



# Turkish Perspectives on Iran's Nuclearization\*

By Mustafa Kibaroglu

Turkey's official stance toward Iran's nuclear program is clear. Turkey recognizes the right of Iran, being a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), to develop nuclear technology, provided that it remains on a peaceful track and allows for the application of full-scope safeguards inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in such a way that would lend the utmost confidence to the international community about its intentions. Partly because Turkey will soon establish its first nuclear power reactor(s)

and partly due to the fact that no clear violations of Iran's NPT obligations have been reported, Turkey has apparently taken on a low profile regarding Iran's nuclear program, at least for the time being.

However, consensus among the Turkish political and security elite is that, contrary to its official stance, Turkey cannot stay aloof from Iran's nuclearization for long.<sup>1</sup> If and when unequivocal signs of Iran's efforts to advance its existing nuclear capability toward weaponization are received by Turkish authorities through various sources, it

is highly likely that the issue will figure more frequently on the National Security Council's agenda. Turkey is carefully monitoring the situation from a wider perspective, while at the same time trying to determine alternative policies to minimize the possible negative effects to its national interests and security in case of the eventual weaponization of Iran's nuclear program in the medium to long-term. Nevertheless, Turkey does not have a wide array of choices, due to a number of limitations arising from its institutional liabilities.

One particular reason for this is

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that Turkey became a state party to the NPT by signing the treaty on 28 January, 1969 and subsequently ratifying it on 17 April, 1980. Turkey also contributed to international efforts to strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime and participated actively in the process of enhancing the IAEA's verification system with a view to making safeguards inspections more intrusive. As for the Additional Protocol that was released by the IAEA as a result of "Programme 93+2," Turkey became a state party to it by signing and ratifying the document in July 2000.<sup>2</sup> Another reason for limited options vis-à-vis the rise of a nuclear weapons-capable Iran is Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a member of NATO since 1952, Turkey is theoretically given "positive security guarantees" by the other members of the Alliance, according to Article 5 of the 1949 Washington Treaty, meaning that the Turkish territory would be covered by a "nuclear umbrella" against attacks from other countries, including Iran. Added to these, Turkey's candidate status before the European Union (EU) is also noteworthy. Hence, if developed, Turkey's nuclear program would be under the scrutiny of the relevant institutions of the EU throughout the accession negotiations. If and when the accession process is successfully completed, Turkey will have to become a state party to the EURATOM Treaty, as a condition of full membership, which would permit only peaceful applications of nuclear technology.

### Implications of Iran's Nuclearization for Turkey

All three reasons mentioned above suggest that Turkey will not follow Iran's path by developing a dubious



nuclear infrastructure that may have weapons implications in the future. However, will this really be the case? Put differently, will the current standing of Turkey remain the same for a long time to come? It is difficult to give an affirmative answer to this question with great confidence, due to the changing circumstances both inside and outside of Turkey. The relations of Turkey with the above-mentioned institutions, which are presented as insurance policies against Turkey's potential inclination toward "going nuclear" may not remain on the same track in the long term.

Regarding the danger of the spread of weapons of mass destruction globally, Turkey's fundamental policy has long been to support candidly the international initiatives that aim at strengthening the chemical, biological, and nuclear non-proliferation regimes, with special emphasis on their inspection and verification mechanisms. However, North Korea's nuclear detonation; revelations about Iran's secret facilities suitable for fissile material production; the US-India nuclear deal; failure to get the ratification of IAEA's Additional Protocol from all of the states of concern, including Iran; failure to urge the enforcement



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and unacceptable treatment by the major suppliers of nuclear technology in the West, such as the United States, Germany, and Canada, resulting in the failure to install nuclear power plants in the country.<sup>3</sup> Such a situation caused loss of confidence among the Turks in the value of the “bargain” that was inherent in the NPT, which suggests that, in return for denouncing nuclear weapons, member states would benefit from nuclear technology transfer from other countries and/or develop as much as they needed indigenously under international safeguards. Turkey has acted as a responsible member of the nuclear non-proliferation community and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, membership in NATO has meant more than security guarantees for most Turks. NATO has been perceived as part of Turkey’s “Western” identity. Throughout the Cold War years, Turkey entertained an undisputed status as a staunch ally of the West. However, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of the Soviet Union brought down Turkey’s reputation as an indispensable ally and a bulwark against the Communist threat. Added to these, the process of the transformation of the Alliance from a collective defense organization with a “hard power” stance, to a collective security organization with a perceived “soft power” attitude, has further diluted the powerful image of NATO in the eyes of most Turks.

Similarly, Turkey has been striving to be a part of the European integration process for nearly half a century. Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC) signed the Ankara Treaty in 1963, which, in theory, gave Turkey a full membership perspective.

of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); and failure to start negotiations for a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) have cast doubts on the future

prospects of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. This list can be expanded. Moreover, in its previous attempts Turkey has long been subject to the unequal





However, only after a long period of ups and downs in the relations, did Turkey manage to get a date in 2004 to start formal accession negotiations with the EU, yet with conditions attached. Despite the fact that the start of accession talks has institutionally brought Turkey closer to the EU, the optimistic mood among the Turks and the Europeans soon took a negative turn. Suspicions of Turkey's suitability for membership have grown ever since.<sup>4</sup> It would not be unfounded to argue that prospects for Turkey's accession talks to be completed at an early date are not promising and that they are likely to take a long time, due to a number of structural problems in Turkey-EU relations.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, it is not easy to argue with great confidence that future generations of Turkish decision-makers will display similar unequivocal loyalty to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, to the security guarantees of NATO, or

to the European vocation, if Iran, under the NPT provisions, cannot be prevented from manufacturing nuclear weapons or from developing breakout capabilities that may enable it to assemble weapons in a short period of time.<sup>6</sup>

### Turkish Perspectives on Iran's Nuclear Program and Nuclear Weapons

Opinions in Turkey toward nuclear weapons in general and Iran's nuclear program in particular exhibit stark differences, depending on from which perspective one looks at these issues. While on the one hand, a significant degree of support exists in the Turkish public domain for Iran's nuclear endeavors, on the other hand, serious concerns about the possible negative implications of Iran's growing nuclear capabilities are also expressed by the security elite. Differences between the opinions of the Turkish security elite and the general

public concerning Iran's nuclear program notwithstanding, the common denominator between the two sides seems to be support for the idea of Turkey's nuclearization.

### Perception in the Turkish public domain

From the public perspective, Iran's nuclear ambitions are mostly welcome among the Turks for a number of reasons. First, Iran's defiance of U.S. pressure to halt its enrichment program is considered as a dignified stance of a small country against a global hegemonic power. Second, Islam is seen as a common denominator between the Turks and the Iranians, and the emergence of another Muslim nation with atomic power after Pakistan against the Christian and Jewish bombs is considered a necessary equalizer. Third, and in relation to the second, due to anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments,

growing ever since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, anything that is seen as hurting American or Israeli interests is usually welcome. There are numerous Internet web sites, blogs, and chat rooms in which Turks exchange their views on whether Iran's nuclear ambitions constitute a threat to Turkey and whether Turkey should possess nuclear weapons or not. Regarding Iran's nuclear aspirations, the majority of Turks do not believe that Iran, as a friendly Muslim nation, would want to threaten Turkey with nuclear weapons, today or in the future, especially when Israel is considered to be Iran's prime target. The prevailing view among Turks is in favor of possessing nuclear weapons for reasons similar to those expressed in the past by other countries.

### Views among the Turkish elite

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned sentiments that are quite pervasive in the Turkish public domain in support of Iran's nuclear ambitions, also expressing their views are intellectuals, journalists, community leaders, and retired civil and military public servants who assess the negative implications of Iran's nuclear ambitions for Turkey's national interests. For instance, Prof. Ümit Özdağ from Gazi University in Ankara and the founder of the

Eurasian Center for Strategic Studies (ASAM) stated in March 2005, "Iranian attainment of nuclear weapons would cause Iran to gain gravity in regional developments, in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus at the expense of Turkey. For example, a nuclear Iran will have more influence over Azerbaijan".<sup>7</sup> For Özdağ, "Turkey will not accept living side by side with an Iran possessing nuclear weapons for a long period of time, and it will produce nuclear weapons to achieve the balance since it will be difficult to live with an Iran whose self confidence has excessively mounted. Also, the ensuing shift in the power of conservatives in Iran will have adverse implications for Turkish-Iranian relations".

In January 2006, Doğan Heper, a columnist in the daily *Milliyet* stated three main reasons to bolster the argument that it is essential for Turkey to devel-

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op nuclear weapons. First, possessing nuclear weapons is a means to protect the unity and the integrity of Turkey and its standing in the region. Second, in addition to buoying its standing in the region, an army possessing such a capability would render Turkey an arbiter, a determining power in its region. Third, success in the nuclear arena would boost the morale of the Turkish people. This, in turn, would unite a population 70 million strong and consolidate their pride in being citizens of Turkey. For Heper, Turkey's elevation to the status of a nuclear power seems to be a somewhat inevitable outcome, because, he contends, "new conditions in the world are compelling Turkey to develop nuclear weapons".<sup>8</sup>

Former Commanders of the Turkish Air Force, Gen. Ret. Halis Burhan and Gen. Ret. Ergin Celasin argued in February 2008, "if Iran develops nuclear weapons Turkey should do the same so as to be able to preserve the balance of power between the two countries and also in the region." Similarly, former Minister of State Vehbi Dinçerler, from the right-of-center and conservative Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*—ANAP), takes the issue to yet another level and argues, "Turkey should not only develop nuclear weapons, but the quantity as well as the quality of Turkey's nuclear weapons arsenal should be at par with those of the other nations in the region", pointing at the Israeli nuclear capability.<sup>9</sup>

### Why Turkey Should Stay on a Peaceful Track in the Nuclear Field

Even though there is much talk in Turkey about why Turkey should develop nuclear weapons among those who approach the issue from the perspective of national pride and prestige as well as security, most of the decision-makers in Turkey who currently occupy responsible seats in the country's administration are quite aware that the possible consequences of going nuclear would mean a violation of Turkey's international obligations. This degree of awareness results not only from reminders by out-





side powers pointing to the difficulties Turkey may have to endure, but also the state practice in Turkey's notable institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Staff. These institutions have always designed and conducted Turkey's foreign and security policies in line with the principles enshrined by the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's words, "*peace at home peace in the world*"

Against this backdrop, one should not expect Turkey to embark upon a rushed nuclear weapons program, even if Iran crosses the critical threshold of nuclear weapons development capability. Should this happen, however, what will keep Turkey away from nuclear weapons will not simply be its responsible state practice. The extent of the willingness and the ability of Turkey's friends and allies to mitigate its fears that emanate from the worsening security situation in the region will also

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have a decisive effect on Turkish policy makers. Improving relations with the United States, the European Union as well as strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime will make the greatest impact in this regard. This last point is particularly important.

It is worth remembering that North Korea acquired much of its scientific and technological capabilities and then decided to walk away from the NPT in the run up to its first nuclear detonation in October 2006. Iran, being a state party to the NPT, has managed for many years to conceal its efforts to establish significant capabilities to enrich urani-

um and to produce heavy water, both of which are important landmarks on the route to nuclear weapons development. Iraq and Libya had displayed similar efforts while staying in the NPT. These are unequivocal signs of the deficiencies and weaknesses inherent in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. A major achievement has been the conclusion of the Additional Protocol, which has surely strengthened the IAEA's safeguards regime, which is yet to enter into force, especially in the states of concern, including Iran. Yet, even the experts argue that this is not enough.

If in addition to improved relations between Turkey and the U.S. as well as the EU, the nuclear nonproliferation regime can be further strengthened, Turkey's acquisition of nuclear technology will not necessarily become a case for serious concern. This is largely because Turkey will be under the scrutiny of the international community through the



effective implementation of the IAEA safeguards as state party to the NPT. This must be kept in mind particularly by those who might still aspire to a nuclear power status in Turkey.

Even if one considers for a moment that Turkey has decided to go nuclear and has managed to get the support of a nuclear power, or that it has established a clandestine nuclear weapons procurement network and gotten away with it without being noticed, what will be the role of nuclear weapons in Turkey's security and foreign policies? Will nuclear weapons enhance Turkey's security? Or, will they simply hurt Turkey's interests?

This author has spent years studying military history, superpower rivalry, arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation matters. Even when looked at from these rich perspectives, the author sees no feasible scenarios under which nuclear weapons would bring additional security to Turkey. On the contrary, any attempt to illegally pursue, let alone acquire, nuclear weapons capability will be extremely damaging to Turkey's vital interests. Turkey is passing through a difficult domestic and international political conjuncture where there are many sensitive issues (social, economic, political) that may be carefully exploited by its rivals. In addition, at a time when its relations with the U.S. and the EU have been in decline, these countries may be of no help in dealing with the problems that will rise thereof.

Against all these odds, even if one considers for a moment that Turkey has acquired nuclear weapons capability, then under which scenarios and against whom will these weapons have added value in Turkey's foreign and security policies? It is hard to give a meaningful answer to this question. Out of Turkey's neighbors, Iraq is under U.S. occupation and is its protectorate, possibly for a long period to come. Even if the U.S. withdrew fully from Iraq, its commitment to the security of that country will most likely remain the same. Syria has proved that, even with its ballistic missiles and chemical weapons arsenal,

it could not resist Turkey's coercion in 1998 that was aimed to expel the head of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, from that country. Even if Iran's nuclear weapons capability disrupted the balanced relations with Turkey, this alone may not be a justification for going nuclear and for going through all possible ways of hardship to get there. A nuclear-weapons capable Iran will most likely be an issue that will have to be dealt with collectively with the rest of the international community, the U.S. and Israel being at the forefront. Greece and Armenia are other potential countries with which Turkey has had, and is likely to have, problems in its foreign relations. However, Greece's EU membership and the powerful Armenian diaspora in the U.S. and Europe will most likely nullify the nuisance capability of Turkey's nuclear power against these countries. In addition, Turkey has good neighborly relations with the rest of the countries in its environs, such as Bulgaria, Romania (now NATO allies), the Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia (which still keeps a large nuclear arsenal).

As such, there seems to be no possible feasible scenario whereby Turkey could expect effective use of its nuclear power status, if achieved. However, there are scenarios in which Turkey's vital interests can be seriously damaged simply because it will have attempted, or even succeeded, to acquire nuclear weapons capability.

It is unfortunate that a debate has taken place in Turkey for the last several years around this subject, but not necessarily with the contribution of informed and educated views from the experts in the field. Most of the debate is rather emotional, reactive to daily events, and also partly ideological. These reactions, however, must be avoided in order to preserve Turkey's political unity and territorial integrity for as long as possible and also to serve the primary interests of the Turkish nation. For this to happen, first of all, the factors that trigger such a debate must be eliminated, including, among others, the possibility of Iran's nuclear weapons development. Secondly, intellectu-

als, community leaders, and concerned citizens must get involved in the debate in order to enlighten the public as well as the decision-makers. Third, Turkey must invest in such scientific and technological areas that will seize the future and will help advance the quality of life in the country and in the rest of the world.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Author's conversations over a long period of time, especially since 2002, with high-ranking military and diplomatic officials as well as academics and experts in Turkey, many of whom spoke under the condition of non-attribution.

<sup>2</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey's Sweet & Sour Policy Against WMD Proliferation," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2 Summer 2004, pp. 101-111.

<sup>3</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey's Quest for Peaceful Nuclear Power," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 Spring/Summer 1997, pp. 33-44.

<sup>4</sup> Tarik Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Is the Westernization Process Losing pace in Turkey: Who's to Blame?" *Turkish Studies*, March 2010 (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Tarik Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroglu "Incompatibilities in Turkish and European Security Cultures Diminish Turkey's Prospects for EU Membership," *Middle Eastern Studies*, November 2008, Vol. 44, No. 6, pp. 945-962.

<sup>6</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger the Young Turks to Think Nuclear", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, available on [www.ceip.org](http://www.ceip.org).

<sup>7</sup> Ümit Özdağ, "İran Nükleer Silah Sahibi Olmalı Mı? [Should Iran Possess Nuclear Weapons]," *Akşam*, 7 March 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Doğan Heper, "Türkiye 'Atom' Yapabilir [Turkey May Build Atomic Bomb]," *Milliyet*, 26 January 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Gen. Burhan, Gen. Celasin, and Mr. Dincerler, 11 February 2008, Ankara.

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