

Yaryna Zavada

Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine

TURKEY'S POSITION TO IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

The article explores the history of the development of bilateral relations between the Turkish Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran through the prism, which substantiates Ankara's position on Tehran's nuclear program. It has emerged that Turkey's influence in the Middle East has grown significantly in recent years. The relations between the two countries are ambiguous, as both countries seek to pursue their own interests in the Middle East and claim regional leadership. Turkey supports the peaceful development of Iran's nuclear program and criticizes the unilateral withdrawal of the D. Trump administration from the JCPOA. It is indicated that Ankara's position is favorable to Tehran, however, this does not reduce regional contradictions between countries.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Turkey, Turkish-Iranian Relations, Nuclear Program, JCPOA.

Geopolitically, Iran has a special authority in the region. That is because the country is located between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea with its huge energy reserves, its direct neighborhood with some important regions like Central Asia and the Middle East including its own influence in these regions that contributes to Iran's increasing role in regional and international relations¹.

Tehran is located at the core of all major events in the Middle East. Iranian influence is noticeable in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and throughout The Persian Gulf. Political and security development in the Middle East has become more interconnected and engenders intense international debate. In addition, such the development in the Middle East has changed the balance of regional power structures in favor of Iran, and thus furthered strengthening of its regional role and impact on international security. Therefore, Iran became an important linkage between the Middle East and international security². Israel, Saudi Arabia and other non-regional actors including Turkey, and USA. also play an important role in the region.

Turkey's influence in the Middle East has increased significantly in recent years, so it is important to consider Turkey's position on Iran's nuclear program through the lens of their interstate relations.

Despite the fact that Iranian-Turkish relations in the chess period were friendly, it has worsened significantly after the Islamic revolution in Iran, Turkish secular power and military elite, like the rest of the elites from other countries in the region, treated the new Shiite power in the Tehran and its Ideas of Exporting the Islamic Revolution cautiously.

While Turkey has been promoting secularism since the time of K. Ataturk, but not an atheistic state model (Turkey is run by a party Islamic ideology), Iran proposes a theocratic model of the state, assuming that its export should take into account local confessional and political features. Therefrom, the alternative of Islamic confessions predetermines that de jure secular but de facto Sunni Turkey, unlike theocratic Shiite Iran, gravitates to Sunni groups in the region.

The current state of bilateral relations between Tehran and Ankara has been affected by the ruling elite change in Turkey. Islamist Sunni Justice and Development Party come to power in 2002. From that time relations between these states, especially in the security field, have essentially been improved, firstly by confronting new challenges and those of security threats.

In 2004, following Turkish Prime Minister R. Erdogan visit to Tehran a cooperation agreement was signed up recognizing Kurdish political organization, Congress of Freedom and Democracy of Kurdistan (KADEK) terrorist organization and starting a cooperation on a common border protection and operations

¹ Özalp, O. N. (2011). Where is the Middle East? The Definition and Classification Problem of the Middle East as a Regional Subsystem in International Relations. *Turkish Journal of Politics*, 2 (2), 17.

² Barzegar, K. (2009). Iran, the Middle East, and International Security.

<<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-middle-east-and-international-security>> (2019, October, 20).

eliminating Kurdish fighting groups¹. The cooperation between IRI and Turkey has covered not only the security but also economy, trade and energy areas. Due to this, Iran became the second, after the Russian Federation, natural gas supplier to Turkey.

Extending cooperation with Ankara, Tehran expected the support from the country for the development of its own nuclear program that at that time has become one of the most polarized issues. These expectations were fulfilled, as Justice and Development Party leadership upheld Iran's right to implement a peaceful nuclear program and develop appropriate technologies required by the IAEA. More than anything, Turkey Prime Minister R. Erdogan has offered mediation in the negotiations between Iran and the Western powers².

However, it should be noted that the ruling elite change in Turkey hasn't changed its consistent stance on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region. Hence, Ankara has a negative attitude towards receiving nuclear weapons from Iran, although country's nuclear program is not a direct threat for Ankara. Ankara's concern, as the Turkish ambassador explained in the US O. Sunberk is that "Iran, with its nuclear production, will be the dominant force. It will be asymmetrical relations of the two parties"³. Tehran nuclear weapons possession can destabilize the region, unleashing the nuclear arms race and encouraging other regional states, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, acquire its own nuclear power plant bomb. This development will have far-reaching negative consequences for Turkey and will significantly reduce its security level, forcing it to rethink its own strategic intentions, particularly to obtain its own nuclear weapons.

Given the implacability of Iran-Israel parties relations, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will impede Turkey's political course, aimed at balancing Tehran and Tel Aviv which Ankara maintains strategic relationships with. Thus, sociologists note that anti-Israeli sentiment of the Turks is much stronger than the anti-Iranian ones. Wall Journalist Street Journal, D. Parkinson emphasizes: "Turkish public poll opinion showed that the idea of the greatest threat to the security of the country is linked to the US (43%), Israel (24%), and Iran by only 3% of those polled said"⁴.

It's noted that the official statements of the Turkish leaders are reduced to Iran law to implement its own peaceful nuclear program. However, this approach contradicts the views of their major NATO allies, including the United States, being more dogmatic about Iran's nuclear policy prospects. However, the view differences between Washington and Ankara on resolving the NFP is rather tactical than strategic to some extent. After all, both states want Iran not to become a nuclear power. However, the views only differ in the best approach achieving that goal. Ankara advocated and still advocates the solution of this problem exclusively by diplomatic means⁵. For its use, after the official visit to the United States in 2008 the Prime Minister R. Erdogan noted that Turkey, having experience in negotiating with Iran, can be effective mediator between them⁶.

In 2009, Tehran and Ankara's relations reached a new level. Turkish President A. Gul attended the Economic Summit development (ECO). At a press conference after the Summit, the Turkish minister of Foreign Affairs noted that Tehran and Ankara are forging relations between the security services to fight terrorism, strengthen stability and improve security in the region. There was an exchange visits of officials where they were discussing the status and prospects of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries.

Although the status and nature of the INP implementation significantly affects the relationship between Iran and Turkey, however, Ankara has not changed its own position on the issue. The confirmation is Turkey representative vote, a temporary member of the UN Security Council, against the application

¹ Мамедова, Н. М., Каменева, М. С., Федорова, И. Е. (2016). *Иран во втором десятилетии XXI века: вызовы и перспективы*. Москва: ИВ РАН; Издатель Воробьев А.В., 129.

² Özcan, N. A., Özdamar, Ö. (2010). Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. *Middle East Policy Council*, 17(3), 114.

³ Vick, K. (2006). Energy, Iran Spur Turkey's Revival of Nuclear Plans. *The Washington Post*. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/06/AR2006030601513.html?noredirect=on>> (2019, October, 15).

⁴ Bayyenat, A. (2011). Elite and public perception in Turkey and Arab countries towards Iran. *Iran Diplomacy Watch*. <<http://www.irandiplomacywatch.com/2011/01/turks-view-us-and-israel-not-iran-as.html>> (2019, November, 05).

⁵ Larrabee, F. S. (2013). *Turkish-Iranian relations in a changing Middle East*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 28.

⁶ Erdoğan Washington'da Konuştu (2008). *Hürriyet*. <<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-washingtonda-konustu-10362185>> (2019, November, 05).

of sanctions on Iran's nuclear program in 2010. In fact, the vote wasn't the one deciding the results of the ballot, but was positively regarded by Tehran¹.

Arab Spring events have seriously changed the situation in the Middle East and have had a significant impact on bilateral relations. Iran and Turkey took various positions in the conflict in Syria, starting from 2011. IRI, The Russian Federation and China supported President B. Assad, while Turkey, the United States and their Arab Sunni allies and NATO members supported the Syrian Sunni opposition. For most of the conflict, Turkey has been the mainstay through Sunni fighters transit to Syria, while Iran provided and supported the Assad regime through Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah organization and other non-military Shiite structures².

Due to some religious differences with Shiite Iran, Turkey is for Sunni groups in the region not only in Syria or Iraq, but in general, against the backdrop of Iran's support for the Iraqi government, headed by N. al-Maliki and his party, the Dawah (Islamic Call Party). Turkey has supported a secular Iraqi bloc, which Iran has a very negative attitude to³. R. Erdogan's desire to take decisive steps and encourage Western intervention states into the Syrian conflict to replace B. Assad on the friendly Sunni Ankara elite, did not do anything for Turkey, but a complication of the Turkish-Iranian relations, exacerbating at the same time the Kurdish region problem for every state. Turkey's tough stance on Syria, instead has undermined its regional policy course implemented under the slogan "zero problems with the neighbors". Well, the de facto motive behind Ankara's involvement in the event around Damascus was an attempt to solve their own problems with the Kurds.

The relationship between the two countries was also adversely affected by NATO's decision to deploy at the Turkish border with Syria SAM "Patriot". December 2013, The United States, Germany and the Netherlands have deployed these complexes to Turkey combat duty in the southeastern territories of the country⁴. During the deployment Turkey has largely reached its domestic political aims, and the SAMs were eventually removed from the country at the end after NATO mandate on launching air defense systems in late 2015.

With H. Rouhani coming into power, the relations between the two states switched to a new level. First of all, it was about economic, energy, tourism cooperation. It is worth noting that only during this period the negotiations have begun between Iran, the US and EU member states on the issue of INP, which ended with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015). Turkey belongs to the countries that are supporters of the agreement, and its president R. Erdogan became the first foreign leader to visit Iran afterwards signing a nuclear treaty.

The implementation of the SVPD has given Turkey some new opportunities and modified its difficulties with Iran. Well, in terms of maintaining the proper regional security level, SVPD promotes Turkey, first of all, its pursuit of a nuclear-free zone implementation course in the Middle East. After all, Iran nuclear program, and the likelihood of its occurrence, could cause nuclear arms races in the region, and other regional states would have had to develop nothing but the same course⁵. From the economic point of view, Iran sanctions elimination and strengthening it financially makes the country such a perfect prospective trading partner. Although its economic potential can quickly be exhausted, yet Iran's international market economy reintegration will also mean Turkey's businesses will have to compete with even bigger and better capital-provided European firms.

At the same time, the nuclear agreement signing did not imply Iran's regional policy change. On the contrary, sanctions elimination enabled Tehran further strengthening of its position. Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, especially – that is where the biggest contradiction exists between Turkey and Iran. IRIs policy and empowerment in the region not only expresses Turkey, as well as other countries fright, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, which were actually against Iran's regional policy and nuclear agreement.

¹ Мамедова, Н. М., Каменева, М. С., Федорова, И. Е (2016). *Иран во втором десятилетии XXI века: вызовы и перспективы*. Москва: ИВ РАН; Издатель Воробьев А.В., 135.

² Pieper, M. (2013). Turkish Foreign Policy Towards an Iranian Nuclear Program: In Search of a New Middle East Order after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War. *Alternatives Turkish Journal Of International Relations*, 12 (3), 188.

³ Rayburn, J. (2014). *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press Publication, 215.

⁴ German troops arrive in Kahramanmaraş (2012). *Anadolu Agency*. <<http://aa.com.tr/en/turkey/germantroops-arrive-in-kahramanmaraş/297536>> (2019, October, 22).

⁵ Özalp, O. N. (2011). Where is the Middle East? The Definition and Classification Problem of the Middle East as a Regional Subsystem in International Relations. *Turkish Journal of Politics*, 2 (2), 2.

As already mentioned, with the D. Trump coming to power in the US, an American policy on Iran and nuclear agreement have been changed. I. Kalin, a spokesman and President Erdogan, in particular, noted that the United States unilateral nuclear deal exit will cause instability and new conflicts. Turkey regards the decision as a bad step towards an agreement that is a milestone on the way to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation in the region¹.

The current uncertainty surrounding the CFSP and the lengthy negotiation process resolving the Iranian nuclear problem has underlined that Iran's relations with the international community can have serious consequences for the international community security. Since the successful implementation of the nuclear agreement and enhanced cooperation between Iran, the great powers and the neighboring countries could promote the resolution of regional issues that affect the Middle East's security. Conversely, failure to cooperate can destabilize the region, aggravate existing threats, thereby breaking global security. However, the cooperation is difficult to reconcile and develop due to the lack of common interests, different perceptions, and misunderstandings between the States².

The US withdrawal from SVPD gives the President R. Erdogan an opportunity to use anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment fighting for the leadership in the Muslim world. Opposing the US decision is extremely profitable for Tehran itself. However, it is worth emphasizing that even in under these conditions, relations between Ankara and Tehran remain ambiguous, because both states are not only promoting their own interests in the Middle East, but claim regional leadership in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where they support opposite parties. Iran is considering Turkey's active foreign policy course as a threat to its own interests and tries to limit and reduce its impact in the region.

References:

1. Özalp, O. N. (2011). Where is the Middle East? The Definition and Classification Problem of the Middle East as a Regional Subsystem in International Relations. *Turkish Journal of Politics*, no. 2 (2), 17. [in English].
2. Barzegar, K. (2009). Iran, the Middle East, and International Security. <<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-middle-east-and-international-security>> (2019, October, 20). [in English].
3. Mamedova, N. M., Kameneva, M. S., Fedorova, I. E. (2016). *Iran vo vtorom desjatiletii XXI veka: vyzovy i perspektivyj* [Iran in the second decade of the XXI century: challenges and prospects]. Moscow: IV RAS. [in Russian].
4. Özcan, N. A., Özdamar, Ö. (2010). Uneasy Neighbors: Turkish-Iranian Relations Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. *Middle East Policy Council*, no. 17(3), 114. [in English].
5. Vick, K. (2006) Energy, Iran Spur Turkey's Revival of Nuclear Plans. *The Washington Post*. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/06/AR2006030601513.html?noredirect=on>> (2019, October, 15). [in English].
6. Bayyenat, A. (2011). Elite and public perception in Turkey and Arab countries towards Iran. *Iran Diplomacy Watch*. <<http://www.irandiplomacywatch.com/2011/01/turks-view-us-and-israel-not-iran-as.html>> (2019, November, 05). [in English].
7. Larrabee, F. S. (2013). *Turkish-Iranian relations in a changing Middle East*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. [in English].
8. Erdoğan Washington'da Konuştu (2008). *Hürriyet*. <<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-washingtonda-konustu-10362185>> (2019, November, 05). [in English].
9. Pieper, M. (2013). Turkish Foreign Policy Towards an Iranian Nuclear Program: In Search of a New Middle East Order after the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War. *Alternatives Turkish Journal Of International Relations*, no. 12 (3), 188. [in English].
10. Rayburn, J. (2014). *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press Publication. [in English].
11. German troops arrive in Kahramanmaras (2012). *Anadolu Agency*. <<http://aa.com.tr/en/turkey/germantroops-arrive-in-kahramanmaras/297536>> (2019, October, 22). [in English].
12. Özdamar, Ö. (2015). *Turkish-Iranian Relations after the Framework Agreement*. Oslo: NUPI. [in English].
13. World reacts to US withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal (2018). *Anadolu Agency*. <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/world-reacts-to-us-withdrawal-from-iran-nuclear-deal/1140043>> (2019, October, 19). [in English].
14. Katzman, K. (2019). *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*. Washington: Congressional research service. [in English].

¹ World reacts to US withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal (2018). *Anadolu Agency*. <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/world-reacts-to-us-withdrawal-from-iran-nuclear-deal/1140043>> (2019, October, 19).

² Katzman, K. (2019). *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*. Washington: Congressional research service, 12.