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# Geopolitical Territorialization of Turkey and Its Implications for the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Case Study: Iraq and Syria)

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## ABSTRACT

Control over and influence within geographic space has consistently constituted a significant objective for actors operating in the international system. It appears that, similar to traditional geopolitical perspectives, the unparalleled position of the physical–structural elements of geographic space in the production of power plays the most decisive role in shaping states' passivity or activism and in their adoption of territorial expansionist policies. The profound and rapid transformations in the West Asia region in recent years have provided a suitable context for the involvement of various regional and extra-regional actors. Turkey is among the actors that have played a prominent role in recent regional developments. As a regional power with extensive geopolitical ambitions, Turkey has undertaken substantial efforts in recent years to expand its influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq. These efforts, which are conceptualized as “geopolitical territorialization,” will directly entail consequences for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The present study, which is fundamental–applied in terms of purpose and adopts a descriptive–analytical approach, relies on library sources and field studies to elucidate Turkey's geopolitical territorialization in Iraq and Syria and to analyze its implications for the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Keywords:** *Territorialization; Geopolitics; National Security; Turkey; Iran*

## Introduction

Despite transformations in the factors enhancing national power, the position and role of geographic space and its physical elements remain unparalleled in their influence on power. Accordingly, political actors—drawing on traditional geopolitical ideas within a renewed approach—are determined and actively engaged in pursuing their interests beyond national borders in order to realize national interests and enhance their power. According to Autaille, world geography is the outcome of struggles among rival forces that have sought to organize, occupy, and govern space; imperial systems throughout history have imposed order and meaning on space in this manner (1). From the perspective of neorealists, the distribution of power as the central axis of international politics constitutes a determinant of changes in the regional and international behaviors of actors. Hence, the collapse of states and the reconstruction of political maps—which reflect humanity's persistent efforts to penetrate, influence, possess,



and control territory and other spaces—consistently indicate a direct relationship between territory (geographic resources and values) and state existence, as well as its effect on the power of intervening actors in these regions, to the extent that some equate the importance of territorialization with the necessity of air for breathing (2).

Turkey, given its geopolitical and geostrategic significance, enjoys a distinctive capacity to influence the equations of the West Asia region. This country, which until World War I was the dominant power in the region, is today—following the rise of Islamist-oriented political forces—seeking to revive its lost role. Beyond policy-directing variables shaping its regional policy (such as acting as a bridge between Asia and Europe, NATO membership, post-Islamism, support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Neo-Ottomanism, and water-related issues), a set of geographical, military, ideological, political, and environmental variables has also affected the formation of Turkey's regional policy (3, 4). Overall, policymakers of the Justice and Development Party, within the framework of Neo-Ottomanism, strive to transform Turkey into a major international axis in the future in order to increase its bargaining power and regional presence relative to other powers (5). Accordingly, considering Turkey's actions in Syria and Iraq—which are regarded as part of its geopolitical territorialization—these measures appear to entail consequences for the Islamic Republic of Iran (6). Therefore, in the course of this research, in addition to examining the factors influencing Turkey's geopolitical territorialization in Syria and Iraq, the impacts of these actions on the Islamic Republic of Iran are also explicated. The present study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach and, drawing on library sources and fieldwork, seeks to explain Turkey's geopolitical territorialization in Iraq and Syria and its implications for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Geopolitics*

Geopolitics is the study of competition and the expansion of spheres of influence by governments and organized political groups that seek to acquire power by seizing geographical tools, levers, and opportunities that enable dominance over rivals. In pursuing opportunities and capabilities, they compete within geographic space, endeavor to expand their influence, incorporate these spaces into the realm of their will, and conversely expel rivals from contested spaces. In essence, the scientific definition of geopolitics can be articulated as a composite concept comprising three fundamental elements—geography, power, and politics—each possessing an intrinsic character (2). These relations and interactions are contingent upon states' geopolitical strategies and positions, as well as the structure of the global geopolitical system. Consequently, a high degree of coherence exists between geopolitics and patterns of foreign policy behavior, on the basis of which geopolitical strategies are designed and implemented to impart direction and meaning to geopolitical relations. In many geopolitical theories, states are compelled to pursue increasing power through penetration into other territories in order to secure vital space. Geopolitics thus denotes the study of the interrelationships among geography, power, and politics and the actions arising from their interaction (7).

### *National Security*

The concept of national security is the most widely used notion in security studies and is formed by the addition of the term “national” to security. National security encompasses the psychological and material pursuit of safety and is fundamentally among the responsibilities of national governments to prevent external threats to the survival

of regimes, civic systems, and citizens' ways of life. Walter Lippmann defined national security as a condition in which a nation is not compelled to sacrifice its values to avoid war and, if it enters war, can safeguard those values through victory. National security is articulated through both negative and positive discourses. In the negative discourse, national security focuses on safeguarding territory, sovereignty, and the population against threats and dangers posed by adversaries, whereas the positive discourse, while preserving national interests, seeks to create opportunities for development and progress (8).

### *Penetration and Sphere of Influence*

Penetration refers to an approach and a set of actions designed to fully realize the objectives of various types of threats and warfare—hard, semi-hard, soft, and hybrid—through methods that are easier than war, or at least to prepare the ground for threats and to facilitate and accelerate victory in each type of conflict. The operational domains of hard penetration involve individuals; semi-hard penetration targets systems; soft penetration focuses on ideas and preferences of elites across the three dimensions of the social system (political, economic, and cultural); and contemporary forms of penetration encompass individuals, systems, ideas, and calculations across all these dimensions (9).

### *Geopolitical Territorialization*

Territory constitutes the foundation of state formation, and no state can exist without it. Territorialization, or the construction of territory, refers to the exercise of power over a place, most clearly manifested in nation-state governments. Owing to the influence of the physical and structural capacities of geographic space on the other two elements of geopolitics—politics and power—the concept of territory, as a segment of geographic space and a set of human constructs, remains significant and continues to attract the attention of political actors (10). Accordingly, territorialization functions as a spatial or locational strategy aimed at influencing, being influenced by, or controlling resources and populations through spatial control, in response to human territorial aspirations to affect, penetrate, or regulate people, phenomena, and relations by delineating boundaries and supervising a geographic area. Regardless of its diverse forms of expression, territorialization serves as a means to achieve specific objectives such as survival, political domination, or resistance to external forces. Thus, territorialization, as a political and human-made structure, possesses an inherently contentious survival-oriented nature due to its territorial ambitions and efforts to divide space; it cannot exist without the often harsh partitioning of space into separate and exclusively allocated sections.

However, in geopolitical territorialization—unlike Ratzel's theory of territorial expansion—states do not primarily pursue physical territorial enlargement, although they essentially follow similar expansionist logics. This time, nations seek dominance through spheres of thought and culture (politics, economy, technology, and related domains) in order to control hearts and minds and ultimately oversee diverse geographic territories in line with the capitalist order they require across various spaces (11). Consequently, geopolitical territory emerges when geographic space and its associated human or demographic structures fall within the sphere of influence of one or more political, religious, cultural, economic, social, military, security, commercial, technological, or media variables wielded by a powerful state or political actor. In such circumstances, surrounding countries, lands, and geographic spaces become embedded within the influence of a powerful, centrally positioned (polar or metropolitan) country or city.

Accordingly, the relative stability of political–geographic borders does not imply the absence of political actors' efforts to exploit geographic capacities and values beyond these borders; rather, objectives are pursued through novel methods other than war and occupation, and geopolitical borders—characterized by dynamism—are continuously redrawn and transformed. This dynamic nature of geopolitical borders appears consistent with Haushofer's theory of fluid borders, which rejected rigid legal or natural boundaries and has served as a basis for practical state action (10).

## Research Findings

### *Strategic Depth Theory (Conceptual Foundation of Turkey's Geopolitical Outlook)*

Turkey's foreign policy since 2002 cannot be understood without reference to its intellectual foundations. In *Strategic Depth*, published in 2001, Ahmet Davutoğlu elaborates his strategic vision for Turkey, arguing that, due to its history and geographic position, Turkey possesses strategic depth and belongs to a small group of so-called "central countries." Davutoğlu maintains that Turkey should not be satisfied with a merely regional role in the Balkans or the Middle East, because it is a central power rather than a regional one; therefore, it must simultaneously exercise leadership across multiple regions, a role that confers global and strategic significance. In his view, Turkey is simultaneously a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, and Black Sea country, capable of deploying influence across all these regions at once and laying claim to a global and strategic role. On this basis, he rejects the conventional depiction of Turkey as a bridge between East and West, arguing that such a view would reduce Turkey to an instrument for advancing the strategic interests of other states. He further emphasizes that this strategic and geographic depth has been historically reinforced by the Ottoman legacy and that, to achieve these objectives, Turkey must capitalize on its soft power potential. These potentials derive from Ankara's historical and cultural ties with the regions to which it belongs, as well as from the democratic institutions and dynamic economic markets that Turkey has developed in recent years following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (12).

**Table 1. Factors Influencing Turkey's Geopolitical Codes**

Level	Factors
Regional	Failure within geopolitical structures
	Neo-Ottomanism (geopolitical dimensions)
	Identity-based action among Turkish minorities in Syria and Iraq
	Production of space
National	Geopolitical expansion and territorial ambition
	Redefinition of Atatürk's identity legacy
	Long-term territorial independence
	Construction of the Turkish national territory within Turkey
	Party hegemony of the Justice and Development Party vis-à-vis the DHP, MHP, and CHP

### *Neo-Ottomanism (Revival of the Ottoman Empire and Reconstitution of Spheres of Influence)*

Neo-Ottomanism refers to the set of policies adopted by Turkey after the Arab Spring. This new foreign policy is characterized by religious motivations through support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, as well as by Turkey's ambition to reassert its presence in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire (5). Neo-Ottomanism denotes an active and multidimensional foreign policy grounded in the Ottoman heritage; in other words, it signifies Turkey's penetration into surrounding regions and the enhancement of its international standing on the basis of its

historical and identity-based advantages. Turkey's foreign policy during the Justice and Development Party era evokes a form of Neo-Ottomanism, as it combines religious postures in expanding relations with Islamic countries with elements reminiscent of Atatürk's foreign policy, which emphasized a new Western orientation and good neighborly relations. Turkey seeks to play a connecting role between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia and, by assuming a more prominent position in international politics, to elevate its status within the international system. The foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party government thus represents a renewed revival of Ottoman identity, characterized not by exclusive orientation toward the European Union but by active engagement in the Middle East and, more broadly, by a diversified policy interacting with both East and West. In this sense, Neo-Ottomanism should not be understood as a fixed ideology but rather as a novel approach that, by highlighting historical, cultural, and geographic elements, assigns new meaning to Turkey's geopolitical environment. Within this approach, manifestations of Islamism, Turkism, Easternism, and Westernism coexist. In this interpretation, within the cognitive framework of the "Turkish individual," three identity elements—Middle Eastern Muslim, Eurasian Turk, and European citizen—are logically and meaningfully integrated (3). Turkey's failures in its policies in Southwest Asia, along with shifts in domestic alliances following the 2016 coup attempt, led to strategic adjustments and renewed efforts to establish a presence in the eastern Eurasian belt, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Levant. Through presence and influence in these regions, Ankara not only pursues the revival of the Ottoman Empire but also aspires to become an energy and transit hub in its new era (5).

#### *Turkey's View of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

At various junctures during his tenure, and in light of conflicts between Iranian and Turkish interests, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has attributed the emergence of religious extremism and the erosion of regional stability and security to ideological policies—what he characterizes as Shiism, expansionism, nationalism, and Iran's Persian imperial ambitions. For example, in April 2017 Erdoğan stated that it was regrettable that Iran had placed Persian nationalism and expansionist policies on its agenda, arguing that Iran had calculations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon and sought to form a Persian force in the region through influence in these countries. He expressed hope that Iran would reconsider its policies, emphasizing Islamic unity and warning against sectarian fanaticism. Similarly, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu claimed at the Munich Security Conference in February 2017 that Iran was attempting to turn Iraq and Syria into Shiite states, which he described as extremely dangerous, asserting that Turkey opposed any form of religious or sectarian partitioning and criticizing Iran for actions that, in his view, undermined peace opportunities in the Middle East. In January 2016, Erdoğan remarked on Iran's actions in Syria by stating that, alongside Russia's entry into a dangerous trajectory, Iran was using regional crises such as Syria and Iraq as pretexts to expand its sphere of influence. This distrust contributed to unilateral military actions by Turkey, such as the "Operation Peace Spring" in Syria. Such statements reflect Erdoğan's lack of trust in Iran's regional policies, particularly in Syria. Turkey regards Iran as a regional competitor and seeks to curtail its influence. Ankara opposes those aspects of Iran's foreign policy that it perceives as ideologically driven, viewing them as sources of regional instability and as competitors to Turkey's own Brotherhood-oriented ideological agenda. In this context, Turkey interprets Iran's policies in Syria and Iraq, as well as the actions of groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces, Hezbollah, and Ansar Allah, as components of Iran's regional influence expansion. Consequently, even when Iran justifies its actions as resistance to the Zionist regime, Turkey construes them primarily as manifestations of Iranian expansionism, Shiism, and Persian imperial ambitions (13).

*Turkey's Fear of the Expansion of Iran's Sphere of Influence in the Region (Syria and Iraq)*

The contemporary rivalry between Turkey and Iran represents a recurrence of an old regional contest—an ancestral competition between Byzantium and Persia. Although both countries have transitioned from empires to nation-states and have maintained peace for approximately two centuries, they have consistently competed over influence in neighboring countries. Today, as in the past, Tehran and Ankara confront one another over tensions in Syria and Iraq. Their inability to reconcile mutual interests has the potential to weaken, and even reverse, the strong relations developed over the past two decades, despite deep economic interdependence. The strategic choices made by Iran and Turkey to consolidate their power—and whether they can overcome their differences—are critical determinants of the Middle East's future. Turkey's intervention in Iraq and Syria is largely a response to the perception that Iran has increasingly expanded its historical sphere of influence, particularly in strategically significant areas near Turkey's borders such as Aleppo and Mosul. Friction and competition between Turkey and Iran, along with their respective allied groups, have intensified to an alarming degree, while mutual trust has diminished to a minimal level. Tehran views Turkey's new regional policies as products of Ankara's Neo-Ottoman ambitions and its efforts to dominate Sunni-majority countries. What Turkey undertook in Syria following the outbreak of the civil war was driven less by regime rivalry with Iran than by its own ambitions. Tehran has also criticized Ankara for failing to prevent the entry of takfiri militants into Syria via Turkish territory and for providing them with financial and logistical support.

*Weakening of the Axis of Resistance*

The Axis of Resistance constitutes a distinctive security–political complex whose foreign policy foundations—regardless of sectarian affiliation—are defined as opposition to the hegemony of the United States and, simultaneously, confrontation with Israel and the realization of the objective of liberating Palestine. As articulated by Iran, the Axis of Resistance comprises diverse actors across the world, particularly in Asia and Latin America, and—according to the framing attributed to “Barry Buzan”—can be understood as a centered political–security complex. In light of this conception, Iran is presented as the principal power of this security–political formation; moreover, within its declared policy orientation it has insisted on the complete elimination of the Zionist regime and has pursued specific plans toward that end. This security, political, and social formation—described as the Axis of Resistance—has, over recent decades, operated predominantly under Iran's management, with Iran positioned as the central node. What is termed the Axis of Resistance is not described as having rigid membership criteria and is portrayed as maintaining open channels for attracting and admitting new members. However, steering such a formation requires specific conditions, and over the past decades only Iran is claimed to have been able to lead and manage it. Accordingly, given the “open-door” policy attributed to the Axis of Resistance, claims regarding Turkey's acceptance and tactful presence within it are portrayed as conceivable; nevertheless, Turkey's place and role within this security–political complex are not depicted as particularly prominent. The record of friendship between the Turkish state—especially Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—and actors associated with the Axis of Resistance is portrayed as deeply problematic, characterized by deceptive policies and what are described as betrayal-like actions against the Axis. Many leaders and citizens associated with the Axis are said to accuse Erdoğan of ingratitude, arguing that he and his government—despite having benefited from the support of the Axis until the early 2010s—adopted a hostile posture toward its members following changes in circumstances and the onset of



the Arab uprisings commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, thereby inflicting irreparable harms on the Axis. The very friendly relationship between Turkey and Erdoğan, on the one hand, and the Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad, on the other—described as having been established with Iranian mediation and assistance—was presented as so close and institutionalized that it facilitated Turkey's influence, particularly through its security and military institutions, in Syria and granted Turkey access to exceptional information. Yet, with the start of the Arab Spring, Turkey is described as having abruptly become the first regional state to oppose the legal government of Bashar al-Assad, forming an anti-Syria—and even anti-resistance and anti-Iran—axis alongside Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and collectively targeting what the text frames as the Axis of Resistance's objectives in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The Arab–Turkish axis (Saudi Arabia–Qatar–Turkey) is thereby characterized as an anti-resistance axis that, with Western and U.S. support, aggressively attacked the positions and interests of the Axis of Resistance and Iran across Southwest Asia and sought the collapse of this security–political complex. The Erdoğan government's efforts to overthrow the Syrian government and seize parts of Syrian territory; interventions in Iraq and the seizure of parts of Iraqi territory alongside efforts to weaken Iraq's Shiite government; attempts to constrain Hezbollah in Lebanon through support for anti-Hezbollah currents; reliance on the political and military capacities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, Syria, and Egypt to counter the Axis of Resistance; efforts to penetrate resistance currents to weaken the “Iranian model” of resistance by promoting Arab “peace” (Syria, Lebanon, and Hamas) with the Zionist regime; and the propagation of an Erdoğanist/Turkish governance model across the Islamic world are all presented as examples of Turkey's betrayal-like actions toward the Axis of Resistance—actions that, in this framing, render claims of Turkey's commitment to the Axis merely a form of deceptive policy. The text further argues that Turkey is currently under severe pressure from Arab states—especially the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—and that collaboration between the Zionist regime and these Arab states could seriously threaten and weaken Turkey's and Erdoğan's power at regional and global levels, potentially even contributing to the collapse of Turkey's power and territorial integrity. The entirety of Turkey's and Erdoğan's perceived support for the Axis of Resistance in recent years is attributed mainly to the presence of segments of Hamas's leadership and organizational structures in Turkey and to meetings aimed at countering Arab “peace” and the Zionist regime among Palestinian groups, particularly Hamas and Fatah. Accordingly, Turkey and Erdoğan are portrayed as attempting—through the same deceptive policy orientation—to present themselves as opponents of normalization between the Zionist regime and Arab states, because the friendship between anti-Erdoğan Arab states and that regime could intensify threats to Erdoğan's ambitions; thus, Erdoğan is described as seeking, through performative proximity to the Axis of Resistance, to draw other regional actors—especially Iran, Iraq, Hamas, and Hezbollah—into Turkey's conflict with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In this view, Erdoğan's rhetoric against Arab normalization with the Zionist regime should not be interpreted as a component of strategic change in the regional balance of power in Southwest Asia; rather, these positions are framed as instruments to counter the assertiveness of Arab states opposed to Turkey—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE—that are said to have posed severe threats to Turkey's strategic interests. The current regional situation and Turkey's stance against Arab “peace” and the Zionist regime are thus depicted as an expression of a broader struggle between Turkey and its former Arab partners, whose foremost objective over recent years is described as attacking the Axis of Resistance, weakening it, and ultimately undermining Iran (11).

*Turkey's Approach and Objectives in Syria and Iraq*Syria

Turkey's approach toward Syria is noteworthy because a shift is observable in this policy. Over recent years, as the Middle East experienced upheavals and revolutions in multiple countries, Turkey opened a pathway in its foreign policy oriented toward following regional developments, capitalizing on them, and creating political opportunities for future leverage in its outlook on the Middle East, including shifts in its foreign policy priorities in the region. However, examining Turkey's positions regarding developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other Middle Eastern countries—and ultimately Syria—reveals contradictions in this outlook. Among all Arab states affected by internal unrest, none tested Turkey's foreign policy under the Islamist leadership of the Justice and Development Party as severely as the Syrian crisis. What had previously made political changes in other Arab countries more tolerable for Ankara was the alignment of Turkish interests with those of its most powerful neighboring state, Iran—an alignment that collapsed abruptly following the Syrian uprising aimed at overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. These protests, which emerged in the wake of the uprisings associated with the so-called Islamic Awakening, produced divergent reactions and policies by Syria's two neighboring states. The nature of protests in Syria, however, differed fundamentally from developments in other Arab countries. Turkey's handling of the Syrian crisis appears to have been driven less by an intention to promote democracy as an expression of Turkish soft power than by Turkey's strategic alignment with the West, particularly the United States; the reasons for this may be traced to three premises: (a) Turkey's concern about regional developments due to the possibility of increasing and strengthening Iran's position; (b) Turkey's economy-centered or capital-centered perspective, whereby Saudi Arabia's role in capital flows in the Middle East—and, by extension, the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Arab investments in Turkey—influences Turkey's interpretation of developments; and (c) the consonance of Turkey's Middle East foreign policy with the policies pursued by the United States and the West—a consonance that is especially evident regarding Syria (14).

Iraq

Iraq, due to its geopolitical and geostrategic conditions, vulnerable geography, persistent political instability, and historically tense and challenging relations with its neighbors, has become a strategic arena for neighboring states—particularly Iran and Turkey. In addition, the presence and effective role of Kurdish actors in northern Iraq have further increased the country's importance for Turkey. Moreover, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq lies at the intersection of three cultural and civilizational spheres—Persian, Arab, and Turkic—thereby underscoring the strategic significance of contestation for the three neighboring states. Iran and Turkey share numerous historical, cultural, religious, and social commonalities; nevertheless, in regional policy they often operate at opposing poles. As a result, Iraq has witnessed regional polarization centered on Iran and Turkey. Owing to its geographic position and post-Saddam political conditions, Iraq represents an optimal option for Turkey: by achieving economic dominance there, Turkey would not only pursue its economic objectives but could also employ Iraq as a political and security lever in future West Asia decision-making processes. Turkey's economic activities in Iraq, beyond their material and commercial dimensions, also encompass a spectrum of political and security objectives. Economically, trade and Turkey's dependence on Iraqi energy resources are of paramount importance and can be considered priorities of Turkey's economic agenda in Iraq. Politically and in security terms, the continuation of Neo-Ottoman policies and



influence over West Asian governments, proximity and cooperation with Sunni groups and currents in Iraq, and the containment of Kurdish separatist groups—alongside establishing economic relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq—are of considerable importance to Turkey. Regarding Turkey's objectives in Iraq, it is argued that an Islamist government eager to revive its historical role as a primary regional power has pursued what may be regarded as a revival of Ottoman-era policies; the withdrawal of military forces provided an opportunity to expand its influence (15).

Overall, the political objectives underpinning Turkey's economic penetration in Iraq can be summarized as follows: exerting pressure on Iraq's central government through support for selected groups in Nineveh and Kirkuk provinces and within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; attempting to sever links between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Kurdish-populated areas in Syria perceived as threatening Turkey's territorial integrity; drawing leaders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq closer to Ankara; and aligning with certain actors opposed to the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Axis of Resistance in Iraq and Syria (16). From Turkey's perspective, the provinces of Mosul, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah were parts of the Ottoman state's territory, and Ankara claims to support Turkmen populations in Tal Afar and Kirkuk. Through this approach, Turkey is portrayed as seeking, at an opportune time, to annex the historical Mosul region. Turkish forces in Mosul have reportedly trained Sunni paramilitary forces known as the "National Mobilization" (Hashd al-Watani) under the leadership of Atheel al-Nujaifi, with the expectation of eventually exerting control over the area. At present, Turkey is described as attempting to revive its influence over Mosul under the guise of humanitarian assistance. Turkey opposes the presence and activities of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which in media outlets supportive of the Turkish government are labeled a "Shiite terrorist group." From Turkey's viewpoint, the Popular Mobilization Forces are likened to the PKK, with the distinction that they are perceived as affiliated with Iran. From Iran's perspective, maintaining influence over Mosul keeps open Tehran's access route to Syria via the Iraq–Syria border. Turkey is also identified as Iran's principal economic competitor in the Iraqi market. Turkish companies have reportedly invested approximately USD 25 billion across some 900 construction and infrastructure projects—including energy, water, and petrochemical industries—in various Iraqi cities. Furthermore, in Iraq's electricity sector, previously dominated by Iranian firms, competition between Tehran and Ankara has intensified. Turkey also regards its geographic position linking Eastern Europe and West Asia as a unique geoeconomic advantage and has increasingly sought to monopolize transit routes to neighboring regions. In this context, Turkey aims—by expanding economic relations with Iraq—to obstruct the potential transfer of Iranian energy to Europe via Iraq and Syria, to position itself as the principal hub for energy exports to Europe, and to open a southern corridor toward Jordan and Saudi Arabia for the transit of Turkish and European goods to Gulf Arab markets.

### *The Kurdistan Region*

While Iraq continues to grapple with security challenges—such as remnants of ISIS and sporadic attacks and bombings—it has also experienced bombardment of its border areas by the Turkish military under the pretext of combating PKK forces. Turkey has occupied parts of northern Iraqi territory on this basis and established nearly 18 military bases. Concurrently, amid these security threats, Turkey has—through cooperation with one of the ruling parties in the Kurdistan Region—extracted a substantial portion of the region's energy via the Ceyhan pipeline and directed a significant share of its exports to the Kurdistan Region, effectively leveraging the region's geographic constraints to hold it economically hostage (17).

Some analysts contend that, within the framework of the historical Lausanne Treaty of 1923, Turkey has been preparing to annex portions of territories separated from Turkey, claiming that the treaty's validity would expire in 2023. According to assertions attributed to Turkish officials, Turkey would then be entitled to demand referendums among populations in areas it considers part of its territory. These areas are said to include Sulaymaniyah and northern Iraqi provinces such as Kirkuk and Nineveh, as well as parts of the Kurdistan Region including Duhok and Erbil. Turkey's current military and political efforts are thus framed as preparation for the centennial of the Lausanne Agreement, enabling President Erdoğan to call for referendums among residents of these areas and to annex those portions of the territory deemed attainable. Consequently, Turkey's policy up to 2023 is portrayed as weakening Iraq's sovereignty over its northern regions while strengthening Turkey's presence there and cultivating a local support base through the provision of public services, with the aim of securing referendum outcomes favorable to annexation (4).

### *Iran–Turkey Competition in Syria*

For many years, Turkey has maintained fragile relations with Syria. At the same time, it has been observed that with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party, Turkey developed relatively friendly relations with Syria. The government of Bashar al-Assad likewise sought to resolve disputes from earlier periods and to avoid their escalation. It is noteworthy that Syria and Turkey have long-standing disagreements over several issues, including Kurdish political activities linked to the PKK, the allocation of Euphrates River waters, and the status of the Alexandretta (Hatay) Province. With regard to Alexandretta, it may be noted that in 1939—coinciding with the outbreak of World War II—the colonial power France transferred the province to Turkey; however, Syria has continued to regard Alexandretta as an inseparable part of its own territory. Concurrently, Turkey has pursued the formation of a Syrian government with a Sunni and Muslim Brotherhood–oriented approach. The party that assumed power in Turkey is ideationally and attitudinally aligned with Muslim Brotherhood–oriented Sunni political thought. Hamas in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey operate as Brotherhood-affiliated branches in their respective countries. Accordingly, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Mohamed Morsi, and Khaled Mashal were, at a certain historical juncture, closely connected as key figures of the Brotherhood current in West Asia. This posture indicates that Turkey, in seeking to transform itself into a regional power, has aimed to shape a set of countries aligned with its objectives, interests, and programs across the region. With the onset of the Syrian crisis, Turkey endeavored to support extremist and terrorist groups in Syria. After ISIS emerged as a globally recognized terrorist organization, Turkey opted to adjust its official positions. At present, Turkey's strategic priority has been the overthrow of the Syrian government, and it has framed actions against ISIS and armed opposition groups in light of the heightened risk of retaliatory terrorist attacks on Syrian territory and the consequent strengthening of the Syrian state; therefore, it has exerted efforts aimed at sustaining rather than dismantling these groups. Regarding the Kurds, Turkey's policy has focused on preventing the empowerment of Syrian Kurds, who are perceived as being in an implicit alignment with the Syrian government, particularly given Turkey's broader opposition to Kurdish empowerment across the region. Turkey shares approximately 900 kilometers of border with Syria. Geographic proximity and Turkey's central position within the Syrian crisis—owing to the influx of refugees and the endangerment of border lines due to extensive cross-border fire—have directly implicated Turkey's national interests and security. Developments in Syria have thus directly targeted Turkey's national interests and security. Ankara has argued that Syria has incited Turkey's domestic opponents, including

Kurdish groups, generating multiple security crises. In 2012, Erdoğan claimed that Bashar al-Assad had allocated a province to Kurdish opponents of Turkey to act against Ankara and, simultaneously, to undermine Turkey's long-standing efforts to accede to the European Union, given that instability along Turkey's borders would be perceived as instability at the EU's borders. Consequently, the EU—which had previously approached Turkey's security with optimism—has conditioned Turkey's accession on the establishment of calm and security along its borders. In contrast, Iran has not faced comparable pressures and has therefore engaged the Syrian crisis with comparatively fewer constraints. This asymmetry in exposure to the Syrian crisis has contributed to contention and confrontation between the two countries. Moreover, Syria functions for Iran as a vital conduit for the Axis of Resistance—a key access route enabling Iran to support Lebanon and Palestine, strengthen resistance against Israeli territorial expansionism, and partially mitigate Western pressure on Iran. The failure to recognize these differences, alongside divergent perspectives and the absence of a realistic assessment of the crisis's impacts, has fueled Iran–Turkey confrontation (18).

While Turkey pursued a strategy aimed at altering the status quo in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran—viewing the Syrian crisis as a premeditated conspiracy to remove Syria from the Axis of Resistance—adopted a status quo–preservation approach. Iranian officials assessed that altering the status quo would both weaken the Axis of Resistance and conflict with Iran's objectives; accordingly, by adopting a preservationist approach, they sought to prevent the weakening of the Axis, the reduction of Iran's regional influence, and shifts in the regional balance of power in favor of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Zionist regime, as well as to avert deterioration of Iran's military security, which is directly linked to its strategic depth in the Levant (19). In practice, perceiving Turkey's expansionist policies as a threat to Iran's interests—particularly in Iraq and Syria—Iran attempted to counterbalance Turkey through closer coordination with Russia and by assuming a more active role in the Syrian and Iraqi crises (6).

The Turkish army is currently deployed in parts of northern Syria. While Damascus has characterized this presence as a clear violation of Syrian sovereignty and territory, Ankara remains determined either to detach these areas from Syria and annex them to Turkey or, if compelled to withdraw, to entrench its foothold therein. As a consequence of Turkey's regional policy, for the past several years parts of northern Syria—most notably Idlib—have remained among the few areas not reclaimed by the Syrian government from takfiri terrorist control. Turkey, which from the outset of the Syrian crisis anticipated a decisive blow by terrorist groups against the Syrian state and had for extended periods provided them with logistical support, gradually altered its strategy as the Syrian army advanced in formerly occupied areas and as expectations regarding the efficacy of terrorism in Syria diminished. Accordingly, Ankara moved beyond reliance on proxies—particularly Turkmen brigades and the Free Syrian Army—and, in addition to exploiting these takfiri and terrorist groups, undertook direct military intervention in the Syrian crisis (17).

### *Iran–Turkey Competition in Iraq*

Turkey has consistently been among the states that did not accept the consequences of Saddam Hussein's overthrow in Iraq. By employing discourse centered on the notion of an “inclusive government,” Ankara demonstrated in practice that it did not accept electoral outcomes and the numerical predominance of Shiite forces aligned with Iran. Although in 2008 Ankara and the first government of Nouri al-Maliki agreed to establish a High Council for Strategic Cooperation, expand bilateral trade, and enhance political dialogue between the two capitals—placing relations on a seemingly promising path—tensions escalated in 2010 following Iraq's parliamentary

elections and the process of selecting the prime minister. This juncture marked the initial spark for a shift in Turkey's perception of Iran. In those elections, Turkey prioritized support for the Iraqiya coalition led by Iyad Allawi, while Iran backed the State of Law coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki's renewed premiership generated a new dispute between Iran and Turkey over developments in Iraq and also strained Baghdad–Ankara relations (18).

Turkey and Iran initially shared similar concerns regarding the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, which produced a degree of mutual understanding between Tehran and Ankara. Although both states opposed the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, Iran remained apprehensive about the potential deployment of Turkish military forces in Iraq. When the Kurdistan Region of Iraq moved toward holding an independence referendum, the decision provoked strong reactions from Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara, compelling the three states to set aside differences and adopt a joint stance against Kurdish independence. Both Iran and Turkey closed their borders and airspace to the Kurdistan Regional Government and supported measures by the Iraqi government to preserve territorial integrity and political unity. Turkey cultivated close relations with Iraqi Sunni actors and articulated positions favoring the formation of a unified Sunni regime and an inclusive government in Baghdad; however, Iran interpreted these efforts as opposition to a Shiite-dominated government. In effect, Turkey expressed concern over the fusion of sectarian politics with Iran's expanding influence in Iraq (20).

From Tehran's perspective, Turkey's military activities in Iraq undermined the sovereignty of the Baghdad government. Given nationalist claims by Turkish actors regarding Mosul and Kirkuk, Iran has been particularly concerned about the deployment of Turkish forces near these areas. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government mobilized volunteers to combat ISIS, a process that culminated in the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), promoted by Shiite religious leaders and supported by Iranian military advisers who provided training and guidance. Turkey viewed the PMF as an instrument employed by Iran to expand and consolidate its influence in Sunni-majority regions of Iraq and labeled it a terrorist organization. Iran, by contrast, encouraged and supported PMF participation in subsequent operations and held Turkey responsible for violating Iraq's unity and territorial integrity (4).

### **Implications of Turkey's Territorialization in Iraq and Syria for the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Turkey's foremost objective in Syria has been to retain control over areas it considers historically linked to itself and, in some cases, to pursue their incorporation. Within Turkey's long-term strategy of penetrating the heart of the Arab world, Syria represents the first step. The Syrian crisis has provided Turkey with an opportunity to assert itself in regional politics vis-à-vis rivals and partners alike. Establishing and expanding relations with Western states has constituted part of Turkey's regional policy in recent years to facilitate influence in Syria. Turkey's interventionism in Syria—through takfiri groups and under the pretext of territorial expansion and penetration into Iran's geopolitical sphere—has directly affected the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Turkey's foreign policy approach toward terrorist groups and armed opposition forces in Syria evolved from initial neutrality to mediation between the government and these groups, and ultimately to direct support. A salient indicator of cooperation between Turkey and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been the hosting of meetings of Syrian opposition forces in Turkish cities. Beyond Syrian developments, Turkey has aspired to leadership of Muslim-majority states; this ambition helps explain its recent positions in Syria and its shift from a “zero problems with neighbors” policy to one of active intervention in regional affairs. In pursuit of regional hegemony, access to Middle Eastern energy resources, and domination of regional markets, Turkey initiated expansionist policies. Its interventions in sectarian conflicts in Syria

and Iraq can likewise be interpreted as efforts to limit Iran's influence as a leader of the Shiite world and to promote the rise of so-called moderate Islam at the regional level.

Turkey's interventions in Iraq—through support for Sunni and secular groups and efforts to secure energy resources—have also affected Iran's national security. Ankara seeks to institutionalize a permanent presence in Iraq by backing Sunni and secular actors and pursuing control over energy assets. A substantial portion of Iraqi oil is exported to Turkey via the Kurdistan Region, enabling Ankara—by exploiting the region's geographic constraints—to exercise *de facto* leverage over it. Turkey's encroachment into Iraqi territory reflects attempts to revive its strategic depth through support for Sunni and secular groups and the acquisition of energy resources. Turkey has established close relations with the Kurdistan Democratic Party and has transferred Kurdish oil to its domestic market at discounted prices, exporting part of it to the Mediterranean and selling it to foreign companies; it has also signaled future plans regarding Kurdish gas. While the Kurdistan Regional Government has ceded control of Iraq's oil industry to Turkey, the costs of this arrangement are borne by Iraq as a whole. Turkey's cultural influence in Iraq raises the prospect of expanded Salafi–takfiri activity along Iran's northwestern and western borders, posing threats to Iran's national security. Turkey's regional policies in Iraq have reduced Iran's national security in recent years and have led to a deterioration in bilateral relations. Ankara's pursuit of annexing northern Iraqi territories, its expanded ties with Western powers, and the deepening of military relations with Western and Arab states aimed at intervention in Iraq collectively threaten Iran's national security. Moreover, the presence of extra-regional forces—such as terrorist groups—near the Iran–Iraq border has created serious security risks for Iran (6).

## Conclusion

The rise to power of Islamists in Turkey through the Justice and Development Party ushered Iran–Turkey relations into a new phase. Shared borders, historical and cultural ties, and economic imperatives have meant that, despite ideological divergences and regional rivalries, relations between the two countries—from the establishment of modern Turkey by Atatürk in 1924 until the ascent of Islamists—have endured, notwithstanding definite fluctuations. The findings of this study indicate that Iran and Turkey, for political and geopolitical reasons as well as cultural or ideological factors, have become engaged in intense competition for greater influence and power in the region. Turkey is deeply concerned about the expansion of Iran's influence in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Despite their long-standing relations, Iran and Turkey harbor profound mutual distrust, which is evident in their support for different groups and militias in Syria and Iraq. While Tehran interprets Turkey's policies in these areas as products of Neo-Ottoman ambitions to expand Turkish–Sunni governance in the region, Ankara claims that Iran seeks to revive a Persian empire through the Shiite crescent in former Ottoman territories. By referencing the historical antecedents of the current rivalry and confrontation between Iran and Turkey, this article demonstrates that the tensions of recent years did not emerge suddenly but rather stem from the two countries' identity-based and security orientations in the Fertile Crescent and their ideological and geopolitical objectives. Accordingly, Iran and Turkey today stand on opposing fronts in Syria and Iraq: Ankara, in concert with its Arab and Western allies, seeks the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, whereas Tehran is among his principal supporters.

In Iraq, Turkey asserts a historical responsibility to protect Sunni and Turk minorities against Shiite forces that, with Iranian support, are active in countering Salafi elements and centrifugal forces in the region. Conversely, Iran—alongside the Iraqi government—views Turkey's intervention and military presence as aggression aimed at weakening Iraq's central government and advancing territorial expansion under a Neo-Ottoman approach.

Moreover, Turkey, much like during the Ottoman era, seeks to act as a patron of Sunnis in the region, while some argue that Iran is simultaneously pursuing the formation of a Shiite crescent stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean. However, the nature and modality of Iran's role in Iraq and Syria are fundamentally different from those of Turkey. Whereas Iran in both Syria and Iraq aims to strengthen the central government and prevent political fragmentation, assessing its interests as contingent upon preserving the territorial integrity of regional states, Turkey has oriented its actions toward supporting groups that are fundamentally in opposition to central authorities and has, at times through strategic shifts, recalibrated the boundaries of alliances and enmities.

The region's particular circumstances and prevailing issues indicate that neither Iran nor Turkey can remain indifferent to regional developments. Historical ties and historical disputes with Iraq and Syria have led Iran to adopt a strategy of preserving the governments of Syria and Iraq to prevent the recurrence of past threats and hostilities against the country. This factor, in turn, prompted Turkey—at the outset of recent crises—to prioritize the removal of the Syrian government and the weakening of the Iraqi state. However, following consultations between Russian and Iranian political–security officials and Turkey's leadership, the attempted coup against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Kurdistan Region independence referendum, the growing empowerment of Syrian Kurds in the north, and the weakening of ISIS, Ankara was compelled to retreat from its earlier aggressive policies aimed at advancing its regional model by penetrating the central governments of Syria and Iraq. Another factor necessitating and reinforcing regionalism in the foreign policies of both Iran and Turkey is the presence of shared ethnicities and sects across the region. Ethnic groups such as the Kurds—who for years have linked the national security of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria—continue to shape regional equations. Shiism, for the Islamic Republic of Iran, carries both security implications and significance for regional influence and power. From this perspective, regarding regionalism, Iran and Turkey—confronted with the Syrian and Iraqi crises—have strengthened their regional approaches in light of emerging capacities and threats.

Despite the expansion of Iran–Turkey relations after the rise of Islamists, clouds gradually appeared over these relations, giving rise to divergent viewpoints. Recent tensions stem from the continuity of foreign policy principles from the era of secular governance into the new period. More precisely, an analysis of Turkey's foreign policy based on the strategic depth perspective indicates that under Islamist rule, Turkey continues to pursue earlier principles: expanding influence in the Middle East to become a regional actor, maintaining and prioritizing relations with the West, and reshaping the region's political geography to attain regional power status. In line with these objectives, Turkey—unlike Iran—supports opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, seeks to present its own model to Islamic movements in Arab countries, and, notably, has agreed to the deployment of a Western missile defense shield on its territory. All three positions conflict with Iran's perspectives. The Islamic Republic of Iran regards the Assad government as a strategic ally due to its support for resistance; opposes Turkey's efforts to appropriate the Arab uprisings in line with Western policies; and ultimately views the missile defense shield as a mechanism to tighten the encirclement of Iran by the West, particularly the United States. Consequently, Turkey's recent policies pose a fundamental challenge to Iran's national security. Iranian foreign policy decision-makers must therefore conduct relations with Turkey in accordance with the principles of dignity, wisdom, and expediency, placing Iran's national interests at the forefront.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Syria and Iraq constitute the most critical arenas in which Turkey's actions and policies fundamentally conflict with the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Given that the Axis of Resistance represents one of Iran's most significant achievements and that Syria and Iraq are its core actors, the



divergence of interests between Iran and Turkey could inflict substantial damage on their expanded political relations. Syria and Iraq not only provide the necessary instruments for Iran's regional role in West Asia but also serve as deterrents against military and security threats posed by the Zionist regime to Iran. The continuation of crisis, or the collapse and disintegration of the political systems in these countries, could lead to the spillover of instability into Iraq, Lebanon, and other friendly states, thereby tipping the strategic balance and regional power equilibrium against Iran's national interests. It is evident that if Turkey's policies and those of its Western and Arab supporters succeed, they would undoubtedly reduce Iran's capacity for power generation and opportunity creation in advancing its perspectives, policies, objectives, and programs at regional and global levels, while simultaneously expanding the range of opportunities available to Turkey.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### **Transparency of Data**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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