

Turkey and Iran: The Ties That Bind

By [Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya](#)

Global Research, January 23, 2014

[RT Op-Edge](#) 20 January 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [US NATO War](#)

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As Turkey works for harmonization with Iran and Russia, an internal struggle has developed between the PM and the Gulenists that may threaten the process. If the leadership of the AKP is to be believed, it's part of a foreign conspiracy to remove them.

Regarding the conflict in Syria, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party) government in Ankara might be on the opposite side of the fence from both Tehran and Moscow, but the depth of Turkish ties with Iran and Russia go beyond this.

Turkey is not only tied to both Iran and Russia through geography and centuries of common history, it also shares the bonds of mutual trade, culture, linguistics, and ethnic composition. Although Turkish policies and political relations with Iran and Russia are subject to fluctuation, the many links tying Turkish society to both cannot be undone, including the economic reality of their ties.

Tehran and Moscow are two of Turkey's most important trading partners and sources of energy. Aside from Germany, in terms of Turkish exports and imports, the combined volume of Turkish trade with both Iran and Russia outflanks, by way of comparison, any bilateral trade relations Ankara has with other countries.

Realizing the importance of Turkish economic ties to Iran, it is important to note that the unilateral US and European Union sanctions set up against Iran have hurt the Turkish economy. The Turks need Iranian energy in the form of natural gas and oil. When the US government asked Ankara to cut back on Iranian energy imports, it basically expected the Turkish government to knowingly handicap the Turkish economy in order to serve Washington's agenda.

Even under the US-led sanctions regime directed against Iran as a form of economic manipulation and warfare, Turkish businesses and the AKP government have tried their best to maintain their economic and energy ties with Iran. This has been done both openly and covertly. Turkey has even acted as a covert channel for Iran to evade the US and EU sanctions.

Among other things, the corruption scandal involving the head of the state-owned Halk Bankasi (People's Bank), or Halkbank for short, that emerged on December 17, 2013, is a reflection of the continuation of business and trade between Turkey and Iran. Sales from Iran were silently facilitated by the Turkish bank through the purchasing of gold that was given to Tehran as payment, instead of a currency, after Tehran was blocked from using the SWIFT international money-transfer system in March 2012. Halkbank maintains that the

transactions were legal and that no rules prevented trading precious metals with Iran until July 2013 and that it ceased doing so on June 10, 2013.

An internal power struggle has emerged in Turkey. The Halkbank scandal is really a sub-plot and symptom of this. Not only do the recent graft probes reflect widespread government corruption in Turkey, but it puts the spotlight on an inner tussle within the AKP and, more broadly, within the Turkish elite managing the affairs of the Republic of Turkey.



A demonstrator carries a shoe box, a symbol of the corruption scandal after police found \$4.5 million secreted in shoe boxes in the home of the chief executive of Turkish state-owned Halkbank, during an anti-corruption protest in Ankara on January 11, 2014 (AFP Photo /Adem Altan)

Neo-Ottomanism: Winter in Turkish foreign politics

Since 2011, the economic damage on Turkey caused by the sanctions regime against Iran has been aggravated through an aggregate of Turkish miscalculations and domestic incidents. In large part, these miscalculations are the result of the metamorphosis of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's business-friendly 'zero problems' foreign policy into the much more aggressive 'neo-Ottoman' foreign policy.

Senior Turkish politicians believed that the so-called Arab Spring would elevate Ankara as an indisputable regional powerhouse from the borders of Morocco to Iraq. These Turkish views were also encouraged by the US and from inside the EU, with the promotion of the so-called '*Turkish model*' for the Arabs, which buoyed the AKP government to diverge from its '*zero problems*' policy in pursuit of neo-Ottoman dreams of unchallenged Turkish economic and political supremacy in the Arab World.

Through its neo-Ottoman enterprise, Ankara walked away from the Ankara-Damascus-Tehran axis that appeared to be forming and all the advances it had made with Libya, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. A winter of sorts had arrived for Ankara in the field of foreign affairs. Turkish relations eventually soured, with almost all the countries on its borders and a chilling of relations began to emerge with Tehran and the Kremlin.

Neo-Ottoman foreign policy was initiated through the Turkish government's support for the NATO war and regime change operations in Tripoli that ultimately disrupted Turkish trade with the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Although the Turkish government pretended it was against the war, Ankara did not veto any of NATO's war plans at the North Atlantic Council in Brussels. Instead Turkey supported the NATO-imposed no-fly zone, actively took part in the naval embargo around the Libyan coast, manned the airport in Benghazi as the NATO provisional authority there, and facilitated the Libyan anti-government forces in multiple ways.

As a result of the Turkish government's own actions, the intensity of Turkish business ties and trade with Libya has not recovered since the NATO war in 2011 due to the damage and instability inflicted on the Libyan economy.



Gulf of Izmir, formerly known as the Gulf of Smyrna, on the Aegean Sea in the Turkish city of Izmir (AFP Photo)

The events in Libya were followed by the eventual suspension of Turkish trade with Syria, another important Turkish trading partner. The discontinuation of legal trade with Syria resulted as a consequence of Erdogan's reckless support for regime change in Damascus.

All the while, Turkey's relations with Iraq, another major Turkish trading partner, were degenerating due to the arrogance and hubris of Erdogan and the AKP. Ankara believed that Iranian influence in the Levant and Mesopotamia would be replaced with Turkish influence and kept pushing for its affiliates to supplant the governments in Damascus and Baghdad.

Even when the AKP government saw that a formidable Eurasian alliance formed by Russia, Iran and China would not let Damascus collapse to the anti-government insurgency supported by Turkey and its NATO and GCC allies, Erdogan opted to stay the course against Damascus instead of trying to reverse Ankara's disastrous Syria policy.

Aside from the economic damage the AKP was inflicting on Turkey, the instability that Ankara was helping support in Syria through the training, arming, and financing of insurgents in Syria began to have [political and security consequences](#) on Turkish soil too.

As the Turkish economy began to hurt, domestic political tensions began to build, the disparity caused by the AKP's neoliberal economic policies began to hurt more, and the AKP began to act more authoritarian so as to protect its authority.

To an extent, the [Gezi Park protests](#) that spread from Istanbul across Turkey in 2013 are a reflection of the ignition of these domestic tensions.

This article was originally published by Russia Today on January 20, 2014.



A worker walks past the pumping station on the border between Iran and Turkey (Reuters)

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About the author:

An award-winning author and geopolitical analyst, Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya is the author of *The Globalization of NATO* (Clarity Press) and a forthcoming book *The War on Libya and the Re-Colonization of Africa*. He has also contributed to several other books ranging from cultural critique to international relations. He is a Sociologist and Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), a contributor at the Strategic Culture Foundation (SCF), Moscow, and a member of the Scientific Committee of Geopolitica, Italy.

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