

# Turkey and Iran: Two Centers of Power and Strategic Competition in the Middle East

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**Abstract:** The Middle East region is recognized as one of the regions of key strategic importance in global politics today. The region's wealth in energy resources, geopolitical location and cultural diversity form the core of the competition between the world's political powers. This article is devoted to the study of the regional policy of the two main centers of power in the Middle East - Turkey and Iran, their strategic approaches to each other and areas of competition. The historical development of Turkey and Iran, the foreign policy pursued by them, as well as their economic and military potential in the region are the main sources of this competition.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Turkey, Iran, strategic competition, regional politics, transport corridors, energy, Syria, military-political interests, non-state actors.



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## Introduction

The Middle East region is currently one of the most relevant centers of global politics, and the strategic importance of this region is associated with its rich natural resources, geopolitical location and cultural diversity. This region is home to a large part of the world's oil and gas reserves, which makes it a point of intersection of international interests. Therefore, a number of major countries are seeking to expand their spheres of influence in the Middle East, which largely determines the balance and dominance in the region. In such a complex and dynamic regional environment, Turkey and Iran stand out as two main centers of power. The rich historical heritage, military power, political and cultural identity of both countries, as well as their aspirations to advance their interests in the region, further intensify the competition between them. While Turkey has been strengthening its position on the international stage through its close ties with the West and its membership in NATO (1952), Iran has maintained its influence in the region by promoting its independent foreign policy and revolutionary ideas, and by working effectively with allied countries and international organizations.

As a member of NATO, Turkey has developed close ties with the West and in recent years has emerged as a state that has sought regional leadership. The priorities of its foreign policy include expanding transport and logistics capabilities, protecting national interests, strengthening cooperation with Central Asian countries, strengthening its role in the international arena, as well

as developing military-technical cooperation. Iran, on the other hand, has been pursuing an independent policy against Western countries since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and expanding its sphere of influence in the region through non-state actors. In this process, Iran is trying to achieve its strategic goals by providing military and financial support to organizations such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, the Fatimid Brigades, and Hamas. The article also analyzes the main areas in which the rivalry between Turkey and Iran in the region is reflected. In particular, during the civil war in Syria, Turkey supported the opposition forces, while Iran is known as one of the main allies of the Bashar Assad regime. In addition, control over transport corridors and energy interests are also the main areas of competition between the two countries. Turkey's "Middle Corridor" strategy and Iran's "North-South" transport corridor project are further intensifying the competition in this regard.

This article aims to examine the regional strategies, spheres of influence, and areas of competition of Turkey and Iran, as well as the impact of their relations on security and stability in the Middle East. In particular, the political, economic, and military interests of these two countries in the region also have a significant impact on global processes. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the strategic competition between Turkey and Iran is one of the urgent tasks.

### **Methodology**

**Historical context.** Turkey and Iran are both leading states of the Muslim world with ancient statehood traditions. Historically, both countries have claimed leadership in the region. While Turkey, as a member of NATO, has maintained close ties with the West, Iran has taken an anti-Western position after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

**Regional sphere of influence.** Turkey's strategic interests

Turkey has been pursuing an active foreign policy in the region in recent years. This is particularly evident in the following areas:

1. Strengthening ties with the countries of Central Asia
2. Expanding transport and logistics capabilities
3. Developing military-technical cooperation

In particular, Turkey's relations with Uzbekistan have reached a new level. According to 2023 data, the trade turnover between the two countries amounted to \$ 3.099 billion, of which \$ 1.851.2 million was Uzbekistan's import share and \$ 1.248.5 million was export. Looking at Uzbekistan's foreign trade turnover indicators, in 2023 the country was recorded as the fourth largest trading partner with a 5% share after Turkey, Russia, China and Kazakhstan. According to the Turkish Statistical Agency, in 2021 Turkey's total foreign trade volume amounted to \$ 496.7 billion. Of this volume, \$ 3.5 billion corresponded to commercial relations with Uzbekistan, which accounted for 0.7% of Turkey's foreign trade turnover.

**Iran's regional strategy.** Iran, in turn, has established extensive cooperation with "non-state actors" to strengthen its influence in the region. These include:

1. Hezbollah (in Lebanon)
2. Houthis (in Yemen)
3. Hamas (in Palestine)
4. Fatimid Brigades (in Syria).

Iran has been providing military and financial support to these organizations. For example, according to US data, Iran provides more than \$700 million per year to Hezbollah alone.

## Results and discussion

**Competition Areas: The Syrian Issue.** The Syrian issue is the most striking example of the competition between Turkey and Iran. Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the country has become a battleground for various interests and spheres of influence in the region. The positions of Turkey and Iran on this conflict are fundamentally different.

Iran, after the civil war in Syria, has been actively supporting the government of Bashar al-Assad and seeking to strengthen its strategic and religious influence through Syria. Tehran aims to strengthen its "Resistance Axis" strategy through this. Iran's support has been carried out not only through political and diplomatic support, but also through military assistance. In particular, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its allies in Lebanon, such as Hezbollah and the Fatimid Brigades, have supported the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict, playing an important role in realizing Iran's strategic interests in the Middle East.

Turkey, on the other hand, has been supporting opposition forces in Syria, including various rebel groups. The Turkish government sees democratic changes in Syria and the overthrow of the Assad regime as in its interests. In addition, Turkey sees the strengthening of Kurdish military groups operating in Syria as a threat to national security. Therefore, Turkey is conducting military operations against these groups and seeking to limit their territorial influence.

The confrontation between Turkey and Iran in the Syrian conflict is not limited to regional politics, but also has a significant impact on the global scale. Turkey's membership in NATO and Iran's alliance with countries such as Russia and China further complicate this issue. The Syrian issue has not only deepened the strategic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, but also negatively affected stability and security in the region, turning this conflict into a global problem.

**The struggle for transport corridors.** Turkey seeks to connect with Central Asia and China through the "Middle Corridor". In this direction, the "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars" railway project is of great importance. Iran, in turn, is trying to develop the "North-South" transport corridor.

**Military-political competition.** As a NATO member, Turkey has a modern army equipped with Western military technology. In recent years, Turkey has developed its military industry, in particular, it has launched the production of drones such as the "Bayraktar". Iran, on the other hand, is independently developing its military potential and is increasing its influence in the region through "non-state actors".

**Economic interests: Energy sector.** One of the important areas of economic interest between Iran and Turkey is the energy sector. Iran is one of the world's leading oil and gas exporters, and it plays an important role in the energy market on a regional and global scale. Iran is one of the world's largest natural resource countries, particularly in terms of gas reserves. At the same time, Iran's export capabilities have been limited by international sanctions and political restrictions.

Turkey, on the other hand, relies on imports to meet its energy needs. Its geographical location is of strategic importance for energy transport, and Turkey also acts as a transit country for gas and oil from the Middle East and Central Asia. This creates the basis for both cooperation and competition between the two countries.

Energy relations define the strategic relationship between the two countries. Turkey's desire to ensure energy security and Iran's goal of expanding exports create new opportunities in this direction. At the same time, competition and sanctions in this area bring certain complications to bilateral relations.

**Trade relations.** Turkey is striving to develop free trade and economic cooperation in the region. For example, it has set clear goals to increase trade with Uzbekistan.

## Conclusion

Turkey and Iran, as two major power centers in the Middle East, continue to advance their strategic interests. The rivalry between these two countries in the region is not limited to political or military directions, but also covers economic, cultural and geostrategic aspects. In recent years, Turkey, as a NATO member, while maintaining close ties with the West, has sought to further strengthen its independent foreign policy in the region. In particular, it has made significant progress in developing relations with Central Asia and China in the transport and logistics sector, developing modern military technologies and increasing trade volumes.

Iran, on the other hand, is trying to effectively use its historical and religious influence to expand its sphere of influence through non-state actors in the region. Support for organizations such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas plays an important role in its regional policy. At the same time, Iran's North-South Transport Corridor project is also gaining special importance in the strategic balance in the region.

The most prominent areas of competition between Turkey and Iran are the Syrian issue, the struggle for transport corridors and energy interests, and dominance in the Middle East. This competition has a significant impact on security and stability in the region. At the same time, the fact that this competition does not lead to open conflicts and the ability of the two sides to balance their regional interests may determine the future political landscape of the Middle East.

The topics studied in the article show that the influence of Turkey and Iran in the Middle East is of urgent importance not only regionally, but also globally. The political, economic and military decisions of these two countries will continue to shape the international political balance.

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