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TURKISH-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: EXAMINING IMPLICATIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS (2002–2020)

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Chanan Messaoud**

Abstract. Our study seeks to understand the various dimensions and key dynamics of the regional rivalry between Turkey and Iran in the Middle East. This is accomplished by analyzing all international and regional implications and indicators that underlie the international and regional conflict- most notably, the ideological, political, and economic divergences, which fuel hegemony, control, and the expansion of regional influence. Both states have leveraged vital policies and programs, benefiting from their global and regional geopolitical and geostrategic positions, aiming especially to activate self-directed interests and pursue both individual and collective confrontations during the formation of regional alliances to face adversaries in the region. The study further aims to monitor and analyze the orientations, foundations, and determinants of both Turkish and Iranian strategies, as well as the degree of each state's influence on the regional security environment. To that end, it utilizes the most significant political, economic, security, and geostrategic means and mechanisms, emphasizing their roles in shaping the actions of both countries in the context of current international transformations. The Middle East has long witnessed ongoing conflicts and disputes resulting from the clashing interests and strategic objectives of influential powers operating within the regional system. Each seeks to assert regional hegemony and control over areas and countries, against a background of escalating political violence, the fragility of nation-states, the spread of religious and sectarian wars, and worsened security conditions. The

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abundance of renewable and nonrenewable natural resources-such as oil and natural gas-has enhanced the region’s strategic importance. Among the most active and prominent powers, Turkey and Iran each vie for hegemony, control, and expansion over spheres of influence, relying on the most advanced techniques and international, national, and regional strategies, each according to their strategic vision. The Turkish-Iranian rivalry is thus marked by the intersection of complex and interconnected dimensions, ranging from conflict to cooperation.

Keywords: Middle East, regional security, Turkey, Iran, security strategy, regional hegemony and control

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ТУРЕЦКО-ИРАНСКОЕ СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВО НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ: АНАЛИЗ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЙ И ПРОЯВЛЕНИЙ (2002-2020)

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Абстракт. Настоящее исследование направлено на понимание различных аспектов и ключевых динамик регионального соперничества между Турцией и Ираном на Ближнем Востоке. Это достигается путем анализа всех международных и региональных последствий и индикаторов, лежащих в основе конфликта, прежде всего идеологических, политических и экономических расхождений, которые подпитывают борьбу за гегемонию, контроль и расширение регионального влияния. Обе страны используют важные политические курсы и программы, эффективно применяя свои глобальные и региональные геополитические и геостратегические позиции, с целью активизации собственных интересов и ведения как индивидуальных, так и коллективных противостояний при формировании региональных альянсов для противодействия оппонентам. Цель исследования также заключается в отслеживании и анализе направленностей, основ и определяющих факторов турецкой и иранской стратегий, а также степени влияния каждой из стран на региональную безопасность. Для этого используются ключевые политические, экономические, оборонные и геостратегические средства и механизмы, с

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акцентом на их роль в формировании поведения обеих стран в условиях современных международных трансформаций. Ближний Восток на протяжении длительного времени остается ареной непрекращающихся конфликтов и споров, вызванных противоречивыми интересами и стратегическими целями влиятельных держав, действующих в рамках региональной системы. Каждая из них стремится к региональному господству и контролю над странами и территориями на фоне нарастающего политического насилия, хрупкости государств, распространения религиозных и сектантских войн, а также ухудшающихся условий безопасности. Богатство региона возобновляемыми и невозобновляемыми природными ресурсами, такими как нефть и природный газ, усиливает его стратегическую значимость. Среди самых активных и влиятельных сил Турция и Иран стремятся к гегемонии и расширению своих зон влияния, опираясь на современные технологии и стратегии международного, национального и регионального уровня, каждая - в соответствии со своим стратегическим видением. Турецко-иранское соперничество, таким образом, характеризуется переплетением сложных и взаимосвязанных аспектов, варьирующихся от конфликта до сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Ближний Восток, региональная безопасность, Турция, Иран, стратегия безопасности, региональная гегемония и контроль

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YAXIN ŞƏRQDƏ TÜRKİYƏ-İRAN RƏQABƏTİ: TƏSİRLƏRİN VƏ TƏZAHÜRLƏRİN TƏHLİLİ (2002-2020)

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Chanan Messaoud**

Abstrakt. Bu araşdırma, Yaxın Şərqdə Türkiyə ilə İran arasında davam edən regional rəqabətin müxtəlif aspektlərini və əsas dinamiklərini anlamağı hədəfləyir. Tədqiqat beynəlxalq və regional səviyyədəki bütün təsirləri və göstəriciləri təhlil etməklə aparılır. Bu rəqabətin arxasında duran əsas səbəblər-ideoloji, siyasi və iqtisadi fikir ayrılıqları- hegemonluq, nəzarət və regional təsirin genişləndirilməsi məqsədlərinə xidmət edir. Hər iki dövlət, qlobal və regional geopolitik və geostrateji mövqelərindən istifadə edərək mühüm siyasət və proqramları həyata keçirmişdir. Məqsəd- öz maraqlarını aktivləşdirmək, fərdi və kollektiv qarşılıqlı əlaqələrdə iştirak etmək və regional müttəfiqliklərin qurulması mərhələsində rəqiblərlə üz-üzə gəlməkdir. Tədqiqat həmçinin Türkiyənin və İranın strategiyalarının yönəli, təməli və müəyyənedicilərini, eləcə də bu dövlətlərin regional təhlükəsizlik mühitinə təsir dərəcəsini müşahidə edib təhlil etməyə çalışır. Bu məqsədlə tədqiqatda ən mühüm siyasi, iqtisadi, təhlükəsizlik və geostrateji vasitələr və mexanizmlərdən istifadə edilir və bu vasitələrin beynəlxalq transformasiyalar kontekstində hər iki ölkənin davranışlarının formalaşmasındakı rolu vurğulanır. Yaxın Şərq uzun illərdir ki, maraqların toqquşması və strateji məqsədlərin qarşıdurması nəticəsində münaqişə və gərginliklərin hökm sürdüyü bölgə olmuşdur. Bölgədə fəaliyyət göstərən təsirli güclər öz

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hegemonluqlarını qurmaq və ölkələrə nəzarət etmək məqsədi ilə bir-birilə rəqabət aparırlar. Bütün bunlar siyasi zorakılığın artması, dövlət strukturlarının zəifləməsi, dini və məzhəb müharibələrinin yayılması, təhlükəsizlik şəraitinin pisləşməsi fonunda baş verir. Bundan əlavə, bölgənin neft və təbii qaz kimi təkrar və tükənməz enerji ehtiyatları onun strateji əhəmiyyətini daha da artırmışdır. Bu kontekstdə, Türkiyə və İran bölgənin ən fəal və nüfuzlu gücləri olaraq nəzarət və təsir dairələrini genişləndirmək üçün müxtəlif beynəlxalq, milli və regional strategiyalara, eləcə də qabaqcıl texnologiyalara əsaslanaraq mübarizə aparırlar. Beləliklə, Türkiyə-İran rəqabəti, qarşıdurmadan əməkdaşlığa qədər uzanan mürəkkəb və bir-biri ilə əlaqəli ölçülərlə xarakterizə olunur.

Açar sözlər: Yaxın Şərq, regional təhlükəsizlik, Türkiyə, İran, təhlükəsizlik strategiyası, regional hegemonluq və nəzarət

I.Introduction

Regional rivalry is further characterized by the pivotal roles played by actors in the region- through forming alliances and strategic blocs- to expand spheres of influence and achieve local and international gains. This occurs within the framework of deploying military, ideological, and geostrategic tools to describe the prevailing security situation in the Middle East, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the ongoing regional transformations.

Accordingly, the study's main research question is: In what ways do the implications of Turkish-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East manifest?

To address this question, the study is organized around three main axes:

- The first axis is conceptual and theoretical, defining the key concepts and variables of the study.
- The second axis addresses the historical development of Turkish-Iranian relations.
- Finally, the third axis is dedicated to the regional and international implications of the Turkish-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East.

First Axis: The Cognitive Foundations of the Study

Understanding and analyzing the Turkish-Iranian rivalry requires a precise theoretical and conceptual framework that identifies the main concepts and features at the core of security studies on this topic. Diverse and divergent contexts have rendered the rivalry a complex regional phenomenon, necessitating the precise definition of scientific terms central to scientific research by employing the most prominent security theories interpreting the subject.

II.The Conceptual Framework of the Topic

Regional rivalry is a critical and central topic within the field of security studies and is closely linked to several concepts, including regional influence, regional powers, regional roles, and other relevant security terms.

2.1.Regional Rivalry and Related Concepts (Influence, Regional Role, Regional Rivalry)

The study introduces numerous security concepts and terms closely related to the subject. The main ones can be summarized as follows:

Definition of Regional Rivalry

Regional rivalry is a regional phenomenon expressing conflict and dispute between two or more states, whether within a single geographic scope or beyond, according to geographical and regional criteria and determinants. The rivalry's purpose is to expand influence and achieve vital interests through the use of economic, political, and diplomatic means and strategies to manage regional and international affairs in the region, with the goal of asserting regional hegemony and control within a single region. Major regional powers strive to enhance their standing within a shared geographic space by adopting

mechanisms to preserve their status and presence, maximizing national and regional interests through alliances, interventions, or indirect influence.

Thus, regional rivalry is a complex phenomenon reflecting the interaction between different units and international actors inside and outside the region, aiming to achieve national interests and goals based on available mechanisms and capacities. The crux lies in the dynamics of bilateral and trilateral adversarial and cooperative relations, taking multiple forms- political, economic, and military alliances, among others- not to mention the actual and participatory roles of regional actors in managing regional issues and addressing current international challenges, all within the dynamic of promoting international peace and security [Bouzeidi, November 2021].

Regional rivalry constitutes a decisive factor in reshaping the nature of regional security, especially in environments marked by security fragility and vacuums, as observed in the Middle East, due to widespread international wars, ethnic disputes, and economic and security crises in the regional environment. These are principal drivers for states acting unilaterally to secure their international interests without permitting other parties' interference. Achieving this has required the acquisition of modern means, advanced technologies, and strategies under international transformations imposed by globalization and its regional manifestations- entangling international and regional relations in a struggle for absolute gains in both regional and global arenas [Bouzeidi, November 2021, p.322].

Accordingly, regional rivalry denotes the contest over available influence and interests among regional actors, such as states, official and unofficial international organizations, blocs, alliances, etc., all striving to protect their regional interests. This runs parallel to marked regional transformations with the rise of globalization and financial market developments, along with the formation of political, economic, and trade alliances, raising regional power levels and leading to comprehensive expansion of the concept of regional rivalry into many international arenas and fields [Bouzeidi, November 2021, p.332].

2.2. Concepts Similar to Regional Rivalry

A. Regional Influence: The term "regional influence" refers to the behaviors, interactions, and political, military, economic, and technological capacities enjoyed by a dominant state, enabling it to steer international events and decision-making within a defined geographic area. The goal is to impose hegemony, extend influence, and enhance the strategic position of rising, medium, and major powers within the regional context. The intrinsic degree of regional influence and control is assumed to be lower than that of direct colonization and international wars.

Within this context, the concept of regional influence is a static one, closely tied to the structure of the regional system and its internal and external interactions, evolving alongside the regional security environment- for example, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of economic groupings, such as the Asia-Pacific Forum and the American Free Trade Association, as well as other dynamic transformations in regional security, such as:

- The emergence of revisionist international powers, transforming the content of regional security.
- The rise of regional powers as institutions seeking to assert influence and control.
- The creation of new regional institutions aiming to establish shared security and political membership, to achieve strategic interests and objectives.
- Building alliances characterized by flexibility and regional legitimacy to respond to regional systemic changes.

B.Regional Role:The concept of the regional role is linked to behaviors, orientations, and international practices, as well as the evolution of interests, objectives, and both material and moral capabilities, in relation to their geostrategic significance in both regional and international balances- and the degree to which they shape a state's foreign policy toward international issues and crises, whether through mediation, alliance, leadership, or negotiation, to achieve consistent security decisions.

The regional role is understood as the crucial internal and external interactions and functions within a geographic environment, seeking to adopt a specific official stance toward international security issues, for reasons such as geographic proximity, good neighborliness, and regional rivalry, realized via commitments, stances, and behaviors.

Thus, studying international and regional orientations necessarily requires understanding and interpreting the regional roles of international actors, which in turn reveals mechanisms of security interaction in the regional environment. This is commonly associated with dramatic security transformations and the effects produced by the regional security environment, such as international security tensions, ethnic and racial wars, military coups, and their repercussions on regional stability and security, necessitating the adoption of international strategies and mechanisms to mitigate security tensions in the global system.

The "regional role" thus refers to repeated behavioral patterns, positions, and commitments made by governments at the level of state foreign policy, derived from the perceptions and intellectual faculties of political decision-makers.

C.Regional Power: The concept of regional power refers to the sum of interactions, activities, and varied international practices by states during times of peace and war, as well as the management of crises and international issues, using material and moral capacities and intelligent strategic planning to administer international and regional affairs- security-related or otherwise- in pursuit of control and regional hegemony over other international actors. This also entails achieving international objectives and interests that are characterized by continuity and stability within the regional order, making regional power a subjective term denoting a state's possession of material and moral capacities, permitting it to manage its internal affairs and enabling latent capacity to administer regional affairs. The following points clarify this:

- Regional power must demonstrate continuity, stability, and effectiveness in its regional activities.
- There must be international and regional recognition of this regional power.
- The state must possess a size and territorial dimension that sets it apart within the regional system.
- It must possess the basic fundamentals of power, empowering it to influence the region [Al-Raouf, 2017, p.41].

D. Regional System: The regional system is defined as the set of interactions and exchanges among actors in the international system, characterized by shared interests and objectives, and sharing many geographic, identity, political, economic, and geographical features. This promotes a sense of regional unity among the region's peoples and seeks to form a cohesive regional unit marked by brotherhood and solidarity dynamics within a defined geographic space, aiming to unify peoples to protect regional interests and tackle security challenges. This is evident in regional efforts to resolve international crises.

Hani Elias Al-Hadithi defined it as: "A group of states belonging to a specific geographic region, bound by historical, geographic, cultural, and economic factors, with the goal of improving regional interactions and maintaining solidarity in dealing with other states of the same region, as well as building common security and political stances to avoid regional security transformations and difficulties." Louis Cantori describes it as, "An organized region composed of two or more countries with shared geographical and regional characteristics that enhance regional identity through the actions and stances of states outside the system" [Wahbi, 2024, p.630].

From the above, several political characteristics of the regional system can be distilled:

- Existence of unity and solidarity mechanisms among peoples.
- Geographic proximity and ethnic affiliation.

- Necessity of forming a shared regional identity.

2.3.Theoretical Framework of the Study

The Turkish-Iranian rivalry is an intricate international phenomenon involving considerable overlap between local, international, and regional dimensions and variables. To explain the complexities of this subject, scholars have addressed it using a variety of interpretive theories and approaches, including analysis of its orientations and mechanisms as follows:

1.Role Theory

Role theory begins by studying the social and political affairs of states, focusing on individual and collective practices and activities and their relationship to fulfilling public rather than individual interests, and the effects on domestic and foreign policy programs. It also analyzes the evolution of international and regional environmental variables and dramatic changes imposed by the international system after the Cold War. As a scientific and academic concept, role theory provides explanatory premises for interpreting the orientations of states both internationally and regionally, as follows:

- **Assumptions of Role Theory in Explaining State Behavior:** Role theory rests on several analytical and explanatory assumptions:
 - The unity of individual behavior as a basic unit of analysis for discerning state conduct in the international and regional environment.
 - Identification of the roles of international actors, based on the essential political behaviors and core internal and external interactions of the units within the regional system, enabling the definition of the main roles of states (major, leading, regional, minor).
 - Goal and interest achievement: Role theory focuses on defining the main goals and purposes of states and international actors.
 - States as a unit of analysis in the regional system: Role theorists define the state as a social entity influenced by the mental perceptions and conceptions of decision-makers and local elites, which are also projected onto the external level.
 - The relationship between a state's external behavior and its social environment: This involves analyzing external state behavior as influenced by perceptions and mental conceptions of decision-making elites, as well as identity, culture, interior politics, and external factors [Makhlouf, 2022].
- **Explanatory Components of Role Theory:**Role theory comprises:
 - **Role Conception:** The regional role of a state is determined by its external behavior and by security, political, and social transformations in the regional and international settings that

drive the adoption of diverse strategies to achieve international goals in either stable or turbulent environments. Mental perceptions play a strategic role in framing foreign policy decisions and determining paths and roles in the regional system [Al-Raouf, 2017, pp.44-46].

- **Role Expectations:** The concept of role encompasses revenues, goals, interests, policies, executive decisions, security procedures, and regulations, all related to the perceptions and mental images of security policy-makers and shaped by direct and indirect encounters with the international environment and the dramatic security changes of the global system.
- According to Holsti, the external role of states in the regional system involves a set of standards, indicators, and material and moral capabilities- as well as strategic, geographical, and economic possibilities- by which one may predict the state's political and strategic conduct under prevailing international changes, security lapses, and numerous variables such as asymmetric threats, and the state's actual ability to administer international and regional affairs in a way that promotes regional control or hegemony and expands the reach of strategic influence [Al-Raouf, 2017, p.44].
- **Role Function:** Represents all strategies and mechanisms used to achieve security goals and interests, commonly embodied in the shaping of external security policy and its function in identifying and solving regional issues. Role function is usually linked with three basic criteria: the means used, the objective or interest sought, and the geographical scope.

2.Balance of Power Theory

Balance of power is one of the classical theories in international relations, prominent since World War II and the evolution of international security events, where hard power became the main tool of the international security community. Hans Morgenthau emphasized this in his book "Politics Among Nations," offering a detailed analysis of the balance of power phenomenon and its relation to global security shifts during the Second World War, by highlighting:

- **Human Nature's Aggressiveness:** Morgenthau asserts that the international system is anarchic and driven by the "evil nature" of states, dominating the formulation and implementation of strategic policies abroad, coupled with the absence of a supreme central authority to regulate mechanisms of interaction and international conflict to achieve goals and interests.

- **Balance of Power as a Deterrence Mechanism:** Morgenthau focused on the balancing process between states and international actors involved in conflict and rivalry, aiming to reduce the likelihood of international wars and chaos, restrain ambitions involving military weapons, and prevent conflict from escalating into hegemony.
- **Defending International Interests:** Understanding and interpreting the balance of power requires a realistic perspective rooted in systematic international movement to achieve goals and interests [Al-Mun'im, 2023].

Intellectual and Scientific Contributions of Balance of Power Theory in Explaining Regional Transformations:

The theory provides an array of intellectual and scientific contributions for interpreting current international security transformations and their effects on regional systems:

- It stems from knowledge and scientific gaps in idealist theories when analyzing the realities of international security relations, advocating for a theoretical base founded on realist principles.
- It asserts that military power is imperative in international security relations, necessitating its regulation and management to achieve regional and international aims; thus, regional states' contest for hegemony and control is essential and inevitable.
- Morgenthau stressed that security cases are directly linked to the establishment of military alliances, blocs, and international integrations to deter regional enemies.
- The theory clarifies the dynamics of regional transformation linked to military balance and containment of threats and direct deterrence to achieve international goals.
- Balance of power theory has a main role in analyzing the emergence of regional alliances and the involvement of major powers- whether regionally based or external- in managing regional and international affairs.
- It helps in projecting future shifts and anticipating events such as arms races, the remaking of military alliances, and other key international issues [Jaya, 2011].

3.Power Transition Theory

Power Transition Theory is regarded as one of the explanatory frameworks for the changes and transformations affecting the distribution of power among internationally influential states. The theory emerged during the Cold War through the work of the Italian thinker Kenneth Organski in his book, "World Politics." It sought to revise traditional realist assumptions regarding the prevalence of chaos and the random mechanisms of international interaction

resulting from the illegitimate use of military force to pursue national interests and objectives.

In this context, Organski advanced a set of scientific and academic premises to interpret the realities of power and its implications for changes in the nature of the international system, aiming to provide security solutions and recommendations relevant to changes in power patterns internationally.

Contributions of Power Transition Theory to Understanding Regional Transformations

Power Transition Theory provides key interpretations for situations of international rivalry, coming to prominence after the Cold War. The theory offers several scientific hypotheses that align with a realist analytical vision of international politics, which are:

- The international order is a hierarchical system, with states ranked according to their power capabilities, leading to specific patterns of control in international relations.
- States are political units that compete and struggle among themselves for international interests.
- Gains are a fundamental concept, and states aim to maximize these rather than solely seeking to increase power to the maximum.
- The theory holds that the dominant state possesses the greatest amount of hard and soft power, as well as other basic capabilities, which underpin its ability to develop power [Salim, 2008, pp.140-146]1.

III.The Historical Development of Turkish–Iranian Relations

Turkish-Iranian relations, given their historical, political, and economic depth, constitute a vital topic and have undergone significant development at the levels of mechanisms, tools, and international and regional approaches- within a framework of cooperation and rivalry to achieve various interests and objectives. The most important stations include:

1.Turkish–Iranian Relations during the Safavid and Ottoman Periods

The relationship between Turkey and Iran has witnessed many historical changes characterized by practical dynamism, especially in terms of rivalry and conflict between the Ottoman and Safavid states over regions in the Islamic world: Iraq, Anatolia, key areas in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Baghdad, among others. Each sought to expand their influence and achieve regional hegemony.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, both states experienced acute tension and rivalry concerning the expansion of their geographical borders, control over international spheres of influence, and exploitation of renewable and non-renewable natural resources- compounded by ongoing security and environmental developments in the Middle East. These included border disputes, Safavid support for rebel and separatist movements, and the

intervention of European Union states to manage international crises- a result of the specific political and geographic contexts of the Middle East, which fueled additional tension through manipulation of regional balances of power [Al Jazeera, 2024]1.

The Safavid–Ottoman relationship also included notable developments at the sectarian, ethnic, and religious levels, rendering international interactions limited but influential in border regions, such as trade, religious pilgrimages, sacred sites, and other social issues determined by the following factors:

- Border disputes and overlapping interests and international objectives increased the intensity of conflict and competition.
- Ethnic and religious conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites deepened tensions between the two states.
- International alliances and European Union interventions in managing Middle East crises exacerbated the region's security situation.
- Turkish–American relations and their ramifications for Turkish–Iranian ties.
- Iran's support for certain security movements, tense Turkish responses, and the shift from rivalry to relative balance.
- Joint international cooperation at times, between the Safavid and Ottoman states, to prevent external interventions (e.g., by Russia and Britain), with continued competition in vital domains.

2. Consequences of the Iranian Revolution for Turkish–Iranian Relations

The Islamic Revolution remains a key subject in Iranian political thought, necessitating attention to its epistemological and etymological implications through distinctive historical stages and its political and economic effects on domestic and foreign policy structures. It shaped orientation, security programs, and local and regional approaches, compelling Turkey to adopt strict security measures to contain anticipated threats from Iran, such as support for armed terrorist groups, political Islamic movements, and invigorating Kurdish groups and other security issues- impacts that have been clearly felt in Turkey's domestic security. The main effects of the revolution on bilateral relations include:

- Sectarian and doctrinal conflicts, as well as tensions between secularists and Shiites.
- Alternating tension and cooperation, especially regarding traditional security threats related to the Kurdish issue and Iran's encouragement of Islamic movements.
- The implicit support of secularism in Turkey, responding to the rise of Islamic consciousness and social awareness against the political left [Kaya, 2020]1.

3. Turkish–Iranian Relations after the Cold War

Following the Cold War, the Middle East experienced dynamic transformations at the structural and superstructural levels of the regional system, due to shifts in the balance of power and changing international actors. There was the rise of new international powers, expansion of regional hotspots due to terrorist groups, increased Israeli activity, growth of sectarian militias (e.g., Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon), the worsening of irregular migration, and developmental and humanitarian challenges, driving the adoption of various strategies to achieve comprehensive, sustainable development. Security events in Iraq (2003), the Caucasus, and other international areas within the Middle East witnessed acute security crises, largely attributed to the absence of Arab influence and the lack of international cooperation mechanisms in regional security administration-creating opportunities for both Iran and Turkey to compete regionally for dominance.

Within this context, Turkey and Iran sought to establish security policies based on identity, ethnicity, and geographic proximity- mapping international strategies defined by mutual rivalry and competition, in pursuit of desired national interests and regional dominance under accumulating international events. Iran pursued an oil-centered policy, promoting investment in energy and asserting independence from both the US and Russia, while also using foreign policy as a calming agent in the Caucasus, aiming to restrict Turkish influence. Concurrently, the post-Cold War Turkish world, with its notably advantageous geography, allowed Turkey to cultivate both cooperative and adversarial relations with various peoples, thereby advancing national objectives and counterbalancing Iran's regional presence. The main features included:

- Turkish and Iranian intervention in managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with a shared desire to penetrate the region using diverse tools and strategies.
- Bolstering regional stability via the emergence of Turkey as an allied regional force balancing Iran.
- US-Turkish cooperation to support former socialist republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, expanding Western reach and stimulating Iranian moves toward these areas.
- The absence of Arab influence in managing regional security after the fall of Iraq in 2003, resulting in a strategic vacuum that facilitated Iranian infiltration via political parties in Iraq, as Turkey simultaneously sought to enhance its ties through the Kurdish issue.
- Contrasting stances in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where Iran supported the Assad regime, Houthi forces, and communist parties in Iraq, while

Turkey adopted positions directly opposed to those of Iran [Ikhfaji, 2015]1.

IV. Manifestations and Mechanisms of Turkish-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East

Turkish-Iranian rivalry is characterized by diverse, interwoven dimensions, generating a plurality of manifestations and strategies for managing competition and conflict, notably:

A. Manifestations of Rivalry in the Middle East

Turkish-Iranian relations involve major determinants, with both states rapidly asserting regional dominance in the Middle East- mirrored in Asia Centralia, the Caucasus, the Arab region, and extending to other international areas [Bakir, 2009]1. Rivalry is evident in multiple sectors:

1. Political Sphere

Political rivalry is derived from each country's foreign policy programs and mechanisms, as both enhance their presence and persistence within the region based on national interests and available capacities. This peaceful competition prevents third-party powers from dominating, recognizing the international and regional importance of the Middle East due to its abundant natural resources and strategic significance. Both states pursue distinct policies toward the Middle East:

- Iran fosters Shiite identity to expand its influence in neighboring states (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon) and promote regional control.
- Turkey acts as a secular regional power, establishing alliances that serve its national interests and both adapt their strategies to local security and political changes.

Additionally, conflict resolution in Middle East hotspots- state-building in Syria, sovereignty and independence issues, influence conflicts in Iraq and Yemen, and Israeli encroachment- drive both states to develop alliances with Gulf, Western, and Eurasian actors to boost their economic and political security agendas.

2. Economic Sphere

Both Iran and Turkey enjoy significant geographic and strategic positioning and control abundant renewable and non-renewable mineral and energy resources. Their rivalry is apparent in:

- Pursuing commercial relationships with neighboring states to deepen international engagement and expand trade and investment.
- Competing for control over regional interests, especially energy product transportation to global markets amid tensions with Russia, and ongoing challenges in extraction and marketing.
- Each state's economic potential positions Turkey as the 15th largest economy globally, with a GDP of \$663 billion and around \$107 billion

in exports, while Iran, with a dynamic rentier economy heavily dependent on oil exports, continues to attract international economic partnerships [Bakir, 2009]1.

3. Military Sphere

Military power is a vital area, with each state utilizing complex military strategies to achieve national and international goals. The ability to maximize gains is closely linked to military capabilities in a region marked by chaos and instability, driving the development of defensive and offensive military bases and extensive security networks.

Recent regional transformations have led both Turkey and Iran to develop divergent military policies and alliances, with Turkey building military borders and mechanisms with various states- especially the US- leveraging the Kurdish issue in Iraq, the Anatolia Project, and increasing defense budgets, as well as forming alliances with Israel to counter Iranian expansion. Iran, meanwhile, has enhanced both defensive and offensive military strategies to deter classical and unconventional threats, particularly from Israel and the US, and engaged in military interventions during the Iran–Iraq War (“Gulf 1”) and the Iraq-Kuwait War (“Gulf 2”), in addition to military cooperation with South Korea and China [Ikhfaji, 2015, p.45]1.

B. Regional Rivalry Mechanisms: Turkey and Iran

Turkish-Iranian relations combine dynamism and stasis, marked by pursuit of international interests and unilateral and multipolar maneuvers to secure regional dominance. Both states utilize multiple diverse mechanisms to achieve supremacy, including:

1. Intervention in Regional Conflicts

The Middle East’s many regional conflicts and threats have attracted significant external interference and international schemes, such as the “Greater Middle East” project. The following mechanisms have been used:

Iran:

- Bases its foreign policy in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon on religious and doctrinal expansion, supporting military militias like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen, and emphasizing defense of its role in the Gulf.
- Direct and indirect military support, as well as broader strategies such as the “Islamic Middle East” plan, in response to American expansion in the Gulf.
- Seeks strategic and economic backing through Shiite geopolitics and establishing a new security order focusing on the Gulf and its neighbors, promoting Iranian nuclear technology, and reducing regional armament.

- Alliances with Russia, China, South Korea, and other influential Middle Eastern actors to counterbalance American and Israeli regional influence [Zrouka, 2016, p.40]1.

Turkey:

- Conducts military operations in neighboring states- namely, northern Syria ("Euphrates Shield"), and interventions in Iraq.
- Supports the Syrian opposition to overthrow the Assad regime and pursues a strategy of "zero problems" with neighbors.
- Maintains high-level regional security cooperation with the United States and fills the strategic vacuum left by the US withdrawal from the region.
- Active economic diplomacy aims to maximize gains and minimize losses.
- Uses military power in Iraq and Syria as a means to exert regional leadership, focusing the world's attention on Middle East security issues [Zrouka, 2016, pp.100-102]1.

2.Soft Power and Media Influence

Soft power has become a fundamental concept encompassing main characteristics of international relations, including cultural, political, and ideological elements that shape external orientations for both Turkey and Iran. Soft power revolves around the influence of civilizational dialogue and strategic use of mass media (print, televised, audio, and digital), directly affecting regional public opinion- crucial for crisis management.

- **Turkey:** Utilizes cultural, social, economic, and secular-democratic benchmarks to attract global and regional opinion, including international broadcasting of dramas and programming as part of a transition from military-led modernization to democratic, secular, and national identity politics. Turkey thus seeks to enhance soft power by modernizing secular discourse and cultivating amicable relations with global powers, with the Middle East as both motivation and objective.
- **Iran:** Integrates military, intelligence, and soft power tools (economic exchanges, media campaigns, and social networking) to shape both regional and international appeal- building a "smart-soft power" model that seeks to shield itself from US and Israeli threats. The Iranian soft power strategy relies on religious and historical affinity, and ideological support for Islamic resistance movements, gaining public and elite support in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen [Sour, 2016-2017, pp.106-108]1.

V.Regional and International Implications of Turkish-Iranian Rivalry

Regional rivalry between Turkey and Iran presents a variety of overlapping and divergent consequences that directly affect the overall security of the Middle East:

1.Impact on Regional Stability

The region's security sector has undergone several dramatic transformations, including events in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, all affecting regional stability and development mechanisms. The Turkish-Iranian rivalry is a primary factor influencing regional stability due to intense competition and conflicting interests:

- Iran seeks to consolidate Shiite factions and expand strategic depth by employing various means and strategies.
- The Middle East also faces intervention from major international actors- China, Russia, the US- with the latter actively promoting geostrategic projects (e.g., the Greater Middle East plan) and support for Israel. Ongoing distributions of power and political-military operations in Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon, as well as Iran's continual support for Hezbollah and other groups combating international terrorism, have led to fundamental changes within the Middle East's security architecture [Sour, 2016-2017, pp.110-112]1.

These changes realign the priorities of regional competition, introduce new actors due to energy supply issues, and shift the geostrategic rationale of Turkish-Iranian competition in favor of other primary factors.

2.Flashpoints Between Turkey and Iran in the Middle East

A.The Syrian Issue

The roots of the Syrian conflict- political and security-related- reflect rising demands for civil rights and increased oppression, resulting in civil war and divergent positions among domestic, regional, and global actors, including clear disagreements between Iran and Turkey.

- **Turkey's Stance:** Relations between Turkey and Syria have experienced intense tension, especially concerning Kurdish issues and the Iskenderun region. Since 2003, Turkey's approach to Syria shifted from rivalry to cooperation in certain sectors, but Syria has consistently remained a priority on Turkey's foreign agenda.
- **Iran's Stance:** The relationship is defined by cooperation and alliance, especially regarding Israeli expansion. Syria acts as a strategic link between Iran and the Middle East, and its alliance with Iran is a key reason for Western pressures. Iran's approach includes:
 - Supporting Syria against external Western attacks;
 - Warning that Syria's political vacuum will have dire regional consequences;

- Claiming that American-backed protests and civil wars are artificial constructs [Ahmed, 2024]1.

B.The Kurdish Issue

The Kurdish issue is among the most complex in the Middle East, emblematic of geostrategic and security shifts. The Syrian crisis (2011) intensified sectarian and ethnic conflicts, necessitating international intervention for peace- primarily involving Turkey and Iran.

- Kurdish demonstrations and activism in Syria against the Assad regime heightened security threats to Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, requiring immediate responses: Turkey intervened militarily in northern Syria ("Euphrates Shield," "Peace Spring") to pre-empt a Kurdish entity, while Iran supported the Syrian regime to undermine the Kurdish project.
- Iran adopted security operations against Kurdish opposition in Iraq, Kurdistan, and Syria, and engaged in military cooperation with Iraq against Kurdish threats.
- Turkey, facing growing security risks from the Kurdish issue, enacted strict legal and military measures aiming to suppress Kurdish presence, refusing recognition, which exacerbated security instability in the southeast. Over the decades, peaceful Kurdish demands escalated to armed conflict led by the PKK, prompting Turkey to employ a spectrum of counterinsurgency strategies.
- The evolution of the Kurdish issue, including the establishment of "terrorist" bases in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, prompted both Turkey and Iran to take firm security and military measures [Zrouka, 2016, pp.100-101]1.
- **Iranian Perspective:** Iran refuses to acknowledge separate political, civil, and cultural Kurdish rights, seeking to maintain national integrity and unity through stringent policies. Military action is used to suppress autonomy claims and related movements, including transferring Shia citizens to Kurdish regions for religious, social, and cultural integration-to pre-empt dangerous security repercussions for Iran.

VI.Conclusion

Since ancient times, the Middle East has represented a geostrategic center of attraction for major empires, from the Greeks to the Romans, the Persians, and the Ottomans. During the period of European colonialism, it became a theater for the geopolitical rivalry of major powers, vying to control its vast territories, waters, and oil, in addition to dominating maritime routes, as it constitutes a vital link between three continents.

Regional power competition in this area is not a recent phenomenon; rather, it is a struggle with deep historical roots and enduring constants. Each state

continually seeks to impose its will and secure its interests over those of other rival Middle Eastern states.

The Turkish-Iranian rivalry in the region centers around various dimensions, including the preservation of national borders and geopolitical interests, safeguarding national identities- whether ideological, religious, or ethnic- around which populations coalesce, as well as forming new alliances and regional axes opposed to others.

The Middle East has been marked by numerous changes and security transformations, along with the implications of crises, wars, and both local and international conflicts. The boundaries between internal and external security actions have blurred, and the escalation of military and political alliances for managing the region's international affairs has increased. All these variables have prompted Turkey and Iran to intervene and alter the nature of their strategies and mechanisms for managing international crises in the Middle East in order to maintain their respective interests and objectives.

Iran has sought to bolster its influence in the Middle East by employing 'smart power,' combining hard and soft power. This strategy has enabled Iran to exert political influence over four Arab capitals- Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a- in a manner that serves its regional and global interests. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has operated according to a Shia geopolitical logic, creating a platform for regional penetration and projecting itself as a Middle Eastern and Islamic power. This approach has provided it with instruments of leverage against Arab and Western states that oppose Iran.

Amid current international changes, Iranian interventions have become more pronounced, as Iran engages in both combating international terrorism in Iraq and supporting Hezbollah against the Israeli presence in the region, while also backing Syria. These moves aim to achieve regional hegemony and encircle Turkish influence.

For its part, Turkey has sought to expand its influence in the Middle East by leveraging history and geography, drawing on civilizational, religious, economic, and cultural dimensions. Turkey initially relied on soft power policies through a 'zero problems with neighbors' approach. However, the international changes brought about by the Arab Spring, along with the resultant spread of terrorism and waves of refugees that directly threatened Turkish national security, compelled Turkey to employ hard power- including military interventions- to protect its geopolitical interests in the Middle East, which it regards as its own backyard and strategic depth, as articulated by Turkish foreign policy theorist Ahmet Davutoğlu.

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