

This article was downloaded by: [Ozkan, Mehmet]

On: 11 January 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 932260892]

Publisher Routledge

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Strategic Analysis

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t780586780>

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Mehmet Ozkan

Online publication date: 11 January 2011

To cite this Article Ozkan, Mehmet(2011) 'Turkey-Brazil Involvement in Iranian Nuclear Issue: What Is the Big Deal?', Strategic Analysis, 35: 1, 26 – 30

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09700161.2011.530980

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2011.530980>

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Commentary

**Turkey–Brazil Involvement in Iranian Nuclear Issue:
What Is the Big Deal?**

Mehmet Ozkan

The Iranian nuclear stand-off is still a major issue in global politics. From international players like the European Union, the United States and the United Nations, to individual states, almost each country has its own stake in the issue. However, the recent deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil has not only changed the nature of the issue, but also the discussion itself. The deal has changed the nature because the one-sided dialogue between the international community and Iran is no longer relevant. Big players, like the US, have especially understood that it is virtually impossible to change the Iranian position given the years-long ongoing hard power rhetoric. The deal has changed the discussion itself because a global issue is no longer the playground of only the big players; now middle-sized states too want to have their voice heard and, indeed, have shown the power to do so. Both these changes have local, regional and global implications. Before discussing the implications, one needs to understand the sequence of events and what the content of the deal itself is.

What happened?

Iran has had a nuclear programme for more than 50 years, beginning with a research reactor purchased from the US in 1959. The then Shah's plan to build 23 nuclear power reactors by the 1990s was regarded as grandiose, but not necessarily viewed as a 'back door' to a nuclear weapons programme. However, in 2002 after the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCR) helped expose undeclared nuclear activities of Iran by providing information about nuclear sites at Natanz and Arak, the Iranian nuclear issue has become a global issue. Since then, intensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have also revealed significant undeclared Iranian efforts in uranium enrichment and separation of plutonium, as well as undeclared imported material.

Since 2003, negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme have proceeded on two levels: the IAEA inspectors and at the IAEA Board of Governors in Vienna, and the European Union foreign ministers (known as the EU-3) of Germany, the UK and France. In 2006, after Iran's non-compliance was reported to the UN Security Council, the EU-3 was joined by Russia, China and the US, with the grouping renamed as P5+1. There have been intermittent negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, but these have not resulted in a single signed document. Since 2007, Turkey has started to make more inroads to facilitate the negotiations through its good offices and as a facilitator.

Mehmet Ozkan is a PhD candidate at Sevilla University, Spain, and was a Visiting Fellow at IDSA between July and October 2010.

Despite increasing calls for a military solution, international diplomacy has continued with a mixture of hope and frustration. In mid-2008, the EU resubmitted a 2006 offer of incentives for Iran to give up its enrichment activities. In October 2009, talks between Iran, the US and other world powers ended in failure, as Iran's leadership rejected a plan to send its uranium to the West. In November 2009, the Iranian government approved 10 new uranium enrichment plants. In February 2010, escalation mounted when Iran announced plans to heighten the enrichment levels of existing uranium stockpiles and the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, declared on the Islamic Republic's 31st anniversary that Iran was a 'nuclear state'. Russia and China traditionally have resisted calls for UN sanctions, but in March 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev signalled that Russia was warming to such a possibility. China, however, has continued to resist stronger sanctions, and its foreign minister, for example, announced in early March 2010 that sanctions would not solve the Iran nuclear issue. In May 2010, with both time and patience running out in the West, calls for stronger sanctions and even a military option started to come to the surface and the climate for such moves was by and large supportive.

Against this, Turkey and Brazil seized the moment and encouraged Iran with a deal based on earlier proposals made by the P5+1. With the participation of the foreign ministers of Turkey and Brazil, along with the Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Iran signed a joint declaration on May 17, 2010, with Brazil and Turkey, 'in which Iran agreed to send low-enriched uranium to Turkey in return for enriched fuel for a research reactor'.¹

The declaration basically contains the IAEA's October 2009 offer to Iran based on a possible fuel swap. Turkey and Brazil were particularly visible during the nuclear summit in Washington, DC in May 2010, and brought the IAEA's offer to the Iranians once again. This time Iran agreed to the Vienna Group's offer by accepting that Iran give 1,200 kg of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey. The joint declaration was considered a very serious one by specialists closely following the nuclear negotiations. However, instead of responding positively to the agreement, the US and the overall reaction of the West remained on imposing sanctions on Iran, although the content of the deal was what the US had earlier sought from Iran.² This led to a new UN Security Council decision, which imposed new sanctions on Iran. On June 9, 2010, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1929 imposing a complete arms embargo on Iran, travel bans on certain Iranian figures, banned Iran from any activities related to ballistic missiles, freezing of all assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Iran Shipping Lines, and inspection of all Iranian cargo or financial institutions, such as banks, on their territory.³ The resolution was passed by a vote of 12–2, with Turkey and Brazil voting against and Lebanon abstaining. Turkey and Brazil argued that their vote actually was a yes to the continuation of diplomacy as the only way to find a solution.

What makes it important?

The Turkey–Brazil deal has implications far beyond merely being related to the Iranian nuclear crisis. It has implications for global politics, for now and in the future, and requires a deep and categorical analysis. Only within this context may one condemn or appreciate the joint efforts of Turkey and Brazil. Both Turkey and Brazil are emerging powers in their regions from economic and political points of view, and have started to exert their influence in global arenas. Brazil is part of the unique tri-lateral

cooperation initiated in 2003 with India and South Africa, called India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), whereas Turkey has been cited as the rising star of the 21st century in the Muslim world by deepening its democratic credentials and opening up new horizons, especially in the Middle East. The aim of this paper is not to discuss the political and economic developments in Brazil and Turkey, but to present a perspective on the possible implications of their joint declaration with Iran on the future of middle-sized state activism in international politics at the local, regional and global levels.

Local

From a local perspective, the Turkey–Brazil deal has confirmed that Iranians will not concede to any power that has an inclination to speak from a position of strength. The Turkish foreign minister has frequently argued that 60 per cent of all negotiations in any conflict comprises their psychology, atmosphere and environment, 20 per cent relates to methodological issues, with only 20 per cent being the content.⁴ Turkey and Brazil have not talked to Iran as if Iran is to comply with something; rather the atmosphere was more friendly and the aim was to convince the Iranians about the importance of such a deal for global security and regional politics. Moreover, Turkey and Brazil have not spoken to Iran through the power hierarchy of the existing international system; rather they have spoken to their counterpart as an ‘equal’.⁵ It was this atmosphere that defined and facilitated a deal with Iran, not the content, which was by and large the same content that the IAEA had offered Iran in 2009. Here, some may argue, the changing climate of international politics may have played a facilitator role in the timing of the deal. While this may be true, it is difficult to measure how effective the climate change was, considering that in earlier years there were more talks on the military option than today. Against this, one may claim that the global atmosphere has changed in a way the Iranians desired, because in 2010 there are fewer hard power talks against Iran than before. It is also possible to argue that the current situation in Afghanistan and Iraq is forcing the West and the US to be less effective on Iran.

Regional

Since the end of the Cold War, regional reconfigurations are taking place all over the world, involving a process of redefinition of regional parameters, leaders, equals and influences. Brazil has tried to contribute to this regional reconfiguration in Latin America by creating a new discourse based on centre-left politics without clashing with the neoliberal values. Although rivals like Venezuela have questioned Brazil’s new reconfiguration at the political and discursive levels, there is a general consensus that Brazil is the key player in Latin America and has been the face of newly emerging Latin America in global politics.

Similar observations can be made about Turkey in its immediate region. From being a pariah in the Middle East for a long time, Turkey has transformed itself into one of the most important players in the region at the economic, political and discursive levels. Strengthening of relations with Syria, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other players, along with strong relations with Israel (until recently), has transformed Turkey into a place where even rivals can visit and talk very frankly. Turkey’s reconciliation efforts in the domestic politics of Iraq and Lebanon, championing for a just solution to the Palestinian issue and its mediation role between Syria and Israel in 2008, are some

of the examples of Turkey's re-integration with the region. At the discursive level, the Islamic transformation of Turkey's ruling elite from a conservative outlook to an accommodative one has also been closely followed by the Islamic movements in many countries, not only in the region but also in the overall Islamic world.

How viable the path will be that Turkey and Brazil have taken in their regions remains to be seen, but with the nuclear deal with Iran, they have increased their level of interaction to create a new discourse. In fact, they have crafted a new discourse, which may be called a 'second option' in solving global issues. The Iranian nuclear deal can be seen as the first effort to create a *political* discourse on a global issue, which is different, solution-oriented, diplomacy-based and fair in its engagement, as compared to many examples of Western involvements. It is also an effort to solve a non-Western issue by non-Western powers. In that sense, it is unique and has the possibility to pave the way in the creation of a new discourse and self-confidence in the non-Western world for their engagements in global conflicts.

Global

The most important implication of the Turkey–Brazil deal is expected to be seen at the global level. It is not because of the nuclear issue itself, rather the doors that it has opened. During the Cold War, middle-sized powers had two options: align with one bloc or keep quiet in one's own region with a low profile. When the leverage of Cold War parameters changed in the early 1990s, middle-sized states engaged a redefinition of their roles in global politics. They were freed from the Cold War restrictions but they also had to assume the responsibility in their regions and beyond.

Until the early 2000s, mostly due to domestic political instabilities, the middle-sized states were not able to craft a new position in global economic and political reconfiguration. However, especially through the World Trade Organisation's Cancun meeting and subsequent Doha Talks, they found ways to make their voice heard in the global economic arena. They asked for fair trade, expressed their displeasure about restrictions against non-Western states and subsidies in the West. Out of this environment, the emergence of a new organisation, the IBSA, was not surprising, simply due to the fact that there was an urgent need to express the new rising powers' economic demands for a better share in the global economy. The IBSA is a pioneering organisational example connecting three continents by establishing a tri-lateral organisation. It has also contributed to economic interaction between member countries. However, it was, in essence, not more than a new *economical* grouping. It has some political aspirations, but it has been very careful not to upset global powers at the political level. In many aspects, the Turkey–Brazil deal should be seen as an extension of inroads taken by middle-sized states in global affairs. Nevertheless, this has been the first inroad directly related to the *political* and *discursive* arenas, which were usually left to the Western powers. The fact that the Western powers have tried to ignore the deal is quite interesting given their otherwise intensive efforts to settle the Iranian nuclear crisis. It is also important here to note that while both the Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan were trying their best to succeed in their negotiations with Iran, Washington was publicly expecting their failure and even hoping for it.⁶

The Turkey–Brazil deal has also opened a door to debate the inefficiencies of international institutions and the general global legitimacy crisis in the post-Cold War context, more generally in a political context. It has contributed directly to debates

and the role of emerging powers in a multi-polar and multilateral world.⁷ The deal has also stressed that if a new international system is to be established and the economic and political problems in the current system are to be solved, diplomacy can constitute a milestone not only in the Iranian nuclear issue but in all other issues. In short, it is possible to argue that the Turkey-Brazil deal has upgraded the level of involvement and the engagement of the middle-sized states in global politics. It has changed the discourse from benefiting economic changes in the system to a political one.

Conclusion

In the future, those who write on the increasing role of non-Western powers in a West-dominated world need to open a chapter on the IBSA and another on the Turkey–Brazil deal. If the former’s effort to change the global *economic* structure is to be appreciated, the latter’s demand and the pioneering role in channelling that demand on *political* fields must not be forgotten. If the 21st century is to be about the fall of Western powers, the IBSA and the Turkey-Brazil deal are to be seen as milestones in the rise of non-Western powers.

There are indications that the involvement of the middle-sized states in the political arena will continue in the future. One example is that Brazil and Turkey’s involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue is expected to continue for quite some time. After the last UN sanctions against Iran, it was the foreign ministers of these countries who met with their Iranian counterpart to heat the ground for future negotiations. In such a meeting, which took place on July 25, 2010, in Istanbul, the foreign ministers of Turkey and Brazil urged Iran to be flexible and open in its dealings with the West over its atomic programme and openly asked Iran to indicate its readiness to resume the nuclear talks. After this meeting, reports indicate that talks are expected to resume sometime in the near future.⁸ It is still too early to judge the involvement of these two middle-sized powers in the new round of talks; however, there are strong indications that Turkey and Brazil will be part of the P5+1 group of world powers—Britain, China, France, Russia, the US and Germany—in the upcoming negotiations with Iran.

Notes

1. For the full text of the declaration, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8686728.stm (accessed 20 July 2010).
2. See Obama’s letter to Lula regarding Brazil-Iran-Turkey nuclear negotiations, dated April 20, 2010, available at <http://www.politicaexterna.com/11023/brazil-iran-turkey-nuclear-negotiations-obamas-letter-to-lula#axzzOpBSF3OCQ> (accessed 20 July 2010).
3. See the UN resolution, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sc9948.doc.htm> (accessed 20 July 2010).
4. See Jonny Dymond, ‘Turkey FM Davutoglu Embraces Mediation Role’, BBC News, December 3, 2009, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8393516.stm> (accessed 21 July 2010).
5. See Graham Fuller, ‘Brazil and Turkey Shift Global Politics’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 27(3), 2010, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
7. See Taha Ozhan, ‘Multilateralism in Foreign Policy and Nuclear Swap Deal’, *Foreign Policy*, 3 June 2010, at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/06/03/multilateralism_in_foreign_policy_and_nuclear_swap_deal (accessed 24 July 2010).
8. See for details, ‘Turkey, Brazil Urge Iran to Be Flexible on Nuclear Talks’, July 25, 2010, at <http://www.rnw.nl/english/bulletin/turkey-brazil-urge-iran-be-flexible-nuclear-talks-0> (accessed 25 July 2010).