



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey Is Building a Geopolitical Alliance Between Sunni and Shiite Islamists

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recent news about the involvement of Iranian diplomats in the murder of an Iranian dissident in Turkey sparked a flare of international interest from within the all-encompassing coronavirus pandemic coverage, largely thanks to unflattering comparisons with [coverage](#) of the Jamal Khashoggi murder in 2018 (which the Iranian press promoted with gusto). The relative lack of interest in the crime from within Turkey itself reflects Ankara's willingness to consort with Shiite Islamists to its own advantage.

At the time of the murder of Saudi journalist and spokesman Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unleashed an intense media campaign blaming the kingdom's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman for the crime. He did this in part to advance his own agenda of asserting more control in Syria, where Saudi Arabia was a hindrance. Most of the mainstream Western media covered the Khashoggi killing by relying on leaks from Turkish intelligence-affiliated outlets as well as Al Jazeera, and thus ended up spending an inordinate amount of time producing hagiographies of Khashoggi and demonizing the Crown Prince.

Erdoğan and the media stayed quiet, however, on the number of journalists fired, imprisoned, and even assassinated in Turkey, as well as on the Iranian dissidents who have been surveilled, threatened, assaulted, and even abducted thanks to a tacit security arrangement with the IRGC, which roams freely in Istanbul and other big cities in Turkey. None of that activity could occur without the Turkish leadership's approval. When Saeed Karimian, an Iranian executive who had launched a popular TV station in Turkey but who also had ties to Iranian drug trafficking and sanctions

circumvention, was assassinated in Istanbul in 2017, Iranian government involvement could be easily presumed, but Ankara chose not to press the issue.

The involvement of the Iranian government in assassinations of dissidents in Turkey should come as no surprise to anyone who has been watching the military and ideological [alliance](#) that continues to grow between the countries despite their seemingly clashing long-term interests. In view of that alliance, it is naïve to expect Ankara to create a [rift](#) with Tehran over Iran's involvement in a killing on Turkish soil.

Iran has a long record of using intelligence operatives with diplomatic cover for all sorts of active measures. In the last few years alone, an Iranian diplomat stationed in Algiers used his position to facilitate Hezbollah's access to the local separatist group Polisario, which, with the help of the Lebanon-based Iranian proxy, was training to attack Morocco. This abuse ultimately led to the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Rabat and Tehran.

In 2018, a Vienna-based Iranian diplomat conspired with his colleagues in Berlin and IRGC personnel to stage a terrorist attack against a dissident rally in Paris. Similar plots by Iranian diplomats against local dissidents were uncovered in Albania. Iran has assassinated Kurdish and Ahwazi Arab dissidents in the Netherlands and [attempted](#) to assassinate three Ahwazi Arab activists in Denmark in 2018, adding to tensions with Europe.

Turkey's relationship with Iran has grown not in spite of but because of its willingness to use "wetworks" to advance its geopolitical agenda beyond the Middle East.

Turkish operatives, together with Polish criminal gangs controlled by a Moroccan fugitive working for Iran who was recently arrested in Dubai after his involvement in the assassination of a dissident in the Netherlands, assisted Tehran in an unsuccessful assassination attempt against an Ahwazi Arab conference in Warsaw in February 2019. Turkish gangs have often clashed with Kurdish refugees in Germany. Turkey reportedly [uses](#) mosques and cultural centers for recruitment by its intelligence in various European countries and in the US. On the occasion of Erdoğan's visit to the US, Turkish security [attacked](#) protesters in Washington, DC and New York.

Iran and Turkey, despite seemingly disparate ideologies and competing long-term geopolitical and ideological claims, have cooperated on a strategy to counter the growing Kurdish push for autonomy in both countries and in Syria. Turkey has also been facilitating a money-laundering [oil-for-gold](#) scheme with Iran to circumvent sanctions since at least 2012.

The Turkey-Iran rapprochement was certainly complicated by their divergent goals in Syria, but that did not inhibit their cooperation on many other fronts,

including [energy](#). Where analysts like the US-based National Intelligence Council and RAND focused on the two countries' different goals and strategic interests, Iran and Turkey saw an opportunity to divide and conquer. They have put aside their rivalry for the sake of weakening common enemies, at least in some areas.

Despite Erdoğan's clumsy tactics in Syria, his long-term strategic view is coherent. He has been steadily working to build up a bloc of influence with other authoritarian regimes, partnering with political Islam to galvanize populations in target countries and spheres of influence. Shiite and Sunni Islamists, despite their different ideologies, have a history of cooperation on both geostrategic and local political levels. In the US and Europe, Iran-backed and Turkey/Qatar/Muslim Brotherhood-backed organizations often support left-wing political candidates and [agitate](#) for the same political campaigns. The late Muhammad Morsi's short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt worked with Iran's then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Quds commander Qassem Soleimani to develop an IRGC-style independent [intelligence network](#).

Ayatollah Khomeini had some of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb's texts translated and popularized inside Iran. Both Khomeinist revolutionaries and Muslim Brotherhood dogma were influenced by Bolshevik, Nazi, and other revolutionary ideologies and methods as well as their focus on international influence and outreach.

From Erdoğan's perspective, Iran's ground game experience and superior intelligence/black ops apparatus is indispensable in weakening and destabilizing countries, including European and African states, that stand in the way of his neo-Ottoman ambitions. Iran can substantially boost Turkey's presence as Erdoğan works to exert power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya.

For Iran, access to the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the end goals of its "[land corridor](#)" strategy of connecting Lebanese fighters to Syria via Iran and Iraq. An IRGC naval presence could protect Turkish ships transporting weapons and fighters to Syria and discourage Western intervention into Turkey's illegal gas drilling in the Cyprus area. Turkey's moves in Libya, too, may be directly [inspired](#) by the Iranian model.

Iran could be stretched too thin to gain [direct control](#) of Libya on its own. However, should its forces side with Turkish militias and Tripoli government forces, it could consolidate territorial control by creating additional physical obstacles in the way of Khalifa Haftar's advance. For Turkey, Libya is part of both its neo-Ottoman defense line and its strategy to unite pro-Muslim Brotherhood parties, governments, militias, and footholds in North Africa and the Sahel. For Iran, it is an opportunity to spread

chaos in the region and expand both the proselytizing of Shiite Islam and the backing of Shiite terrorist groups.

Until this point, Iran has been reluctant to get overly involved due to the threat of Egypt's direct intervention. Tehran simply cannot afford a direct war with Cairo. But anything that contributes to instability in the region ultimately helps Iran's [other goals](#) for Africa, which include money-laundering and smuggling operations and the expansion of Hezbollah's presence.

While details of this potential alliance are yet to be determined, Turkey and Iran may negotiate an arrangement involving a division of spheres of influence that will allow each to pursue its own interests without direct clashes and conflict while complementing each other's financial, military, intelligence, and ideological needs. Iran has a history of political and intelligence cooperation with [Algeria](#) and [Tunisia](#), North African countries that have also been partial toward Erdoğan. Iran has sponsored Hamas operatives in Algeria while Erdoğan hosts Hamas leaders in Turkey.

Erdoğan has shown himself willing to use ex-ISIS members to fill the ranks of his militias, which are now heading to Libya. Iran has hosted al-Qaeda members and used the threat of ISIS to its own political advantage at home and abroad. These non-state terrorist organizations, and their homegrown African counterparts like Boko Haram and ash-Shabab, can certainly benefit from state support to push against weak and corrupt local governments and create instability. They can also infiltrate more stable countries through religious networks, online propaganda, prisons, and criminal organizations, giving both states access they would otherwise have difficulty attaining.

Turkey's willingness to work with both Sunni and Shiite Islamists is likely to pay off strategically, so long as Western and African governments fail to pursue concerted and unified strategies to counter and break up this alliance.

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