

Diplomacy under strain: Turkey's stance on Iran

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In a statement issued on 4 March, Turkey's Ministry of National Defence announced that an Iranian ballistic missile heading towards Turkish airspace had been shot down. It was most likely bound for the Incirlik base, where, among others, American and Polish troops are stationed. The incident represents a challenge to Ankara's previous stance on the war. Turkish politicians had criticised both the US–Israeli operation and Tehran's attacks on the states of the Persian Gulf. They called for the cessation of hostilities and a return to negotiations, offered mediation between the parties to the conflict, and appealed to Muslim states in the region to intensify diplomatic efforts. At the same time, the Presidency's Directorate of Communications consistently denied reports that Turkish airspace had been used for US strikes against Iran.

Turkey continues to prioritise diplomacy, as it fears that the continuation of military operations could lead to the conflict spilling over into the entire region. It does not wish to see Israel's position strengthened, viewing it as a principal destabilising factor in the Middle East. Ankara also hopes that a protracted operation in Iran may prompt US President Donald Trump to enter into talks with representatives of the regime in Tehran. At the same time, it is concerned that it could be compelled to undertake military action as a result of Iranian operations or pressure from regional partners and the United States. Its priority will be the protection of its own borders; however, in the event of deliberate Iranian attacks on its territory, it may decide to carry out retaliatory strikes.

Iran: the Middle Eastern Pandora's box

The attack on Iran has raised numerous concerns among Turkish officials. They are primarily concerned about a potential influx of refugees, which – in their view – Turkey would not be able to accommodate. Approximately 3.5 million refugees from other countries (primarily Syria and Afghanistan) are already present on its territory, while the country's economy remains in a phase of recovery (see *'Turbulent stabilisation: Turkey's economy under Şimşek's supervision'*). In recent years, this has resulted in significant social tensions, which in turn have generated political costs for the ruling authorities. On 2 March, Ankara and Tehran jointly decided to restrict cross-border movement, allowing only returns to the country of origin and crossings by third-country nationals.

Uncertainty in Ankara is also fuelled by the potential impact of Iran's destabilisation on the peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Iran is home to around 10 million Kurds, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) operating there has not complied with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's decision to disarm (see *'One step forward, one step back – a year of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process'*). Consequently, Turkish

politicians fear that the weakening of Iranian state structures (including the security forces) could allow PJAK to absorb some PKK fighters who oppose the peace process and to undertake actions against Turkey. Concerns have been further heightened by media reports suggesting that the United States and Israel are attempting to mobilise Iraqi and Iranian Kurds to fight the regime in Tehran. For Turkey, the worst-case scenario would be the disintegration of Iran and the emergence on its territory of, among others, a Kurdish parastate.

Ankara is also concerned about the economic disruptions that could result from Iran's weakening. These relate both to direct effects – around 13% of Turkey's total gas imports still come from Iran – and to indirect ones. Turkish officials are aware that a likely consequence of US–Israeli actions against Tehran would be a surge in oil prices. This, in turn, would increase inflationary pressure in Turkey, significantly complicating the economic reforms pursued since 2023. Their primary objective has been to slow the pace of price growth.

However, decision-makers are most influenced by threats whose consequences are difficult to predict. This was highlighted by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who called for a swift end to the war, warning that the region could turn into a 'ring of fire'. Turkish officials fear destabilisation in their neighbourhood (above all in Syria and Iraq) and the possibility that Iranian retaliatory strikes could escalate into a regional war. They are also concerned about the emergence of a 'security vacuum' in the Middle East that could facilitate the activities of non-state actors, particularly terrorist organisations. Such a scenario would undermine the achievements of Turkish foreign and security policy in recent years (including the stabilisation of Syria, the improved relations with Iraq, and the normalisation of ties with Arab states). It would also derail Ankara's plans to expand trade and transport links across the Middle East and could compel Turkey to increase its military activity in order to defend its borders and neutralise terrorist threats.

Israel: no to regional hegemony

Turkish officials view Israel's actions as an attempt to establish regional hegemony based on technological superiority and the support of the Trump administration. For this reason, in recent years – and particularly in 2025 – they have consistently criticised Tel Aviv's policies. They have described Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip as genocide, expressed strong opposition to plans to resettle Palestinians, and sought participation in the stabilisation forces that were to be deployed in Gaza under the so-called Trump plan. They also condemned last year's Israeli strikes on Iran and Qatar, emphasising their incompatibility with international law, warning of the risk of regional destabilisation, and accusing Israel of adopting terrorist methods as an instrument of state policy. Ultimately, Turkey closed its airspace to Israeli military and government aircraft and its ports to Israeli vessels.

The current war is likewise interpreted by Ankara through the prism of Israel's hegemonic ambitions. Erdoğan has blamed its outbreak on the 'provocations' of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On the one hand, this served as a means of shifting responsibility away from Trump, in whom the Turkish leadership places considerable hopes (see '[Turkey and the US: a costly normalisation](#)'). On the other hand, it reflects the belief that Israel is using the United States to pursue its own security interests. In Ankara's view, these interests are defined in maximalist and irrational terms, as they are driven by Netanyahu's domestic

political needs. In this context, two issues are of particular concern to Turkey. First, statements from Israel suggesting that Iran could be divided along ethnic lines. Second, voices emerging there suggesting that, once Iran has been neutralised, Israel should address the threats posed to it by Turkey.

Ankara does not consider a war with Tel Aviv to be highly likely; nevertheless, it treats it as a risk against which precautions must be taken. For this reason, it has announced a programme for the construction of civil defence shelters, placed greater emphasis on the development of an integrated air defence system, and intensified efforts to purchase F-35 fighter aircraft from the United States, which would allow it to reduce Israel's technological advantage to some extent. Efforts to counter Israel's ambitions also include Turkey's consistent appeals to its Middle Eastern partners to address regional problems within regional frameworks. These included an unsuccessful attempt at the beginning of February this year to organise Iranian–American talks in Istanbul, which were to be accompanied by delegations from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, and Egypt.

Diplomacy under pressure

Concerns about the negative consequences of the conflict in Iran, firm opposition to Israel's policies, and a preference for regional solutions have led Turkey to distance itself from the war and to press for a return to diplomacy. For this reason, Turkish officials – particularly Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and President Erdoğan – have held a series of talks with representatives of Muslim states (including Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Iraq, and Indonesia), as well as with Western allies (Erdoğan spoke, among others, with Trump, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen). Turkey also maintains contacts with the Iranian authorities, and the President issued condolences following the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a gesture intended to underline Turkey's neutrality.

Ankara's position also stems from the belief that the demand for regime change in Tehran is detached from reality. In its view, the regime is too consolidated to collapse as a result of air strikes alone, even if they were massive. Turkish officials argue that there is no indication that Iranian society itself would bring about its overthrow. In this view, therefore, the removal of the regime would require broader military action, including a ground operation – a scenario that Turkey would prefer to avoid.

Ankara fears being drawn into the conflict. Turkish officials are aware that in Iran there are groups advocating the extension of retaliatory actions to Turkish territory – statements by the Directorate of Communications responded, among other things, to such calls by pro-regime commentators. For this reason, Turkey will most likely continue to call for a return to diplomacy while presenting itself as a party capable of effectively mediating between the United States and Iran. At the same time – particularly over the next few days – Ankara will be operating under increasing pressure. Four scenarios would be especially problematic for Turkey. The first involves further Iranian attacks on the İncirlik base or the NATO radar facility in Kürecik. The second relates to potential US pressure to change Turkey's stance should Trump decide against negotiations with the regime. The third concerns the possible entry of Arab states into the conflict. Of particular concern to Turkey is the situation of Qatar – its most important regional ally, which hosts, among other facilities, a Turkish military base. The fourth scenario would involve Iranian retaliatory strikes against energy

infrastructure (for example the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, through which approximately 30% of Israel’s total oil imports are transported) or renewed attacks on Azerbaijan (on 5 March Iran struck the airport in Nakhchivan), which is not only Turkey’s ally but also a close partner of Israel.