
WHY IRAN ISN'T RATTLED BY TURKEY-RUSSIA TURNABOUT

- 26.08.2016

Al Monitor, 25 August 2016

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TEHRAN, Iran □ The politics of the Middle East are undergoing rapid changes, as demonstrated by recent developments in Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. These shifts will undoubtedly impact the regional and foreign policies of Turkey's neighbors, in particular those of Iran. For Tehran, the two primary factors are Turkey's decision to redefine its ties with Israel and Russia and the diminishing of Ankara's power as a key player in the Middle East and a rival of Iran.

These days, Iran sees itself as Russia's strategic partner in the Middle East. Of importance, the two countries are supporting the same side in the Syrian war. Neither West nor East remains part of the Islamic Republic's lexicon, but Russia has always enjoyed a better position in the country relative to the United States and other Western powers. In this vein, increased military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran is evidence of how important this partnership is for Iran. This month, the Islamic Republic for the first time allowed Russia to conduct military air operations from one of its air bases, perhaps a show of Tehran's wish to maintain its pivotal position in Moscow's regional policies.

As some have recently argued, Iran's allowing Russia to use its Hamedan air base can be considered a message to its opponents in Syria, such as Turkey, who are attempting to court Russia. Indeed, Iran wants to signal that while Russia might talk to different players about Syria, such as Turkey and the United States, at the end of the day, it is Iran that Russia views as trustworthy. This bottom line has been lost amid the storm of criticism from Iranian lawmakers and negative public opinion about the sorties from Hamedan that led Tehran to announce Aug. 22 that Russian military operations from Iranian soil had been halted.

Although Iran and Russia have supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad since the war in Syria erupted, their red lines in the country do not fully overlap. Ali Akbar Velayati, who serves as foreign policy adviser to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had previously stated that keeping Assad in power is Iran's red line in Syria. In contrast, Russia's red line is maintaining the regime but not necessarily Assad. As such, the Turkey-Russia rapprochement, in the context of Ankara distancing itself from the West, may cause concerns in Iran about the possibility of a Turkish-Russian deal on Assad's fate.

Nasser Hadian, a professor of international relations at Tehran University, told Al-Monitor that the impact of the July 15 coup attempt on Turkey's future has three basic dimensions. Generally, the coup has weakened the Turkish position in the region and the world, but it has strengthened President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's power within the Turkish political system, while also limiting the role of the army, he said.

With Turkey's internal turmoil weakening its position in the region, Hadian said, Ankara's power to act in the Middle East will be limited. This in turn could provide Iran, as a key regional player, with more opportunities as Turkey focuses on internal challenges for the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, given the interconnected nature of security in the region, Hadian believes that Iran is in fact concerned about the security situation in Turkey. Indeed, Iranian officials' prompt condemnation of the coup attempt as it unfolded and backing of Turkey's democratically elected government could be seen within this framework.

As for any potentially negative implications stemming from the new twist in Turkish-Russian relations and the possibility of Turkey surpassing Iran as Moscow's regional ally, Hadian said, I believe that [the situation] is not a zero-sum game, and [Iran] should not be concerned about this issue. He thinks that the impact of the rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow on Iran's regional policy will notably be seen in developments in Syria.

It is likely that Turkey will close its borders [with Syria] to stop equipping Assad's opponents, and it may probably agree with a transitional period [as part of a peace deal], with Assad remaining in power during that period, he said. The realization of this scenario is consistent with Iran's regional objectives.

Iran has consistently backed the Syrian government and fought Assad's opponents throughout the 5-year-long civil war. Unlike Western countries and Turkey, Iran and Russia see no difference between the Islamic State (IS) and the moderate opposition to Assad. As such, if Russia can persuade Turkey to effectively seal off its southern border and stop arming Assad's opponents,

both Moscow and Tehran will move closer to their common objectives in Syria.

There are several reasons for Turkey's possibly being receptive to Russian influence. Although the coup attempt has caused instability in Turkey, the country was already suffering from instability related to the Syria war and the situation in Kurdish areas in the southeast. This has put Turkey in a weaker position vis-a-vis Russia. Furthermore, the United States and Russia are reportedly coordinating their efforts in the fight against IS in Syria. Given these developments on the ground, Russia has a good opportunity to persuade Turkey to decrease its support to Assad's opponents. In return, Russia is likely to pay more attention to Turkey's security concerns, and in this regard, likely reduce its support for Kurdish forces in Syria. Finally, unlike complex security issues that have proven difficult to resolve, common economic and commercial interests favor both Russia and Turkey expediently improving their ties.

While Turkey is unlikely to do a complete U-turn of its Syria policy, cooperation between Tehran and Ankara will likely improve, while the relative strengthening of Iran's position in the region in the aftermath of the coup attempt is likely to continue regardless of the improvement in Turkish-Russian relations.

Kaynak/Source: