

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Ankara's Perspective on the US-Israel War on Iran

Abhishek Yadav

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S*ummary*

In the wake of the US-Israel war on Iran, Ankara's strategic space is narrowing due to conflict escalation, energy disruptions and renewed uncertainties relating to the Kurdish question.

When the United States and Israel launched coordinated strikes against Iran on 28 February 2026, within hours, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the attacks against Iran.¹ The following day, Erdoğan expressed condolences over the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed in the US–Israeli attacks.² The response reflected the depth of Ankara’s unease at watching its neighbourhood consumed by a war it neither wanted nor could afford to ignore. Türkiye, a NATO ally hosting American forces, a neighbour of Iran, an opponent of Israeli regional ambitions, and a country wrestling with its own Kurdish question, is one of the most vulnerable states in the current crisis.

Turkish Strategic Balancing Posture

Türkiye’s official stance has been carefully calibrated, reflecting its long-standing preference for strategic autonomy and balancing NATO commitments with regional pragmatism. Ankara has criticised both the American-Israeli air campaign and Iran’s retaliatory missile and drone strikes against Gulf states hosting US personnel. On 14 February 2026, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan captured this dual posture succinctly: diplomacy has no ‘conducive’ conditions because the Iranians ‘feel betrayed’, having been attacked a second time while engaged in negotiations with the US over their nuclear programme.³

However, Türkiye–Iran relations reflect a pattern of competitive co-existence. Before Bashar al-Assad’s fall in December 2024, Syria was the primary arena of rivalry, with Tehran backing the regime and Ankara supporting opposition forces while consolidating its presence in northern Syria.⁴ Assad’s ouster has shifted this balance: Türkiye has gained greater influence in post-Assad Syria, whereas Iran’s position has weakened. Nevertheless, both sides continue to maintain a cautious working relationship shaped by shared concerns over Kurdish militancy, border stability, and regional spillover risk.

Before the 28 February strikes, Türkiye, alongside regional mediators, supported a diplomatic framework that included discussion on limits on Iranian uranium enrichment, constraints on its ballistic missile programme, and restrictions on

¹ [“Statement by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Iran and Developments in the Region”](#), Directorate of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 28 February 2026.

² [“President Erdoğan Offers Condolences Over Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s Passing”](#), Directorate of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 1 March 2026.

³ [“Türkiye Says Iran Open to Back-Channel Talks Amid Raging War”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 15 March 2026.

⁴ Parisa Hafezi, [“Before His Ouster, Syria’s Assad Told Iran That Turkey Was Aiding Rebels To Unseat Him”](#), *Reuters*, 15 December 2024.

support to proxy groups.⁵ That effort failed, but Türkiye’s investment in the diplomatic track served a dual purpose: demonstrating good faith to Washington while signalling at least tacit sympathy with Tehran’s beleaguered government. From Ankara’s perspective, an externally imposed regime change in Tehran is not a stabilising solution; what it fears is the emergence of a pro-Western, pro-Israeli government in Tehran that would entrench Israeli-American influence across the region.⁶

Türkiye has also sought to position itself as a limited intermediary in the Iran crisis. Reports reveal that Ankara has been relaying messages between Tehran and Washington, while Hakan Fidan has separately called for de-escalation.⁷ This diplomatic posture was visible in Türkiye’s participation in a consultative meeting in Riyadh on 19 March 2026 and in the Islamabad talks on 29 March 2026, where Turkish, Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministers discussed proposals to reduce tensions and re-open diplomatic channels.⁸

Domestic political pressures also shape this calculus. According to a 2025 Pew Research Centre survey, 93 per cent of Turks view Israel negatively.⁹ Erdogan’s vocal criticism of the strikes channels this sentiment without committing Türkiye to any costly entanglement. Crucially, Ankara has confirmed that Incirlik Air Base has not been utilised in offensive operations against Iran, a clarification designed to forestall Iranian escalation while preserving Türkiye’s claim to non-belligerency.¹⁰

NATO Infrastructure in Türkiye under Attack

Türkiye’s relations with the United States are anchored in NATO and a broader security partnership. Türkiye has been a NATO member since 1952 and remains a key eastern anchor for the Alliance. Beyond the alliance framework, Washington and Ankara maintain a bilateral Strategic Mechanism to coordinate political and

⁵ Virginia Pietromarchi, [“Mediators Propose Framework For Crucial Iran-US Talks This Week”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 4 February 2026.

⁶ Alper Coşkun, [“Turkey Has Two Key Interests in the Iran Conflict”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 March 2026.

⁷ Jonathan Spicer, [“Turkey Conveying Messages Between Iran-US, Ruling Party Official Says”](#), *Reuters*, 25 March 2026.

⁸ [“Fidan Joins Four-Nation Talks in Islamabad As Iran War Reaches One Month”](#), *Yenişafak*, 30 March 2026.

⁹ Laura Silver, [“Most People Across 24 Surveyed Countries Have Negative Views of Israel and Netanyahu”](#), Pew Research Center, 3 June 2025.

¹⁰ [“Iran Denies Targeting Türkiye After 3 Intercepted Missiles”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 16 March 2026.

security issues with a shared commitment to ensure the defeat of ISIS/DAESH in Syria and Iraq.¹¹

The war’s intrusion into Turkish territory has rendered Ankara’s neutrality increasingly untenable in operational terms. Between 4 and 30 March 2026, NATO air and missile defence assets deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean intercepted four Iranian ballistic missiles headed towards Turkish airspace, all assessed to have originated from Iran, despite repeated denials from Tehran.¹² The third incident triggered sirens at Incirlik Air Base near Adana, a facility housing US, Spanish and Polish forces. Reports indicate that debris from intercepted missiles fell across southeastern Türkiye, including Hatay, Gaziantep and Diyarbakır, as well as areas between strategic installations such as Incirlik Air Base and the Kürecik radar facility.¹³ No casualties were reported, but the symbolic and strategic implications are significant.

In the aftermath, NATO reinforced its ballistic missile defence posture, deploying an additional US Patriot system to Malatya, home to the Kürecik early-warning radar station. This NATO asset can detect Iranian launches in real time.¹⁴ Tehran has long viewed Kürecik with suspicion, alleging that its radar data has been shared with Israel. Ankara has categorically denied this,¹⁵ but the presence of the radar and the question of what intelligence Türkiye shares with whom have emerged as a fresh irritant in Türkiye–Iran relations at precisely the worst moment.

Fidan described Iran’s bombing of neighbouring countries without making any distinction during the ongoing war as an ‘incredibly wrong strategy’, warning that Tehran’s targeting of regional energy infrastructure and host nations of US forces would only risk the widening of the conflict.¹⁶ Despite three missile incidents, Türkiye has explicitly ruled out invoking NATO’s Article 4 or Article 5 provisions, preferring to manage the situation bilaterally by summoning the Iranian ambassador each time.¹⁷ This restraint seems deliberate as Ankara fears that

¹¹ [“Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism”](#), U.S. Department of State, 9 March 2024.

¹² [“Iran Denies Targeting Türkiye After 3 Intercepted Missiles”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 16 March 2026; [“4th Ballistic Missile From Iran Neutralized Over Türkiye's Airspace”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 30 March 2026.

¹³ Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, [“Turkey Says NATO Defences Intercepted Third Missile From Iran, Asks Tehran to Clarify”](#), *Reuters*, 13 March 2026.

¹⁴ Gizem Nisa Cebi Demir, [“Türkiye Deploying Patriot Air Defense System in Eastern Malatya Province: Defense Ministry”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 10 March 2026.

¹⁵ [“Türkiye Confirms 3rd Missile From Iran Shot Down, Seeks Clarification”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 13 March 2026.

¹⁶ Sumeyye Dilara Dincer, [“Turkish Foreign Minister Calls Iran's Bombing of All Gulf Region Without Any Distinction Incredibly Wrong Strategy”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 4 March 2026.

¹⁷ [“Türkiye Summons Iran's Ambassador, Demands Explanation For Intercepted Missile”](#), *Türkiye Today*, 9 March 2026.

triggering collective defence consultations would formally enmesh Türkiye in a war it is determined to avoid. That determination, however, is being tested by every fresh missile launch.

Economic and Energy Challenges

Türkiye’s strategic discomfort is compounded by significant economic vulnerability. Iran accounted for 13.56 per cent of Türkiye’s natural gas imports in 2024, via a 2,577 km (1,601 miles) pipeline running from Tabriz to Ankara, making it the third-largest supplier.¹⁸ With inflation running at 31.53 per cent as of February 2026,¹⁹ any disruption to energy supply chains would exacerbate an already fragile economic situation. More broadly, Türkiye imports roughly two-thirds of its energy needs, and approximately one-fifth of its oil supply transits the Strait of Hormuz. A protracted conflict, particularly one that disrupts Hormuz tanker traffic, with oil already trading above US\$ 105 a barrel, would constitute a major external shock to the Turkish economy.

The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which runs from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Türkiye’s Mediterranean port of Ceyhan and accounts for roughly one-third of Israel’s oil imports, presents a separate vulnerability. Iran has signalled it could target the BTC pipeline, and Azerbaijan has already reported foiled IRGC sabotage plots against the infrastructure.²⁰ An attack would disrupt not only Turkish energy logistics but also global markets, pushing already elevated oil prices even higher. This highlights Türkiye’s dual vulnerability as both an energy transit hub and a consumption-dependent economy, thereby amplifying the systemic risks posed by regional instability.

The Kurdish Dimension and the Migration Crisis

Among Türkiye’s most acute anxieties is the prospect that the war could revive the Kurdish question at a moment of fragile domestic progress. In May 2025, Abdullah Öcalan had called on the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to lay down arms and dissolve, and the group announced it would comply. The peace process, however, has since stalled partly amid disputes over the integration of the PKK’s Syrian

¹⁸ [“Iran Reports 30% Surge in Gas Exports to Turkey”](#), Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA), 12 April 2025.

¹⁹ [“Consumer Price Index”](#), Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, March 2026.

²⁰ [“Azerbaijan Says It Foils Iranian Plots Including Plan to Attack Major Pipeline”](#), *Reuters*, 7 March 2026.

affiliate into post-Assad Syria’s military structures. A prolonged conflict in Iran threatens to overturn whatever gains have been made.²¹

Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Iranian branch of the PKK network, remains operationally active inside Iranian Kurdistan. Both Washington and Jerusalem have historical records of instrumentalising Kurdish movements when geopolitically convenient. Ankara fears that in the chaos following Iran’s military degradation, the US or Israel could arm or enable PJAK and allied groups in Iranian Kurdistan, creating a fresh Kurdish political entity on Türkiye’s eastern flank and potentially re-energising the PKK’s broader network. This creates a potential escalation pathway linking external intervention in Iranian Kurdistan to renewed insurgent mobilisation within Türkiye.

For instance, on 5 March 2026, regarding potential Kurdish involvement in the conflict, US President Donald Trump initially expressed support for their participation.²² However, by 7 March 2026, he revised his stance, indicating that he did not want Kurdish forces to enter Iran, citing concerns about further complicating the conflict and the risk of Kurdish casualties.²³ Such instances suggest that the present war could become the next major stress test in US–Turkish relations precisely on this issue.

Türkiye engaged senior leadership of Iraq’s KRG, particularly the Barzani and Talabani factions, to dissuade Kurdish involvement in a potential war against Iran, making clear that no support would be extended if they participated; this firm stance appears to have contributed to Kurdish restraint.²⁴ In parallel, Ankara signalled deterrence towards the PKK, warning against alignment with Israel and invoking its prior military intervention in Syria against the YPG as a precedent. Reinforcing this position, Abdullah Öcalan also cautioned the PKK against acting on external directives or entering the conflict.²⁵

Compounding this is the fear of refugee flow. Türkiye already hosts the world’s largest refugee population from the Syrian and Afghan conflicts. A destabilised Iran, which shares a long land border with Türkiye, could generate a fresh migration crisis of significant proportions. Between 3 and 30 March 2026, around 64,000

²¹ Gönül Tol, [“Turkey Caught in the Vortex of a Widening Iran War”](#), Middle East Institute, 9 March 2026.

²² Jacob Magid, [“After Initially Voicing Support, Trump Says He Doesn’t Want Kurds to Enter Iran War”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 8 March 2026.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zübeyde Yalçın, [“Türkiye Thwarts Israeli Plan to Employ Kurds in War Against Iran”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 29 March 2026.

²⁵ Ibid.

Iranians entered Türkiye, though this flow remains below pre-conflict levels.²⁶ Current arrivals appear to consist largely of routine short-term movements under the 90-day visa-free regime, such as tourism, transit, or family visits, alongside precautionary, temporary travel amid uncertainty in Iran. Türkiye is increasingly concerned about a possible migration crisis should the war drag on longer.

Conclusion

Türkiye’s approach seeks to insulate itself from the conflict while preserving manoeuvrability across competing axes—Washington, Tehran, and the wider regional order. Yet, the key drivers of possible instability, including Kurdish militancy, refugee flows and energy insecurity, are precisely those most vulnerable to escalation. This asymmetry constrains Ankara’s strategic autonomy. Its refusal to invoke NATO mechanisms may preserve short-term flexibility, while deeper alignment with NATO could undermine its non-belligerent posture *vis-à-vis* Iran. In this narrowing strategic space, Türkiye’s balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

²⁶ [“Middle East Situation”](#), Operational Data Portal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 30 March 2026.

About the Author



Dr. Abhishek Yadav is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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