

TURKEY AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

A KEY TO PROGRESS IN REGIONAL DISARMAMENT?

Hanna Ojanen & Barbara Zanchetta

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Hanna Ojanen
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Barbara Zanchetta
Researcher, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs
Visiting Fellow, Geneva Centre for Security Policy

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- The increasing tension around the Iranian nuclear programme and the uncompromising positions of the protagonists have made the goal of creating a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East seem utopic.
- Yet, the current strategy of maintaining a low profile in the discussions on the zone, while keeping the focus exclusively on Iran, is not likely to lead to progress.
- Instead, combining the Iranian question with the zone and enlarging the content and scope of the negotiations even further by including Iran's neighbours could be a better strategy.
- Turkey could play a key role because of its unique relations with Iran, and because of its strong quest for a more prominent international position – if it can only strike the right balance between the role of lead actor and team player.
- Turkish-Iranian relations could notably inspire the consideration of accompanying pragmatic agreements on regional cooperation in other fields as a way forward for the upcoming Middle East disarmament negotiations in Finland.

The Global Security research programme / The European Union research programme
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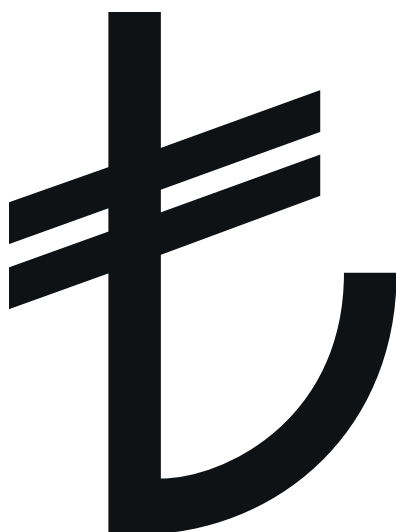


Iran and nuclear disarmament in the Middle East: reaching results by adding complexity

The Middle East is characterized by several mutually reinforcing security dilemmas: between Iran and Israel; between Iran and the Gulf states; and between Israel and the Levant Arab states. The controversy surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme has been one of the most polarizing. The United States and Europe suspect that Tehran is building nuclear weapons, while the Iranian leadership continues to state that its goal in developing a nuclear programme is to provide fuel for medical reactors and to generate electricity, without dipping into the oil supply it prefers to export. Since 2002 – after former President George Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech and statements by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) declaring that Tehran had failed to report certain nuclear activities – the

West and Iran have been at odds over the Iranian nuclear programme. The dispute has recently escalated, with new findings by the IAEA, tougher sanctions by the United States and Europe, threats by Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz to oil shipments and Israel signalling increased readiness to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.

The clash over Iran’s nuclear programme dominates international debates on disarmament and further complicates the longstanding calls to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East (first approved by the United Nations General Assembly as early as 1974 following a proposal by Iran and Egypt). It also risks paralyzing, if not jeopardizing, the on-going planning for the Conference on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (MEWMDFZ) scheduled to be held in Helsinki before the end of 2012.



The Central Bank of Turkey has unveiled a currency symbol for Turkish lira, reflecting the government's ambitions to further strengthen the lira as a global currency and to boost the country's standing as a major international actor. The symbol is a double-crossed "L", in the shape of an anchor. The anchor is intended to convey that the currency is a "safe harbour", while the upward-pointing lines represent its rising prestige, stated Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a ceremony at the Central Bank.

A future treaty on a MEW MDFZ would commit the parties not to possess, acquire, test, manufacture or use any nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as their delivery systems. The 1989 IAEA Technical Study geographically defined the zone as a region extending from Libya in the west, to Iran in the east, and from Syria in the north to Yemen in the south.¹ A subsequent UN Study expanded the concept further by including all members of the League of Arab States, plus Iran and Israel in the zone.

Reflecting differing perceptions of threat and security, Israel has subordinated discussions on the zone to the existence of a durable peace and compliance with international obligations by all states in the region. The Arab states have, instead, stated that no such linkage should exist and that the establishment of a MEW MDFZ would contribute to peaceful relations. Iran has repeatedly demanded Israeli accession to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state as a precondition to the establishment of the zone. In all, therefore, the positions of the protagonists are uncompromising. This makes the task of Finnish Under-Secretary of State Jaakko Laajava, appointed by the UN in October 2011 as "facilitator" of the 2012 Conference, seem overwhelmingly challenging. Still, working towards a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East may

indeed be "a third option" in addition to Israel's false choice between letting Iran develop nuclear weapons or attacking before it gets the bomb.

This paper proposes a strategy that adds complexity to what already seems far too complicated. It would seem important to place the Iranian nuclear dispute within the broader framework of the MEW MDFZ discussions. This also means adding to the obvious protagonists, the Arab states, Iran and Israel and the main outside powers, such as the United States, the EU and Russia, also helpful neighbours. Neighbouring Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan would remain *outside* the territorial extension of the zone. Yet, their role in either facilitating the process or in further complicating it is obviously crucial. In particular, the Turkish-Iranian relationship might be key to ensuring the beginning of a long-term regional disarmament process by broadening the scope of agreement and adding more down-to-earth notions to the discussions. To understand how this could work we need to take a closer look not only at the relations between Iran and Turkey, but also at the significant changes in Turkish foreign policy more broadly, its position in the region and its stance on regional disarmament.

Turkish-Iranian relations: rivals on a common ground?

Good neighbourly relations are usually cherished and applauded – unless they become too good. Images of Turkish and Iranian leaders exchanging friendly

1 Technical Study on Different Modalities of the Application of Safeguards in the Middle East, available at http://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC33/GC33Documents/English/gc33-887_en.pdf.



The other symbol used on the cover is from a current Iranian bank note (the reverse side of the note for 50 000 Iranian rials), designed in 1980. Clearly visible in the background is the nuclear energy sign, symbolizing the long-standing Iranian quest to develop nuclear power.

gestures in 2009 and 2010 truly worried many in Europe and the USA as signs of a potentially dangerous rapprochement between two countries aspiring to power and influence well beyond their region. On the whole, however, Turkish-Iranian relations have both a long history of rivalry, stemming from divergent imperial and religious traditions dating back to the days of the Ottoman and Persian empires, and of cooperation, conducted willingly or out of necessity. In recent years, it has been the soul-searching turns in Turkish foreign policy that have pushed and pulled the relations between the two.

Turkish-Iranian relations are characterized by long-standing elements of cooperation. Since the 1980s, Turkey, unlike other Middle Eastern countries, has viewed Iran as a large and important country that “must be managed rather than confronted”.² Although the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran posed an ideological challenge to Turkey, its effect on the Turkish-Iranian relationship was limited. Turkey was one of the first governments to recognize the Islamic Republic and, in early 1980, refused to impose sanctions on Iran in response to the hostage crisis. During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 – 1988, Turkey maintained neutrality and worked with both countries by becoming their main trade route

to the outside world. Tensions repeatedly surfaced throughout the 1990s as the Clinton administration enlarged the scope of sanctions against Iran and because of Iran’s alleged support for Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq and southern Turkey. But then the bilateral relationship again thawed as Tehran and Ankara agreed to work together to combat Kurdish terrorism.

Since 2002 and the rise to power in Turkey of the Justice and Development Party AKP, Turkish-Iranian relations have steadily improved. The new foreign policy slogan “zero problems with neighbours” applied to Iran, too. Turkey’s policy towards Iran became less ambivalent: the AKP publicly endorsed the Islamic Republic, and Ankara was among the first to offer support to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the 2009 presidential election. In the past decade Turkish-Iranian economic relations have flourished. Between 1991 and 2011, Turkey’s exports to Iran increased from \$87 million to \$3.2 billion; its imports from Iran increased from \$91 million to \$11.6 billion due to Turkey’s growing demand for Iranian natural gas. Trade volume between the two countries reached \$15 billion. Although the bulk of trade is tied to natural gas, Iran has shown interest in opening its economy to Turkish investment.³ As the Turkish demand for energy increases, energy-rich Iran will remain an increasingly important economic

2 MCCURDY, DAPHNE AND NICK DANFORTH (2012) ‘Turkey and Iran: A Fraying Relationship or Business as Usual?’ Blog posted on 28 February 2012, *The Middle East Channel*. <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com>.

3 ÜLGEN, SINAN, ‘Turkey and the Bomb’, *The Carnegie Papers*, February 2012, p. 6.

partner for Turkey. As the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu argued, “a growing economy and surrounded by energy resources, Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests. Therefore, Turkey’s energy arrangements with Iran cannot be dependent upon its relationships with other countries”.⁴ Iran’s strained economy, in turn, can only benefit from a solid, mutually advantageous relationship with Turkey.

Cultural interactions have also increased over the past decade, and 2009 was celebrated as the “Iran-Turkey Cultural Year”. Iranians can travel to Turkey without visa restrictions, making tourism another key industry. In 2011, 1.9 million Iranians crossed the border to Turkey. Iran is a key conduit for Turkish trucks carrying products to central Asia.

But there is another side to the impact of the AKP’s rise to power on Turkish-Iranian relations. Internationally, Turkey’s position has changed considerably. The goals of gaining regional leadership and global visibility have become apparent. The rise of a new, more active foreign policy was accompanied by economic growth and domestic power shifts. New resources were brought into play, notably soft power tools. Self-confidence has grown, and the previously introvert position has turned extrovert. As Turkey indeed improved its relations with all Muslim neighbours, showing signs of success in becoming a regional leader, it started turning into a rival for Iran.

Prime Minister Erdoğan has charted a “third way” for Turkey – as a secular state with devote Muslim leaders, but one that endorses democracy, human rights, and a market economy. His popularity in the Arab world has been demonstrated in various opinion polls, reversing Turkey’s earlier image characterized by militant secularism, obsessive Westernization and the rejection of its Islamic-Ottoman heritage (Taşpınar).

Some even point to Turkey as a ‘model’ for the Arab world. This is not a notion that Turkey officially endorses. For Turkey, it is a role suggested by outsiders – such as the Americans in the G8 and NATO summits back in 2004. Turkey prefers to choose its own role rather than be assigned one. But what

has changed in the past 10 years is that Turkey has gained in credibility: it has the resources and capabilities to act and is working on enhancing its soft power and expertise in the region.

The Arab countries may admire Turkey’s political model or its outstanding economic growth, but also – and perhaps most importantly – its increased autonomy and ability to drive a foreign policy based on Turkey’s own interests rather than those of the USA, Israel, NATO or the EU. To put it bluntly, Turkey’s popularity rises whenever it criticizes Israel or the USA. For Iran, therefore, the concerns regarding the appeal of Turkey seem well grounded. The Islamic Republic’s position, based on its decade-long image of an Islamic way that challenged the West and its puppets, seems to be fading away as Turkey now takes the role of the challenger. Yet, the picture is even more complex. Turkey’s popularity rests on a combination of independence and influence, having a voice of its own that the US and the EU would listen to – a voice that Iran obviously lacks.

The rising tensions between Iran and Turkey go beyond ideology. Indeed, the two neighbours find themselves taking opposite stances towards Syria, Iraq and Bahrain and even rivalling each other in Central Asia. In Syria, Turkey has abandoned its close links with President Bashar al-Assad, profiling itself instead as a supporter of international efforts to bolster parts of the Syrian opposition and end the on-going humanitarian crisis. Iran, on the other hand, continues to endorse the Assad regime, remaining one of the few supporters of the Syrian forces’ efforts to crush the opposition. With the US withdrawal from Iraq and the emergence of sectarian tensions, Iran and Turkey’s divergent interests have clearly surfaced. Iran is the patron of the Shias and openly supported President al-Maliki in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Turkey is, at least in the eyes of many in the Middle East, the benefactor of the Sunnis, and thus supported the rival faction. Conflicting interests – following the line of the Shia/Sunni division – also exist as the Shia-dominated protest movement escalates on the small Gulf island of Bahrain (where in this case the Sunni minority oppresses the Shia majority).

Tensions between the two countries and the growing stridency of public rhetoric on both sides peaked after Turkey’s decision in September 2011 to host an early warning radar as part of NATO’s missile defence

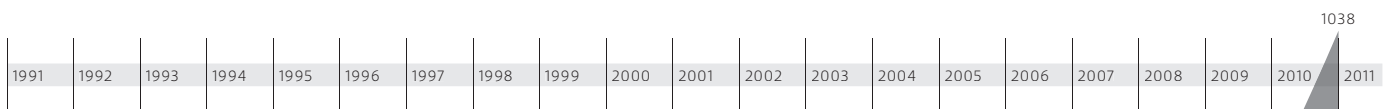
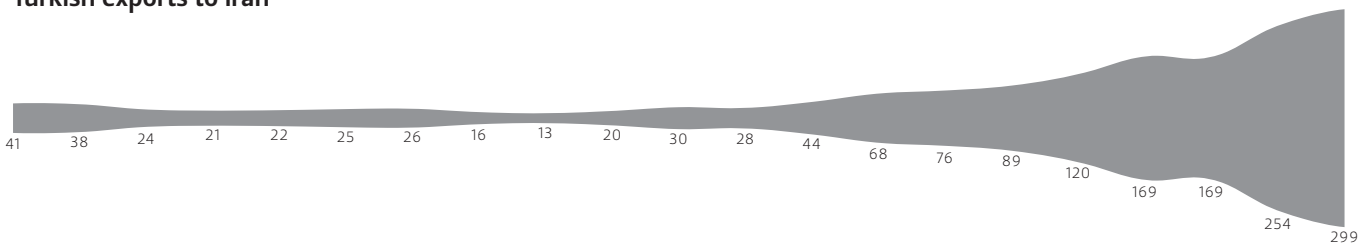
4 POYRAZ, SERDAR (2009) ‘Turkish-Iranian Relations: A Wider Perspective’. *SETA Policy Brief No. 37*, November 2009.

TRADE BETWEEN TURKEY AND IRAN

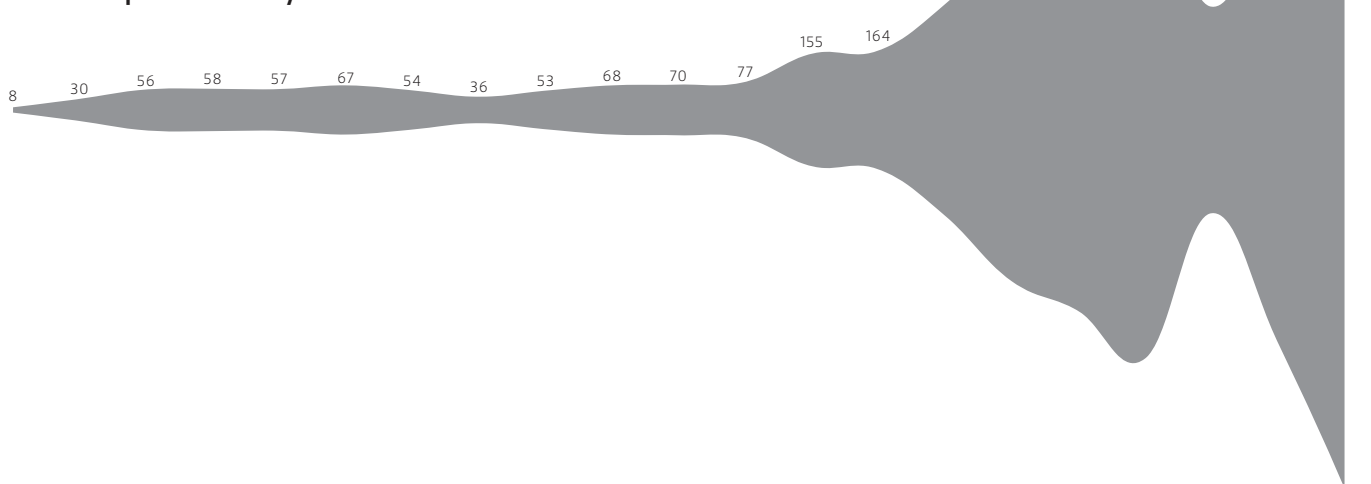
1991 – 2011, in millions USD

Source: OECD

Turkish exports to Iran



Iranian exports to Turkey



system. Despite the Turkish government’s insistence that the shield was not developed as a protection against Iran, in November 2011 senior adviser to the Iranian Supreme Leader on international affairs (and former Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs) Ali-Akbar Velayati warned that Iran would attack Turkey if the United States or Israel attacked Iran.

Turkish foreign policy goals and the Iranian nuclear programme

Turkey’s foreign policy now seems to be geared towards two goals: being independent and autonomous, but also influential. This increases its motivation to invest in mediation and negotiation efforts

appreciated by the international community. There is “an almost compulsive need to be seen as the central, diplomatic player in the resolution of regional disputes”.⁵ Prestige and status matter, and they can be enhanced by both material and immaterial means, by trade and investment as well as by showing principled leadership.

But activism has its caveats: the more Turkey does, the more complicated it gets. The erstwhile very good relations with Israel have become strained.

5 KANE, SEAN (2011) ‘The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq’. *United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report 276*, June 2011.



Anti-aircraft guns guarding the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran. Photo: Hamed Saber

Likewise, Turkey's relations with Iran exemplify the dilemmas. Being too close to Iran is problematic for the West; being too close to the West is not good for bilateral relations. Antagonizing Iran leads, some would say, to decreasing the level of the pressure of gas in the pipelines coming from Iran to Turkey. Too much success with the Arab countries, then, may actually antagonize both the West and Iran, yet it is a necessary component of Turkey's new leading role.

The principled approach of the Turkish leadership is seen in its clear stance against sanctions and in its equally clear approval of the use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Turkey prefers dialogue to sanctions, which it sees as harming the population rather than the leaders. Sanctions against Iranian industry, in particular oil and gas, could have negative consequences for the Turkish economy – but problems in the Iranian economy can also present economic opportunities for Turkey.

While insisting on the need for Iran to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to ensure the transparency of its nuclear programme, Prime Minister Erdoğan has unequivocally supported Tehran's right to enrich uranium to develop nuclear energy. The increased tension resulting from the discussions on a potential military strike against Iran have constituted a further incentive for active diplomacy. Consequently, on several occasions, Turkey has acted as an intermediary between the West and Tehran.

In May 2010 Turkey and Brazil brokered a deal on the basis of which Iran would have sent 1 200 kg of low-enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey and then to Russia and France for further enrichment and fuel fabrication. In exchange, Iran would receive 120 kg of uranium fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. This agreement was criticized by the Western powers for coming too late and too close to a new round of sanctions against Iran, and for the amount of LEU that Iran agreed to “swap”, allegedly too low to seriously hamper Iran's ability to quickly develop a minimum of one nuclear weapon. Turkey, by contrast, defended the deal as an important confidence-building measure and as a success in the face of the West's failure to reach agreement with Tehran. The subsequent Turkish vote against the sanctions in the UN Security Council seriously strained the relationship with the United States and angered many others: Turkey was called a ‘neophyte’, a spoiler, co-opted by Tehran or Tehran's lawyer.

But Turkey also wants to be seen as a state operating on the basis of international law, and is concerned about setbacks to its mediation role. Aspiring – again – to UNSC membership, Turkey nevertheless abides by the sanctions approved by the UN. But to save its own energy imports, it has requested a waiver from Western energy sanctions and looked to Saudi Arabia for alternatives.

Turkey has, thus, realigned its position with the West, but without modifying its stance on Iran's right to enrich uranium. It has returned to the

role of facilitator. Prime Minister Erdoğan recently travelled to Iran and reportedly conveyed a positive (or at least slightly reassuring) message from President Obama to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Shortly thereafter, on April 14, 2012 negotiations between the P5 + 1 and Iran resumed in Istanbul. While these talks yielded no breakthrough, they were not a total debacle either. The parties met again in Baghdad in May, and agreed to reconvene to continue discussions in Moscow later in June.

Turkey's clear-cut support for Iran's right to enrich uranium has sometimes misled analysts in the West to rush to claim a dangerous Islamic radical reawakening of Turkey. But Turkey's position by no means conveys Ankara's support for a nuclear-armed Iran. Turkey strongly supports regional stability, which would be dramatically challenged should Iran decide to build nuclear weapons. While Turkey might not feel directly threatened by Tehran, other countries in the region would. The current balance of power would be altered and, potentially, this would trigger a regional arms race with regional and global repercussions. Thus, Turkey is categorically against the possession of WMDs and ready to consider a regional security architecture *à la* OSCE, comprising a region-wide WMD-free zone.⁶

Turkey's stance on the nuclear issue is not merely a question of regional position; there are three other logics at play, too: religion, economy and (national) prestige. The role of religion might be a sideline, yet it surfaces from time to time, constituting the 'principled' view that the use of weapons of mass destruction is against Islam.

The economic considerations follow the logic of growth and increasing energy consumption. Turkey imports 90% of its energy needs. It requires more energy, and it also wants to shield itself against the volatilities of the energy market and to reduce its vulnerable dependency on Russian and Iranian gas for electricity. Therefore, Turkey sees the need to build nuclear energy for its own consumption, too,

thus availing itself of the same right that it says Iran has to build nuclear power for peaceful purposes. The idea of building nuclear power plants in Turkey has prevailed since the 1970s, but the know-how and the required resources were not available. Now, while the know-how might still be lacking, the money to buy that know-how and the construction of the facilities is not.

There are now plans to build three nuclear power plants. For the first one, Turkey has an agreement with the Russian company Rosatom, which will build, own (for the most part) and operate the plant in Akkuyu near Mersin on the Mediterranean coast; construction should start next year. Turkey is investigating further with South Korea, Japan, China and Canada on the second power plant, this time on the Black Sea coast in Sinop, and there are plans for a third one not far from the Bulgarian border in İğneada. Even Iran has expressed interest in building a plant in Turkey, but Turkey has dismissed cooperation on this front.

Eyebrows have been raised over the eagerness, if not stubbornness, to press ahead with the issue, despite lacking know-how, and regardless of criticism by the population, protests and concerns emanating from Cyprus and Bulgaria, and the serious environmental risks of building in such earthquake-prone regions.

Again, the economic arguments appear rather weak. The share of energy production would not amount to much. The decrease in dependency has also been questioned, as Turkey would appear to be trading it for another kind of dependency, namely that of Russian know-how to start with. But there is something else behind the drive for nuclear energy, namely prestige: Turkey wants to have nuclear power by the 100th anniversary of the Turkish republic in 2023 – perhaps as a sign of progress or status of some kind.

Involving Turkey to nurture the negotiations

For more than a decade, the Iranian nuclear issue has been isolated from broader regional dynamics and has been approached by the West as an isolated, controversial bilateral (West versus Iran) negotiation. The lack of progress has been obvious, and the potential for the issue to escalate into armed conflict

6 The President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül, Address at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 18 April 2012 (<http://www.tccb.gov.tr>) and his article 'Turkey's New Course', *Today's Zaman*, 23 May 2012 http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=281079.

is more than evident. The current negotiations of the P5 + 1 and Iran – mainly because of the position taken by the major Western powers, with the United States in the lead – are completely detached from the on-going preparations for the 2012 Conference on MEW MDFZ.

Linking the Iranian nuclear controversy to a broader regional security system inherent in the – however distant – prospect of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction could represent a better option. In order to do that in practice, the major powers such as the USA, some EU countries and Russia would have to change views, abandoning the focus on Iran only for a more all-inclusive approach. In this process, Turkey could have a key role, should it be included in the discussions on the MEW MDFZ.

Despite all the rivalry and tension, Turkey is, for Iran, the only country with crucial security links to the USA (and the West in general) that openly supports the Iranian right to enrichment within the limits of the IAEA. For Tehran, this is a crucial point. The importance for Iran of building alliances with the “northern tier nations” is a long-term foreign policy goal which could endure and transcend the current clash over Syria.

The Iranian leadership might find it helpful to have Ankara involved in the negotiations, also because of religious and cultural links and shared economic interests. As the International Crisis Group suggests, Turkey could be in a position to help engage Iran vigorously on all levels. But Iran and Turkey might share something more. The Turkish quest for independent policies also means that it is sympathetic to Iran’s view that the West cannot dictate who can have a nuclear capacity and who cannot. Henri Barkey argues that Iran and Turkey share a profound insecurity about real and imaginary enemies, and the notion that their importance is largely unappreciated. Such an existential resemblance could facilitate their finding a common ground. Turkey, provided it can adhere to a middle position without huddling too close to anyone yet close enough to exert an influence, could help in regional disarmament by bringing to the table something that is in Iranian interests and which Iran wants. The latter could include the pragmatic side of business interests, trade issues, infrastructure, building roads and railroads in the region, but also contributing directly or indirectly to the question of security guarantees.

Turkey itself now combines soft and hard power resources; and it does have the necessary links to all the crucial security guarantors that could come into question for Iran: the USA, Russia, and the EU.

Taking the process of US–Soviet détente as a reference point in the definition of parameters of arms control despite on-going antagonistic relations, the discussions on regional disarmament should be accompanied by other bilateral and multilateral agreements. It might be useful to recall that at the Moscow summit in May 1972, when the first US–Soviet treaty on the limitation of nuclear weapons was signed, it was accompanied by numerous other agreements on various areas of mutual interest, such as the prevention of incidents at sea; cooperation on the peaceful exploration of outer space; cooperation in science and technology, health, and environmental protection; and agreements on increasing exchanges in the fields of science, technology, education and culture. While these documents seemed minor at the time, today it is more than evident that cultural, scientific and technological interaction ultimately played a crucial role in bringing the Cold War to an end.

Envisioning a broadening of the issues on the negotiating table – not only when addressing the Iranian nuclear issue, but also in the discussions on the MEW MDFZ – could facilitate the creation of a less antagonistic climate between regional actors. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, this could initiate the process of addressing the deeply-rooted mutual hostility through increased interaction between people rather than exclusively seeking to diminish confrontation at the highest political level. It is in the initiation of this type of process that – due to the complexity of the Turkish–Iranian relationship – the role of Turkey can be seen as particularly promising.

In this context, Finland’s stakes as the host and facilitator of the 2012 conference should be equally high. The creation of an institutionalized process for, or in, the Middle East – such as the one that evolved from the 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe – could be seen as a means to advance a more all-inclusive agenda. While the vision and ambition may have been lacking in the 1970s (few imagined at the time that the CSCE would become a landmark event in the history of the Cold War), the past can and should be used as a reference point in order to move forward with more courageous goals.

Suggested reading

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The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
tel. +358 9 432 7000
fax. +358 9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi

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