

Good news from Vienna is a relief to Ankara

By Mustafa Kibaroglu, Selim Can Sazak, July 18, 2015

After months of harrowing negotiations, the nuclear talks in Vienna have finally succeeded, marking the most significant accord between Iran and major world powers since Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979. Absent from the festivities, however, was one country that worked hard to bring this day forth—Turkey.

In 2010, the prospects for rapprochement with Iran were as grim as ever. Iran's nuclear facilities were swarming with computer viruses specially designed to get its centrifuges spinning to self-destruction. Its nuclear scientists were dying suspicious deaths. There was a serious debate around the merits and demerits of a preventive strike against Iran—an option Israel was allegedly already considering at the time. And at the helm of Iran's nuclear policy was not, as it is today, an English-fluent, doctoral graduate from the University of Denver, but instead the inflammatory, obstinate Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who had the dubious honor of ranking eighth in Foreign Policy's 'Worst of the Worst' list that year.

Against such impossible odds, Ankara, along with Brazil, managed to broker a deal that would have drastically reduced Iran's stockpiles of enriched uranium. The arrangement built on a previous proposal mediated by former Egyptian diplomat Mohammad ElBaradei, and US officials had confirmed that it was an option "still on the table" even a few weeks before the Turkish-Brazilian initiative.

Yet, when the initiative succeeded in getting Iran on board, the United States balked. US officials killed the deal by linking the proposal to Iran's immediate, permanent suspension of its enrichment activities—a bar that even the current agreement fails to clear, as it allows Iran to keep 5,060 centrifuges active at Natanz and to enrich uranium to 3.67 percent. Additionally, the current deal's limitations lapse after 15 years, with gradual and precisely defined increases in Iran's enrichment capacity allowed, starting from the tenth year. The US tone in 2010 was an even worse affront than the enrichment requirement, with US officials belittling the new initiative as

naive (even though the Turkish foreign minister adamantly insisted that Secretary Clinton had been briefed on his initiative from the start).

Much water has passed under the bridge since the United States left Turkey at the altar in 2010. As relations have thawed, the United States has availed itself of an uneasy partnership with Iran in the fight against the Islamic State while the Gulf states' fears over a resurgent Iran and a retreating United States have mobilized them against Iranian influence anywhere and everywhere. Hence, Turkey got caught in a struggle for regional dominance between two loose coalitions, one grouped around Saudi Arabia, the other around Iran.

Yet, even though Turkey is not immune to rising fears about Iran's regional ascendancy, cooperation with Iran is still a likelier prospect for the Turks than conflict is. First, there is a strategic balance between Turkey and Iran. The frontier between the two countries has remained roughly unchanged since the Kasr-i Shirin Treaty signed between the Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persian in 1639; there are ethnic and sectarian differences, divergent strategic visions, and the Zagros mountain range between the two countries, all creating natural boundaries that are difficult to redraw. Turkey has no zero-sum strategic competition with Iran comparable to the Saudis' strategic stakes in Bahrain and Yemen or Iran's territorial disputes with the United Arab Emirates. Indeed, most flash points of Iran's grand strategy (like Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain) are not priorities for Turkey. In contrast, Turkey and Iran have many converging interests, from thwarting the rise of the Kurds to carrying Iranian gas to European markets to balancing Russian power in the Caucasus.

Second, the sectarian dynamics in Turkey are different from those in Iran's Gulf competitors. Despite reports of rising Shiite-phobia in Turkey, the Shiite Alevis have been an integral part of political life in Turkey, and they are especially strong in the main opposition party, CHP. They are staunchly secular, with a liberal, Sufi-inspired approach to religion. Unlike their Shiite brethren in Tehran, Turkey's Alevis are to Islam what Unitarian Universalists are to Christianity: Iran's hardline conservatism has no appeal to them. Indeed, it was never the Alevis who felt an affinity for Iran's Islamic ideology, but Turkey's Sunni Islamists. Turkey's Alevis are not the natural constituency that Shiites in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, or Yemen are for Iran. Hence, unlike the Saudis or the Emiratis, the Turks do not have much reason to worry about a destabilizing influence from Iranian incitement of Shiite discontent.

The crux of Turkey's recent troubles with Iran are Syria and to a lesser extent, Iraq. Even in those conflicts, there is room for mutual agreement. In Syria, both countries increasingly face the reality that they cannot get all they want. With close to two million refugees inside its borders, the prospect of an independent Kurdish enclave

in the north of Syria, and the domestic public's rising disapproval of the government's regional policies, Turkey has found itself in a tough spot in Syria. Iran, too, has pressing domestic concerns to address, and it is already getting stretched too thin by its war in Syria. The likeliest outcome in Syria, then, is not a Sunni restoration or a Shiite phoenix rising from ashes—it is a fragile power-sharing arrangement between coastal Shiites and inland Sunnis, as both have demographics on their side in their respective spheres of control. No permanent solution can be brokered without both Turkey and Iran, and neither can afford an indefinite war in Syria.

Similarly, in Iraq, Turkey's interests are pragmatic, not ideological. Turkey's chief ally in Iraq are not the Sunnis, but the Kurds. Unlike the Gulf monarchies, Turkey has no horse in the race in Baghdad as long as its political, economic, and security interests—such as energy cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government and keeping control of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish government—are preserved. Indeed, the pragmatic nature of Turkey's interests in Iraq could even make Turkey a critical bargaining partner as Shiites vie for control over Baghdad.

In conclusion, Turkey's reaction to a successful deal with Iran will be relief, if not revelry. Iran's abandonment of its nuclear ambitions spares Turkey from having to divert its resources to military (and possibly, nuclear) spending. It allows increased diplomatic engagement toward a workable solution in Syria and Iraq, and it even opens the possibility of a windfall for Turkish business as Iran opens up to global markets and starts investing in its crumbling infrastructure, and at a time when Turkey faces mounting economic pressures.

Don't believe the doomsayers—unlike in Jerusalem or Riyadh, good news from Vienna is little cause for grief in Ankara.