 people were lost their lives and continues with the rise of ISIS in the region. The Kurdish insurgency also from a long period has been creating the same problems for the people of the region. Therefore, there are also millions of people who were suffer and bear the burns of the conflicts, millions of people who lost their jobs, education and health care facilities. Indeed it is responsibility of both Turkey and Iran to come forward and play the role of the responsible countries for maintaining the peace and stability in already war torn region. In order to stop further human and economic loss as well as to bring stability in the most crucial region of the World, Is it not time for both the countries to leave the politicising these crisis and play an active role for finding out a peaceful resolution of the crisis so that the precious lives can be saved. Both the countries must catch the opportunity to set an example and show the other countries of

the world that there are possibilities for resolving the issues peacefully. Further the resolution of the issues will also open new ways for developing their long term strategic partnership.

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Отношения между Ираном и Турцией после 11 сентября 2001 г.

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Иран и Турция являются двумя важными странами в современной политике Ближнего Востока. Обе страны относятся к древним цивилизациям и с давних пор соперничают за право играть ведущую роль в распределении сил на Ближнем Востоке. Вторжение США в Афганистан и Ирак в 2001 и 2003 гг. добавили масла в огонь, создав тем самым определенный вакуум в структуре власти региона. Тем не менее, несмотря на идеологические разногласия, Турция и Иран сохраняли мирные отношения ввиду определённой заинтересованности в геополитических событиях и наличии экономических интересов, в том числе в сфере энергетики. Кроме того, исключение Ирана из мировой политики из-за санкций, введенных США, также способствовало тому, что обе страны были вынуждены действовать сообща. Турция принимала активное участие в переговорах между Ираном и США, касающихся мирного разрешения ядерного вопроса для Ирана. Однако текущая ситуация на Ближнем Востоке, и сирийский кризис в частности, вновь обострили разногласия между странами. Обе страны обвиняют друг друга в подогревании кризиса в регионе с целью защиты своих национальных интересов. Ситуация неоднозначная, и данная статья посвящена рассмотрению изменчивой природы иранско-турецких отношений в период после террористических атак 11 сентября 2001 г., а также анализу и определению конфликтных сфер для двух стран и их влиянию на стабильность региона.

Ключевые слова: Иран, Турция, санкции, политическая ситуация на Ближнем Востоке.

Научная специальность: 22.00.00 – социологические науки, 23.00.00 – политология.