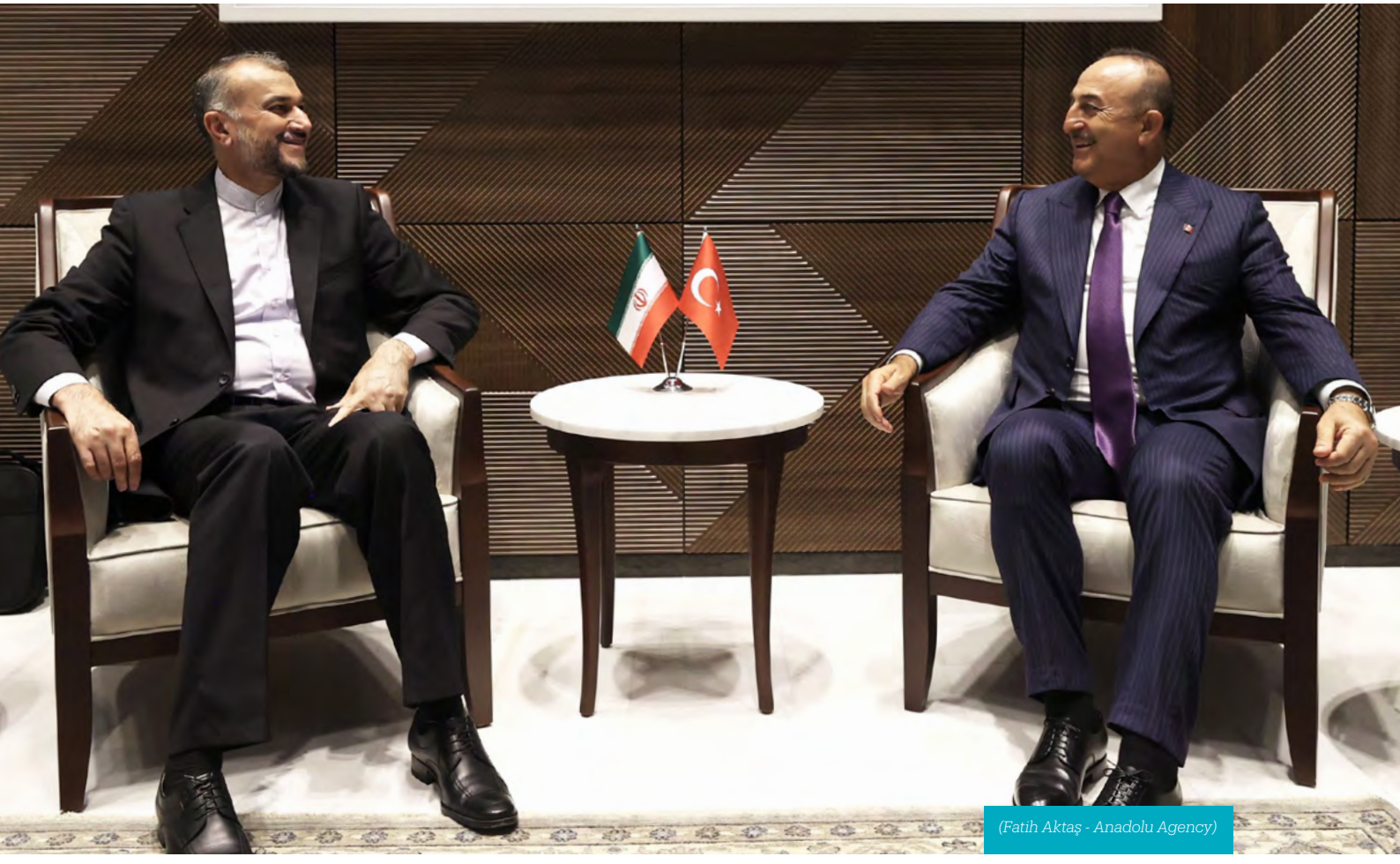
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Turkish-Iranian Relations under the Raisi Administration: A Bridge over Troubled Water?

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(Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook discusses the potential evolution of Turkish-Iranian relations under the administration of Ebrahim Raisi. It explores the possibility that the steady and promising mood between the two capitals during the Rouhani era may disappear due to Raisi's foreign policy vision, together with the current state of regional problems. This pessimistic account of future relations does not necessarily mean that two states will enter a period of hostility. However, several factors that generated strong cooperation between the two sides over the past few years have waned, especially in Iran, with several potential points of tension, including the de-intensified but ongoing civil war in Syria, the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

On August 5, 2021, conservative Iranian cleric Ebrahim Raisi was sworn in as the Islamic Republic's eighth president in a parliamentary ceremony broadcast live on state television. During his inauguration speech, Raisi said: "I will dedicate myself to the service of the people, the honour of the country, the propagation of religion and morality, and the support of truth and justice," adding that Iran is ready to extend the hand of friendship and brotherhood to all countries in the region, especially its neighbours.

On the day of his inauguration, Raisi also hosted a high-level Turkish delegation led by Mustafa Şentop, the speaker of the Turkish Parliament, in Tehran. During the meeting, both sides referred to the longstanding tradition of friendly relations and cooperation in numerous fields. As the seventh summit of the High-Level Cooperation Council between the two states is approaching, a new chapter is set to begin in the long history of bilateral relations. That being said, this new chapter in Ankara-Tehran relations is accompanied by its own set of potential problems and fault lines, as has been the case since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

This policy outlook will discuss the potential evolution of Turkish-Iranian relations under the administration of Ebrahim Raisi. It explores the possibility that the steady and promising mood between the two capitals during the Rouhani era may disappear due to Raisi's foreign policy vision, together with the current state of regional problems. This pessimistic account of future relations does not necessarily mean that two states will enter a period of hostility. However, several factors that generated strong cooperation between the two sides over the past few years have waned, especially in Iran, with several potential points of tension, including the de-intensified but ongoing civil war in Syria, the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rouhani's Legacy

Rouhani's presidency represents a landmark in post-Revolution Iranian history. During his 8-year administration, he dealt with a complex foreign policy context in regional and global affairs. Although Rouhani's first term was widely considered to be more successful than his second, his achievements were overshadowed by the problems that emerged during his second term, including Donald Trump's maximum pressure policy.

Most important among these issues is the ongoing impasse regarding the return to the JCPOA. This impasse is defined by mutually eroded confidence and the implementation of assertive measures against the interests of the other. As a result, both the US and Iran expect the other side to take the first step towards any renewed agreement. Even though Iran and the P5+1 restarted talks on April 6 in Vienna, they have yet to agree on the conditions to facilitate Iran's full compliance with the JCPOA. On June 20, two days after Raisi was elected, the commission in charge of negotiations announced that the sixth round of talks ended with no result, calling the talks into question.

In addition to increasing its military presence and expanding its support to the Assad regime in Syria, relations with Iraq were strained during Rouhani's second term. Moreover, in the aftermath of the assassination of Soleimani, Iran-affiliated militias have continuously





Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi (C), Prime Minister of Kuwait Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah (L), Vice President of the United Arab Emirates Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (R), Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (3rd L), Jordanian King Abdullah II (6th R), French President Emmanuel Macron (4th L), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (7th R), Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud (5th L), Iranian Foreign Minister Hussein Emir Abdullahiyan (2nd R), Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit (5th R), President of Egypt Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi (4th R), Secretary General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf Nayef Falah M. Al-Hajraf (3rd R) and Secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Yusuf Bin Ahmed Al Uthaymeen (2nd L) pose for a photo during the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation & Partnership in Baghdad, Iraq on August 28, 2021. (Royal Hashemite Court/Handout - Anadolu Agency)

attacked US targets. However, as in Syria, it is clear that Iran feels the absence of Soleimani in Iraq. Iran has also had to face Arab-Israeli rapprochement in the final years of the Rouhani presidency. One of the reasons the UAE and Bahrain decided to formalise relations with Israel was to solidify an anti-Iranian alliance in the region. While these dynamics emerged during the last years of the Rouhani presidency, they will continue under Raisi, at least during the initial stages of his presidency.

Raisi's Foreign Policy

Raisi's approach towards the West will likely differ markedly from his more moderate predecessor. Along with his relative lack of diplomatic experience, Raisi's dogmatic positionin support of the revolution will shape his foreign policy approach, especially towards the US and EU. Raisi is on the US and EU sanctions list because of his involvement in the 1988 massacres that saw the execution of thousands of political dissidents. Moreover, Raisi is known for his critical stance towards the nuclear deal. He has stated that even though the agreement is a respectable national document, getting sanctions lifted will not ultimately be achieved through negotiations.

As a leading establishment cleric, Raisi has also praised the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and hailed the organisation's approach to foreign policy. Before being elected president, he said: "The IRGC has excelled in every field it has entered, including security, defence, services and construction, both internationally and domestically." Accordingly, Raisi is expected to work harmoniously with the IRGC. The IRGC has been Iran's dominant player in shaping regional policy in the past decade. Unlike Rouhani and his foreign minister Javad Zarif, who publicly announced their frustrations with the IRGC's meddling in foreign policy, Raisi and his team will be more compatible with the paramilitary nexus.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that Raisi would appoint a figure such as Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as his foreign minister. Known for his hawkish views, Amir-Abdollahian has been active in Iran's foreign policy-making process since Mohammad Khatami's presidency. After serving as the deputy chief of mission at Iran's embassy in Baghdad (1997-2001), he was appointed as Iran's ambassador to Manama, Bahrain. Amir-Abdollahian was deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs between 2011 and 2016, until being dismissed by Zarif. During his service in Iraq, Amir-Abdollahian was close to the IRGC's expeditionary Quds Force. He was often sarcastically described as the representative of the Quds Force at the foreign ministry.

Amir-Abdollahian's initial statements indicate that his ministry will be very different from his predecessor's. During the parliamentary session in which his ministry was approved, Amir-Abdollahian highlighted that the foreign policy priority of the Raisi government would be to prioritise relations with neighbours as well as the Asian continent. This is "because the 21st century belongs to Asia and that we are witnessing the new emerging economic powers in Asia." He also added that the JCPOA would not be the highest priority item during his tenure.

Amir-Abdollahian stirred controversy during his first visit as foreign minister to Baghdad. Attending the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in the Iraqi capital on August 28, the top Iranian diplomat breached protocol and stood next to heads of states who attended the conference, unlike other ministers who stood in the back for the official photo. His Baghdad tour and several other visits in the same week also gave clues of what Iranian foreign policy in the region will look like under Raisi's presidency. Together with attending the conference in the Iraqi capital, Amir-Abdollahian also visited the location where Qassem Soleimani was assassinated and then met with Syria's Bashar al-Assad in Damascus after the conference. His speech, which was addressed in Arabic, underlined that Syria should have attended the meeting. These can be seen as a sign of how Iran's foreign policy's "axis of resistance" discourse will occupy a key place against the US and its allies in the Middle East under the Raisi administration.

The general focus on the region and the Asian continent can also be seen in Iran's response to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Influenced by the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, Iran and the previous Taliban government had tense relations. Tehran listed the Taliban as a terrorist organisation and heavily engaged with the post-Taliban administration in Kabul. However, in the context of US presence in the country, tensions were replaced with a degree of based on mutual interests in the last decade. Among the most pressing issues was the US presence in Afghanistan. Even prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Iran had already improved its communication channels with the movement by hosting some of its leading figures in recent months. Such efforts of intensifying contacts went further, particularly after Afghan migrants began to use Iranian territory as transit route to the West.

Relations with Turkey

For the last eight years, Ankara's relations with Tehran went through an undulating pattern. The two sides acted delicately to preserve amicable relations in the midst of their rivalry in regional hotspots. This trajectory is expected to persist under the Raisi administration and his foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian. However, several dossiers, such as Syria and Iraq, are likely to see increased tension particularly because Raisi and his team enjoy strong bonds with the paramilitary nexus, and the IRGC in particular. Members of the organisation, especially those within the Quds Force, have actively supported the Assad regime in Syria and fought against ISIS in Iraq. Growing Iranian military influence in both countries has seen tensions between Ankara and Tehran spike on several occasions. With Raisi becoming president, more emphasis will be placed on the "axis of resistance" discourse, and support for the IRGC and its affiliated militant groups in the region will undoubtedly increase.

Nevertheless, the two states still need each other, especially in light of the new realities in Afghanistan and the post-pandemic economic situation. Speaking to TRT World Research Centre, Hakkı Uygur, director of IRAM (Center for Iranian Studies), said that there will not be a significant change in the course of bilateral relations. According to Uygur, "It is known that the main policies have been determined by the Supreme Leader since 1979 so that change in the presidential office does not mean a lot unless Ayatollah Khamenei makes major political alterations". He then added that "I don't think the current situation regarding areas of cooperation and rivalry between the two states will experience any serious change; however, the likelihood of a new ruling elite in Iran acting more ideologically should be definitely taken into account."

He also claims that Turkey's declared support for Iran's peaceful nuclear activities might gain more significance for the Iranian ruling elite due to the uncertain future of the JCPOA and nuclear talks with the P5+1, given the frequent emphasis of Raisi and his team about developing good relations with neighbours. "Turkey's attitude with regards to Iran's nuclear activities is clear and it supports every country's right to implement peaceful nuclear activities within the framework of international rules and supervisions. Therefore, Ankara will continue to defend Tehran's right to pursue [peaceful] nuclear activities unless the IEA presents reports saying that they are doing otherwise."

The latest meeting between Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers showed that bilateral cooperation in regional crises is of great importance for both countries. On September 23, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir Abdollahian met in New York on the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly. In this second high-level official meeting since Raisi assumed the presidency, the foreign ministers emphasised the importance of strategic relations between the two states as well as maintaining and enhancing their consultative relationship in Afghanistan and Syria. The meeting also revealed that Turkey and Iran attached great importance to the trilateral regional mechanism in the Southern Caucasus between Ankara, Tehran, and Baku. In this regard, both ministers agreed that the next summit would be held in Tehran.

Afghanistan under the Taliban

The return of the Taliban marked an early test of Turkey's relationship with Iran under the Raisi administration. Though both states are eager to make official contact with the group, they also have serious reservations about stability in Afghanistan. However, this similarity does not necessarily enable us to neglect the differences in approach towards the new reality in Afghanistan. For

instance, both Ankara and Tehran have concerns about the migration flow from the Taliban-controlled country but with different nuances. Turkey is currently facing a steady flow of Afghan migrants on its eastern borders largely because Iran turns a blind eye to and even encourages Afghan migrants to use Turkey as a transit route to Europe.

With such a policy vis-à-vis Afghan migrants, Tehran aims to achieve two objectives: First, Tehran seeks to relieve its own refugee burden while using the Afghan migrant/refugee issue as leverage against Ankara in the regional chess game. This way, Iran aims to influence the domestic political debate inside Turkey by playing up the Afghan migrant influx issue. Second, it also aims to retaliate against Turkey's influence in Iran's sphere of influence. Turkey has been making strong political gains in areas such as Afghanistan by coordinating the repair of the Kabul airport. Similarly, Turkey supported Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict against Iran-backed Armenia. By creating problems for Turkey, Tehran aims to demonstrate to Iranians that it has numerous cards that can be played to harm Turkey's interests.

The influx of Afghan migrants represents an additional burden for Turkey, which already hosts about 4 million Syrians. Authorities say that there are 182,000 registered Afghan migrants in Turkey, with an additional 120,000 unregistered. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urged European countries to take responsibility for any new migrant flux, warning that Turkey had no intention of becoming "Europe's migrant storage unit." Additionally, Turkey decided to bolster the security of its border with Iran to prevent illegal migrant flows. Authorities plan to add 64 kilometres (40 miles) by the end of the year to a border wall started in 2017. Ditches, barbed wire fences, and security patrols around the clock will cover the rest of the 560-kilometre frontier. "We want to show the whole world that our borders are impenetrable," stated Mehmet Emin Bilmez, governor of the eastern border province of Van. For Iranians, building this border wall is "denting Iran's reputation" since it paints Iran as a country that cannot provide security. This issue will be one of the major discussion points in the forthcoming seventh summit of the Turkey-Iran High-Level Cooperation Council in Tehran.

Syria and Iraq

Iraq may prove to be the biggest test for Turkish-Iranian relations. Both Iran and Iran-supported Shia militant groups in Iraq have voiced their objections to Ankara's military operations against the PKK and expressed their hostility towards the Turkish presence in Iraq. Leaders from the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), such as Qais al-Khazali, the Secretary-General of Asaeb Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Abdulrahman al-Jazairi, have strongly criticized the Turkish military presence in Iraq. They have also called on the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to support the PKK unequivocally. Amidst such tensions, Ali Rıza Güney, Ankara's ambassador to Baghdad, attended the funeral of Ayatollah Al-Hakeem, a major Shia scholar from Kufa. Some of the most influential Shia clerics in Iraq welcomed the Turkish ambassador. Some experts considered the ambassador's attendance at the funeral as a balancing act against the PMF's campaign.

Pointing to the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections in October, Tamer Badawi, an independent analyst focusing on paramilitary groups and politics in Iraq, claims that Iran-backed paramilitary groups in Iraq are likely to increase their rhetoric against Turkey. "This could be coupled with launching rockets at TAF posts in northern Iraq. If Iraqi groups secure a substantial number of seats in the Iraqi Parliament, then this will give them greater domestic legitimacy to take military action," he said. According to Badawi, the Raisi administration sees economic imperatives in improving its relationship with Turkey. However, given its ties with the IRGC, it will likely be emboldened by the US withdrawal from the region in its efforts to restrain Turkey. "Escalation seems more likely between the Turkish Armed Forces and Iraqi groups than before. One possibility is that Iran may leverage that to ask Turkey for economic concessions, among others, to help de-escalate tensions in Iraq," he argued.

Another possible fissure point between the two states is Syria. Most recently, Daraa al Balad, the heartland of the revolution in Syria has been besieged by the Bashar al Assad regime and Iranian militias since late June. After 76 days of siege, Syrian regime troops entered the town for the first time since it lost control over the area a decade ago, residents, the army and former rebels said on September 8. Turkey expressed "concern" over the situation in Daraa and stated that it is "unacceptable" that the town and its surroundings are besieged, and civilians are forced to flee due to the Assad regime's attacks. As an ally of the Assad regime since the beginning of the uprising, Iran supported the regime's Fourth Division through the IRGC. With Russia supporting this set-up, this trio effectively sabotaged any truce efforts.

The influence that Iran had built in Iraq and Syria through Shia militia groups and IRGC-affiliated paramilitary organisations, while still strong, has somewhat waned in the wake of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. The latter had decades of experience and personal connections with many local commanders and was the ultimate authority for Iran on the battlefield. Esmail Qaani, the current leader of the Quds Force, does not have the same overarching charisma as his predecessor.

With that being said, the discord that existed between the Iranian Foreign Ministry under Zarif and the IRGC's Quds Force will be no more. Unlike Zarif, whose relations with Soleimani soured, Amir-Abdollahian will focus on protecting the IRGC-affiliated military groups' presence in Syria and Iraq. Tehran may also seek to rein in the central government in Baghdad, and the KRG in Irbil in particular, as their relations with Ankara have recently improved.

Nagorno-Karabakh and the Southern Caucasus

The South Caucasus has also become a realm of competition between Ankara and Tehran. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the subsequent peace deal showcased Turkish influence in Azerbaijan in light of the military and diplomatic support granted to Baku. Turkish-Iranian relations were strained in the wake of the conflict. Tensions intensified after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recited a nationalist poem about the Aras River on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border to mark Azerbaijan's victory. This poem touched a sensitive nerve with the Iranian leadership. Since the 1990s, Tehran has distanced itself from Baku as Baku has sought influence among Iran's ethnic Azeri population. Iran has preferred to develop relations with Armenia as a counterweight to Azerbaijan in the region.



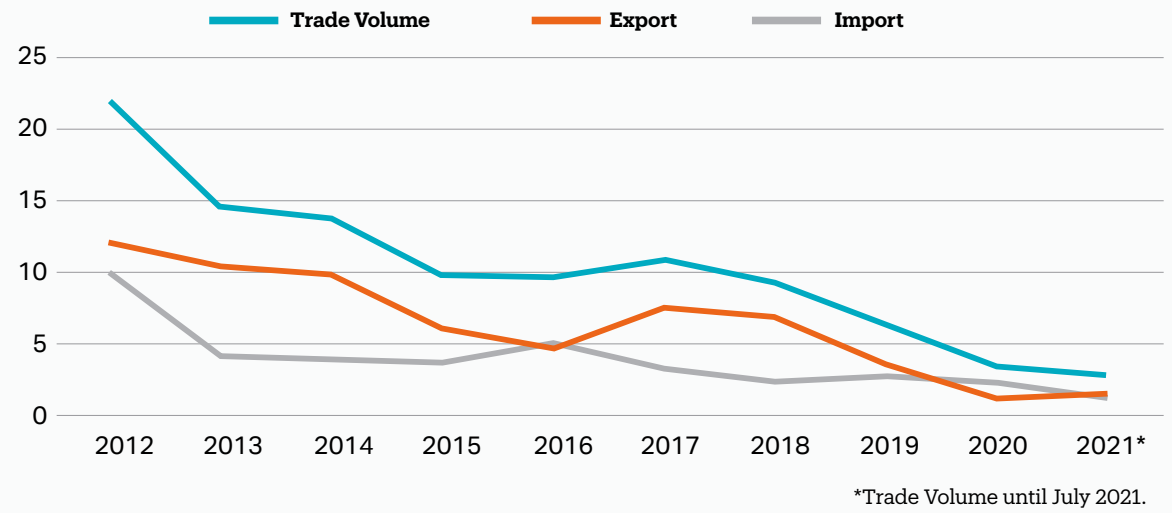
(Azerbaijan Defense Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

With the latest war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran's perspective seems to have changed. The Islamic Republic took steps to close the distance between the two capitals while not excluding its good relations with Armenia. As evidence for this friendlier stance towards Baku, Iranian religious leaders publicly acknowledged that Karabakh and surrounding lands are inseparable parts of Azerbaijan. Moreover, then-Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said he is happy to see that Azerbaijan has regained control over its occupied territories from Armenia. Azerbaijan welcomed this new and warmer tone. Subsequently, Azerbaijan's First Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev stated that economic cooperation with Iran in Karabakh could be fruitful in the energy field. Similarly, President Ilham Aliyev's congratulated Raisi right after his electoral victory. Such statements show that there is a mutual willingness to open a new page.

Turkey has also welcomed such an opening between Iran and Azerbaijan. Previously, Turkish President Erdoğan proposed forming a six-country regional cooperation platform including Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia and Armenia. The facilitation of this proposal is currently being discussed in meetings between Turkish, Iranian, and Azerbaijani experts. They point out that although it seems difficult for the six to come together in the near future, Turkish and Iranian cooperation in Southern Caucasus should be maintained.

Iran currently runs a double-track policy vis-à-vis the Southern Caucasus. On the one hand, it does not want to push Azerbaijan further into Turkey's arms by highlighting the concerns over its Azeri minority and remain isolated in the region and the Caspian Basin, which have now become more deeply linked to the Middle East. On the other hand, it does not want to alter its traditional stance of supporting Armenia and expressing discontent with the Turkish military presence in the region. Leaked videos of Iran providing logistical assistance to Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh led Baku to send a diplomatic note to Tehran and complain to Moscow that such activities breached the ceasefire deal reached with Armenia. Iran is irked by the Turkish-Azerbaijani plans to set up a corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey through the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan and the joint military exercises between Ankara and Baku. This double-track policy of Iran since the Karabakh war cannot be analysed without taking into consideration Iran's rivalry with Turkey. Thus, the Raisi administration is expected to hold the line on this policy in the short term.

Turkey's trade with Iran *(billion USD)*



*Trade Volume until July 2021.

Source: Turkish Ministry of Trade, Turkish Statistical Institute.

Economic Relations

Raisi's prioritising better relations with the neighbours can also be interpreted as an intention of developing better economic relations with Turkey. Since 2012, except for 2017[1], the trade volume between the two states has decreased by 85% from $21.9 billion to $3.4 billion in 2021 (Figure 1). This drop is mainly related to the sanctions imposed on Iran and tensions resulting from the civil war in Syria. Despite Raisi's positive statements, returning the bilateral trade volume pre-2012 levels will be challenging for both sides. Additional factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, should not be discounted. As a result of the pandemic, the Turkey-Iran border was closed between February 2020 and May 2021, which had a negative effect on trade.

For the Raisi administration, the removal of sanctions is not a top priority as it was for the Rouhani administration. Khamenei and the establishment, with whom Raisi enjoys a close relationship, promote the "resistance economy" model. This model seeks to offset the impact of sanctions by reducing dependence on imports and increasing domestic production. It also endeavours to replace foreign technologies with those made at home. On the Turkish side, Turkey has gradually become less dependent on Iranian gas. The volume of gas imported from Iran has decreased over the last few years. Moreover, Ankara has also increased its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean by conducting reconciliation efforts with Egypt and Israel. Discovering considerable natural gas reserves in the Black Sea will also undoubtedly consolidate Ankara's energy security. Therefore, the two countries need to seek new areas of trade and economic cooperation in the long term.

Conclusion

After a long history of cordial but competitive relations, a new chapter is set to open in bilateral relations following Raisi's election. The overarching essence of bilateral relations witnessed under the Rouhani presidency will likely continue in the near term. However, the rivalry could escalate because Iran enjoys a wide influence in Turkey's neighbourhood, especially in Damascus and Baghdad. Meanwhile, Turkey has increased its military footprint in regional conflicts in Syria and Southern Caucasus. The latest migrant flow problem from Afghanistan and decreasing trade volume create additional layers of complexity. Nevertheless, as two regional powerhouses in the Middle East, Turkey and Iran also have a long tradition of managing bilateral conflicts and compartmentalising issues. The new government led by Raisi is expected to consider this aspect, especially regarding the crises in Afghanistan, Syria, and the cooperation efforts in the Southern Caucasus.

[1] In 2017, bilateral trade increased by $1 billion due to the lifting of sanctions in Iran. However, the positive impact on Turkish-Iranian economic relations was short-lived following then-US President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of sanctions in 2018.