

Is Turkey preparing for the day after the Ayatollah regime?

written by Noa Lazimi | 16.03.2026

So far, Turkey has reported three separate incidents involving ballistic missiles launched from the direction of Iran toward Turkish airspace. Ankara's restrained response thus far largely reflects its complex interests vis-à-vis Tehran. The prevailing narrative in Turkish media and in statements by officials is that the missiles fired from Iran toward Turkish airspace - intercepted by NATO - were not intended for Ankara. According to Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, the matter is currently under diplomatic clarification: Turkey has requested an explanation from Iran while reserving the right, if necessary, to defend its security.

The statement by Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli that an uncontrolled weakening of Iran (as well as the collapse of Lebanon) could trigger a wave of instability spreading across the region reflects, to some extent, the cautious position Turkey has adopted in light of the war in Iran and the potential risk of its collapse.

Ankara may welcome the weakening of its long-standing rival, one with which it competes for regional influence and leadership of the Muslim world. At the same time, however, it fears the consequences of chaos emerging in the wake of war, the possible spillover of the conflict into its own territory, and the strengthening of Israel's regional position.

The risks are numerous: a massive influx of refugees, popular unrest in Iran that could serve as a model for Turkey's domestic opposition, the strengthening of Kurdish groups that Ankara views as hostile, and even the potential groundwork for the eventual establishment of a Kurdish state. Against this backdrop, a scenario in which the ayatollah regime is replaced by a pro-Western government aligned with Israel would also be viewed unfavorably in Ankara.

Yet alongside cautious declarations about the desire to renew negotiations that could end the war and restore regional stability - and warnings against the fragmentation of Iran into ethnic entities - Turkey may also be preparing a contingency plan for what it would define as an emergency requiring intervention. It is conceivable that if refugee flows expand significantly, or if Kurdish autonomy

or independence is declared in Iran, Turkey could move to establish a buffer zone along the border inside Iranian territory, which it would present as a necessary step to contain the threats emanating from escalating instability in the neighboring state.

There are precedents for such a move. During the 1991 Gulf War, hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees, fearing the Iraqi army, fled toward the northern border with Turkey. Ankara succeeded in preventing their permanent settlement by establishing a protected zone in northern Iraq as part of an international operation.

In the Syrian case, Turkey explicitly promoted the idea of a “security zone” designed not only to push hostile Kurdish forces away from the border but also to resettle Syrian refugees there. In practice, since 2019, as part of Operation *Peace Spring*, a de facto Turkish-controlled area has existed in northern Syria, including not only Turkish military presence, but also civilian infrastructure such as schools and municipal services, and even Turkish currency.

This pattern could, under certain conditions, be replicated in the Iranian arena if Ankara concludes that the collapse of order along the border poses a direct threat to its security. Such a move would not be without constraints. Foremost among them are restraining factors in the international arena, particularly the United States, which could use its influence to oppose a deep Turkish military operation inside Iranian territory.

For now, Ankara appears to prefer maintaining a cautious, moderate tone, avoiding direct involvement in the conflict. At the same time, however, a narrative is taking shape in Turkish political and media discourse emphasizing the dangers of instability, refugee flows, and the Kurdish threat. If the crisis intensifies, this narrative could help lay the groundwork for a possible Turkish intervention.

From Israel’s perspective, the primary strategic objective at this stage remains the downfall of the Iranian regime, while recognizing that such a process could also bring about greater Turkish involvement in the regional arena and prompt Ankara to leverage the situation for significant strategic gains. Israel will not be able to control all the dynamics that may emerge following a substantial weakening – or even collapse – of the regime in Iran. It must therefore take into account that such a development could also strengthen Turkey’s regional position,

a challenge it will likely need to address sooner or later.

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