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A Turkish-Iranian understanding under way?

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On 15 June 2020, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif visited his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Ankara. The political rapprochement between the two regional powers suggests a far-reaching shift in the balance of power in the Middle East. Is an accommodation emerging, and if so, how far will it go? Will it have an impact on the situation in the war-torn Middle East?

In the current period of political restoration following the revolts and war devastation of the past decade, initiatives to put Turkish-Iranian relations on a new footing come as no surprise. All three Middle Eastern regional alliances led by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey respectively agree that military interventions to prevent revolts at home are in principle legitimate as long as they do not affect the interests of another regional power. The current Iranian-Turkish flirtation is therefore based on a convergence of interests.

An old alliance

What is surprising is how blatantly both sides are ignoring the tensions of recent months. Remember: until October 2019, the relationship between the two countries was reasonably intact. Iran was one of the first countries to condemn the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, as President Erdoğan repeatedly emphasized. Turkey and Iran worked well together in the Astana coalition protected by Russia; even a security policy cooperation between Turkish authorities and the Iranian revolutionary guards was possible. The conflict of interests in Syria hardly seemed to disturb the relations. When

the first units of the al-Quds brigades of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards intervened in Syria in May 2012 in favour of the al-Assad regime, Turkish politicians and military officials did not see this as an immediate threat to Turkish security interests. In fact, until October 2019 there had hardly been any dangerous rapprochement between Turkish and Iranian troops in Syria. Iran and Turkey supported each other in their respective disputes with the US in the summer of 2018: Turkey publicly opposed US sanctions against Iran and Iran condemned the sanctions against Turkey that the US government had decided to impose after the detention of Presbyterian Pastor Andrew Brunson by Turkish police.

Setbacks and differences

At least for the public, relations deteriorated after Turkey decided to intervene in Rojava, the Kurdish dominated northeast of Syria, in October 2019. While the Iranians accepted earlier Turkish occupations in northwestern Syria, the military actions in Rojava went too far for them. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif protested, probably also because Tur-

key had not previously agreed to the intervention with Iran. Then Turkey decided to comply with US sanctions and stop buying oil from Iran. Relations now cooled off noticeably and reached a low point when it became clear that Turkey had indirectly supported the USA in the killing of the Iranian commander of the al-Quds brigades, Qāsem Solaimāni, on 7 January 2020.

However, as Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif stressed, soon after the outbreak of the Corona crisis both sides agreed that economic relations, the value of which had collapsed by almost 50%, and cooperation in the energy sector had to be resumed. It was threatening for Turkey that in addition to the absence of European tourists due to the Corona crisis, Iranians were now also absent. As a result, the Turkish economy lacked income of almost €1.4 billion, or almost 4% of total income from the tourism business. In addition, Iran has great interest in supplying the European energy market with natural gas via a pipeline that runs through Anatolia ("Persian Pipeline"), even if this should lead to competition with the Russian Turkish Stream project opened on 8 January 2020.

Turkish Courtship

Turkey also appears to have a growing interest in normalizing relations with Iran. Turkey leads the smallest of the three alliances in the Middle East having only one reliable partner, namely the Emirate of Qatar. Tunisia, Oman and Kuwait flirt with Turkey from time to time, but so far have not wanted to join the alliance. Moreover, with the Libyan government in Tripoli, Turkey has gained yet another partner. However, the Saudi alliance's arms expenditure is five times as high as that of the Turkish alliance, which still has a little more capital at its disposal than the Iranian alliance, which, apart from Russia, has only weak partners at its side.

Closer cooperation between the Turkish and Iranian alliances would therefore have great advantages for both sides: Turkey would be able to improve its strategic position significantly, and Iran would have the chance to offset at least partially the military superiority of the Saudi bloc.

A strategic cooperation would have to be justified by a convergence of interests. This would have to go beyond the fact that Iran and Turkey have both equally fallen victim to the US sanctions policy. It should become clear that Saudi Arabia has become the main enemy for Iran as well as for Turkey. Moreover, it would have to become clear that with Israel's entry into the Saudi alliance, the new Iranian-Turkish alliance could become the guarantor of Islamic-Arab interests in the Middle East.

If this is the case, perhaps it might also be possible to find ways to resolve the Iranian-Turkish proxy conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen. There are already the first signs of this. The Iranian Government has in fact recognised the legitimacy of the Libyan Government of Tripoli and has stopped open arms assistance to Khalifa Haftar's LNA. In return, the Turkish government has made clear that it wants to disengage the still strongly anchored party of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, al-Islāh, and its militias from the alliance with the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition and the Hādī government. If this were to succeed, the Saudi coalition would face another opponent who, for his part, has good social networks with the North Yemeni Ansār Allāh, i.e. Hūthī.

The Islamic divide

It should be much easier for Iran to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood and its environment than for the Muslim Brotherhood to accommodate the Shiite Iranians. Here again, a new orientation is indicated: Important representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and its think tanks in Qatar are approaching to reassess the roles of the Shiite tradition in Islamic history. Some also recall that also in the Shiite tradition a trend existed that pursued a similar concern as the Muslim Brotherhood; this included above all the powerful Da'wa party in Iraq.

However, not everything fits together yet. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards are currently once again celebrating the so-called Resistance Alliance, i.e. the transnational alliance of Shiite communities that have sworn allegiance to the Iranian revolutionary leader Khamenei. The

Turkish policy of promoting the national conservative Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood has no place here.

Duality

However, it is possible that both options will continue to exist side by side. On the one hand, the two alliances, which are clearly different in terms of discursive and power politics, and on the other hand, a community of interests standing outside the coalitions, which forms an alliance against the new Saudi bloc.

Whatever the outcome, the President of the Syrian regime in Damascus will be the laughing third. On the one hand, he can look forward to the EU and the United Nations meeting on 30 June 2020 at the fourth Brussels conference "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", to mobilise aid for Syrians within the country and in neighbouring countries, including for the host communities, through pledges totalling US\$5.5 billion for 2020 and multi-year pledges of almost US\$2.2 billion for 2021 and beyond. Al-Assad will no doubt interpret this as meaning that the pressure on Syrian fiscal policy is now easing. On the other hand, the regime in Damascus will be well rewarded for its willingness to participate in an overall solution. The Kurdish question will remain a stumbling block, however. There may be a convergence of Syrian and Turkish interests on this issue, as there was 22 years ago

when PKK leader Öcalan was expelled from Syria. However, this time Iran would have to play along.

The possibility of surprises is not excluded

Some observers of Middle Eastern politics, however, interpret the Iranian-Turkish rapprochement as a purely tactical security partnership, should the actual political goal, namely a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, fail. In fact, even in the United Arab Emirates there is a growing willingness to seek a balance with Iran, at least on an informal level. For some politicians in the UAE, Shiite Iran is less threatening than the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has found a powerful patron in the Turkish government. Saudi Arabia and the UAE certainly have a great interest in isolating Turkey. It is not yet clear whether the Saudi princes will take such a diplomatic risk. Whatever the outcome of the game of restoration policy, the prelude seems to have been made with the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister to Ankara. He will soon travel to Moscow, and another visit to Damascus is part of his travel plans. The fact that he is travelling in person this time and not getting involved in video meetings suggests that Iran does not want to leave anything to chance here. The end-result could indeed be the negotiation and consolidation of a new Middle Eastern bipolar order.