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How Sincere Is the Turkey-Iran Friendship?

by Dr. Alon J. Doenyas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: If the world press is anything to go by, the Turkey-Iran courtship is getting serious, and Russia is playing best man. The two countries' strengthening ties are based on shared regional goals, the most prominent of which is Syria. But how sincere is the burgeoning relationship?

The horrific civil war in Syria is a matter of deep concern to both Turkey and Iran. What will Syria look like when the war ends? Who will rule? Will the country be split up? Will the Kurds of Syria try to establish an independent state? And what about the refugees who have fled to Turkey and become a burden there?

Common concerns over Syria have led to deepening ties between Ankara and Tehran, as reflected in the many high-level meetings that have occurred in recent years between officials of both countries, including presidents Erdoğan and Rouhani. Four summits on Syria have been held by Turkey, Iran, and Russia; the latest was in Sochi earlier this year and was hosted by President Putin. Photos from those summits and meetings went viral, strengthening the image of a love story in the making.

It is no secret that the beleaguered Islamic Republic has always wanted to get closer to neighboring Turkey. Whenever a more Islamic-oriented party is in power in Ankara, the Iranians approach. This occurred in the 1990s, when Erbakan was in power; the same is happening today with the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government.

Doing this makes sense from an Iranian perspective for several reasons. First, Turkey, with its population of over 80 million, is a great economic market in general, and a huge potential market for Iranian oil in particular. Second, Turkey is a regional superpower, so it is wise to be on its side. Third, and most important, the Turkic-Azeri population of Iran is estimated to be a full quarter

of the Iranian population. With a Turkic minority of that size, it is sensible to keep the biggest and most important Turkic country in the world close by.

It is nevertheless questionable that Ankara and Tehran will ever get particularly close. Major obstacles stand in the way. Turkey and Iran are the two major Muslim non-Arabic players in the Middle East. Both have a good deal of territory and big populations of over 80 million. Officially, Turkey is a secular republic populated by mostly Sunni Muslims; Iran is an undemocratic Islamic Republic populated mostly by Shiites. The sects are totally different in their beliefs and method of practicing Islam. The two countries designate themselves as playing a leading role in the Muslim world, but their completely different perspectives on Islam might clash.

Moreover, Turkey has reason to worry about Tehran's global Islamic ambitions because Iran affects all of Turkey's Muslim-bordering countries. It is true that in Syria, neither country wants to see an independent Kurdish state emerge and they will do what they can to prevent that from happening. But Iran has thrown its lot behind Bashar Assad's regime, which Turkey opposes. Though the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni, the regime is Alawite (which is associated with Shiite Islam). Ankara may have wished the "Arab Spring" to culminate in a new Sunni leadership for the Sunni state, but in the absence of such a result, it does not want to watch Assad massacre his Sunni subjects. For its part, Tehran is backing the regime that is not only conducting these massacres but pushing millions to flee Syria – often for Turkey, where they are a great burden.

The case of Iraq is instructive. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a Sunni-governed state, but after the fall of his regime, Iraq, where Shiites constitute over two-thirds of the population, came under Shiite domination – with Tehran playing an ever-growing role in its neighbor's domestic affairs. In the process, Turkey was geographically cut off from the rest of the Sunni world. Its neighboring countries are either Christian or Shiite. This being the case, Turkey does not want to see a stronger Iran with greater regional influence on its own border.

Turkey and Iran are also competing for influence in Central Asia's Muslim republics. Many that were part of the Soviet Union are Turkic, and they view Turkey as a role model. Pan-Turkic ideology is common in some of these countries, and their leaders want to maintain good relations with Ankara. But Iran, which is geographically closer, very much wants to gain influence over them. The spread of revolutionary Islam is, after all, one of the Islamic Republic's core principles.

Neither the Shiite Iranian ambition to influence the Muslim world, nor Tehran's dogged drive for nuclear weapons, is in the Turkish interest.

It is also important to remember that Turkey is part of NATO and maintains relations with both the US and Israel (despite recurrent tensions), which the ayatollahs refer to, respectively, as the “Great Satan” and the “Little Satan.” Furthermore, according to a Turkish official, Ankara stopped purchasing Iranian oil in May as a result of the US sanctions.

It is undeniable that Turkey and Iran are getting closer thanks to their common interests, particularly in Syria. But many obstacles stand in the way of a genuine alliance.

Dr. Alon J. Doenyas holds a PhD in Middle East Studies from Bar-Ilan University. He specializes in Turkish domestic and foreign affairs.