Turco-Iranian Competition in Iraq & Syria

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Syrian Crisis is a watershed moment in the recent Middle Eastern history. It invoked the competition not only at the global level but also between the warring regional states. More crucially, it majorly provided the space for three states to exercise their power in the Middle East while for two other entities, it resulted in the shrinking of their influence. After more than a decade since the inception of the Syrian Crisis, Russia, Iran, and Turkey continue to remain the major beneficiaries while the US and the GCC have seemingly failed to translate their policy objectives into concrete results. Despite sponsoring the so-called 'moderate rebels' under the umbrella organisation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the US and the GCC could not push the regime change inside Syria.[1] On the other hand, with the help of militias and the utilisation of its air force, Iran and Russia respectively succeeded in establishing their footprints in the country. However, Turkey remained an exception as despite failing to achieve its objective of dethroning Bashar Al-Assad from power, it not only remained a significant player in Syria but also enabled itself to use this arena as a pivot for its influence across the region.

Turkish policy has been fluctuating on both sides in a conflictual manner. In war against the ISIS, the US provided support to YPG (Kurdish Militia) in Syria which further provided the leverage to counter Assad's influence. However, since Turkey was apprehensive of Kurd's demand of autonomy and had put the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party)—the political wing of YPG—on terror list, it created a rift in Turkey-US relations and hence, resulted in an informal break away of Turkey from the US-led policy and coalition inside Syria.[2] Likewise, Turkish approach in joint Russo-Iranian-led Astana Peace Process for Syrian Crisis also deviated from the other two parties. Russia and Iran were adamant of launching military operation in the last rebel-stronghold city of Idlib. However, Turkey not only opposed this policy but also established working relations with Ahrar Al-Sham, one of the strongest and largest militant organisation present in Idlib.[3] In fostering its own policy on Syria, Turkey came in competition with Iran (also a major contender for regional influence) for which Syria was a key.

Historically, since 1979, Iran ventured upon the path of expanding its role in the Middle East in a successive manner. The support of the Palestinian groups, establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and initiation of historic diplomatic ties with Syria against the common enemy, Israel, indicated Iran's leading role. The fall of Saddam in 2003 complemented the Iranian position as it continued to dominate the political sphere of Iraq. Years later, in 2011, the Arab Spring also provoked Iran to lend its support to popular uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen, hence further consolidating its position. Unlike Iran, Turkey did not focus on Middle Eastern geopolitics, and rather remained eager for legalising its European status. That is why, the Middle Eastern rivalries have remained limited to Iran, Iraq, the GCC and Israel for the most part until recent times. For Iran, minimising the role of the GCC in the Middle East and encircling Israel

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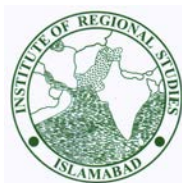
through its proxy network was a successful feat. Nevertheless, countering Turkey's influence is a daunting task. Iran's open hostility against the GCC and Israel provided the leverage to the former to utilise its proxy network with precision. But Turkey presents an altogether different scenario for the following reasons.

First, unlike GCC and Israel, Turkey never openly showed hostility towards Iran. In fact, Turco-Iranian ties have largely remained positive owing to linguistic and cultural affiliations. The absence of Turkey in the Middle East also worked in Iran's favour as it did not have to engage with yet another powerful regional state. Second, Turkey's activism in the Middle East is not officially termed as a countermeasure to the expanding Iranian role. On the contrary, Turkish military presence in Iraq and Syria—the strongholds of Iran—is to ensure the diffusion of Kurdish threat.[4] The Kurdish issue has the similar ramifications for Turkey and Iran alike and any attempt by the Kurdish population to vow for their autonomy is strongly opposed by both the states. Third, the fact that Turkey is 'officially' a part of the Astana Process indicates its unpronounced tilt towards Iran. In an overall regional context, Turkey is supportive of Islamist movements, critical of GCC role, and shares sentiments in favour of Palestine and against Israel. All such policy measures embody a replica of the Iranian stance and should make Iran and Turkey natural allies. Nevertheless, the terminology which most IR scholars use for Turco-Iranian engagement is that of "frenemies".

The traditional Arab-Iran rivalry has, to an overwhelming extent, ended owing to Iran's successes in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The intra-GCC diversions and vulnerability of the GCC states to Houthis attacks have minimised their strength in the region. The decline in Arab power was exploited by Turkey in the wake of Arab Spring in three manners. First, Turkey vehemently supported the Arab uprisings of 2011 and lent its support to Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Second, it quested upon the policy of making inroads in the Arab world and nurtured its diplomatic relations with Qatar against Saudi Arabia. Third, given the autocratic nature of the GCC political system and its illegitimacy as the Islamic leader owing to its silence over Palestine and Kashmir issues, Turkey provided the alternative Islamic model in the name of "Political Islam" and openly expressed its concerns over the human rights violations in Palestine and Kashmir, and against Islamophobia.[5] Such steps do not explicitly target Iran but they do threaten Iranian interests in the region. Although Iran has been vocal in criticising Gulf States' political system as "non-Islamic" and has been involved in fervently supporting the Palestinian liberation struggle yet its exertion remains rather limited. This is because while some regional state and non-state entities do share similar views with regards to GCC and Palestine, yet they do not hold any favourable opinion towards Iran as well (owing to sectarian differences). On the other hand, Turkey's emergence as a major power has a greater degree of appeal in the context of regional Sunni geopolitics as evident from its hosting of Muslim Brotherhood members as well as anti-Assad Syrian opposition factions.

Therefore, although Turkey is not in outright hostility with Iran, still the noteworthy development is its encroachment in the traditional Iranian sphere, more specifically in Iraq and Syria. The incitement of war inside Syria was exploited by Turkey in its own favour.
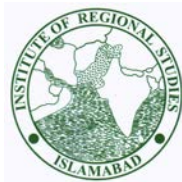
Despite being a member of the US-led coalition against ISIS, Turkish military adventures have remained dubious. Turkey, while utilising the leverage of being a US-allied state, focused its attention against Kurdish threat, i.e., a vital force against ISIS. In accomplishing this task, Turkey initiated two military operations in the Syrian territory, i.e., Olive Branch (2018) and Peace Spring (2019), and established a buffer zone in the northeast region. Simultaneously, Turkey embarked upon the policy of military intervention in Iraq as well through two operations, i.e., Claw Tiger and Claw Eagle in 2019. What Turkey tried to achieve through these military assertions can be categorised broadly into two aspects.

First is the formation of proto-state structures as reflected in northeast Syria. In its buffer zone, Turkey is providing the educational and social services while officially, Turkish currency Lira is being utilised for financial transactions.[6] In a more militaristic manner, Turkey managed to unite the Syrian armed rebel groups under a cohesive umbrella organisation, i.e., the Syrian National Army (SNA) and linked it with the Ankara-based Syrian Opposition. SNA acts as a proxy organisation of Turkey which provides leverage to the latter for its political manoeuvring inside Syria. It also helps Turkey to utilise this proxy group as a counterweight to Iranian-backed militias as well as ISIS attacks near its border. As SNA has the sizeable membership of approximately ninety thousand (90,000), this could also translate into Turkish influence over Syrian politics in any post-war settlement.[7]

Second achievement is the Turkish concept of forward defense that coincides with its ambition of expanding its role across the Middle East. Turkish military deployment in the form of military bases manifests this strategy. Likewise in Syria, Turkey has dominated the security sphere of northern Iraq to resist Kurdish encroachment towards its border. The inroads in Iraq allow Turkey the political space as well which it has been eying since the fall of Saddam. In order to seal the power vacuum, Turkey resisted the rise of Shi'ite Islamic parties in Iraq. Regardless of the strong Iranian influence, Turkey's weak relationship with the Iraqi Central Government and the rise of ISIS, made this task difficult. However, the declaration of Kurdish Referendum by Masoud Barzani in 2017 provided the opportunity for Turco-Iraq rapprochement due to a common Kurdish threat.[8] Similarly, as Iraq engulfed into frequent mass protests between 2018 and 2021, the nationalist alliance of Muqtada Al-Sadr emerged as the largest political group in both 2018 and 2021 parliamentary elections. The rise of Muqtada acted as an intervening force in the Shi'ite-dominated political sphere. Resultantly, Turkey exploited the Shi'ite divisions by uniting the Sunni forces, i.e., Al-Takaddum Movement and Al-Azem Movement, the two largest Sunni parties in Iraq. The Sunni Sovereignty Coalition allied with Muqtada and Barzani to form the largest political bloc in Iraqi parliament against the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias and State of the Law Coalition.[9]

The aforementioned developments highlight the emergence of Turkey as a determined and powerful regional actor. Turkey's realisation for its own security coupled with the power vacuum in Sunni-dominated areas left by the declining role of the GCC, helped the former to establish its footprints as a new guarantor of Sunni politics in the Middle East. Furthermore, aligned to this is the association of Turkey's President Racep Tayyib

Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party with the Ottoman legacy—which entails the concept of reinforcing influence over the erstwhile Ottoman regions.[10] Syria and Iraq, both present ideal scenarios for Turkey in all three aspects of security, geo-sectarianism, and Ottoman claims. While Turkish policy towards these states cannot be termed as anti-Iranian, yet the future competition between these two Middle Eastern giants is inevitable. Sustaining control over Syria is crucial for Iran for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure consistent supplies to Hezbollah and secondly, to keep Israel in check. If Turkey manages to persist on its policy of dominating north-western Syria, not only it would be detrimental for Syrian sovereignty but would also result in the withering away of Iranian power. Meanwhile, Iraq is the pivot for Iranian inroads in the Middle East and larger Arab region. Any power sway in Iraq away from the Shi'ites would entirely change the Iranian position inside Iraq. Henceforth, Turkish incursions in northern Iraq is expected to be tolerated by Iran only to a certain extent, the crossing of which would bring the two states in conflicting terms with each other. Conclusively, an empowered Turkey in the Middle East will not serve Iranian interests despite being on friendly terms as the clash of its expansionist ambitions with the Iranian sphere of influence would be unavoidable and could provoke yet another regional power competition.

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