CONTINUITY AND FLUCTUATION IN THE TURKISH-IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP 2002-2018
RIVALLING ALLIES OR ALLIED RIVALS?
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Abstract

This paper discusses the evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002, when the AKP came into power in Turkey and radically changed Turkish foreign policy, and 2018. The central research question is ‘Which factors have remained consistent in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’. This is answered by comparing the geopolitical context, economic relations and the role of elites and individuals, three factors that have influenced bilateral ties between Ankara and Tehran. On the one hand, this paper provides a thorough, updated overview of Turkish-Iranian relations between 2002 and 2018 and addresses the lack of attention in the existing literature for the evolution of the relationship after 2016 and the role of elites and individuals. On the other hand, the findings of the paper are put into a general theoretical framework to find an explanation for the evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship. This paper explains how the two countries have been finding new grounds for cooperation since 2016, which has led to a new rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran. On the theoretical level, this paper finds that the importance of economic interdependence is overestimated in the existing literature. Instead, geopolitics and economics have kept each other in balance between 2002 and 2018 and their respective influence has varied. Additionally, elites and individuals have played a crucial role throughout the entire period in supporting the developments that were initiated by the first two factors.

1. Introduction

Amidst tensions regarding the Syrian Civil War and the conflict in Yemen, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan heavily criticised Iran in 2015, stating that the country seeks to expand its influence in the region and that it is ‘trying to chase Daesh (Islamic State) from the region only to take its place’ (France 24, 2015). Though the remarks were seen as proof of the very obvious tensions in the Turkish-Iranian relationship, they were a rather rare expression of frustration by one of the two countries’ leaders. The strategic divergence between Turkey and Iran has been clear since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, but leaders in both countries have always tried to stay diplomatic and to maintain a good relationship with one another. Just one year earlier, the same President Erdogan called Iran his ‘second home’, though tensions between Ankara and Tehran existed already (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroglu, 2015).

This sudden switch in rhetoric has not been unusual in recent years; rapid developments and changes, both domestically in Turkey and Iran and on the geopolitical stage, have challenged Turkish-Iranian bilateral ties and forced both countries to constantly adapt to new situations. At the same time, Ankara and Tehran have maintained a stable relationship over the last 15 years. Despite their disagreements on various policy issues including the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan, there have been continuous diplomatic efforts from both sides to improve bilateral ties (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014; Ben Taleblu & Tahiroğlu, 2015).

This research paper will explore the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in Turkey, and 2018, in the first place because Turkey and Iran are two middle powers in the Middle East, and the two main non-Arab actors in the region. Thus, analysing their bilateral relationship is essential to understand geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Moreover, the Turkish-Iranian relationship is an interesting case with regard to international relations theory. Not only has the relationship remained stable, but recently observers have even noticed a rapprochement and renewed cooperation between Ankara and Iran (Hürriyet, 2017a). Hence, the Turkish-Iranian case is perfect for testing some international relations theories.

The goal of this research paper is twofold; first and foremost, it aims to present a thorough overview of the Turkish-Iranian relationship over the last 15 years and the factors that have influenced it. This way, it can be assessed which, if any, factors have been consistent and which have been fluctuant. Moreover, there is a significant gap for the period after 2016 in the existing literature, and this paper contributes to filling that gap. Secondly, this paper will explore how a variety of different factors that influence the bilateral relationship can explain the evolution of Turkish-Iranian relations and how they compare to each other.
2. Literature Review

A lot has been written about the Turkish-Iranian relationship already. This section gives an overview of the most important academic contributions as well as the biggest shortcomings of the existing literature. From the 1990s onwards, Turkey departed from the hard-line secularism that had characterised the Kemalist era, especially after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was voted into power in 2002 (Barry & Shahram, 2017). This move towards a greater role for religion in public life eased the bilateral relations with Iran, an Islamist theocracy. Additionally, the AKP shifted the foreign strategy of Turkey towards a policy of ‘zero problems with neighbours’ and actively invested in better ties with Iran (Bas, 2013). At the same time, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami tried to diminish the role of ideology in Iranian policy and focus on ‘détente with neighbours’. These changes decidedly had a positive impact on Turkish-Iranian relations. The mutual security concerns in Ankara and Tehran after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 also contributed to a strengthening of the Turkish-Iranian bilateral relationship. Both countries were worried about losing influence in the region and about the possibility of a disintegrating Iraq, which could lead to the emergence of an independent Kurdistan and thus cause problems with the Kurdish minorities that live in Turkey and Iran (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010).

The bilateral relationship reached a symbolic high when then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Turkey in 2008, as the first Iranian leader to be welcomed by a member of NATO since the Iranian Revolution (Barry & Shahram, 2017). It is very telling that during this meeting, then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan insisted on referring to the Iranian leader as ‘my dear brother’. As the two states grew closer, Turkey got progressively more involved in efforts to find a solution to the Iranian nuclear situation, which had led to a number of international sanctions against Iran. Turkey, together with Brazil, presented itself as a mediator between Iran and the West, and tried to secure a deal. It should be mentioned that this was also seen by observers as an effort by Ankara to increase its regional influence.

The existing literature focuses heavily on the economic ties between Turkey and Iran during these years. The increased Turkish demand for energy in particular led to a deepening of economic cooperation between Ankara and Tehran (Bas, 2013). Trade between the two countries grew from around $1 billion in 2001 to almost $22 billion in 2012. Scholars have therefore argued that the rapprochement and the close bilateral relationship between Turkey and Iran was mainly built on economic interdependence (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroğlu, 2015). The logic behind this is that economic ties have enabled Ankara and Tehran to set aside their regional competition and maintain a friendly relationship, as a conflict between them would inevitably lead to a decrease of bilateral trade and thus negatively impact both the Turkish and the Iranian economy (Demiryol, 2013).

The Arab Spring drastically changed the friendly Turkish-Iranian dynamic that had been developing since the early 2000s. The two neighbours displayed a dramatically different approach to these events,
and to the Syrian civil war in particular. The strategy of both countries has been widely perceived by scholars as an effort to advance their own global strategy and obtain greater influence in the region (Ben Taleblu & Tahirolgu, 2015). It is no surprise that this formed the foundation of sever tensions between Ankara and Tehran. Turkey saw the events as an opportunity to ‘naturalise’ its relations with the Middle East and wanted to export its ‘values of democracy, human rights, and market economy’, while leaders in Tehran concluded that the Arab Spring had been inspired by the Iranian model of revolution, calling the events an ‘Islamic Awakening’.

The strategic gap between the two countries widened when it became clear that Iran backed Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, in sharp contrast with Turkish calls for a removal of the president from power (Ben Taleblu & Tahirolgu, 2015). Moreover, Turkey was perceived by Iran as the major hub in the Middle East for hosting Syrian rebel factions, so the issue of the Assad-regime is linked to another area of disagreement between Turkey and Iran: the problem of radical Islamist factions in- and outside of Syria. While both countries want to defeat such terrorist groups, their approach to how this should be conducted, proved to be contradictory (Lawson, 2015). The Turkish government argued that these jihadist factions in Syria will disappear once Bashar al-Assad was removed from power; Iran disagreed and argued that the real source of Islamist radicalism was the Sunni militancy in the region.

Yet, despite these contradictory points of view, the relationship between Turkey and Iran has been stable over the last decade, and none of the aforementioned tensions have led to an actual diplomatic or military conflict between the two countries. On the contrary, there have been continuous diplomatic efforts by both sides to strengthen bilateral ties (Ben Taleblu & Tahirolgu, 2015). Again, the existing literature is primarily focused on the economic aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship to find an explanation for this phenomenon. In an article that explores the nature of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, Rafizadeh argues that the driving force behind this stability is the economic interdependence of the two countries. Once again, it is argued that bilateral trade in the energy sector in particular prevents the outbreak of a major conflict, since Ankara and Tehran rely on each other when it comes to oil and natural gas (Rafizadeh, 2016). While other areas of economic cooperation between Turkey and Iran are also important, none are as significant as energy cooperation (Kalehsar, 2015). To support the claim of economic interdependence, scholars have presented various figures; of the 16 billion dollars of bilateral trade volume in 2011, an astonishing 12 billion dollars was the result of energy trade (Flanagan, 2013). As much as 90% of Iran’s natural gas export flows to the Turkish market, and it makes Iran Turkey’s second largest supplier of natural gas (Ben Taleblu & Tahirolgu, 2015; Rafizadeh, 2016).

More importantly, since 2001, Turkey has been the major importer of Iran’s natural gas (Babali, 2009). Though Turkey has very limited oil and gas sources, the country is able to function as a major energy hub in the region because of its strategic position between Europe and the Middle East (Baghat, 2014). The 2000s were characterised by an increased interest in the role of Turkey with regard to global energy politics (Fuat Keyman, 2016). Thus, not only does Ankara need Iranian oil and gas in order to maintain
the growth that has characterised the country’s economy over the last 15 years, it also relies on these resources to fulfil its role as an important actor on the regional and global energy market (Baghat, 2014). Since Turkey is dependent on Iran’s oil and gas to reach these goals, and since Iran needs access to the Turkish energy market, scholars argue that there is an economic convergence between these two countries that prevents a major confrontation between them as a result of their disagreements concerning other issues (Rafizadeh, 2016). In other words, the academic consensus seems to be that the need for cooperation in the area of energy has resulted in an economic entanglement that is strong enough to overcome these countries’ strategic differences in other policy areas (Baghat, 2014; Ben Taleblu & Tahiroğlu, 2015; Rafizadeh, 2016).

3. Research Problem, Research Questions, and Relevance

There are two problems in the existing literature on the Turkish-Iranian relationship that this paper aims to address, which will be discussed in this section.

The first problem concerns two gaps in the existing academic work. As mentioned above, there have been significant developments since 2016, both domestically in Turkey and Iran and internationally, that have influenced the bilateral ties between Ankara and Tehran. Observers have described the emergence of a new rapprochement between Turkey and Iran (Lindgaard, 2017). Indeed, a number of events and developments, including the start of the so-called ‘Astana Talks’ between Russia, Turkey, and Iran to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict, and the Qatar diplomatic crisis have brought Ankara and Tehran closer and have led to renewed cooperation between the two neighbours (Middle East Monitor, 2016; Beaumont, 2017). This remarkable evolution has so far not been addressed by academics. This paper can thus make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on the Turkish-Iranian relationship, both by describing the recent events that have impacted the relationship and thus expanding the current academic narrative, and by finding a theoretical explanation for this rapprochement after a period of severe tensions.

Furthermore, there is a significant lack of attention in the existing literature for the role of elites and individuals in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. While several articles focus heavily on the factor of economic interdependence between the two neighbours and others have also addressed the most important geopolitical factors that have influenced the relationship between Ankara and Tehran, the idea that elites and individuals can have a significant impact on the bilateral ties of two countries has thus far largely been neglected in the existing literature. Not only does incorporating this aspect into the debate on the nature of the Turkish-Iranian relationship make an important contribution to the current academic work, discussing the role of elites and individuals also makes it easier to analyse the impact of the geopolitical context and economic ties; by comparing three instead of two factors, the relative importance of each factor can be assessed more accurately.
The second problem is more theoretical in its nature. The argument that economic interdependence has prevented the outbreak of a conflict between Turkey and Iran over the last 15 years seems valid and in accordance with trade statistics up until 2012, when bilateral trade peaked at a volume of $21.8 billion. One could argue that it was this growth that prevented an actual conflict between Turkey and Iran in the years when the Syrian civil war escalated and both countries hardened their respective positions. However, bilateral trade collapsed dramatically in 2013 and fell to a volume worth $13.8 billion as a result of international economic sanctions against Iran (Baghat, 2014). Ankara and Tehran realised that they had to take measures to prevent their bilateral trade volume from plummeting even more, so they set a target at the 24th meeting of the Iran-Turkey Joint Economic Commission to increase trade and reach a volume of $30 billion by the end of 2015. The actual outcome would prove to be less desirable, as the trade volume shrank even more in 2015 and 2016, setting a new low of $9.65 billion (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

However, this decline in bilateral trade does not seem to have impacted the Turkish-Iranian relationship as much as one could have expected based on the theory that is presented in the existing literature on bilateral relations between Ankara and Tehran. Even though the trade volume shrank dramatically in 2013, this doesn’t seem to have led to increased tensions between the two countries and hasn’t destabilised their relationship (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroğlu, 2015). Not only was there no actual conflict between the two neighbours but, as mentioned above, they also continued their diplomatic efforts to improve their relationship. Moreover, there have been the aforementioned recent signs of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran. The Astana Talks are just one example of that evolution. In other words, this rapprochement has been taking place in a context of decreased economic interdependence and growing geopolitical tensions and strategic differences. Whether the theory of economic interdependence as an explanation for the good Turkish-Iranian relationship is still valid when confronted with this new information remains to be explored in the rest of this research paper. However, the fact that this situation of close ties amidst diminishing economic relations and geopolitical tensions has thus far not been addressed by academics proves that this paper can make a valuable contribution to the debate by addressing this question.

The presence of other factors impacting the Turkish-Iranian relationship and contributing to its stability seems likely in this context. Because the existing theory that economic interdependence leads to tight bilateral relations doesn’t seem to be in accordance with this context, it is necessary to reassess the entire relationship from 2002 until 2018. It is now problematic that the entire relationship has been largely explained through the paradigm of economic interdependence and it is possible that the importance of the economic factor has been exaggerated from the very beginning. Not only does this give an additional justification to the idea of exploring the role of elites and individuals, it more generally creates the possibility of investigating the impact of different factors on the Turkish-Iranian relationship.
Turkey and Iran are both part of a number of international organisations, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. These are all organised in an intergovernmental way and don’t seem to have a very big impact on the Turkish-Iranian relationship. This paper will therefore not focus on the role of international organisations. Instead, the role of economic ties, the geopolitical context, and elites and individuals will be explored, assuming that these are the most important factors in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. The role of the state as a separate level will not be investigated, as it is closely related to the previous three factors and thus cannot be seen separately.

The study of these three factors enables an assessment of the continuity and fluctuation in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018. In other words, by conducting a thorough study of these factors, it can be discovered which of them, if any, have played a consistent role throughout the years and which have been fluctuant, resulting in a general analysis of the evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship from 2002 onwards. Thus, the main research question of this paper is ‘Which factors have remained consistent in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’ A problem with the existing literature on the subject is that most articles focus on one aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship. Others describe both the economic ties and the geopolitical context, but don’t make a comparison between the impact of these two factors. Furthermore, the influence of elites and individuals is almost entirely neglected, as explained above. Therefore, this paper can make a valuable contribution to the debate. Investigating the role of these different factors offers a new perspective on the Turkish-Iranian relationship and could furthermore be an interesting case study in the broader discussion concerning the factors that impact bilateral relations between countries. Moreover, a thorough assessment of the consistent and fluctuant factors in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018 hasn’t been made before, even though this is a very distinct period in the relationship between Ankara and Tehran because of the major changes after 2002.

A first subquestion that needs to be answered in order to solve the main research question is ‘How has the Turkish-Iranian relationship evolved after 2016?’. As explained above, the evolution of the bilateral ties between Turkey and Iran after 2016 has not been addressed in the existing literature thus far. However, observers have perceived a significant change in the Turkish-Iranian relationship after 2016. It is thus necessary to look into this period in order to fully understand the evolution of Turkish-Iranian bilateral ties between 2002 and 2018. It is important to investigate whether there has been an actual shift in the Turkish-Iranian relationship after 2016, and if so, what the cause of this change has been. The second subquestion is ‘How have elites and individuals impacted the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’ As explained above, this is another gap in the existing theory that needs to be filled. First of all, this paper needs to find out if elites and individuals have effectively had influence on the relationship between Ankara and Tehran. If so, it also needs to be investigated in what way specifically these elites and individuals have impacted the Turkish-Iranian relationship. Not only does
this give additional insight into the dynamic behind the bilateral ties between Turkey and Iran, it also contributes to a better understanding of the role that elites and individuals can play in international relations.

The last subquestion is ‘How can economic interdependence theory explain the stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’. This question serves two purposes. First and foremost, it is a test of the assumption in the existing literature that economic interdependence between Ankara and Tehran has been the reason why the two neighbours have maintained a good relationship over the past 15 years. As has been illustrated above, evidence suggests that this theory might not be valid for the period between 2011 and 2016. By comparing the economic ties between Turkey and Iran to the impact of the geopolitical context and of elites and individuals, it can be explored whether the economic ties have been as important as the existing literature claims. Secondly, this question allows for a broader theoretical investigation of economic interdependence theory. In other words, by exploring one specific case, this paper can make a contribution to the general debate on the validity of economic interdependence theory.

4. Theoretical Framework

Most analyses in the existing literature on the Turkish-Iranian relationship explain the geopolitical circumstances that complicate bilateral ties, to then conclude that these differences between Ankara and Tehran are overcome through their economic interdependence. In other words, according to most scholars, the economic ties between Turkey and Iran prevent the emergence of an actual conflict between the two neighbours regarding their strategic differences. However, as explained above, the serious geopolitical tensions between Ankara and Tehran between 2011 and 2016 did not lead to an actual conflict between the two neighbours and there were even diplomatic initiatives to improve bilateral ties during this period, despite a collapse of bilateral trade between them (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroğlu, 2015). Therefore, the role of economic ties in the Turkish-Iranian relationship and the validity of economic interdependence theory as an explanation for this situation needs to be reassessed.

In order to do so, it is necessary to explain economic interdependence theory first. The idea that open international markets and increased trade between countries prevent interstate conflict has existed in international relations theory for a long time already, especially in the liberal school (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003, pp. 2-3). This idea is supported by several arguments. One is that an increase of trade and foreign investments diminishes the need for territorial expansion as a way of acquiring resources. Other scholars have argued that contact between two countries and communication between private actors and governments increase when bilateral trade grows, thus leading to more political cooperation. Perhaps the most convincing argument is that an increase in bilateral trade makes private traders and consumers more dependent on the market of the other country, which causes policy makers to avoid interstate conflicts, as this would put these economic ties at risk and harm their own economy.
The question is then how a ‘conflict’ can be defined. When discussing conflict, realists are most likely talking about an armed confrontation between two states (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003, p. 16). In liberal theory, however, the concept is defined much less clearly, and there are different views on its meaning. Some liberal theorists argue that states may continue to openly express their disagreements and threaten their bilateral trade partner with sanctions or even the use of military force. These scholars wouldn’t classify such a ‘war of words’ as a conflict. However, as illustrated above, this hasn’t been the case for Turkey and Iran. On the contrary, the two countries continued to make diplomatic efforts to improve their bilateral ties, even at the height of geopolitical tensions and rivalry. Therefore, this paper follows the more traditional liberal interpretation that says that conflict can exist on all levels of intensity and in all areas, including diplomacy and military force. The aim of this paper is to test the economic explanation for the stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship as it is described in the existing literature, and it is therefore necessary to use the same definition of ‘conflict’. Though never specified, these scholars repeatedly stressed the existence of continuous diplomatic efforts to improve the relationship. It is thus likely that they used this same traditional liberal definition of ‘conflict’.

The idea of economic interdependence fits into the broader conception of interdependence, which is part of the liberal view on international relations and the functioning of the international system (Arreguin-Toft & Mingst, 2014, pp. 116-117). Keohane and Nye (1999, pp. 308-309), pioneers of interdependence theory, stated “Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterised by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries. (…) Where there are reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) costly effects of transactions, there is interdependence.” They describe their interdependence theory as the ‘opposite of realism’. Liberal theory assumes that (economic) interdependence prevents conflict; realist theorists don’t necessarily agree that this is the case. They argue that interdependence often makes states more vulnerable, and that it is better to minimise dependence and become more independent (Kauppi & Viotti, 1999, pp. 76-77). In other words, for liberal theorists, economic interdependence is an integral part of what will be treated as ‘the geopolitical context’ in the rest of this paper, whereas realist theory has a completely opposite view on this geopolitical context. As explained above, there are reasons to doubt the validity of economic interdependence theory in the case of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, especially for the period between 2011 and 2016. Therefore, the realist view on the international system (‘the geopolitical context’) is put forward in this theoretical framework as an alternative to the liberal idea of economic interdependence.

For realists, economic factors such as bilateral trade are seen as part of ‘low politics’. Instead, they prefer to focus on grand strategy issues and international security, which they deem much more important. They argue that the state is the most significant actor in international politics (Kauppi & Viotti, 1999, pp. 6-7). It is important to note that realists view the state as a unitary actor who acts on the international stage as an integral unit, speaking with one voice and pursuing one national interest. Thus, disputes among different policy makers are solved internally before acting in the geopolitical sphere.
Furthermore, the state is thought to be a rational actor, meaning that each policy alternative is evaluated before choosing the one that gives the state the biggest benefit. It is also assumed that the most important issue for states is guaranteeing national security. According to realist theory, the international system is anarchic. Thus, states are left with no choice but to put its own interests above anything else (Arreguin-Toft & Mingst, 2014, pp. 108-112).

Since one of the main assumptions of realist theory is that the state is a coherent, unitary actor, it is not surprising that elites and individuals, another factor that will be explored in the literature research of this paper, play no significant role in international relations according to realist theorists. In this logic, states as unitary actors do not differ based on their government type or the style or personality of its leaders (Arreguin-Toft & Mingst, 2014, pp. 178-190). This is in stark contrast with liberal theorists who do recognise the fact that individuals can have a significant impact on international relations. They particularly look at the influence of individual leaders and their characteristics on foreign policy, but they do believe that private individuals can occasionally make a difference too.

When it comes to the impact of elites on foreign policy making, Arreguin-Toft and Mingst contend that the actions of individuals are more likely to have influence when political institutions are unstable, young, in crisis, or collapsed, or when there are few constitutional limits to what the individual can do. The latter is mostly the case in dictatorial regimes, where the leaders of the country are relatively free and don’t have to take into account the reaction of the public as much as in democratic systems. Of course, the specificity of a situation also determines how much of a role individual leaders can play. Thus, leaders in democratic systems can sometimes greatly impact international relations as well. A lot also depends on the personality and background of these leaders, as these characteristics partly determine which decisions a leader will make. As for the impact of private individuals on foreign policy, Arreguin-Toft and Mingst argue that these actors can play linkage roles between different countries.

With regard to the literature study of this paper, testing the economic interdependence explanation that is used in the existing literature to explain the stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship ultimately comes down to the question whether the economic ties between Ankara and Tehran have enabled this stability, or if other factors have led to a stable relationship, which then enabled closer economic ties. The first option would support liberal theory, the latter would fit into the realist narrative if the stable relationship were the result of decisions by the state based on the geopolitical context, and liberal theory if elites and individuals influenced the bilateral ties.

5. Methodology and Research Design

The Turkish-Iranian relationship will be explored in this paper through a literature research, using both primary and secondary literature. Since several scholars have already written articles about Turkish-Iranian relations or a closely related subject, many of the sections in the literature research will mainly
draw on secondary literature, reorganising the findings of different articles into one structure and combining research on different aspects of the bilateral relationship. Primary literature, especially newspaper articles and official government statistics, will be used to fill in gaps in the existing literature and, more importantly, to investigate the Turkish-Iranian relationship from 2016 onwards, since this hasn’t been written about by academics so far.

The literature research makes a clear distinction between three periods within the time frame 2002-2018. The first period runs from 2002 until 2011, when the Syrian Civil War broke out. Since this conflict has marked a turning point in the Turkish-Iranian relationship, as explained above, the literature research identifies a new period from 2011 to 2016. Observers have described a new rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran from 2016 onwards, after the two neighbours, together with Russia, established an initiative to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict. Thus, the literature research explores the events after 2016 in a third, separate time period.

Every period will be introduced by an overview of the general evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship during those years, followed by three sections in which the geopolitical events impacting the bilateral ties, the economic interdependence of the two countries and the role of elites and individuals in the relationship are explained. It is of course impossible to discuss every elite and individual that is involved in the Turkish-Iranian relationship. Therefore, only those that had an obvious and significant impact on the bilateral ties between Ankara and Tehran will be addressed. For each period, these sections are then followed by a short general conclusion. This structure enables a comparison between the three periods in the subsequent section. This way, the importance of the different aspects of the relationship during the three periods can be assessed, as well as the difference in the overall relationship between the three periods. More generally, the goal in this final section of the literature research is to find out which of the aspects of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, if any, have been consistent throughout the three periods and which factors have been fluctuant. By applying the theoretical framework as laid out in the previous section, a theoretical explanation for the evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018 can then also be found.

6. Literature Research

The structure of this literature research consists of three distinct periods of time that have defined the relationship between Turkey and Iran over the last 15 years, starting in 2002, when the AKP came to power in Turkey and drastically reshaped the country’s foreign policy. A subsequent consistent period in the Turkish-Iranian relationship lasted until 2011 and was ended by the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, in which both countries clearly proved to have divergent strategic interests. A new turning point can be perceived in 2016, with newly aligned Turkish and Iranian interests with regard to a number of policy issues, thus marking the start of a third period of time. For each of these three periods, the literature research will explore the geopolitical context in which the relationship was embedded at that
time, the economic ties between the two countries, and the role of elites and individuals in the bilateral relationship. At times, it might seem like this literature research focuses more on the Turkish than on the Iranian side of the story. This is simply because there is a lot more literature, both primary and secondary, to be found about Turkey than about Iran. However, a balance between the two has been pursued as much as possible.

Before discussing the 2002-2018 timeline, however, it is important to elaborate on the ties between Turkey and Iran before the rise to power by the AKP in 2002 signalled significant changes to the relationship. In other words, to fully be able to understand the time period 2002-2018, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the relationship before this time frame, in order to obtain an image of the context that led to the events during the time period discussed below.

6.1. The Relationship pre-2002

With the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the country’s foreign policy changed drastically, thus also resulting in a different bilateral relationship with Turkey, mainly because of the many strategic differences that arose between the two neighbours (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). For instance, Iran would maintain a deeply troubled relationship with the United States, whereas Turkey remained a NATO member and an important US ally in the region. However, this did not stop the two regional powers from working together. When the Iran-Iraq War broke out in 1980, economic cooperation became a critical issue for both countries; Iran was in desperate need of using Turkish sea ports for imports as part of their war effort. Meanwhile, Turkey was actively looking to enhance its trade as a way of boosting its own bankrupt economy. These circumstances led to a trade volume between the two countries that exceeded $2 billion.

Despite this growing economic cooperation, the 1980s saw the development of problems between Turkey and Iran with respect to other policy issues. In 1984, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Worker’s Party or PKK) launched a guerrilla insurgency in Turkey (Calabrese, 1998). The Turkish government suspected that Iran might support Kurdish fighters, or at least that Tehran allowed its territory to be used by the organisation as a base for planning and conducting attacks into Turkey. Iran’s alliance with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were also grounds for great concern in Ankara (Sinkaya, 2012). The increase of PKK attacks caused Turkey to conduct military operations in Northern Iraq. These actions were met with heavy protest by Tehran. Iran, on the other hand, accused Turkey of harbouring opponents of the regime (Calabrese, 1998).

In November 1988, tensions between Ankara and Tehran escalated into a series of diplomatic crises, with for example the Iranian embassy in Ankara refusing to lower its flag to commemorate the death of Atatürk (Elik, 2011, pp. 41-42). After the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the collapse of the Soviet Union shortly after, it also became clear that Turkey and Iran were competing for influence in the region (Bas,
Turkey decided to focus on exporting the ‘Turkish model’ to Central Asia, emphasising the historical ethnic Turkic ties shared by these countries, secularism, the importance of integration into Western economic and political institutions, and increased trade and cultural ties (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). This approach was met with mixed success. Turkey definitely did not seem to be the most important actor in the region, but it did manage to maintain a certain level of influence. Meanwhile, Iran made active efforts to create its own spheres of influence and to forge alliances against Turkish-Western presence in the region. An integral part of this strategy was the development of stronger ties with Russia. As for the Central Asian Turkic republics, Iran promoted Islamic ideology, supported Islamist movements throughout the region, and developed economic relations through energy trade.

PKK terrorism in Turkey peaked in the period between 1992 and 1995. The organisation could freely use the vacuum left behind by the United States and its allies in Northern Iraq after the Gulf War and conducted its largest attacks on Turkey. Attempts by Ankara to end Iranian support for the PKK through diplomacy proved to be ineffective. The free movement of PKK fighters across the Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian borders made it virtually impossible for the Turkish armed forces to pursue them. Ankara carried out bombings at the Turkish-Iranian border, led to a severe political crisis between the two countries that could have turned into an armed conflict.

Turkish-Iranian relations remained deeply troubled in the late 1990s. Both the Kurdish question and the rise of Islamist ideology in Turkey and in the wider region, the biggest problems that Turkey had to face in this period, were closely related to Iran and its foreign policy. Tehran was consistently portrayed as an enemy by Turkish secularist and mainstream media because of its alleged support for terrorist Islamist movements in the region (Elik, 2011, pp. 51-52). At the time, there was an ongoing struggle between secular and Islamist forces in Turkey, which culminated in Islamist Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan being forced to sign a National Security Council document in February 1997 by the Turkish military that was effectively aimed at diminishing the influence of Islamists in the country (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). Erbakan would eventually resign a few months later, and his Welfare Party (RP) was banned by prosecutors shortly after. Certain academics refer to these events as ‘the 28 February coup’ or ‘the post-modern coup’. The Turkish military managed to maintain great influence on the domestic and international politics of in the following years.

The situation led to multiple diplomatic crises between the two countries, such as Mohammed Bagheri, Iranian ambassador to Ankara, being asked to leave the country in 1997 after speaking out in favour of Islamist movements in Turkey. The relationship was also negatively impacted by the Turkish government’s decision to dismantle an Islamist terrorist organization, the Turkish Hezbollah. Ankara claimed that leaders of the organisation had received political and military training from Iranian security and intelligence forces, and that they were on the payroll of the Iranian government and were involved in politically motivated assassinations in Turkey during the 1990s. Thus, the Turkish-Iranian relationship hit a serious low at the end of the 20th century (Sinkaya, 2012).
From 2000 on, however, several developments within the domestic political system of Iran led to a decrease of tensions with Turkey (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). The capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan by Turkey in 1999 was met with a series of Kurdish demonstrations and unrest throughout the region. Iranian officials now realised the extent of the PKK’s influence on the Kurds in Iran, and decided to drastically diminish its support for the PKK, bearing in mind the possibility of Kurdish separatism on Iranian territory. The possibility of an American-led invasion into Iraq after the 9/11 attacks and the threat this would pose to Iran’s influence in the region spurred Tehran to speed up its actions with regard to the PKK. Iran pledged to prevent the PKK from launching attacks into Turkey at a joint meeting of the Turkey-Iran Commission on Security Cooperation in 2001, thus improving the bilateral relationship with Ankara.

6.2. Period 1: 2002-2011

6.2.1. Overview: New Foreign Policy and Rapprochement

Many observers point at the official visit to Iran of then Turkish President Necdet Sezer in 2002 as the turning point in the Turkish-Iranian relationship (Sinkaya, 2012). However, it is obvious that the change in the Turkish-Iranian relationship didn’t result from a single presidential visit, however important this might have been on a symbolic level. Rather, the positive evolution in the relationship during the period 2002-2011 stems from a switch in the foreign policy approach of both Ankara and Tehran. Around 2002, the beginning of the time frame used here, both countries significantly changed their respective foreign policies, their regional strategies, and the way they deal with neighbouring countries (Sinkaya, 2012). In Iran, what is now known as the ‘détente’ policy approach was designed under the presidency of President Mohammad Khatami, who was the leader of the country from 1997 to 2005, and was focused on the non-ideological aspects of foreign policy (Ehteshami, 2007). This ‘détente’ approach was twofold, consisting of a ‘Dialogue among Civilizations’ on the one hand, and ‘détente with neighbours’ on the other hand, thus greatly affecting the bilateral relationship with Turkey (Sinkaya, 2012). Under Khatami’s leadership, Iran increased its diplomatic relations and bilateral visits with Turkey (Elik, 2011, p. 60).

However, this approach did not settle all differences between Turkey and Iran, and tensions continued to exist between the two countries regarding the activities of terrorist organisation PKK and other radical Islamists on Turkish territory (Sinkaya, 2012). Despite President Khatami’s efforts, the Turkish government continued to accuse Iran of providing support and shelter for PKK fighters and other terrorists (Aras, 2001). This issue became somewhat less pressing after the Turkish Hezbollah was seriously weakened by Turkish armed forces in 2000 (Sinkaya, 2012). Moreover, the south-eastern part of the country rapidly pacified after PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was arrested and the PKK diminished its activities in the region. It is in this context of less acute security concerns that Turkey, too, decided
to adapt its foreign and regional policy, promoting ‘reconciliation’ with its neighbours and the wider region.

When the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) came to power in Turkey in November 2002, Turkish government policy drastically changed on many issues, including foreign strategy. After years of domestic instability, including the aforementioned ‘28 February coup’, an Islamist party had managed to grab power and reform the Turkish system in such a way that the influence of the military was significantly reduced (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). Though there had been a hesitant normalisation of Turkish-Iranian relations in the years before, this drastic change in Turkish policy signalled an actual shift in the way Ankara and Tehran treated one another (Sinkaya, 2012). The biggest difference between the AKP’s foreign policy strategy and that of previous Turkish governments was its focus on proactive diplomacy, aimed at reaching what they described as ‘zero problems with neighbours’. This also meant that it would have to go against the interests of its traditional Western allies at times, thus striving towards more strategic autonomy (Ersoy & Gürzel, 2012). This newly found independence from the West concerning Middle East policy was greatly appreciated in Iran and seen as a sign of willingness to normalise the bilateral relations of the two countries (Bas, 2013). Another foreign policy objective of the AKP was to create a certain level of economic interdependence between Turkey and its neighbouring countries (Sinkaya, 2012). It hoped to obtain this by promoting bilateral trade. It is very clear that this new strategy facilitated rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran even more than what the previous governments of both countries had accomplished.

6.2.2. Geopolitical Context

The regional context and power relations in the Middle East dramatically changed after the US invaded Iraq in 2003 (Sinkaya, 2012). This event, at the beginning of the 2002-2011 time period, was a turning point for the region and would continue to define interactions between states and affect disputes between ethnic groups until today. After the US-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent occupation of the country, it became very unclear what kind of future the Americans envisioned for the country. Moreover, the occupying forces failed to establish a stable, legitimate Iraqi government. This instilled both Turkey and Iran with fear of a scenario in which Iraq would disintegrate and slide into chaos. In other words, the American actions and failures in Iraq unintentionally led to a common concern in Tehran and Ankara. More specifically, the possibility of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq in case of a disintegration of the country, which could trigger separatist Kurdish groups on Turkish and Iranian soil, was perceived as very worrisome in the two neighbouring states. Thus, both countries strongly defended Iraq’s territorial integrity.

Another mutual concern of both countries were the developments around the Qandil Mountains, near where the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi borders meet. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, it had become the base from which separatist and terrorist movements operated and launched attacks against and into
Turkey and Iran. The most prominent organisation that was active in this area, was the PKK. After the United States seized control over the Iraqi territory in 2003, they made it very clear that they would not tolerate any Turkish operations against the PKK on Iraqi soil, thus de facto establishing a safe haven for the terrorist organisation. It facilitated PKK operations and led to an increase of attacks by the group against Turkey from 2004 onwards. Around the same time, the PJAK (the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) started an armed conflict with Iranian security forces. This new organisation had its roots within the PKK and was also based in the Qandil Mountains area. It formed a new and unknown threat to Iranian national security, whereas the PKK had never really been perceived as very troubling in Iran.

The presence of these two organisations close to both the Turkish and the Iranian border caused the two neighbours to increase their bilateral cooperation on security issues, and to coordinate the military operations that they conducted against the PKK and the PJAK. When Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Iran in 2004, Tehran agreed on labelling the PKK as a terrorist organisation, thus significantly strengthening the bilateral ties in doing so (Bas, 2013). Both governments would eventually also sign an agreement on cooperation against terrorism, smuggling, and organised crime in the context of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s official visit to Turkey in 2008 (Sinkaya, 2012).

It is also interesting to note that from the early 2000s onwards, Turkey and Iran had a mutual approach to and view of Syria. Since the revolution of 1979, the Syrian government had openly supported the Islamic Republic, whereas the relationship with Turkey was extremely troubled throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Syria was particularly worried by the strategic partnership that developed between Turkey and Israel, and it was also involved in territorial disputes with Ankara over the Hatay province and the shared Euphrates River. Turkey, on the other hand, was deeply concerned by the fact that Syria offered shelter to PKK leaders after the mid-1980s, so much so that at one point it threatened Damascus with the use of force. But after having avoided a military conflict, the two countries signed the Adana agreement in 1998, and the Syrian regime subsequently removed the PKK leadership from its territory. Iran tried to act as mediator in this conflict and balanced between Damascus and Ankara. From this point onwards, Turkey and Syria also cooperated more closely on security issues, which led to a significant improvement of the Turkish-Iranian relationship. The rise to power of the AKP and the subsequent change in Turkish foreign policy would lead to an even deeper cooperation between Turkey and Syria. Thus, both Turkey and Iran maintained very close relations with Syria throughout the 2000s. The rapprochement between Syria and Turkey was hailed by the Iranian government, as it coincided with the détente in Turkish-Iranian relations.

Another development that most definitely brought Turkey and Iran closer during the time period 2002-2011, was Turkey’s increasing criticism of Israel, and its growing support for the Palestine National Authority (Sinkaya, 2012). During the 1990s, Turkey had worked on a strategic partnership with Israel, much to the dismay of Iran, which had always been one of the biggest critics of the Jewish state. From the early 2000s onwards, however, Ankara openly started condemning Israel’s treatment of the
Palestinians and the Israeli settlements on the West Bank. There are multiple concrete examples of Turkey’s hardening stance vis-à-vis Israel throughout these years. In 2006, Turkey hosted a Hamas delegation and declared its political support for the group, which led to disappointment and frustration in the West and enthusiasm in Iran. Another example is then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s reaction to Israel’s invasion of Gaza and military operations in the area in 2008. He accused Israeli President Shimon Peres of the murder of innocent Palestinians and stated that Israel had offended international law. All these events led to a deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. A critical low in the relationship was reached in 2010 following the Mavi Marmara incident1 (Aytürk, 2011). This resulted in a deep political crisis between Turkey and Israel, and thus, in a rather perverse way, to a convergence of Turkish and Iranian positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian question.

Turkey’s positive position and efforts concerning the Iranian nuclear programme were both a sign of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran and an accelerant towards even closer bilateral relations between the two neighbouring countries (Sinkaya, 2012). During the 2002-2011 time period, Iran’s nuclear programme led to major tensions with the West and an increasingly isolated position within the international community. The major Western powers claimed that Tehran was developing this programme for military objectives. Iran always firmly denied these suspicions and claimed that it had an internationally recognized right to conduct research and to develop peaceful nuclear technologies. Turkey, contrary to its Western allies, agreed with Iran and recognised this right, but asked Iran to acknowledge international concerns and to increase its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In other words, Ankara decided to take up the role of mediator on this issue. The Iranian nuclear programme had been an international source of discussion since the 1990s, but it wasn’t really addressed in Turkey before the rise of the AKP (Ersoy & Gürzel, 2012). The party brought the issue to the table and backed Iran. This fits into the new, regional foreign policy that the AKP introduced when it came to power, focused on expanding relations in the Middle East and having ‘no problems with neighbours’ (Bonab, 2009).

When undeclared nuclear facilities were found in 2002 in the Iranian towns of Natanz and Arak, pressure from the West on Iran to halt its nuclear programme rose (Ersoy & Gürzel, 2012). Turkey reacted by repeatedly emphasising the importance of diplomacy and finding a peaceful solution, despite constant calls by the United States to cooperate with its Western allies. Fears of an Iraq-style American intervention into Iran that would destabilise the entire region caused Ankara to abandon its role of observer, which it had been since the 1990s, and move on to become a facilitator. Not only was it clearly in Turkey’s national interest to avoid destabilisation of the region, but taking up this role also allowed the country to build on the strategic autonomy it had been striving towards since the AKP assumed

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1 When in May 2010, the Mavi Marmara, a ship owned by a Turkish-Islamic NGO, participated in an international protest against Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory and its naval blockade of Gaza, it was stormed by Israeli commandos while still in international waters, killing one Turkish-American and eight Turkish activists (Aytürk, 2011).
power. Turkey would fulfil this role for a few years before switching its position again in 2008; after elaborate discussions with the United States, the government decided that, rather than being a facilitator, Turkey’s efforts would be more effective if it acted as a mediator, an idea that was backed by the US government. In a joint diplomatic effort with Brazil, it managed to convince Iran of accepting the uranium swap agreement in May 2010. After the agreement was rejected by the ‘Vienna group’, Turkey voted against new sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council, where it was a non-permanent member at that time (Sinkaya, 2012). This gesture was hailed in Iran and perceived as proof of continued Turkish support for the nuclear programme. Thus, despite the limited success of Turkey’s diplomacy, the country’s efforts did have a positive effect on its bilateral relations with Iran.

While many of the geopolitical events during the 2002-2011 period brought Turkey and Iran closer to each other, they also caused a divergence between Turkey and its Western allies. The aforementioned American warnings against Turkish military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq, for instance, sparked a new-found anti-American sentiment in Turkey. Iran tried to gain from this situation of divergence between Turkey and the West by trying to use it as a basis for improving Turkish-Iranian relations, for example by proposing closer Turkish-Iranian security cooperation. The rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran was perceived in the West as proof that Turkey was distancing itself from its traditional allies. In that context, the fact that many of the Turkish decisions that were criticised by the West received outspoken support from Iranian officials, didn’t have a positive effect on Turkish-Western relations.

6.2.3. Economic Relationship

The economic ties and bilateral trade between Ankara and Tehran heavily influenced the positive evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship in the period 2002-2011 (Sinkaya, 2012). As mentioned above, when the AKP came into power in 2002, one of its goals was to establish more economic interdependence with its neighbouring countries. It launched an active diplomatic effort to strengthen economic ties with countries in the Middle East region and received the support of the Turkish business community to do so (Habibi, 2012). This approach would definitely turn out to be successful in the case with Iran. One example of this strategy is the fact that most of the Turkish-Iranian diplomatic visits during the 2002-2011 period were mainly focused on economic issues and often resulted in economic agreements. The range of economic issues that were dealt with in those agreements also often went beyond those dealt with in regular bilateral investment and trade.

Specifically in the area of energy cooperation, activity increased dramatically during these years (Sinkaya, 2012). With energy needs in Turkey growing by 6 to 8 percent every year in this period and

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2 The Vienna group represented the interests of the ‘5+1 countries’, which consist of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany. This group would regularly hold meetings in Vienna, hence its name.
very limited domestic reserves, Ankara was looking to diversify its supplies in order to avoid becoming completely dependent on Russia. In that context, it looked at Iran as an interesting additional supplier of oil and, more importantly, natural gas. Iran itself was in desperate need of foreign exchange earnings because it found itself in a very isolated position on the international stage and was struggling economically as a result. Therefore, Tehran was very enthusiastic about the idea of a new trading partner to export natural gas to. In this context, the two countries signed an agreement in August 1996, in which it was arranged that Turkey would buy 228 billion cubic meters of Iranian natural gas, worth $23 billion, over the next 25 years (Aras & Aydin, 2005). After a series of financial, political and technical difficulties had led to a delay of the start of the gas flow, delivery finally began in December 2001, after the Tabriz-Erzurum Pipeline was completed (Yilmaz, 2017). Thus, the two countries only started reaping the benefits of their agreement from 2002 onwards (Sinkaya, 2012). During the period 2002-2011, this energy cooperation would underpin Turkish-Iranian trade relations, so much so that by the end of this era, in 2011, 30 percent of Turkish oil imports came from Iran, which made Iran the biggest exporter of oil to Turkey (Habibi, 2012). Furthermore, Tehran was also the third largest provider of Turkey’s natural gas, after Russia and Iraq.

During the same period, both the Turkish and the Iranian governments were making active efforts to promote their bilateral economic ties as part of the normalisation of their relations. In November 2001, a Turkish-Iranian Business Council was founded, aimed at the development and expansion of the economic and commercial ties of the two countries. The two countries also regularly organised official visits to both capitals, with various important businessmen accompanying the political delegations, as a way of trying to get the private sector involved in the efforts of the governments regarding the bilateral relationship, and to diversify the economic relations. Both countries deemed it important to add other layers to the trade relationship in addition to the energy trade, and to create more direct investments and tourism between them.

In addition to the strong energy ties between Ankara and Tehran, the progressively heavier US and EU sanctions against Iran in the context of the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as the active government efforts, brought the two neighbours closer together, resulting in an increase of investments and trade in non-oil goods. Significant amounts of Iranian money were being invested in Turkey as a way of avoiding international isolation. Tehran also decided to reinvest some of the capital it had invested in Dubai earlier, because of the increasing American pressure on the latter (Sinkaya, 2012). According to observers, Iran was also trying to make it more difficult for Turkey to support the international sanctions regime by deepening the economic interdependence between them (Habibi, 2012). Various Iranian companies were founded in Turkey, specifically in Istanbul, and these investments would reach a volume worth $110 million by 2010. Despite the international sanctions against Iran, the Turkish government was very welcoming of these investments. More generally, the Turkish business climate improved drastically during the 2002-2011 period, yet again an example of the AKP economic strategy.
Turkey opened up for foreign investors and the government has provided them with a lot of support. By 2010, an impressive total of 1,470 Iranian firms were active in Turkey, compared to 319 businesses in 2002. In 2011, this number grew even more dramatically to a total of 2,072 Iranian firms. The majority of them was involved in Turkish-Iranian trade activities, but a significant number was also used to obtain access to the European market, which wasn’t possible for firms based in Iran because of the international sanctions regime.

Many Turkish entrepreneurs also decided to invest in Iran, particularly in the real estate sector (Habibi, 2012). Admittedly, some major companies, like TAV and Turkcell, did not succeed at developing a sustainable, lasting investment after interventions by the Iranian government. These two cases served as a reminder that despite the growing trade ties, the Iranian economy was still an illiberal, state-controlled market (Demiryol, 2013). However, this did not affect Turkish interest and enthusiasm regarding the economic possibilities in Iran, and some investments would turn out to be very successful (Sinkaya, 2012). A famous example is Turkish company Gübretas, which took over a major Iranian chemical enterprise, Razi Petrochemical, in 2008. Another huge project is that of the Ozal Investment Group, which constructed a commercial complex in Tehran worth $400 million (Habibi, 2012). These are just two examples of Turkish investments in the Iranian economy; by 2011, some 200 Turkish firms were active in.

Statistics show that bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran rose gradually during the 2002-2011 period, from a trade volume worth around $1.2 billion in 2001, to $4.3 billion in 2005 and $10 billion in 2010. This trade volume would amount to $16 billion in 2011 (Sinkaya, 2012). However, Turkish exports to Iran remained significantly smaller than its imports from that country, even though during the 2002-2011 period there was an evolution towards a more balanced trade relationship (Habibi, 2012). This trade deficit was not the result of a lack of willingness or enthusiasm of the Turkish business sector, but rather of high tariffs, due to the complex and often very arbitrary Iranian tariff system. These tariffs disproportionally affected most consumer goods that Turkey tried to export and favoured immediate export rivals of Turkey, such as China. However, Turkey was partially able to compensate its trade deficit through tourism. Part of the strategy of both governments in an effort to normalise the bilateral relationship after the 1990s was also to promote cross-border travel and tourism, and this initiative very clearly paid off (Sinkaya, 2012). Some 330,000 Iranian tourists visited Turkey in 2001, compared to an estimated 2.7 million in 2010 (Habibi, 2012). Thus, tourism became an integral part of the Turkish-Iranian relationship.

Regarding the 2002-2011 period, it can generally be concluded that while Iran’s economic ties with the international community gradually became more strained as the result of the international sanctions regime in the context of the Iranian nuclear programme, the Turkish-Iranian economic relationship evolved in the opposite direction and became increasingly more important to both trading partners. Both the Turkish and the Iranian economy gradually became more dependent on one another, with many of
Iranian industrial sectors depending on Turkey as their link to international markets in the context of restrained access to many of the most important markets. While there were other big markets to which Iran still had access, most importantly China, Turkey, according to estimations, was one of the three most important economic partners for Iran in overcoming the sanctions. It should be mentioned that despite their strong development, Turkish-Iranian economic ties have not been completely immune to the effects of the international sanction regime and the pressure of powerful actors such as the United States. Turkey, for example, delayed planned investments in Iran after it was urged to do so by the US. State-led oil Turkish oil company TPAO signed an agreement with the oil ministry of Iran in 2007, stating that the firm would develop three block of the South Pars natural gas field in Iran, but no significant progress was made on the project afterwards, and the Turkish government finally decided against the investment in 2014 (Platts, 2014). However, it is undeniable that the economic ties between the two countries flourished between 2002 and 2011 (Habibi, 2012).

6.2.4. Elites and Individuals

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Turkish ruling class and elite had traditionally always been very sceptical of Iran and its foreign policy motivations towards Turkey (Sinkaya, 2012). There was a constant fear that Tehran would attempt to export its revolutionary model to Turkey and the wider region, thus creating a lot of mistrust between Ankara and Tehran. After the AKP rose to power in 2002, this ‘traditional’ elite gradually started disappearing and being replaced by a more pragmatic ruling class. The small group at the top of society no long mistrusted the Iranian regime like their predecessors did, and they were excited about the idea of working together with Tehran and developing economic ties. The rise to the top of this new, Iran-enthusiastic Turkish elite has very clearly been the merit of the AKP, as has been the change in foreign policy as explained above. It is interesting to explore where these new ideas about what Turkey’s relationship with Iran should look like came from, after decades of very strained relations and mutual mistrust.

In that context, one cannot avoid addressing the role that Ahmet Davutoglu has played in the development of the AKP’s foreign policy. There probably hasn’t been anyone during the period 2002-2011 whose influence on the Turkish foreign policy decision making process has been as big as Ahmet Davutoglu’s. He is widely regarded as the intellectual architect of the AKP’s foreign policy since 2002, first as chief advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan and later as Minister of Foreign Affairs (Demirag & Özpek, 2012). There seems to be an academic consensus that Davutoglu almost singlehandedly changed both the ideology and practice of Turkish foreign policy (Aras, 2009). When the AKP won the Turkish parliamentary elections in 2002, he was one of only a few academics who joined the party (Grigoriadis, 2010). Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan named Davutoglu his chief advisor on foreign policy, an office which he elevated and made more powerful, transforming it from a small bureau to the source of
strategic thinking of the Turkish government. It now provided ideological support for the AKP’s new foreign policy, based on the party’s Islamist background (Murinson, 2006).

Davutoglu had had an extensive career in the field of political science and international relations before he made the decision to switch to politics, and he had already developed his own strategic view on Turkey during his years as an academic (Grigoriadis, 2010). His early publications were based on rather outdated geopolitical models, but during the 1990s and early 2000s, he drastically changed his vision. A lot of his work was still focused on geopolitics, but he now started adding new and more liberal elements to his work, emphasising the importance of concepts such as ‘soft power’, ‘win-win solutions’, and ‘conflict resolution’. In 2001, he published ‘Strategic Depth’, arguably his most famous and important work to date, in which he elaborately illustrated his strategic view for Turkey. The book’s main argument is that Turkey has ‘strategic depth’ as a result of history and geography; therefore, he considers his country to be part of a small group of ‘central powers’. Thus, an exclusively regional role is not enough for a central power like Turkey. Rather, it must take up the role of leader in several regions and acquire more global strategic significance in doing so. Davutoglu states that Turkey is not just a Middle Eastern country, but that it is also a Mediterranean, Caspian, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Gulf, and Black Sea power, and that it can and must exercise influence in all these areas.

In other words, a state like Turkey can become an important global strategic actor through strong regional bilateral ties. Thus, guided by Davutoglu, the focus of Turkish foreign policy shifted towards the Middle East and North Africa (Coskun, 2015, p. 189). As chief advisor, Davutoglu introduced the ‘zero problems with neighbours’ policy, an excellent example of his newly found interest in liberal concepts such as soft power. This policy would become the basis of all the decisions of the Turkish government concerning its neighbouring countries. Perhaps the most obvious example of this policy in practice are the efforts of Turkey, together with Brazil, regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, as explained above. Rather than siding with its more traditional allies like the United States, Turkey decided to take up the role of mediator and even to defend Iran’s right to a nuclear programme (Bonab, 2009). This mediating roll allowed Ankara to expand its influence in the region, as well as to strengthen ties with Tehran, two objectives of Davutoglu’s foreign policy. Moreover, Davutoglu himself, in his capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs, was very actively and personally involved in the negotiations between Turkey, Iran, Brazil and the 5+1 countries (Hafeza, 2010). The importance given to strong regional ties by Davutoglu also explains the emphasis throughout his work on economic interdependence and its consequent importance in Turkish foreign policy (Cohen, 2016). He regularly describes this as one of the main tools for countries to expand their strategic depth in their neighbourhoods, and the most important enabler of regional peace. During the 2002-2011 period, significantly increasing bilateral trade and investment volumes characterised Turkey’s economic relations with its neighbours, and specifically with Iran (Coskun, 2015, p. 189). As explained above, the Turkish government made active efforts to stimulate the economic ties with Iran, yet another example
of Davutoglu’s theory being applied on real policy measures. It can thus be concluded that the rapprochement between Turkey and Iran from 2002 onwards was heavily impacted by the ideas and policies of Ahmet Davutoglu.

6.2.5. Conclusion

From 2002 onwards, there was a clear détente and rapprochement between Turkey and Iran. In a context of converging geopolitical interests, such as battling Kurdish rebel groups PKK and PJAK and guaranteeing the stability of Iraq, Ankara and Tehran developed closer ties. Not only did they increase diplomatic efforts to improve bilateral relations, as Turkey did by putting a lot of effort into the negotiations regarding a nuclear deal for Iran, but economic interdependence between the two neighbours also grew exponentially, with bilateral trade exploding from a volume worth around $1 billion in 2001 to $16 billion in 2011. The switch in foreign policy approaches in both Turkey and Iran around 2002 played an important role in this process, and it is worth noting the impact of the ideas of Ahmet Davutoglu.


6.3.1. Overview: A Challenging Period

The period of rapprochement between Turkey and Iran that had started around 2002 came to a sudden halt with the emergence of the Arab Spring in 2011. As this movement spread through the region, it became increasingly clear that it caused a strategic divide between Ankara and Tehran (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2017). It was especially the Syrian Civil War, which started after mass protests in Syria were violently ended by the Assad regime, that would prove to be a major obstacle in the Turkish-Iranian relationship after 2011.

The war in Syria and other strategic differences led to a clear deterioration of Turkish-Iranian relations between 2011 and 2016. In 2015, Ali Younesi, the Iranian Advisor to the President on Minority Affairs, declared in a statement that ‘Everyone who lives on the Iranian plateau will have our support and we will defend them against the hazards of Islamic fanaticism, takfirism, atheism, neo-ottoman domination, Wahhabi domination, and Western and Zionist domination’, effectively putting Neo-ottomanism3 on the same level as Wahhabism and Zionism and sparking outrage in Turkey. This incident was a telling example of the troubled Turkish-Iranian relationship and the frustration in Tehran over Ankara’s approach to the Syrian Civil War.

It is also necessary to mention the nuclear deal that was agreed between Iran and the P5+1 countries in April 2015 (Borger & Lewis, 2015). This deal promised a gradual lifting of the international sanctions

3 Neo-ottomanism is a foreign policy view in Turkey that says that the modern Republic of Turkey should seek more engagement with regions that were once under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (Ozkan, 2016).
against Iran in return for drastic cuts in Tehran’s nuclear programme. Since this lifting of sanctions would clearly influence Turkey’s trade relations with Iran, it is interesting to note that Ankara was not involved in the negotiations of the deal. This might not seem remarkable, since no Middle Eastern countries were part of the negotiations, but it was Turkey that, together with Brazil, had made huge diplomatic efforts to negotiate a deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries only a few years earlier, as explained above. These earlier negotiations, in 2010, took place at a time of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran; 5 years later, the situation had dramatically changed, and Turkey didn’t actively pursue a role in the Iran-P5+1 negotiations, thus perhaps a nuclear deal for Iran was no longer a priority for Turkey.

6.3.2. Geopolitical Context

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, and the subsequent Syrian Civil War, have undoubtedly been the developments in international politics between 2011 and 2016 with the biggest influence on the Turkish-Iranian relationship. When the popular protests first caused a stir throughout the Arab World, both Turkey and Iran seemed to be excited about the prospect of political change in the region, and saw an opportunity to expand their influence (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014). Both countries thought of their own political system as the model which the other states in the Arab world should evolve towards. However, these two models were complete opposites, with Turkey envisioning a combination of local traditions with liberal values such as democracy, human rights, and a market economy, and Iran supporting an ‘Islamic Awakening’ and a 1979-style revolution. Thus, these two visions for the future of the region very obviously conflicted.

To analyse how these developments have affected Turkish-Iranian ties, it is important to understand the approach and actions of both countries with regard to the Arab uprisings and the Syrian conflict. From the very beginning of the conflict in 2011, Turkey publicly condemned the actions of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, and demanded his resignation (Burch, 2011). Ankara actively engaged in the conflict, first and foremost as a humanitarian actor, hosting an astonishing 1.5 million Syrian refugees on its territory over the years (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014). This figure is often overlooked when discussing the Turkish involvement in the Arab Spring, even though it partially explains why the stakes are so high for Ankara. Turkey also tried to empower moderate forces and isolate extremists through its ‘proactive diplomacy’, but throughout the entire period from 2011 until 2016 it failed to effectively do so. Lastly, Turkey also got militarily involved in the Syrian Civil War, in different ways. Shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, Turkish military intelligence started training dissidents of the Syrian army on Turkish territory. This would result in the emergence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which would become one of the biggest and most powerful rebel factions in the conflict. Ankara also provided Syrian rebels with arms (The Guardian, 2015). Turkey initially expected a quick victory against the Assad regime, because of the enormous international pressure and the support for the rebels, but it did not take into account the
importance of Syria in the regional strategy of Iran and Russia, and never expected those countries to get involved in the conflict as much as they did (Unver, 2016).

The relation between the Assad regime and Turkey deteriorated significantly after the Syrian army shot down a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012 (BBC News, 2012). This incident led to serious tensions around the Turkish-Syrian border and a number of armed clashes in October 2012 (Weaver & Whitaker, 2012). Finally, on 24 August 2016, Turkey announced a direct military intervention in Syria, called ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’, which was aimed at combating both Islamic State (IS) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG)\(^4\) in Syria (Al Jazeera, 2016).

From early on, Tehran was seen as a loser of the Arab Spring (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014). Observers assumed that the protestors would overthrow ideological regimes such as the Syrian Ba’athist regime, which would isolate Iran as the last ideological stronghold in the region. However, Iran reacted very quickly and efficiently while other major players were still looking for allies. Since Tehran risked losing a historical strategic ally in Damascus, the stakes were much higher (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2017). Iran thus immediately rejected the uprising in Syria as a plot by the West to harm an anti-Israeli stronghold. When the protests escalated and turned into a conflict, Tehran accused Ankara of conspiring with the US to achieve regime change in Syria, and Turkey did indeed commit itself to the resignation or removal from power of Bashar al-Assad. This clearly formed a breaking point between the two neighbours and put severe tension on the bilateral relationship. The aforementioned Turkish support for the FSA caused outrage in Iran and pushed the two countries further apart.

Iran also actively engaged in the Syrian Civil War. Tehran immediately declared its full support for the Assad regime and helped it to crack down on protestors in 2011 (Tisdall, 2011). Since the start of the conflict, the Syrian army received advice and assistance from Iranian security and military services. This assistance consisted not only of training and technical support, but also of Iranian ‘boots on the ground’ in Syria, of which an estimated 10,000 were active by late 2013 (Sherlock, 2014). Iran also backed the Syrian regime financially with billions of dollars (Lake, 2015). Furthermore, Tehran actively engaged in the battle against IS, both in Syria and Iraq, backing Shiite militias and sending members of its own Quds Force\(^5\) for that purpose (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroglu, 2015). Major General Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Quds Force, was a key actor in leading and coordinating the activities of Shiite factions in Syria and Iraq.

‘Conflict’ as a term is too strong to describe the relationship between Turkey and Iran in Syria between 2011 and 2016, but it is fair to say that Ankara and Tehran engaged in an indirect rivalry during this

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\(^4\) The People’s Protection Units (YPG) is a Kurdish armed group with significant ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) (Barnard & Hubbard, 2018). The YPG is the most important group within the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), the United States military’s official partner in the Syrian conflict.

\(^5\) The Iranian Quds Force is an elite unit within the IRGC with extraterritorial tasks (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroglu, 2015).
period. Here, it must be emphasised that this was always fought either through proxy actors, or at least never directly between both Turkish and Iranian armed forces. Turkish-supported groups would at time clash with Iranian-backed factions, such as the bloody confrontation between the Free Syrian Army and Iranian troops, hence the use of the term ‘rivalry’ (Mandhai & Younes, 2017). It can be assumed that it was never the goal of Ankara or Tehran to engage in a direct confrontation with each other’s military, and Turkish and Iranian forces did indeed never fight on the battleground. However, material support for different actors and the involvement of Iranian troops in the Syrian Civil War severely strained the Turkish-Iranian relationship from 2011 to 2016 (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2017).

Many observers wondered if the Sunni-Shia divide that exists in the Islamic world would play a role in the Turkish-Iranian split over the Syrian Civil War, as the majority of the Turkish population is Sunni, while the Iranian regime is a Shia-based Islamic theocracy. It is tempting to simplify the alliances in the Syrian Civil War and state that Shiite Iran supports the Alawite6 Syrian regime, while Turkey, with its predominantly Sunni population, backs the Sunni Syrian opposition. Some scholars have argued that the Turkish approach sparked Iranian fears that the Syrian government would be overthrown and replaced by a predominantly Sunni leadership, and that the Shia Iranian government therefore decided to financially and militarily support the Syrian regime (Rafizadeh, 2016). Following this reading of the events, the Sunni-Shia split would form an additional field of tension between Turkey and Iran. However, this does not seem to have been the case (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2017). Other than with Saudi-Arabia, Iran didn’t accuse Turkey of engaging in sectarianism. Even though the Turks let sectarian groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra use Turkish territory to reach Syria, Iran didn’t frame these actions in a Sunni-Shia discourse.

Another geopolitical issue that has always been a divisive subject in Turkish politics and that is also of interest to Iran, is the Kurdish question, since both countries have a Kurdish minority and are thus affected by Kurdish nationalism. This issue continued to play an important role in the Turkish-Iranian relationship from 2011 to 2016, especially in the context of the Syrian Civil War. During the summer of 2011, there was increased activity in the PKK campaign against Turkey, killing multiple Turkish soldiers and sabotaging a Turkish-Iranian gas pipeline (Al Jazeera, 2011a; Al Jazeera, 2011b). In a reaction, Turkish forces bombed Kurdish targets in northern Iraq (Al Jazeera, 2011c). Similarly, the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched an offensive against the PJAK in Iraq around the same time (Dehghan, 2011). The offensive lasted until September, when the PJAK accepted a ceasefire and pledged to stay away from the Iranian border, stop attacks on Iranian soil and end the recruiting of Iranian citizens (Demiryol, 2013). It would be expected that Ankara and Tehran would understand each other’s struggles with Kurdish rebels, and initially this appeared to be the case when they announced

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6 The Alawites are a group within the Shia branch of Islam, who, like Shia Muslims, revere Ali, the Prophet Mohammed’s cousin and son-in-law (Spencer, 2016). Unlike Shia Islam, however, they have incorporated elements of other religions into their faith, and they worship a Holy Trinity, consisting of Mohammed, Ali, and Salman the Persian, a companion of the Prophet.
that they would cooperate against the PKK and the PJAK at a joint press conference in October 2011 (Al Jazeera, 2011d).

However, the Kurdish question would soon turn out to be a problematic issue. Ankara started a ‘solution process’ with the PKK in late 2012, but this initiative failed and the armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK resumed in 2015 (Sinkaya, 2017). It is widely reported that Iran put pressure on the PKK to resume its armed conflict and to undermine the ‘solution process’, because Tehran was afraid that a withdrawal of PKK forces would form a national security threat for Iran, as they could join the PJAK. Iran also started developing closer military and strategic ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after these events, and it decided to expand its economic relationship with the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) (Rafizadeh, 2016). It is no coincidence that this happened around the time that the US started to withdraw its troops from Iraq in 2011; there was some kind of ‘influence vacuum’ to fill, and Tehran would gladly jump in to do exactly that (Gourlay, 2016, p. 118). Proof of the improving political ties was the 2011 visit of Massoud Barzani, president of Iraqi Kurdistan, to Tehran, where he met Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Richards, 2013). A few years later, in August 2013, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, travelled to Iran for the inauguration of the newly elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Moreover, in 2014 after it was announced that Iran had been supplying weapons and ammunition to Iraqi Kurdish forces (Coles, 2014). But between 2011 and 2016, there was a big improvement of the economic relationship between Iran and the KRI in particular; in 2012, an Iranian-Kurdistan Region Economic Forum was held, which included a visit to Iraqi Kurdistan by Iranian officials with a delegation of more than 100 Iranian companies. In July 2013 it was announced that a bilateral trade agreement between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan had been signed, and that bilateral trade would surpass $4 billion.

This effort by Iran to develop a closer relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan made Tehran a political and economic competitor in northern Iraq for Ankara, which already had a historic relationship with the KRI. Because of Iran’s close relationship with the Iraqi regime, Turkey had no immediate natural ally in Iraq when the withdrawal of the Americans began (Gourlay, 2016). To maintain influence in the country, it therefore made even bigger investments in Iraqi Kurdistan than Iran did, helping to finance big infrastructure projects to obtain political leverage. By 2013, Turkish companies made up half of all foreign companies registered in the KRI. Bilateral trade between Turkey and the region was worth $8 billion, double the volume of the KRI’s trade with Iran (Coles, 2014). Thus, it is clear that both Turkey and Iran wanted to expand their influence in the region. Ankara’s influence in the KRI was already big because of its historical relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan, while Iran started efforts to obtain more influence from 2011 onwards. This created an additional area of tension between Ankara and Tehran.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the reaction of both countries to Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Yemen in 2015. After the Houthis, a Shia rebel group, took over the Yemeni presidential palace in January 2015, the Saudi Arabian government, along with the governments of other Gulf states,
condemned what they called the ‘coup’ in Yemen (Reuters, 2015). Two months later, in March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention in Yemen against the Houthi rebels, together with a coalition of 10 countries (Al Jazeera, 2015). Iran, an ally of the Shia Houthis, reacted angrily and demanded the immediate halt of the military operation and withdrawal of foreign military forces out of Yemen. It has been widely reported that Iran had been financially and militarily backing the Houthis since before the start of the Yemeni Civil War (Schmitt & Worth, 2012). It is also suspected that Tehran has stepped up its efforts to support the rebels and counter Saudi Arabia’s military efforts since the outbreak of the conflict, though the Saudi-led coalition and its allies, among which the United States, have struggled to deliver concrete evidence to support these claims (Cooper & Ismay, 2017).

Turkey, on the other hand, stated that it supported the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and that it might consider providing logistical support (France 24, 2015). In a reaction, Turkish President Erdogan also stated that Iran must withdraw from Yemen. These opposite reactions and strategic positions of Ankara and Tehran are probably a symptom of their diverging geopolitical interests over the 2011-2016 period, rather than one of the grounds for this strategic divide. In other words, by the time that the Saudis intervened in Yemen, Turkish and Iranian strategic interests were already so far apart that their different reactions to these events were a logical consequence, rather than forming the basis of their strategic split.

6.3.3. Economic Relationship

Despite all the differences and tensions explained in the previous section, Turkish President Erdogan called Iran his ‘second home’ when he visited the country in January 2014 (Ben Taleblu & Tahiroglu, 2015). This seems surprising, but it is important to look at the context in which these words were spoken. Erdogan visited Tehran to finalise a preferential trade agreement with Iran. A few months later, in June, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made a similar trip to Ankara, which resulted in 10 Turkish-Iranian cooperation agreements. These events, and especially the fact that Turkish and Iranian leaders put so much effort into economic diplomacy despite the great geopolitical difficulties between their countries, signalled the enduring importance of the bilateral trade relationship to both countries. In order to assess the actual significance of economic ties and bilateral trade to the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2011 and 2016, it is necessary to take a closer look at some trade statistics. To come to a relevant conclusion, it is also important to include pre-2011 bilateral trade volumes in this section. Therefore, statistics for 2010 are included here as well.

Export from Turkey to Iran was worth $3 billion in 2010 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2018a). This number remained roughly the same in 2011, but increased dramatically to almost $10 billion in 2012, more than 3 times the volume of just 2 years earlier. In 2013, Turkish export to Iran fell back to around $4 billion in 2014 and 2015, and slightly increased to almost $5 billion in 2016, still only half of the 2012 number. Iranian export to Turkey was worth $7.6 billion in 2010 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2018b). In 2011, this number reached $12.5 billion, and this remained at the same level in 2012. From
2013, there has been a gradual decline of Iranian export to Turkey, with the volume decreasing every year and hitting a low in 2016, reaching $4.7 billion.

Both Turkish and Iranian export peaked in 2012, with total bilateral trade reaching a volume of almost $22 billion, and fell back sharply afterwards (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). This makes the aforementioned economic diplomacy after 2012 even more interesting. One would expect a combination of serious geopolitical tensions and declining bilateral trade to lead to a decrease of (economic) diplomacy, but this has clearly not been the case for Turkey and Iran. Putting these trade statistics into context should therefore help to understand this evolution.

When looking at Iran’s general trade statistics, there is a clear trend of sharply declining export volumes after 2012 (Trading Economics, 2018). In other words, this decline is not unique to the Turkish-Iranian relationship. It is difficult to single out one specific reason for this evolution. However, the fact that 30 Iranian banks, including the Iranian Central Bank, were banned from using the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Communication (SWIFT)7 for international transactions in March 2012 has probably had a negative influence on Iran’s export sector. SWIFT expelled these Iranian banks in accordance with sanctions imposed on Iran by the European Union, making it significantly more difficult for them to conduct international business and effectively isolating Iran even more from the world economy.

Furthermore, it should be noted that export from Turkey to Iran remained consistently above the pre-2011 level after 2011, despite the sharp decline after 2012 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2018a). Thus, the Turkish export volume of almost $10 billion was an outlier, while this volume has been stable for the rest of the 2011-2016 period. The exceptional export volume of 2012 might be related to the so called ‘gas-for-gold’ or ‘oil-for-gold’ scheme between Turkey and Iran. The export of gold from Turkey to Iran increased dramatically to $6 billion in the first seven months of 2012, making up 75 percent of the total export volume (Larrabee & Nader, 2013). The fact that the loophole in the American sanctions that made this scheme possible was closed by the Obama administration in 2013 could also be one of the factors that explain the decrease of bilateral trade after 2012 (Dubowitz & Schanzer, 2013). In the next section, this scheme is elaborately discussed.

Despite the decline after 2012, it can be concluded that bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran remained of great importance to both countries throughout the entire period from 2011 to 2016. This explains the continuous diplomatic efforts of both Ankara and Tehran regarding their economic ties and their willingness to make new agreements to expand their economic interdependence.

7 SWIFT is a provider of secure financial messaging services, enabling safe international financial transactions between banks (SWIFT, 2018). The company connects more than 11,000 banks and security organisations, and has its headquarters in Belgium. Since SWIFT is so widely used, it is difficult to make international financial transactions without the system.
6.3.4. Elites and Individuals

In late 2013, a corruption scandal in which high-profile figures connected to the AKP were allegedly involved sent shock waves through Turkey. On 17 December of that year, 52 people, including the sons of three ministers of the Turkish government at the time, were arrested in Turkey as part of three different corruption investigations (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013a). One of the people who was detained that day was Reza Zarrab, an Azeri-Iranian-Turkish businessman and the main subject of one of the aforementioned investigations. He was accused of paying bribes to members of the Turkish government to help him cover suspicious financial transfers and to obtain Turkish citizenship for his family and members of a crime ring he supposedly was part of.

What is interesting with regard to the Turkish-Iranian bilateral relationship is that a year earlier, in 2012, Turkish investigators had discovered illegal money transactions to Iran via Halkbank, one of the biggest state-owned Turkish banks. Rumours had been spreading ever since that the bank was involved in operations that breached sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States, and thus were illegal. This caused Halkbank to release an official statement to deny these accusations, amongst calls by several US Senators to sanction the bank. When Zarrab was detained, he was also accused of paying bribes to Turkish government officials and executives of Halkbank to facilitate such transactions to Iran. Investigators suspected that Zarrab transferred gold to Iran in 2012 in exchange for money, using his connections to a number of high-profile politicians (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013b). Turkish police found $4.5 million in cash in the house of Süleyman Aslan, the general manager of Halkbank, money supposedly used as a bribe to persuade Turkish Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan to cooperate in Reza Zarrab’s Iranian gold trading scheme (Yetkin, 2013a).

The investigations and arrests heavily impacted the AKP. On 25 December, only a few days after the police raid, three of the Turkish ministers named in the investigations were forced to resign (Yetkin, 2013b). After Interior Minister Muammer Güler and Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan quit their position in the morning, Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Erdogan Bayraktar announced his resignation in a television interview, stating that he did not wish to be known as a corrupt minister since Prime Minister Erdogan was aware of everything he had done, and that he should resign too. According to reports, the whistle-blowers who tipped off the police claimed that the son of Erdogan, Bilal, was also involved (Orucoglu, 2015). Shortly after, an audio recording of an alleged phone call between Erdogan and his son was released on YouTube in which Erdogan told his son to urgently get rid of tens of millions of dollars. Erdogan called the recordings ‘fabricated’ and a ‘montage’ created to make him look bad, but multiple experts refused to believe that (BBC News, 2014). Erdogan described the entire corruption investigation as a coup attempt targeting him and his government, and the Turkish government dismissed thousands of police officers, prosecutors, and judges in the aftermath of the 17 December arrests (Orucoglu, 2015).
It is necessary to take a closer look at the gold trading scheme in which Reza Zarrab was involved in order to better understand the impact it had on the Turkish and Iranian economies and the relationship between Ankara and Tehran. In 2011, Turkey exported a total amount of gold worth $1.5 billion, and imported a volume worth $6.2 billion (Sönmez, 2013). Within one year, those numbers exploded, with export overtaking import and rising to an astonishing $13.3 billion in 2012, while import grew to $7.6 billion. In 2013, import grew significantly again, to $13 billion.

To understand why gold trade skyrocketed in just two years’ time, one has to look at the wider context. At the time, US-led financial sanctions against Tehran prevented Iran from getting paid by the Turks in dollars or euros for its gas and oil, which formed a serious problem for both countries (Dubowitz & Schanzer, 2013). Thus, a way to bypass these sanctions had to be found. It was agreed that Turkey would pay for Iranian gas and oil in Turkish liras. Iran had no use for these liras on the international financial markets, so it used this money to buy gold in Turkey, which it received directly from Ankara as well as through the United Arab Emirates, as a way of trying to avoid causing too much concern in the US. The majority of the gold was imported from Switzerland, since gold reserves in Turkey were limited. This gold then allowed Tehran to buy foreign currency and increase its dwindling foreign exchange reserves, which had gravely been affected by the international sanctions regime.

The Obama administration introduced new sanctions on precious metals trade against Iran in 2012, thus making it almost impossible for Turkey to sell gold to Iran without breaching these sanctions. However, these rules only applied to trade with the Iranian government and its institutions, and didn’t technically prohibit gold trade with ‘private entities’ in Iran. A group of high profile figures in Turkey and Iran, led by Reza Zarrab, made use of this ‘golden loophole’ to set up a gas-for-gold trade system worth billions of dollars, operating through Halkbank to make the necessary transactions. Ali Reza Bikdeli, the Iranian ambassador to Turkey, would later praise the bank for its ‘smart management decisions in recent years’ and state that they ‘played an important role in Iranian-Turkish relations’. Halkbank has stated that nothing about these transactions was illegal. This ‘golden loophole’ was closed by the Americans in January 2013, but the Obama administration decided not to sanction Halkbank for its role in the trade scheme. The administration insisted that Turkey had only transferred gold to private Iranian citizens, thus not breaching American sanctions. However, observers suspect that the administration was trying to protect its fragile relationship with Turkey, a strategic ally in the region. The Obama administration also lobbied heavily for the new legislation that closed the loophole not to take effect for another 6 months after it was voted, thus allowing the scheme to continue until July and Iran to obtain gold worth billions of dollars more. This also may have been a way for the Obama administration to show its good intentions to Iran at a time of difficult negotiations regarding what would end up being the nuclear deal.

As explained above, Reza Zarrab was the key figure in this scheme, but the fact that 52 individuals were detained on 17 December 2013 shows that he wasn’t operating on his own. On the contrary, the involvement of several high-profile figures, such as the sons of three Turkish ministers, and the fact that
Prime Minister Erdogan’s name has been indirectly linked to the investigation, proves that at least some part of the Turkish ruling elite was aware of the scheme and supported it. Zarrab has even claimed that Erdogan was personally aware of the scheme and approved it (Weiser, 2017). Of course, Zarrab couldn’t manage the entire operation from Turkey, so he inevitably needed partners in Iran, and some people in Iran did indeed have a lot to gain from bypassing the international sanctions regime.

Consequently, part of the ruling elite in Iran was involved in the scheme as well. The most important actor on Iranian side was Babak Zanjani, a multi-billion dollar business tycoon and head of Sorinet Group⁸, who cooperated closely with Reza Zarrab (Erdbrink, 2013). He was a key facilitator of the scheme through his involvement with the Naftiran Intertrade Company and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), two of the most important companies in the Iranian gas and oil industry (Unver, 2016). Zanjani was arrested by the Iranian police on 31 December 2013 and was accused of corruption, as he would have fraudulently transferred 2.8 billion dollars that were part of the gas-for-gold scheme to his own off-shore private bank accounts (Hürriyet Daily News, 2014a). He was sentenced to death by an Iranian court on 6 March 2014 (Hürriyet Daily News, 2014b).

His role in the scheme is undeniable; Zanjani himself has stated in the past that he ‘used a spider web of 64 companies in Dubai, Turkey and Malaysia to sell millions of barrels of oil, earning $17.5 billion in desperately needed foreign exchange for Iran’s Oil Ministry, Revolutionary Guards and central bank’ (Erdbrink, 2013). It is highly suspected that Zanjani was operating as a middleman for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)⁹, which he himself had been part of in the past (Unver, 2016). This should come as no surprise, since the IRGC is Iran’s most important economic actor, controlling a significant percentage of the country’s GDP (Negahban, 2017). Especially after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections, the IRGC had become omnipresent in Iran’s economic life. Ahmadinejad granted the Guard billions of dollars in government contracts and provoked the emergence of an international sanctions regime that conveniently eliminated the IRGC’s foreign competitors. A good example of this dynamic are the South Pars oil and gas fields, of which the IRGC became the only contractor, gaining them enough revenue to found countless small-scale companies through which it raised its economic power to unprecedented levels. However, while the international sanctions expanded the IRGC’s wealth to some point, they limited further development beyond that

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⁸ Sorinet Group is a group of some 60 companies and banks based in Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Gardner, 2013). It is now suspected that many of those companies were established as a front to facilitate the sanctions evasion scheme (Rasmussen, 2016).

⁹ The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution as a deliberately ideological force to protect the Islamic Republic in a more reliable way than the Iranian army, which was historically loyal to the Shah (Negahban, 2017). According to the Iranian constitution, the IRGC has 3 duties: first, defending the country against foreign attacks and agents; second, fighting counterrevolutionary forces that pose a threat to the internal security of the country, gathering intelligence on threats to the regime and execute judicial decisions; and third, supporting global ‘liberation’ movements. Today, 150,000 people work for the IRGC, coexisting alongside but independently from the army, and its activities are far more wide-spread than those of the army.
point, especially by the end of the 2000s, when new American and European sanctions made it increasingly difficult for Iran to export its gas and oil.

Thus, part of the ruling elite in Tehran, namely the IRGC, had an interest in setting up a trade scheme to bypass international sanctions too. The Guard reportedly approached Zanjani for the first time in 2010 through its construction firm Khatam al-Anbia, which could no longer repatriate money from abroad as a result of the international sanctions (Erdbrink, 2013). Using his own banking firm, Zanjani managed to free $40 million for Khatam al-Anbia in just a few days. From that point onwards, several institutions of the Iranian state, such as the aforementioned NIOC, sought his help, effectively making him the most powerful middleman of the Iranian oil industry. According to witnesses, he directly dealt with the most powerful figures in the business, such as Rostam Qasemi, a former Iranian oil minister. He would prove to be a key actor in the Turkish-Iranian gas-for-gold scheme. After Iran was banned from using the SWIFT network, as explained above, Zanjani obtained stakes in the First Islamic Investment Bank (FIIB), based in Malaysia. Zanjani and Iranian officials could then use the FIIB’s SWIFT codes to transfer money from Iran, via several companies and banks based in different countries, to Turkey, to buy the aforementioned gold, that would then be smuggled into Iran, either directly or via the United Arab Emirates. Zanjani has stated that he facilitated the sale of 24 million barrels of oil.

Zanjani was finally arrested months after the election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013, who had decided to diminish the influence of Ahmadinejad-era officials and the almighty IRGC in Iranian society (Unver, 2016). Bijan Zangeneh, the newly appointed oil minister, tellingly condemned the role of the IRGC in the energy sector, accusing the Guard of corruption and bribery. The IRGC reacted by stating that Iran would not have been able to survive the international sanctions regime without them. The Guard also declared that it would continue to pursue its interests in the energy sector.

6.3.5. Conclusion

After a period of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran and a significant development of economic ties, the Turkish-Iranian relationship faced a number of challenges from 2011 onwards. The biggest issue dividing the two neighbours was the Syrian Civil War, since both countries had radically different visions on who should be supported and what the outcome of the conflict should be. The two countries also competed for influence in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq and backed different sides in the Yemen conflict. Moreover, bilateral trade between Ankara and Tehran collapsed after 2012 and would consistently shrink every year from 2012 until 2016. At the same time, however, there were continuous diplomatic efforts by both countries to improve trade relations. Furthermore, a trading scheme was designed to bypass international sanctions against Iran regarding its nuclear programme and to economically benefit both Ankara and Tehran. Thus, the Turkish-Iranian relationship was under heavy tensions between 2011 and 2016, but it didn’t completely deteriorate.
6.4.  Period 3: 2016-Now

6.4.1.  Overview: Rapprochement 2.0?

On 15 July 2016, a coup attempt took place in Turkey, when a faction within the Turkish military launched an operation to overthrow the government and remove President Erdogan from power (Al Jazeera, 2017). That night, it looked like the attempt was going to be successful, but when news of the coup attempt spread across news channels and social media, thousands of ordinary citizens went out into the streets to protest. The same night, the coup attempt was ended, but 241 people were killed and 2,194 others were injured, leaving the country in shock.

The Turkish government has repeatedly stated that it believes that the coup was organised by Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric who lives in the United States and the leader of Hizmet, a large religious movements with associations, media organisations and schools in Turkey and elsewhere. In the weeks after the failed coup attempt, tens of thousands of suspects linked to Gülen were detained. This purge by the Turkish government has been met with a lot of criticism, and has had a negative impact on Turkey’s foreign relations. The European Union accused President Erdogan and his government of using the coup attempt as an excuse to silence opposition against him and against the AKP. Turkey’s relations with the US have also soured over Washington’s refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen, who resides in Pennsylvania. The Americans argue that there is not enough evidence that Gülen was behind the coup to arrest him.

In that context, Tehran’s reaction to the events of 15 July has been remarkable and extremely significant to the Turkish-Iranian relationship. Just one day after the failed coup attempt, the Iranian government released a statement saying that it fully supported Turkey’s elected government (Reuters, 2017). Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also praised the protesters who helped to end the coup attempt. These supporting remarks came as a surprise to observers after the aforementioned difficulties and differences that had been troubling the Turkish-Iranian relationship since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. As a spokesperson of the Iranian Foreign Ministry would later describe it, Iran’s support for Turkey and its government after 15 July enabled the beginning of a rapprochement in the Turkish-Iranian relationship, calling it ‘a new season’ for Ankara and Tehran (Erkus, 2017). Indeed, there are multiple factors that point at a détente between Turkey and Iran from 2016 onwards, of which Tehran’s reaction to the failed coup attempt might have been the first signal. These factors will be discussed in the following sections.

6.4.2.  Geopolitical Context

As explained above, the war in Syria has been the biggest geopolitical source of tension between Ankara and Tehran since it first started in 2011. Turkey and Iran support different parties in the war and have opposite views of what the outcome of the conflict should be. Though the two neighbours have never
confronted each other directly on the battlefield, they have both expressed their frustration with each other’s strategic position and approach on multiple occasions.

However, in December 2016, Russia, Turkey, and Iran jointly announced that they had chosen Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, as the location of new Syrian peace talks (Middle East Monitor, 2016). The first round of what is known as the ‘Astana Talks’ took place on 23 and 24 January 2017 and resulted in an agreement between Russia, Turkey, and Iran to establish a trilateral monitoring body to enforce the ceasefire in Syria that had been agreed upon between Moscow and Ankara and endorsed by the United Nations one month earlier (Wintour, 2017b). In the margins of this event, Turkey seemed to announce a change in its Syria policy. For years, Ankara had demanded the removal from power of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In Astana, however, Turkish deputy prime minister Mehmet Simsek was quoted saying “We have to be pragmatic, realistic. The facts on the ground have changed dramatically, so Turkey can no longer insist on a settlement without Assad. It is not realistic” (Wintour, 2017a). This effectively moved Turkey’s position a bit closer to Iran’s, as Tehran had always made it very clear that it would not accept any deal that would remove Assad from office (Wintour, 2017b). Since January 2017, there have been multiple rounds of the Astana Talks, so far without many concrete results, proving that differences between Ankara and Tehran have not ceased to exist with the start of this process (Mardasov, 2018). But the mere fact that both Turkey and Iran are willing to engage in talks about such a sensitive subject as the Syrian Civil War is something that would not have been possible a few years before and shows that the dynamic between the two neighbours has changed.

These early signs of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran were confirmed in June 2017, when several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, announced that they were breaking all diplomatic ties with Qatar (Wintour, 2017c). Moreover, they halted all land, sea and air traffic with Qatar, effectively isolating the country from the Gulf region. For years, Qatar had been accused of destabilising the region by supporting terrorist and sectarian groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and Islamic State. However, according to observers, the diplomatic row was in particular the result of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, since Qatar’s good relations with Iran had been frustrating Saudi Arabia for years.

Just a few days after the diplomatic crisis broke out, Turkey demanded the immediate end of the blockade of Qatar (Beaumont, 2017). President Erdogan stated that Turkey would not ‘abandon its Qatari brothers’. Iran initially reacted more reluctantly and did not release an official statement. Instead, President Rouhani told the emir of Qatar “Iran’s airspace, sea and ground transport links will always be open to Qatar, our brotherly and neighbour country” (Erdbrink, 2017a). Two months later, however, Qatar announced that it was fully restoring its diplomatic ties with Iran, after it had recalled its ambassador from Tehran in 2016 in solidarity with Saudi Arabia, whose embassy in Iran had been the subject of vandalism by protestors. In a move to improve ties even more, Turkey and Iran jointly signed a deal with Qatar to boost economic relations on 26 November (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017b).
Yet more grounds for rapprochement were found in September 2017, when the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) organised an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan (McKernan, 2017). As explained above, Turkey and Iran had both been developing closer ties with the KRG between 2011 and 2016 and competed for political and economic influence in the region. Regarding the Kurdish referendum, however, Ankara and Tehran were united in condemning the move by the KRG. They released a joint statement, together with the Iraqi government, in which the three foreign ministers warned that the referendum could jeopardise the gains that had been made against Islamic State in the region. They also stated that they would cooperate on countermeasures if necessary.

An interesting side effect of Turkey’s approach to the Qatar crisis is the impact it has had on Ankara’s position in the international community. In defying Saudi Arabia’s efforts to isolate Qatar from the international community and openly moving closer to Tehran, Ankara effectively severed its ties with Riyadh, thus removing itself further away from the United States-Saudi Arabia axis, as American President Donald Trump spoke out in favour of Saudi Arabia in the Qatar dispute (Beaumont, Siddiqui & Smith, 2017). This is a slow evolution that has been going on for a while, and the fact that Turkey has been moving its foreign policy away from Saudi Arabia and the US has been creating even more space for rapprochement between Turkey and Iran. Only two years before the Qatar crisis, in 2015, Turkey backed Saudi Arabia in the Yemen conflict, as explained above, but Turkish-Saudi relations have deteriorated rapidly since then, with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman recently stating that Turkey is part of a ‘triangle of evil’, along with Iran and extremist Islamist groups (Reuters, 2018).

Similarly, Turkish-American relations have shown a sharp decline in recent years. The refusal of the US to extradite Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is accused by the Turkish government of organising the 2016 failed coup attempt, has soured US-Turkish relations significantly (Farooq, 2017). Another important factor adding to this rift is the American support for the YPG, a group of Syrian Kurdish fighters which is seen by Ankara as an offshoot of the PKK (Gumrukcu & Nehme, 2018). The US has been providing the YPG with weapons, while Turkish troops have been targeting YPG fighters along the Turkish-Syrian border. In January 2018, Turkey launched an air and ground operation called ‘Olive Branch’ in Afrin, a region in northern Syria, to combat the YPG and eliminate what Ankara sees as a security threat to the country. This means that Turkey is now directly confronting a US-backed group, thus putting the Turkish-American relationship under a lot of stress.

It is important to note that Turkey’s operation in Afrin has been met with a lot of criticism from Iran too, proving that the period from 2016 onwards hasn’t brought unequivocal rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran (Al-Monitor, 2018). Despite their efforts regarding the Astana Talks, Turkey and Iran remain supportive of different sides and factions in the Syrian conflict. The strategic approaches of the different actors in Syria are a prime example of the extreme complexity the Syrian Civil War. In the case of Turkey’s Olive Branch operation, the US, the Syrian government army, and Iran are effectively
on the same side of the conflict, since US-backed YPG forces and Iran-backed Syrian government troops are uniting against a Turkish intervention (Tharoor, 2018).

6.4.3. Economic Relationship

Export from Turkey to Iran fell back from a volume worth almost $5 billion in 2016 to $3.2 billion in 2017, while export from Iran to Turkey rose from $4.7 billion in 2016 to $7.5 billion in 2017 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2018a; 2018b). This means that total bilateral trade between Ankara and Tehran grew slightly in 2017, for the first time since 2012. However, bilateral trade is still nowhere near the 2012 level. Statistics for 2018 were not available at the time of writing.

The dream of a 30 billion dollar bilateral trade volume has existed in Turkey and Iran ever since a memorandum of understanding was signed in 2009 (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). The two countries appeared to be on their way to achieve that goal until trade collapsed after 2012, as explained above. However, this idea of raising the trade volume to $30 billion is still very much alive in Ankara and Tehran and was brought up again by Turkish President Erdogan in October 2017 (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017c). One measure that has been taken to raise the bilateral trade volume is a deal that was signed by the central banks of Turkey and Iran later that month in which they agreed to trade in their local currencies. This should lead to a reduction of the costs of currency conversion and thus facilitate bilateral trade.

In the context of Turkish and Iranian efforts to support Qatar against the pressure of the Saudi-led blockade of the country, a trilateral trade and transport agreement was signed on 26 November 2017 by members of the Turkish, Iranian, and Qatari governments (Middle East Monitor, 2017). The goal of the agreement was to facilitate land and sea transport between the three countries, and to establish a working group with members of the three countries to monitor the effectiveness of the deal.

Thus, there is a clear willingness and, more importantly, new-found optimism from both Turkey and Iran to further strengthen and develop trade ties, especially now that the bilateral trade volume is on the rise again. In a recent phone call between Turkish President Erdogan and Iranian President Rouhani, the two leaders expressed their satisfaction with the development of economic ties between their countries (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018).

6.4.4. Elites and Individuals

In terms of the role of elites and individuals in the Turkish-Iranian relationship, there seem to have been no developments since 2016 with a significant impact on Ankara’s or Tehran’s approach to one another. In Turkey, President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are still ruling the country and have tightened their grip on power. By organising a large-scale purge in the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup attempt, the AKP effectively silenced part of the Turkish opposition and expanded its own influence on Turkish society (Hansen, 2017). It needs to be noted that Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu,
whose influence has been explained above, resigned in 2016 in what is widely perceived to be a move by President Erdogan to consolidate his power (Malsin, 2016). However, the recent signs of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran seem to suggest that Davutoglu’s departure has not affected Turkey’s Iran strategy. The AKP gained even more power by winning a referendum in 2017 that allows the Turkish system to be changed into an executive presidential system, thus significantly increasing President Erdogan’s influence (BBC News, 2017b). Hence, the AKP policy with regard to Iran will most likely stay the same in the foreseeable future, unless there are unexpected developments. The same logic applies to Iran. The country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is still in power, as has been the case since 1989, and President Hassan Rouhani was re-elected in 2017 by a wide margin (Erdbrink, 2017b). Thus, Iran’s approach to Turkey will probably also remain unchanged if nothing unexpected happens.

6.4.5. Conclusion

The year 2016 marked a new turning point in the Turkish-Iranian relationship and signalled the beginning of a very cautious new rapprochement between the two neighbours. After years of serious disagreements concerning the Syrian conflict, Turkey and Iran, together with Russia, engaged in the Astana Talks to jointly find a peaceful solution to the war. Furthermore, Ankara and Tehran found that they had mutual interests in the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and a Saudi-led bloc of Arab countries. Both Turkey and Iran backed Qatar, bringing them closer together and leading to the signing of an economic deal between Turkey, Iran, and Qatar. Ankara and Tehran also jointly expressed their concern regarding an independence referendum organised by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and pledged that they would cooperate on countermeasures if necessary. Moreover, bilateral trade between the two countries increased for the first time since 2012. All these signs point at improving Turkish-Iranian relations. However, the rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran is still precarious, as was illustrated by Iran’s outspoken opposition against Turkey’s military intervention in the Afrin region in Syria. This proves that the two neighbours still have grounds for disagreement and thus that the improvement of the bilateral relationship could quickly be reversed again.

6.5. From a Comparison of the Periods to a Theoretical Understanding

Around 2002, the dynamic of the Turkish-Iranian relationship changed drastically. Iran, under the leadership of President Khatami, had already been steering its foreign policy into a new, more open direction, and the Turkish approach switched significantly after the AKP came into power in 2002 (Bas, 2013). Both countries were looking for more cooperation with other states in their region, and in this context, Ankara and Tehran found that from 2002 onwards, they agreed on many policy issues and they shared several strategic interests, such as the stability of Iraq after the US-led military intervention in
As proof of the improving Turkish-Iranian relationship, Ankara also made great efforts to negotiate a nuclear deal for Tehran.

This positive evolution of finding common interests and strategic positions was halted abruptly in 2011 when it quickly became clear that the two neighbours had completely opposite ideas concerning the Arab Spring and the subsequent Syrian Civil War (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2014; Ben Taleblu & Tahirolu, 2015). These events led to enormous tensions between Turkey and Iran and at times resulted in indirect confrontations on the Syrian battle field. Ankara and Tehran also got involved in a competition for political and diplomatic influence in the Kurdish region in North Iraq, and the two neighbours had radically different approaches to the conflict in Yemen (Rafizadeh, 2016; Schmitt & Worth, 2012; France 24, 2015). Thus, the Turkish-Iranian relationship was seriously challenged by geopolitical events between 2011 and 2016.

A new shift in the dynamic between Ankara and Tehran took place in 2016, when the two countries decided to jointly establish the Astana Talks, together with Russia, to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict after years of disagreement and frustration (Middle East Monitor, 2016; Beaumont, 2017). In the following months, Turkey and Iran would also find themselves on the same side in the Qatari diplomatic crisis and the independence referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq (McKernan, 2017). However, Iran’s criticism of Turkey’s military operation in the Syrian Afrin region proves that this new-found rapprochement is still precarious (Al-Monitor, 2018).

Interestingly, the Kurdish question and related issues have always had an impact on the Turkish-Iranian relationship, both in uniting and dividing the two neighbours. Both countries supported a strong Iraq after the American invasion in 2003 to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state (Sinkaya, 2012). Ankara and Tehran were furthermore united in their fight against Kurdish terrorist groups PKK and JPAK (Bas, 2013). While they were still facing this common threat, the Kurdish issue turned into a dividing factor after 2011, when Turkey and Iran started competing for influence in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) (Rafizadeh, 2016). In 2017, however, Ankara and Tehran once again found that their interests regarding the Kurdish question aligned, when they jointly condemned the independence referendum that was organised by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq (McKernan, 2017).

Hence, the evolution of the geopolitical aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship can be summarised as a period of growing cooperation and mutual interests, followed by a period of restraint and serious tensions that posed great challenges to Turkish-Iranian bilateral ties, after which a new rapprochement emerged, though more cautiously. It is important to note that the period of disagreement between 2011 and 2016 never resulted in an actual, direct conflict between Turkey and Iran. Militarily, the two countries managed to avoid direct confrontations on the Syrian battlefield at all times, and diplomatically, there were continuous efforts from both sides throughout this entire period to improve bilateral ties (Ben Taleblu & Tahirole, 2015).
As explained above, the existing literature has thus far explained this consistent stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship through economic interdependence theory (Baghat, 2014; Ben Taleblu & Tahir og lu, 2015; Rafizadeh, 2016). In that context, it is interesting to remark that economic ties between Turkey and Iran from 2002 to 2018 have followed roughly the same pattern as the evolution of the geopolitical factor. From 2002 onwards, bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran grew exponentially, from a volume worth just over $1 billion in 2002 to $16 billion in 2011 (Sinkaya, 2012). Cooperation and trade in the energy sector specifically underpinned this growth. The Turkish and Iranian governments also actively worked to further improve economic relations between the two countries, and bilateral investments soared. Thus, economic ties between Turkey and Iran grew dramatically at a time of favourable geopolitical circumstances. Contrary to the geopolitical difficulties between Ankara and Tehran that arose in 2011 following the Arab Spring, trade between the two countries continued to grow in 2011 and peaked at a volume of $22 billion (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). However, economic ties between Turkey and Iran collapsed in 2013, with the trade volume nearly being halved, marking the beginning of a negative trend that would continue in the following years. With a delay, the economic aspect of the relationship thus seemed to follow the evolution of the geopolitical aspect.

Here it is opportune to answer the research question ‘How has the Turkish-Iranian relationship evolved after 2016?’. As explained above, this year is seen by many as a turning point in Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations. In late 2016, Turkey and Iran, together with Russia, established the Astana Talks, marking the beginning of a new Turkish-Iranian rapprochement. Other geopolitical events, such as the Qatar diplomatic crisis and the Kurdish independence referendum also strengthened ties between the two neighbours. This geopolitical détente was supported by developments on the economic level. In 2017, just one year after the start of the geopolitical rapprochement, the downwards spiral of economic ties between Turkey and Iran was reversed and the bilateral trade volume of the two neighbours, remarkably, grew for the first time since 2012 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2018a; 2018b). Once again, with a delay, economics seemed to follow geopolitics. One could argue that the growth in 2017 has been limited, but as explained above, the geopolitical rapprochement has been cautious and precarious as well.

The fact that the economic relationship seems to follow geopolitical developments could be perceived as a coincidence, since the decline in bilateral trade between Turkey and Iran after 2012 was largely due to international sanctions imposed on the latter. However, it is not the sudden collapse of trade in 2013 but rather the gradual but continuous decline in the years afterwards that stands out. As tensions between Turkey and Iran regarding the Syrian conflict and other geopolitical issues continued to exist and the two countries progressively undertook more actions to support their opposite positions, thus expanding the gap between them, economic relations continued to deteriorate. This trend was reversed in 2017, shortly after the negative evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship on the geopolitical level was halted.
The fact that the economic aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship follows the trends of the geopolitical aspect, partially contradicts the economic interdependence theory that is used in the existing literature, since this explanation assumes that the economic ties between Ankara and Tehran support the stability of the bilateral relationship independently from geopolitical developments (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003, pp. 2-3). Hence, the answer to the question ‘How can economic interdependence theory explain the stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’ is complex and not straightforward. In order to solve it, it is necessary to include the third aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship that was addressed in the literature research section of this paper, the role of elites and individuals. It is not possible to present an overview of the evolution of this aspect of Turkish-Iranian bilateral ties, simply because it is not possible to address all the elites and individuals that have in some way been linked to the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018. Instead, the literature research focused on interesting examples of elites and individuals who seem to have had a genuine impact on the relationship between Ankara and Tehran, and these insights can help to theoretically understand the evolution of Turkish-Iranian relations too.

More than anything, the rapprochement between Turkey and Iran after 2002 was the result of changed foreign policy strategies (Sinkaya, 2012). Iran had been opening up to its neighbours and the wider region under the leadership of President Khatami, but it is clear that the biggest impact came from the changed foreign policy approach of Turkey after the election of the AKP in 2002. This is where the aspect of elites and individuals comes in. As explained above, Turkey’s foreign policy after the AKP came into power was almost singlehandedly designed by Ahmet Davutoglu, first as chief advisor to Recep Tayyip Erdogan and later as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Turkey. As explained by Arreguin-Toft and Mingst (2014, pp. 178-190), individuals can play an important role in foreign policy making, especially when political institutions are unstable, young, in crisis, or collapsed. After years of instability, with for example the ‘28 February coup’ in 1997, the AKP came into power in 2002 and pushed through a number of reforms, effectively limiting the power of the military (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). In the context of these reforms, it can be said that the political institutions in Turkey were ‘young’ when Davutoglu started developing Turkey’s new foreign policy. Although Turkey was, and is, a democracy, the AKP had won the 2002 election so overwhelmingly and had become so big that there were also very few limits to what Davutoglu could do, another condition for individuals to play a significant role according to Arreguin-Toft and Mingst. They also stress the importance of the personality and background of leaders, which is essential in this case. Davutoglu’s background in academia undoubtedly gave him a lot of credibility when he finally started working with the Erdogan government, both with regard to Erdogan himself and with regard to the AKP. This made it easier for him to push through the foreign policy ideas that he had carefully and independently developed as an academic over the years and enabled him to leave his mark on Turkey’s geopolitical strategy.
Thus, Davutoğlu’s foreign policy, aimed at ‘zero problems with neighbours’, laid the groundwork for the post-2002 détente between Turkey and Iran (Demirag & Özpek, 2012). Economic relations between the two countries, especially in the energy sector, would rapidly develop in the years after and become an essential part of the relationship. However, it needs to be stressed that these changed foreign policy approaches by Iran and especially Turkey didn’t automatically lead to stronger bilateral ties and growing trade relations. As important as these efforts and in particular the work of Ahmet Davutoğlu were, these new strategies wouldn’t have stood a chance without the favourable geopolitical conditions. The shared concerns over the invasion in Iraq and common threats by Kurdish separatist movements created the perfect circumstances for policies like ‘zero problems with neighbours’. These approaches would have been much harder to pursue in a situation where Ankara and Tehran disagreed on important strategic issues. In other words, the efforts of elites and individuals, in particular Davutoğlu and the AKP, as well as geopolitical developments enabled the strengthening of economic ties between Ankara and Tehran. Thus, economic interdependence between Turkey and Iran was a result of the rapprochement between the two countries, rather than a driving force behind it.

However, this doesn’t mean that the theory that economic interdependence has been behind the stability of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, as explained in the existing literature, is completely wrong. On the contrary, it is essential to understand the development of Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations after 2011, though not in the way that scholars have described it thus far. The geopolitical events in 2011 and afterwards are proof of the realist assumption that the international system is anarchic (Arreguin-Toft & Mingst, 2014, pp. 108-112). In the years before, geopolitical developments had brought Turkey and Iran together, and now they did the exact opposite. The Syrian Civil War and rivalry in Kurdish Iraq, among other things, put a lot of pressure on the Turkish-Iranian relationship, since the two neighbours strongly disagreed on these issues and resolutely pursued their own national interest. However, they never got into an actual ‘conflict’ with each other. As explained in the theoretical section of this paper, the classic liberal definition of ‘conflict’ is used here, thus referring to all levels of intensity and all areas, including diplomacy and military forces (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003, pp. 16). Again, it needs to be stressed that a military conflict is always rare and the last resort in most cases, but the fact that there was never a diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Tehran despite the circumstances, as there had been in the 1980s and 1990s, is remarkable. On the contrary, Ankara and Tehran continued their diplomatic efforts to improve bilateral ties (Ben Taleblu & Tahirolgu, 2015). Thus, the Turkish-Iranian relationship remained stable despite heavy tensions.

Scholars have theorised that the economic ties between Turkey and Iran, a product of the rapprochement period between 2002 and 2011, kept the two countries from ending up in a conflict. The economic relationship would have been too important to both countries for their governments to jeopardise, as this do major harm to their own economies. However, bilateral trade between Ankara and Tehran collapsed in 2013 and continuously deteriorated in the following years. Once again, this proves the realist
assumption that the Turkish-Iranian economic relationship has never been immune to ‘high politics’. As many observers have pointed out, the main reason behind this setback in bilateral trade were the sanctions imposed on Iran by the US and the EU (Baghat, 2014).

Still, a conflict between the two neighbours never arose and both sides kept taking diplomatic initiatives to improve bilateral ties. To understand this situation, it is important to look back at the period in Turkish-Iranian relations before 2011. As explained above, bilateral trade between the two countries grew exponentially between 2002 and 2012 and reached unprecedented heights. It is during this period that the true foundation of Turkish-Iranian economic cooperation was built and the dream of a $30 billion bilateral trade volume was conceived (Özcan & Özdamar, 2010). The two countries expressed their wish to reach this figure on numerous occasions and got very close in 2012 with a trade volume of nearly $22 billion in 2012 (Bas, 2013). Though bilateral trade collapsed in 2013, this dream was never really given up and the fact that they had gotten so close to achieving it was an incentive for the two countries to keep pursuing it. Of course, bilateral trade remained significant to both Ankara and Tehran after 2012 and though their bilateral trade volume kept shrinking, they were still important economic partners to one another. This has undoubtedly played a role in the stability of the relationship between 2011 and 2016. However, more importantly, it was the possibility of a much greater economic exchange between the two countries, derived from the foundations that were built between 2002 and 2011, that continuously pushed Ankara and Tehran to take diplomatic initiatives and avoid the outbreak of an actual conflict. The trade volume in 2011 and 2012 proved that it was possible to reach the $30 billion dream, and it became a fixation for the two neighbours. It also demonstrates the lasting influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, as he introduced the idea that economic interdependence with neighbours should be an integral part of Turkey’s foreign policy (Cohen, 2016).

Hence, the willingness to cooperate and expand economic ties always remained. This is also reflected in the role of elites and individuals in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2011 and 2016. The answer to the question ‘How have elites and individuals impacted the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’ has already been partially answered by explaining the influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, and is further explained here. The ‘gas-for-gold’ scheme that made extended energy trade between Ankara and Tehran possible after the introduction of severe new international sanctions against Iran would have never existed without the work of individuals such as Reza Zarrab and Babak Zanjani. As explained above, private individuals can influence foreign policy by playing linkage roles between different countries. The apparent ties of both Zarrab and Zanjani to important Turkish and Iranian establishment figures prove that this was the case in the ‘gas-for-gold’ scheme. Zarrab and Zanjani effectively ‘linked’ high-profile figures in the two countries had the support of foreign policy elites in both countries to do so (Yetkin, 2013a; Erdbrink, 2013). The whole affair shows how Turkish and Iranian individuals, together with elite figures in the two countries, took big risks to preserve the strong bilateral trade relationship between Ankara and Tehran, once again proving that even at the most
difficult moments, the two neighbours were seeking cooperation. Thus, between 2002 and 2011, Turkish-Iranian relations were mainly impacted by geopolitical developments and the foreign policy initiatives of the two governments that could thrive in that context, heavily influenced by elites and individuals such as Ahmet Davutoglu. From 2011 to 2016, however, the relationship remained stable under the influence of the economic aspect, and more specifically the dream of a bigger bilateral trade volume. Once again, elites and individuals played an essential role in maintaining bilateral relations and the willingness to cooperate, and countering the negative impact of geopolitics during this period. It can be summarised that throughout the first two periods, elites and individuals have played an essential role in supporting cooperation between Ankara and Tehran.

After a period in which the impact of geopolitics was countered, this aspect regained influence in 2016. As explained above, the international system is anarchic according to realist theory, and the state is the most important actor on this stage. This was demonstrated when Turkey and Iran, together with Russia, established the Astana Talks to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian Civil War. This move must be seen as an attempt by Ankara and Tehran to end the Syrian conflict, a noble and humanitarian objective, while also trying to secure their own national interest and maximise their gains, a classic realist act. It didn’t mark the end of tensions between the two neighbours with regard to Syria, hence the limited success of the talks thus far, but it had a huge symbolic impact on the relationship. Bilateral relations were further eased in the following months by several geopolitical events such as the Kurdish referendum in Iraq and the Qatar diplomatic crisis. Turkey and Iran found that they agreed on these issues and decided to actively work together in their reaction to them because it was in their national interest to do so. Once again, the Turkish-Iranian economic relationship followed the path of this geopolitical rapprochement, and bilateral trade grew in 2017, for the first time since 2012. With regard to the role of elites and individuals, it seems that not much has changed since 2016. The same leaders are still in place in the two countries and they seem to have consolidated their power, which should result in a continuation of the friendly approach of the two countries towards each other. The fact that Turkish President Erdogan emphasised the goal of reaching a $30 billion bilateral trade volume once again in October 2017 seems to confirm this assumption (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017c).

7. Conclusions

The main research question of this paper was ‘Which factors have remained consistent in the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018?’ It is clear that throughout the entire period between 2002 and 2018, geopolitical developments have always had an impact on Turkish-Iranian relations, though not in a consistent way. Before 2011, the geopolitical factor pushed the two neighbours to cooperate more closely and supported the growth of bilateral trade relations. Between 2011 and 2016, however, geopolitics complicated the relationship between Ankara and Tehran and put it under severe tensions, to then switch again from 2016 onwards and favour Turkish-Iranian cooperation. The impact of
geopolitics on the Turkish-Iranian relationship has thus been ambiguous, though it has always had significant influence. More generally, this ambiguity proves the point of realist theory that the international system is anarchic; states are the most important actors on the international stage and they always pursue their national interest. Thus, national interests sometimes align, as was the case between 2002 and 2011, and after 2016. At other times, they clash, in this case between 2011 and 2016.

As explained above, the economic relationship between Turkey and Iran has always followed geopolitical developments. Thus, similarly to the geopolitical aspect of the bilateral relationship, the development of economic relations between Ankara and Tehran between 2002 and 2018 has not been consistent. After a period of intensified cooperation, bilateral trade collapsed in 2013 and would continue to deteriorate until 2017, when it grew for the first time in 5 years. This partially contradicts the point of economic interdependence theory that economic ties between the two countries caused Ankara and Tehran to overcome their strategic differences and cooperate in order to not harm their own economy.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that bilateral trade has played a consistent role in Turkish-Iranian relations in the sense that it has always been one of the most significant aspects of the bilateral relationship. As explained above, during the two periods of favourable geopolitical conditions, economic relations followed the positive evolution of Turkish-Iranian ties and had the chance to expand. However, when the geopolitical context increasingly put pressure on the bilateral relationship between 2011 and 2016, this situation did not lead to a conflict between Turkey and Iran at times when a Qatar-style diplomatic crisis between the two countries could easily have developed. Instead, the two countries continuously tried to improve their bilateral ties. This can partially be explained through bilateral trade between Ankara and Tehran, which remained significant to both countries’ economies despite its sharp decline after 2013. More importantly, however, it was the idea of even bigger trade ties that was conceived before 2011 (the ‘$30 billion promise’) that formed the backbone of the Turkish-Iranian relationship. It pushed Turkish and Iranian leaders to continue diplomatic efforts to improve bilateral ties and prevented the outbreak of a diplomatic or military conflict between the two neighbours. This fits into the economic interdependence narrative, though not in the way that scholars in the existing literature on the Turkish-Iranian relationship have explained it thus far.

This also relates to the third aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship that has been explored in this paper, the role of elites and individuals. This is the only factor that has been consistent throughout the entire 2002-2018 period. As explained above, the work of Ahmet Davutoglu and his focus on economic interdependence between Turkey and its neighbour countries has been essential in the development of the Turkish-Iranian relationship and continues to influence bilateral ties. Moreover, individuals such as Reza Zarrab and Babak Zanjani and the foreign policy elites that supported them played a critical role in sustaining the Turkish-Iranian bilateral trade relationship at the height of international sanctions against Iran. The role of elites and individuals after 2016 is less clear, but statements by Turkish President Erdogan and Iranian President Rouhani indicate that the foreign policy elites in both countries
remain supportive of Turkish-Iranian cooperation. Thus, though cooperation between the two countries was always based on one of the aforementioned factors, elites and individuals have consistently played a crucial supporting role Turkish-Iranian bilateral ties. This proves the point of liberal theory that elites and individual leaders as well as private individuals can play a crucial role in international relations. It is worth further exploring this aspect of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, but this wasn’t possible within the limited scope of this paper.

In conclusion, it is clear that the evolution of the Turkish-Iranian relationship between 2002 and 2018 cannot be explained through one theoretical paradigm. Rather, the combination of aspects of different theories can help to understand Turkish-Iranian relations. With regard to the Turkish-Iranian relationship, the international system has indeed been anarchic, as argued by realist theory, and geopolitics have very clearly initiated the two periods of rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran and have had an effect on the Turkish-Iranian bilateral trade volume. At the same time, economics have underpinned the stability of the bilateral relationship between 2011 and 2016 despite heavy geopolitical tensions, thus supporting liberal claims concerning interdependence and the importance of trade. Moreover, the role of elites and individuals has proved to be essential in the Turkish-Iranian relationship, contrary to the realist assumption that these actors have no impact on international relations.

With regard to this paper’s subtitle, it is difficult to say whether Turkey and Iran are rivals or allies at heart. The rapid rapprochement between 2002 and 2011 and the new-found cooperation after 2016 prove that cooperation and close ties between the two neighbours are possible under the right circumstances, which would not be expected from enemies. More generally, the stability of the relationship throughout the entire 2002-2018 period shows that Ankara and Tehran are definitely not rivals, and diplomatic efforts to improve bilateral ties demonstrate that they do not perceive each other as such. However, the period between 2011 and 2016 was a reality check that proved that the two countries are historically, institutionally, and strategically too different to become actual allies. Hence, it is probably best to describe Turkey and Iran as ‘partners’. This term doesn’t have the same positive connotation as ‘ally’, while it also makes it clear that the two countries are definitely not rivals.
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Inzagerecht in de masterproef (*)

Ondergetekende,

Jules De Neve

 Geeft hierbij toelating / geen toelating (**) aan derden, niet- behorend tot de examencommissie, om zijn / haar (**) proefschrift in te zien.

Datum en handtekening

18 / 05 / 2018

Deze toelating geeft aan derden tevens het recht om delen uit de scriptie/masterproef te reproduceren of te citeren, uiteraard mits correcte bronvermelding.

(*) Deze ondertekende toelating wordt in zoveel exemplaren opgemaakt als het aantal exemplaren van de scriptie/masterproef die moet worden ingediend.

Het blad moet ingebonden worden samen met de scriptie onmiddellijk na de kaft.

(**) schrappen wat niet past.