WHILE IRAN BURNS, TURKEY CALCULATES

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Category: Opinions

By Margarita Krtikashyan, Yerevan, 6 March 2026

The rapid escalation surrounding Iran in early March 2026 is often interpreted as another episode in the long confrontation between Iran, Israel, and the United States. Yet focusing only on that axis risks missing the broader transformation already underway. The current crisis is not simply about Iran's retaliation or Western military pressure. It is about how regional powers are repositioning themselves while the geopolitical balance of the Middle East and the South Caucasus shifts.

Among those actors, Turkey appears to be moving most carefully and potentially most effectively.

The assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, immediately elevated tensions beyond the conventional military sphere. Iranian clerical circles quickly invoked the language of *jihad*, which carries particular weight in Shi'a political theology. While the term is frequently misunderstood in international discussions, Islamic jurisprudence distinguishes between several types of jihad.

In Twelver Shi'a doctrine, offensive jihad (*al-jihad al-ibtida'i*) can only be declared by the Hidden Twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, who, according to Shi'a belief, remains in occultation. Contemporary clerics therefore cannot legitimately proclaim a war of expansion. What they can invoke is defensive jihad (*al-jihad al-difa'i*), declared when Muslim lands or leadership are attacked. The statements attributed to Ayatollah Shirazi appear to fall within this defensive framework.

The doctrinal distinction matters because it shapes the conflict's political logic. A defensive religious framing strengthens domestic mobilization while avoiding the theological complications of initiating a war. It allows Iran's leadership to portray the confrontation not as escalation, but as resistance.

Yet while Iran's rhetoric is anchored in theology, Turkey's reaction reflects a different strategic tradition altogether.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's public statements have been calm and diplomatic. He expressed concern about the American–Israeli strikes against Iran, warned that the region risks entering a "ring of fire," and emphasized dialogue as the preferred solution. At first glance, this might appear to be a conventional call for de-escalation. In reality, it illustrates a long-standing Turkish diplomatic instinct: the ability to position the country simultaneously within multiple strategic narratives.

Turkey condemns Israeli actions in language that resonates across the Muslim world, reinforcing its claim to regional leadership. At the same time, it avoids aligning too closely with Tehran, thereby preserving its relations with NATO partners and Western capitals. This dual posture criticizing both Israel and Iran while presenting itself as a stabilizing actor is characteristic of Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan.

It also reflects a deeper historical pattern. Ottoman diplomacy frequently relied on maintaining strategic flexibility between rival powers rather than committing fully to one side. Modern Turkish

statecraft has refined this approach into a form of calibrated ambiguity that allows Ankara to expand its influence regardless of which side ultimately gains advantage.

Events on March 4 illustrated this balancing strategy in practice. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan held a phone call with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi after a ballistic missile launched from Iran entered Turkish airspace before being intercepted. According to Turkey's Ministry of Defense, the projectile was neutralized by NATO air and missile defense forces deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Fidan reportedly told his Iranian counterpart that all sides must avoid actions that could spread the conflict further. Meanwhile, the Turkish Defense Ministry issued a firm public statement emphasizing that Turkey has the capacity to protect its territory and citizens from any threat.

At the same time, Ankara carefully avoided accusing Iran of deliberately targeting Turkey.

Most analysts believe the missile was likely intended for the American aircraft carrier *USS Gerald R. Ford*, which is currently deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean. If so, the missile's passage through Turkish airspace reflects geographic reality rather than hostile intent toward Ankara.

Turkey's reaction therefore combined three signals simultaneously: reassurance to NATO allies through reference to missile defense cooperation, a warning that Turkish sovereignty will be defended, and diplomatic communication with Tehran to prevent escalation.

This type of multi-layered messaging illustrates why regional instability often strengthens rather than weakens Turkey's position. In conflicts from Syria to Libya to the South Caucasus, Ankara has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to operate within volatile environments while maintaining strategic flexibility.

The same dynamic may now be emerging again.

If Iran emerges from the current crisis weakened whether politically, economically, or militarily Turkey's relative influence in the broader region will increase. Ankara has already consolidated significant influence in Syria and Azerbaijan, and it continues to pursue strategic connectivity projects across the South Caucasus.

At the same time, other regional actors are adjusting their posture. Azerbaijan has reportedly placed military units along its southern border and along the southern line of the territories it controls in Nagorno-Karabakh on heightened alert. While officially described as precautionary, such measures indicate that Baku is closely monitoring developments across the Iranian border.

For Armenia, these developments carry particular significance.

Iran has historically served as one of the few geopolitical counterbalances to Turkish-Azerbaijani influence in the South Caucasus. Even without formal alliance structures, Tehran's presence has helped maintain a degree of strategic equilibrium in the region. If Iran becomes weakened or

internally preoccupied, that equilibrium may shift.

In such a scenario, pressure around regional connectivity projects including proposals for corridors linking Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan could intensify. The broader geopolitical environment would also become less predictable as major powers compete for influence in the aftermath of the Iranian crisis.

Yet Armenia's official response to the unfolding situation has so far remained limited. Government statements have expressed concern about regional instability while avoiding explicit alignment with any party to the conflict. From a diplomatic perspective, this caution is understandable: Armenia maintains important economic relations with Iran while simultaneously seeking deeper engagement with Western partners.

Nevertheless, the crisis highlights a broader challenge facing smaller states located near major geopolitical fault lines. When regional powers actively reposition themselves, silence can sometimes be interpreted not as neutrality, but as strategic absence.

The Middle East crisis is still evolving, and predicting its outcome remains difficult. What is already visible, however, is the emergence of a wider geopolitical shift. While Iran and Israel dominate headlines, other actors are quietly shaping the strategic landscape around them.

Among those actors, Turkey appears particularly well positioned. By maintaining diplomatic flexibility, balancing its relationships with both Western and regional partners, and carefully managing incidents such as the missile interception over the Mediterranean, Ankara is ensuring that whatever the outcome of the current confrontation, it will remain an indispensable player in the region.

For countries on the periphery of this geopolitical transformation including Armenia the challenge will be to adapt quickly to a strategic environment that may soon look very different from the one that existed only weeks ago.

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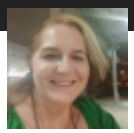
Comments

Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-03-09 13:33:55

Dear Ditord I can understand the feeling behind your comment. For many Armenians, distrust toward Turkey is not an abstract idea but something rooted in historical experience and reinforced by the strong nationalist narratives that still shape political culture in Turkey today. From that perspective, it is not difficult to understand where this sense of caution comes from. Margarita's article approaches the issue from a more diplomatic and geopolitical angle. She describes Turkey's ability to maneuver between different power centers during moments of crisis. In fact, there is an interesting intersection between her analysis and your comment: both point, in different ways, to Turkey's capacity to position itself between multiple sides in regional conflicts. As someone who lives in Turkey, I can say that this phenomenon is not only about foreign policy pragmatism; it is also connected to the country's deep-rooted state tradition and the strength of nationalist political culture. In large segments of society there is a very strong attachment to the state and to its official narratives, and this often makes critical reflection extremely difficult. I say this also from personal experience. As a person living in Turkey who has been repeatedly prosecuted for political reasons and who has spent several years in prison because of opposition to the dominant nationalist order, I know firsthand how heavy the cost of dissent can be here. There are many voices in this country—especially among dissident intellectuals, progressive circles, and revolutionary feminist women—who are marginalized, suppressed, or silenced precisely because they challenge the narratives that sustain the system. They are not the majority, and their space is often very limited. But they do exist. Perhaps the challenge is to recognize two realities at the same time: to remain cautious and realistic about the powerful structures of nationalism and state ideology that shape politics in Turkey, while also acknowledging that within this society there are individuals and communities who struggle to question and move beyond those structures. History has given all of us many reasons for mistrust. But if a more stable and peaceful future is ever to emerge in this region, it will likely depend on those small and fragile spaces where people still dare to question official narratives and imagine different possibilities.



Nurnisa Erismis – 2026-03-09 13:19:16

Dear Margarita, Dear Margarita, Thank you for this thoughtful and carefully written analysis. Your article captures very well Turkey's ability to maneuver during moments of regional instability and to position itself simultaneously within multiple strategic narratives. The discussion of diplomatic flexibility and the historical legacy of balancing rival powers is particularly insightful, especially in explaining how Ankara often presents itself as both a regional stakeholder and a stabilizing actor. While reading the piece, however, I found myself wondering about the broader structural context in which this flexibility operates. The analysis focuses mainly on regional actors, yet Turkey's room for maneuver is also shaped by several global dynamics that remain largely outside the frame. Russia's posture, for example, is crucial for any scenario in the South Caucasus. Moscow's evolving relationship with both Iran and Turkey could significantly influence how much strategic space Ankara actually possesses in a moment of regional crisis. Similarly, China's long-term energy strategy and its investments connected to the Belt and Road Initiative give Iran a global economic dimension that may affect how instability unfolds. Another dimension concerns the Gulf states and global energy markets. A weakening of Iran would inevitably influence oil politics, investment flows, and regional alignments in ways that could reshape Turkey's calculations. Finally, Europe's search for alternative energy routes after the Ukraine war has elevated the strategic importance of corridors passing through Turkey and the South Caucasus. Seen in this wider context, Turkey's "strategic flexibility" may appear not only as a product of diplomatic skill, but also as a response to the openings and constraints created by the broader multipolar system. Your article provides a valuable regional snapshot of Turkey's maneuvering. Placing that snapshot within this larger geopolitical landscape—where Russian military posture, Chinese energy investments, Gulf capital, and European energy diversification strategies all intersect—could make the analysis even richer and help illuminate the structural forces that shape Turkey's room for maneuver. Thank you again for an engaging and stimulating piece.

Ditord – 2026-03-08 11:31:02

Good article, Margarita.... You write very diplomatically, of course. But all Armenians understand: never trust a Turk. Two realities exist regarding Turks. First of all, they are never to be trusted. Secondly, in regard to your analysis, they have always played both sides -- a corallary to the notion that they can never be trusted. That is, neither side can trust them although both foolishly continue to engage them instead of smother them (diplomatically and economically). But this conflict could be very positive for Armenia: 1) form an alliance with Iran; show Iran that Armenia wishes peace and stability; 2) weaken Azerbaijan, a weakening of Turkey's threat against Armenia via its Azeri proxy. But first, Armenia needs to eliminate the incompetents, the fools, the traitors. If Iran continues its successful destruction on regional assets, including US presence, it's quite possible that the US will leave the region or at least become inert. Armenia, if smart, would be less vulnerable to the risk of destruction via a US that cares nothing about the nations it exploits. Of course, the real risk is that, if Iran continues its successes, and if Israel is really at the point of destruction (Tel Aviv and Haifa become another Gaza), then the rabid, relentless, rapacious recalcitrants in Israel, the psychopaths, would launch nukes against Iran. Thus, Iran must make Israel inert: destroy Israel's ability to attack Iran in any way, shape, or form. Knowing the Turkish mind, Turkey would then pause and reconsider attacking Iran, the only voice of reason in the region -- and the only nation who voiced objection to everyone trying to "change the borders" of Armenia (read: destroy Armenia).