



News National

- News
- ▶ National
- Diplomacy
- Politics
- World
- Business
- Interviews
- Columnists
- Op-Ed
- Arts & Culture
- Expat Zone
- Features
- Travel
- Leisure
- Life
- Cartoons
- Women
- Health Briefs
- Weird But True
- Sports
- Turkish Press Review
- Today's think tanks

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TURKEY'S BEST SIGHTS TASTES DRINKS

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Turkey's role in Iran's nuclear row still vague

The nuclear standoff phase of the three-decade-old confrontation between the US and Iran has begun to draw Turkey in, but the rising regional heavyweight staunchly opposes any kind of sanctions on Iran, its historic rival and current ally.

Turkey could have developed very profitable trade cooperation with Iran, particularly as regards its energy resources, but three United Nations Security Council resolutions putting sanctions on Iran and pressure from the US prevented this from happening. Being a regional leader, something Turkey has begun to work for in recent years, entails added responsibility. One is to have a say in issues going on in the neighborhood. If the Western world is right in its presumption that Iran is preparing to acquire a nuclear bomb, Iran will be the 10th nuclear power in the world. Despite Iran's repeated insistence that it has the right to develop nuclear technology as it needs the energy for medical use, the West claims that Iran's nuclear program is ill intentioned and that the country aims to develop a nuclear weapon.

The West fears what may happen if Iran goes nuclear because of its alleged links to terrorist groups and because efforts to stop nuclear proliferation could face an uphill battle as other countries in the region seek to acquire their own nuclear weapons.

Former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Mohamed ElBaradei in December suggested that Iran transfer its low enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey in exchange for fuel rods produced in Russia and France. Iran initially agreed to the proposal, but claimed that any solution must allow it to produce enough fuel to power over 200 medical research facilities. Turkey, the only Muslim member of NATO and a traditional ally of the US, strongly opposes sanctions, asserting that sanctions do not help solve any problem.

Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Justin Logan, an associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said Turkey has long been an opponent of increased pressure on Iran, despite its membership in the NATO alliance. "Washington resents this fact, but has not appeared inclined to do much about it. Turkey could, in principle, assist in facilitating communication between Iran and the P5+1, but there is little evidence that Turkey has played or will play much of a helpful role (as viewed by the Western powers) on the Iran issue in the future," Logan said. The P5+1 refers to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

While saying that possible sanctions will definitely harm economic relations between Turkey and Iran, including gas deals and cooperation among banks in the two countries, Bayram Sinkaya, an expert at the Middle East Strategic Research Center (ORSAM), told Sunday's Zaman that Turkey's opposition to sanctions is primarily political as Turkey does not believe the sanctions will serve any purpose at all. "An isolated Iran will be unstable and more aggressive. Any possible military offensive in the region will certainly reflect in Turkey, too," Sinkaya said. Stressing the importance of Turkey's attempt to act as a broker in Iran's nuclear deal, Sinkaya said if Turkey allows sanctions, it will damage its rising positive image in the region and the particular role it has taken on.

The March/April issue of Foreign Affairs magazine brought the Iran row to its headline with the article "After Iran gets the bomb" authored by James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh. Pointing out the possible ripples in the region resulting from Iran's development of a nuclear bomb, the article notes that it is important to consider not only how Iran is likely to act but also how other states will react to this outcome -- and what the US could do to influence their responses. Drawing a nightmare scenario, Lindsay and Takeyh write that Israel would go on a hair-trigger alert -- ready to launch a nuclear weapon at a moment's notice, putting both countries minutes away from annihilation. "Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey would scramble to join the nuclear club," they noted.

In fact, Iran is a traditional rival of Turkey in the region. But even after the US passed a non-binding resolution in 1994, which effectively puts any country that invests more than \$20 million in Iran on a US "black list," depriving the Middle East giant of large amounts of potential funds, Iran continues to be a major rival to Turkey.

Moreover, Turkey's close relations with Arab countries, some analysts

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countries, some of whose regimes have close relations with the US. Citing areas in which Iran and Turkey cooperate extensively in the region and noting that Turkey has attempted to position itself as a mediator between Iran and the US on the nuclear program, Ali Nader, an Iran expert at the RAND Corporation, told Sunday's Zaman that it is not entirely clear whether Iran will trust Turkey enough to allow it to play such an important role. "The two countries are traditional rivals in the Middle East, and it remains to be seen if their ties will grow beyond economic cooperation to include significant cooperation on regional security issues," Nader stated.

28 March 2010, Sunday
MAHIR ZEYNALOV İSTANBUL

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