

Quiet cooperation, colossal consequences

Why Iran-Turkey alignment is determinative for region



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

At first glance, many defined the trip of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to Tehran and President Erdogan's impending trip within the clichéd framework of increased trade volume, transit corridor, energy, and the number "\$30 billion". However, if we perceive these comings and goings in succession to the imposed 12-day war between Iran and Israel and the strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. In addition, if we place beside it Turkey's recent military leap in the domain of missiles, drones, and new-generation fighter aircraft, an entirely different picture emerges.

In this picture, Tehran and Ankara are not merely two economic partners that seek to broaden exchanges, but two actors that, gradually and imperceptibly, are beginning to apprehend the possibility of designing a type of joint and multi-layered deterrence against Israel and a portion of the Western bloc; a deterrence that does not necessarily possess an overt and contractual form, yet can, behind the curtain, reposition the region's security parameters.

The imposed 12-day war constituted a critical juncture for both countries. From Iran's vantage point, this war demonstrated that the nuclear dossier is no longer merely a matter of negotiations, but, in the truest sense, is intertwined with conventional war: any serious tension at the nuclear level can, immediately, engender extensive missile and drone confrontation with Israel, with the direct presence of the United States. From Turkey's vantage point, this war served as a living laboratory through which it observed how the confrontation between Iran's missile and drone capability, Israel's air-defense network, and Western systems would manifest in practice.

Precisely here, Fidan's administrative role as the official responsible for transmitting American messages to Iran at the peak of the confrontation acquired significance for both sides; for Ankara as evidence that it can serve as a crisis-control channel between Tehran and the West, and for Tehran as an indication that Turkey is not merely a NATO neighbor, but can, in critical moments, perform the role of a safety valve.

After the termination of the war and the attainment of a fragile cease-fire, Iran, according to the claim of certain media, requested in an unprecedented manner that Saudi Arabia play a role in opening the avenue of dialogue with the United States. This decision positioned Saudi Arabia as a political hub and a mediating actor for engendering a potential process of de-escalation. Precisely at this juncture, a warning bell resounded for Turkey that its ideological rival, Saudi Arabia, might surpass it in the Islamic world as the mediator between Iran and the West.

The hosting of nuclear talks between Iran and the Europeans in Istanbul, the explicit articulation of the issue of sanctions and the necessity of their removal in Fidan's remarks in Tehran, and the simultaneous emphasis on a purely diplomatic resolution for the nuclear dossier were all among the items of news upon which Turkey concentrated with particular intensity. In reality, Ankara endeavored to convey the message that if a new architecture for managing Iran's nuclear program and preventing subsequent wars is to be designed, this architecture cannot be constituted without Turkey's



Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan (L) goes to shake hands with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in Tehran on November 30, 2025.

presence. Similarly, Tehran endeavored to demonstrate that its mediation channels are not confined to Riyadh and Doha, and that it also employs Ankara as a second secure politico-security channel.

However, the more consequential stratum of this political commuting is the locus at which hard security enters the scene. In the background of these movements, the possibility of a type of concealed military cooperation, especially in the domain of missiles and, in its extension, Turkey's new-generation fighter aircraft, is being contemplated. Iran and Turkey, during the past decade, have progressed along two divergent yet overlapping trajectories: Iran, through the development of long-range ballistic and cruise missiles and an extensive drone network, has demonstrated that in stand-off warfare against adversaries such as Israel, it possesses serious capacity, yet in the domain of modern fighter aircraft, advanced engines, and certain intricate aerial subsystems, it confronts constraints. Conversely, Turkey, through a major leap in the drone industry, the development of medium-range missiles and precision rockets, and, above all, the commencement of its new-generation fighter project, is transforming into an emergent aerospace power, yet its access to Western technol-

ogies is limited and conditional, and it is continually subjected to pressure from NATO and the United States.

The combination of these two profiles suggests an attractive, albeit high-risk, scenario: Iran can place upon the table its practical experience from missile-drone warfare with Israel and its attack-and-defense patterns, while Turkey can share a portion of its knowledge and modern aerospace infrastructure, directly or indirectly, with Iran; not necessarily in the form of official purchase or sale of armaments, but in the form of conceptual transfer, cooperation on dual-use technologies, and the definition of joint covert projects.

For instance, the most ordinary level of such cooperation can be the exchange of data and lessons learned regarding the performance of Israeli and Western air-defense systems against missiles and drones; namely, which type of flight profile, which saturation and deception tactics, and which combinations of ballistic missiles and drones possessed greater penetrative capacity, and which points of the adversary's defensive network were more vulnerable. At a higher level, conceptual coordination in deterrence doctrine arises: the two sides better comprehend the roles each could play in constraining the operational space of Tel Aviv in the event of a new war with

Israel, even if not a single projectile is fired directly from Turkish territory toward Israel.

Alongside the missile domain, Turkey's new-generation fighter project constitutes both a potential threat and an opportunity for Iran. If bilateral relations deteriorate toward hostility, the possession of a modern fighter platform by a western neighbor is, naturally, alarming. However, if the current trajectory of dialogue and convergence of interests continues, Iran can employ Turkey's experience in designing aerial platforms, managing a complex supply chain, and developing a data network. Cooperation can occur in domains that are legally and publicly introduced as dual-use or non-military: advanced materials, composites, simulation software, flight algorithms, and even certain navigation and communication subsystems. It is unnecessary that the result of this cooperation be the entry of a Turkish fighter into Iran's air force; the final product may solely be a multi-level enhancement in Iran's comprehension and capability for designing, sustaining, and employing more intricate platforms.

The synthesis of these developments generates the possibility of designing something akin to a joint deterrent blueprint against Israel; a blueprint that is not necessarily inscribed on official paper, but that is formed in the minds of the security architects of both countries. This blueprint contains three principal layers.

The first layer is geopolitical: Israel, in order to exercise power in the region, requires a secure operational space, aerial access from the Mediterranean to Iraq, and a network of aligned partners. If Iran and Turkey attain an understanding that, at a minimum, in Syria, Iraq, and the eastern Mediterranean, they will reduce the ceiling of Israel's freedom of action, Tel Aviv will be compelled to recalculate the cost and risk of any military action against Iran. Even if Turkey possesses no intention to fire a missile, the mere limitation of Israel's intelligence and logistical access to certain areas constitutes, in itself, a deterrent factor.

The second layer is missile- and drone-based. The imposed 12-day war demonstrated that Iran is capable of dispatching waves of missiles and drones toward distant targets, and, in contrast, Israel's and the United States' defensive network,



A full-scale model of the fifth-generation "Kaan" warplane, also referred to as the TF and MMU, is presented at the 2019 Paris Air Show. The aircraft completed its maiden flight on February 21, 2024.

ERIC PIERMONT/AFP



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