

# A Difficult Balancing Act: Turkish-Iranian relations in turbulent times

Karabekir Akkoyunlu

## Summary

Turkey has emerged as one of the principal beneficiaries of the post-October 7 regional order, particularly in Syria. Yet Ankara has been a wary winner: while it quietly welcomed the clipping of Iran's wings, it has no interest in a collapsed or destabilised Iran on its border and now finds itself defending a narrow middle ground against both Israeli aggression and Iranian unpredictability. Even as Turkey's pragmatic, often uneasy, *modus vivendi* with Iran is tested, Ankara's posture of [strategic autonomy](#) – keeping working ties with mutually hostile actors and mediating where possible – is likely to hold, while it hedges by drawing closer to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan. For European policymakers, this points to a strategic convergence with Ankara on Iran, but also to Turkey's growing centrality as an ambitious regional power whose priorities will not always align with Europe's.

## The Issue

The US–Israeli war on Iran has placed Turkey in an increasingly delicate position. Ankara has been one of the principal beneficiaries of the post-7 October regional transformation, particularly in Syria, where the weakening of Iran and its allies enabled Turkey to expand its influence and emerge as the dominant external actor after the collapse of the Assad regime. Yet Turkey's gains have also exposed the contradictions of its regional strategy. While Ankara has quietly welcomed the clipping of Iran's regional wings, it remains concerned about an ongoing conflict that could leave Iran either fatally destabilised or dangerously unpredictable.

This has made Turkey's traditional balancing act between Iran and its adversaries increasingly difficult – yet equally important – to sustain. Turkey's relations with Iran have rarely been as cordial, or its relations with Israel as hostile, as official rhetoric suggests. But as tensions with Israel rise, Ankara is forced to seek a difficult equilibrium between limiting Iranian influence while preventing its collapse.

## Analysis

Turkey and Iran share one of the Middle East's oldest and most durable interstate relationships. In a region where most political borders are twentieth-century creations, Ankara and Tehran take pride in having maintained a relatively stable

frontier since the seventeenth century. This historical continuity has fostered a relationship shaped less by ideology than by geopolitical competition, pragmatic cooperation, and mutual restraint.

Historically, periods of rivalry and rapprochement have reflected wider regional dynamics. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, secular Turkey and revolutionary Iran appeared to occupy opposing ideological camps. Yet pragmatism prevailed even during the ideological polarisation of the 1980s. The most serious tensions emerged not over ideology, but geopolitics – such as in



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) in Khankendi, Azerbaijan. Photo: TCCB

the 1990s, when both states competed for influence in the post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia. This competition persists today over the [Turkish-proposed Zangezur corridor](#) that would sever Iran's overland link to Armenia.

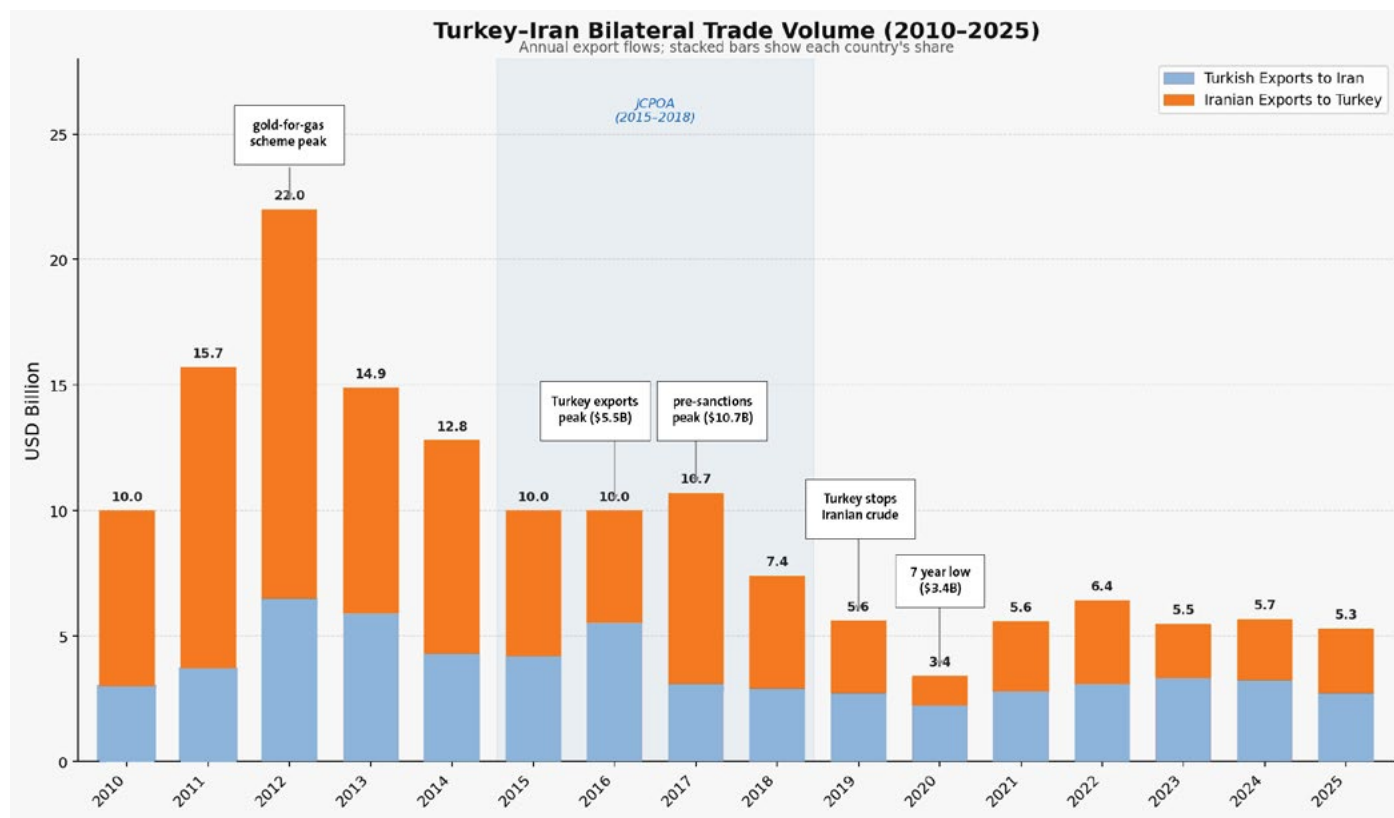
The 2000s, by contrast, marked a period of rapprochement. As Turkey's EU accession process stalled and relations with the United States and Israel deteriorated, Ankara increasingly diversified its foreign policy and deepened ties with non-western regional actors, including Iran. Security cooperation intensified, in particular against armed Kurdish groups. Turkey also positioned itself as an intermediary between Tehran and the West. The 2010 Brazil-Turkey-Iran nuclear fuel swap initiative symbolised Ankara's ambition to emerge as an autonomous regional power capable of engaging all sides simultaneously.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 reignited Turkish-Iranian rivalry, especially in Syria, where Ankara backed regime change and Tehran intervened to preserve the Assad regime. Yet even at the height of the Syrian conflict, the two countries avoided direct confrontation. As in Turkey's relationship with Russia, geopolitical competition coexisted with sustained diplomatic engagement and economic ties. The Astana Process, launched in 2017 by Russia, Turkey and Iran, reflected a shared interest in compartmentalising rivalries and managing instability. Trade has followed a parallel trajectory of pragmatic

growth constrained by external pressures. Bilateral trade grew from around USD 1 billion in 2000 to over USD 10 billion in 2010, peaking in 2012 amid the "gas-for-gold" trade, through which Turkey helped Iran receive payment for energy despite US sanctions. The scheme subsequently led to the Halkbank case in the United States, where the Turkish state-owned bank was accused of helping Iran evade sanctions. Subsequent US pressure and pandemic-era disruptions led to a complete halt to Turkish imports of Iranian oil and a sharp decline in trade, which has only partially recovered since.

The regional balance shifted dramatically following three developments: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Israeli operations targeting Iran and its proxies after 7 October 2023, and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in late 2024. With Russia distracted and Iranian influence diminished, Turkey found space to emerge as the dominant external actor in Syria. Although President Erdoğan loudly condemned Israeli attacks on Gaza, Lebanon and Iran itself, Ankara also recognised the opportunities that the degradation of Iran's regional network created. This culminated in the emergence of a new Syrian regime under Ankara's apparent patronage.

At the same time, however, Iran's weakening has accelerated a growing Turkish-Israeli rivalry, explored in [SUITS Policy Brief 2026:1](#). This has created an increasingly difficult geopolitical calculus for Ankara. On the one hand,



Sources: Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) via Turkish MFA (2021-2024 official); IRAM Center: Carnegie Endowment; UN COMTRADE. 2010-2020 figures are estimates derived from multiple secondary sources. 2025 is a full-year projection based on Jan-Jun actuals (down 4% YoY)

reflecting a desire to consolidate gains in Syria and court the Trump administration, Ankara has contributed to Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran. In October 2025, for example, [it enforced the UN's snap-back sanctions](#) on Iran and moved against entities linked to Tehran's nuclear programme.

On the other hand, Turkey remains deeply uncomfortable with the prospect of a fatally destabilised Iran. Although Turkish fears of refugee flows and renewed Kurdish militancy have eased for now, they would quickly return should hostilities between Iran and the US and Israel intensify. A permanently crippled Islamic Republic would also remove a principal constraint on Israel, leaving Turkey more exposed to Israeli pressure while eroding the leverage Ankara derives from mediation. More immediately, Ankara worries that the current inconclusive status quo could push Tehran's Revolutionary Guards-dominated new leadership towards more aggressive behaviour as it seeks to restore regional clout, including renewed strikes on neighbouring states, continued threats to maritime trade or a breakout nuclear move.

Ankara prefers an Iran weakened enough to limit its regional reach, but stable enough not to break. That calculus has been evident during the 2026 war, which has severely tested Turkey's balancing strategy, while demonstrating some of its advantages. Despite hosting NATO infrastructure and US military assets, Turkey has been largely spared the Iranian retaliation directed at several Gulf Arab states. At the same time, Trump's personal affinity for Erdoğan appears to have yielded dividends, with reports suggesting that the Turkish leader played a key role in dissuading President Trump from mobilising Kurdish insurgents to stage an armed uprising against the Islamic Republic during the early days of the war.

This unstable regional environment has been pushing Turkey toward [closer coordination with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan](#). Rather than a formal alliance structure, this is a loose front forged by necessity in the face of regional turbulence amidst both Israeli military aggression and the risks posed by Iranian unpredictability.

For all the tensions and shifting alignments, however, the underlying logic of Turkish–Iranian relations remains remarkably consistent. Both states recognise each other as permanent regional powers that cannot be eliminated, isolated or ignored. Their relationship is therefore unlikely to upgrade to full partnership or descend into enmity, but will remain an uneasy *modus vivendi* shaped by rivalry, interdependence and geopolitical constraints.

## Implications

Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy has allowed Ankara to navigate successive regional crises with relatively

limited costs. This balancing act has frustrated allies and rivals alike, yet few regional or international actors see antagonising Erdoğan as preferable to accommodating him. This strategy is likely to persist, albeit in an increasingly fragmented and polarised regional environment. Ankara will seek to maintain working relations with Iran, the US, Russia and the Gulf monarchies, while managing tensions with Israel, in an environment that leaves less room for ambiguity and manoeuvre. For Europe, this carries several implications. First, western governments will continue viewing Turkey as a difficult yet indispensable counterpart, whose cooperation they will seek on migration, energy security, Russia and Syria. Ankara's preference for preserving a weakened but functioning Iranian state broadly overlaps with European concerns about state collapse, refugee flows and wider instability. At the same time, the West's focus on geostrategic interests gives Erdoğan greater room to advance his autocratising agenda at home.

Second, the gradual emergence of competing regional blocs increases the risk of a more fragmented and militarised Middle East. While Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan are moving toward greater coordination, Israel, the UAE and India increasingly represent a parallel axis.

Finally, although direct confrontation between Turkey and Israel remains unlikely, the deterioration of pragmatic ties between two key US partners risks adding another layer of instability to an already volatile region. It may also sharpen divisions inside Europe, where some states view Israel as a counterweight to Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, while others maintain stronger ties with Ankara and more critical positions toward Israel.

Europe will need to navigate between these emerging alignments while avoiding contributing to deeper regional polarisation or importing its rivalries into European politics.

## Further Reading

Göçer, Derya. "[Turkey–Iran: Managed Rivalry under Maximum Pressure](#)." Working paper. Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), May 13, 2026.

Aydın-Düzgüt, Senem; Mustafa Kutlay; and E. Fuat Keyman. "[Strategic Autonomy in Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Multipolarity: Lineages and Contradictions of an Idea](#)." *International Politics* 63 (2026): 184–205.

Akkoyunlu, Karabekir. [Guardianship and Democracy in Iran and Turkey: Tutelary Consolidation, Popular Contestation](#). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024.



## Takeaways

- » Turkish–Iranian relations are among the Middle East’s most durable. Shaped by pragmatism and geopolitical constraints rather than ideology, they are likely to survive the current upheaval as an uneasy *modus vivendi*.
- » Turkey has profited from Iran’s weakening, particularly in Syria, but fears the consequences of state collapse. A permanently degraded Iran would also leave Israel unchecked, a prospect Ankara views with growing unease.
- » Turkey’s strategic autonomy in the Erdoğan era means maintaining working ties with mutually hostile actors and playing mediator wherever possible. This has resulted in a loose alignment with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan, formed against Israeli aggression and Iranian unpredictability, an alignment that increasingly mirrors an Israel–UAE–India axis.
- » For European policymakers, Turkey will remain an indispensable but often difficult counterpart. Ankara’s preference for a weakened-but-functioning Iran is a point of strategic convergence with Europe, which Erdoğan will make use of to throttle the remnants of democracy back home.

## Sammanfattning på svenska

Turkiet har framträtt som en av de främsta vinnarna i den regionala omordning som följt efter den 7 oktober, särskilt i Syrien. Samtidigt har Ankara intagit en försiktig hållning. Även om Turkiet i tysthet har välkomnat Irans försvagade regionala inflytande, har landet inget intresse av ett kollapsat eller destabiliserat Iran vid sin gräns. Turkiet befinner sig därför i en svår mellanposition, där man söker balansera mellan israelisk aggression och iransk oförutsägbarhet.

Trots att den pragmatiska och stundtals ansträngda samexistensen mellan Turkiet och Iran utsätts för nya påfrestningar, talar mycket för att Ankara kommer att hålla fast vid sin strategi om autonomi i utrikespolitiken. Detta innebär att Turkiet fortsätter att upprätthålla fungerande relationer med aktörer som står i konflikt med varandra samt att, där så är möjligt, agera medlare. Parallellt stärker Ankara sina relationer med Saudiarabien, Egypten och Pakistan som en del av sin regionala riskhantering.

För europeiska beslutsfattare innebär denna utveckling både möjligheter och utmaningar. Det finns en växande strategisk samsyn mellan Europa och Turkiet i synen på Iran, men samtidigt understryker utvecklingen Turkiets allt mer centrala roll som en ambitiös regional makt vars prioriteringar inte alltid sammanfaller med europeiska intressen.

## About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makes and others the tools to make informed decisions.

*Director*  
Paul T Levin

*Chief Editor*  
Jenny White

[suits@suits.su.se](mailto:suits@suits.su.se)  
<https://www.su.se/institute-for-turkish-studies/>

## About the author

**Karabekir Akkoyunlu** is a research associate at the Latin American Centre, University of Oxford, and a visiting scholar at the Department of Political Science, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. His research focuses on the actors and institutions that drive and resist democratisation, autocratisation and militarisation in the Global South. He explores this topic from an interregional perspective, through in-depth comparison of cases that are not typically compared, such as Turkey, Brazil, Iran and Indonesia.

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