

## **Security and Secular Democracy**

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In determining its position regarding Iran-Iraq rapprochement and Iran's increasing influence over Iraq, Turkey has to assess and balance two partially competing interests. The first is Turkey's security interest in Iraq's unity and stability. The second is Turkey's normative interest in the prevalence of secular democracy (however defined) in the region. In the short term, these interests appear to be clear-cut and the security interest is likely to prevail over the normative. Accordingly, Turkey would approve of Iran-Iraq rapprochement insofar as it strengthens Iraq's territorial unity.

Turkey's long-term interests are more complex. They are contingent upon a variety of internal and external factors.

From the beginning of the war in Iraq, Turkey made it clear that it supports Iraq's territorial unity and opposes Kurdish independence, which it continues to view as a fundamental threat to its own territorial integrity. Like Turkey, Iran opposes Kurdish independence. Thus, enhanced cooperation between Iran and Iraq, and Iranian support of Iraqi Shi'ites, undermine Kurdish aspirations for gaining independence and control of natural resources in northern Iraq.

Surely, one by-product of this development may be to boost Iran's regional power, or that of Shi'ites in general. In the short run and unless it destabilizes the region, Turkey is unlikely to view such a shift in the regional balance of power (insofar as any balance exists) as threatening its own security. Iran and Iraqi Shi'ites have nothing to gain from a military adventure against Turkey. Currently, Iran is not perceived to be particularly active in trying to spread its type of regime in the region (except in Iraq), and in Turkey in particular. Views to that effect had been widespread in Turkey during the 1990s, but subsided along with the perception that Iran turned inward as a result of its preoccupation with domestic politics.

However, there is a limit to the extent to which Iraq-Iran rapprochement can favorably affect Turkish interests, even from a purely security point of view. How far can Iran influence Iraq's reconfiguration in its own image without destabilizing it? Pushing too far to curb Kurdish aspirations for self-government may derail the process of new state-building, and could end up increasing the likelihood of Kurdish statehood. Similarly, promoting Islam as the dominant source of law and legitimacy by Iraqi Shi'ites, or excessive disregard for Sunni-Arab interests, may lead to disintegration. Thus, what is important for Turkey is that Iraq's new configuration is viable and maintains territorial integrity. This requires that it emerge from a difficult multilateral process that is agreeable to all the groups in the country.

Moreover, in the long run, Turkey has ample reason to worry about rising Iranian and Shi'ite political power at its doorstep. For one, this would invite further American meddling in the region. In light of international concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions, this should be a major long-term concern for Turkey also. Excessive political ambitions on the part of regional Shi'ites may also destabilize the region by alienating Sunni regimes.

Second, the principles regulating the relationship between religion and public-political life on which Turkey's secular and Iran's theocratic models are based are polar opposites of one another. As long as the respective regimes in both countries are secure and stable, the two countries can cooperate without threatening each other. However, what if the new conservative government in Iran fails to meet the mounting economic needs of its young and rapidly urbanizing population, and severely disappoints those who voted President Ahmadinezhad to power? In this case, Iranian conservatives may increasingly resort to supporting Islamism in the region in order to secure the survival of their regime, as more and more Iranians become mobilized into looking for alternative models of government.

Similarly, domestic politics would affect Turkey's threat perceptions in regard to the Iranian model: the deeper the secular-Islamist polarization becomes, the more Turkish secularists

would feel threatened by Iranian influence in the region. It should be emphasized that Turkey and the US share a common interest in the containment of religious extremism and the advancement of secular democracy in the region. As for Iraq, while it is up to the Iraqis to decide what type of a government and society they want to live in, Turkey would clearly favor a more secular model.

The presence of a moderately Islamic government in Turkey does not necessarily reduce the polarity between the Turkish and Iranian models. The political project, indeed the very challenge of the AKP seems to be to restructure Turkish society in the image of its own Muslim-conservative ideals as a result of an indirect and gradual process, i.e., without directly challenging the contours of Turkey's secular laws and military and political institutions. This project is supposed to work via EU-inspired democratization that relaxes the secular regulation and restriction of Turkish-Muslim civil society, rather than through a fundamental restructuring of the state institutions that a more radical approach closer to the Iranian model would suggest. Thus, the Iranian model and the moderate Turkish political Islam (or "Muslim democracy") represented by the AKP may be seen as rivals.

All this does not mean that Turkey should, or would, adopt a confrontational policy vis-a-vis Iran or Shi'ites in general. On the contrary, cooperation and engagement with both religiously oriented and secular Shi'ites may be a better approach. However, Turkey may pursue policies to contain the political influence of Iran if that country adopts a revived policy of promoting its model in the region.

The EU anchor is crucial for Turkish politics. While allowing Muslim civil society more freedom to pursue its Islamic-conservative agenda, it also constrains the extent to which any Islam-inspired government or organization can challenge secular laws and institutions, thereby alleviating some secularists' concerns. The deterioration of EU-Turkish relations may rekindle

the secularist-Islamist political cleavage; a downturn in economic growth and the modernization process could generate similar results.

Finally, the continuation (and recent deterioration) of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and the disagreement between Turkey and the US over the necessary course of action against the PKK in northern Iraq restrain Turkey's ability to focus on its normative interests. Instead, Turkey becomes compelled to focus on the question of Kurdish statehood and the related security concerns. If recent intellectual and governmental efforts in Turkey to make progress on resolving the Kurdish question democratically bear fruit, Turkish policy vis-a-vis Iraq and Iran can take shape more in line with long-term normative interests. Improvements in Turkish-US relations, possibly as a result of US actions against the PKK, may contribute to the same outcome.

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