

**PKK IN IRAN’S PERSPECTIVE:  
THE ATTITUDES AND THE  
POSSIBILITY OF A JOINT  
STRUGGLE**

**Çağatay Balcı**





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## **PKK in Iran's Perspective: The Attitudes and The Possibility of a Joint Struggle**

### **İran Perspektifinden PKK: Yaklaşım ve Ortak Mücadele İmkânı**

پ.ک.ک. از منظر ایران: رویکردها و امکان مبارزه مشترک

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### Abbreviations

<b>IRGC</b>	: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
<b>KRG</b>	: Kurdistan Regional Government
<b>PDKI</b>	: Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
<b>KDP-I</b>	: Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran
<b>PAK</b>	: Partiya Azadi Kurdistan/ Kurdistan Freedom Party
<b>PJAK</b>	: Kurdistan Free Life Party
<b>YBŞ</b>	: Yekineyen Berxwedana Şengal/ Sinjar Resistance Units



## SUMMARY

- While Turkey has been defusing the PKK domestically, which it has struggled against for many years, the need for regional cooperation on the issue as a complementary requirement has become more visible.
- The regression and the stack of the PKK in the line of the Iran-Iraq border as a result of Turkey's operations have brought expectations towards the Iran-Turkey cooperation to the agenda, which has come into prominence periodically for many years.
- The regional equation, along with Iran's and the PKK's positioning in this equation, shapes the general characteristic of the Iran-PKK relationship.
- There seem to be significant differences in terms of the attitudes and perceptions in the Turkey-Iran-PKK equation.
- Iran's attitude and perception towards PKK represent the low-level potential for the Turkey-Iran cooperation against the PKK.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Iran, PKK, Terrorism

## ÖZET

- Türkiye, uzun yıllar boyunca mücadele ettiği PKK terör örgütünü, ülke içinde hareketsiz duruma getirirken tamamlayıcı gereklilik olan bölgesel iş birliği ihtiyacı da yoğun biçimde hissedilmeye başlanmıştır.
- PKK'nın, Türkiye'nin harekâtları sonucunda Irak sahasına ve İran-Irak sınır hattına sıkışması, uzun yıllar boyunca periyodik olarak gündeme gelen İran-Türkiye iş birliği beklentisini bir kez daha ortaya çıkarmıştır.
- İran ve PKK arasında kurulan ilişkinin genel karakteri, söz konusu bölgesel denklem ve bu denklemde İran ve PKK'nın aldığı konum doğrultusunda şekillenmiştir.
- Türkiye-İran-PKK denklemi incelendiğinde ciddi bir yaklaşım ve algı farklılığı kendisini göstermektedir.
- İran'ın PKK'ya ilişkin algı ve yaklaşımı, Türkiye ve İran arasında PKK'ya karşı bir iş birliği imkânının düşük potansiyelini de ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, İran, PKK, Terörizm

## چکیده

- ترکیه سالهاست که درگیر مبارزه با سازمان تروریستی پ.ک.ک. است. آنکارا در حال حاضر قدرت عمل را از این سازمان در درون مرزهای خود گرفته است. با وجود این، نیاز به همکاری منطقه ای به عنوان یک ضرورت مکمل به شدت احساس می شود.
  - اکنون که پ.ک.ک. در نتیجه عملیاتهای ترکیه، در درون خاک عراق و خط مرزی ایران و عراق تحت فشار قرار گرفته، اهمیت همکاری میان ایران و ترکیه که سالها به طور دوره ای در دستور کار دو کشور بوده، بار دیگر افزایش یافته است.
  - رابطه میان ایران و پ.ک.ک. و ویژگی های آن، بر اساس معادلات منطقه ای و موقعیت ایران و این سازمان تروریستی در این معادلات شکل یافته است.
  - بر اساس بررسی ها، تفاوت های جدی در رویکردها و برداشتها نسبت به پ.ک.ک. بین ایران و ترکیه وجود دارد.
  - برداشت و رویکرد ایران نسبت به پ.ک.ک.، ظرفیت محدود همکاری میان آنکارا و تهران در زمینه مبارزه با این سازمان تروریستی را نشان می دهد.
- کلیدواژه ها:** اترکیه، ایران، پ.ک.ک.، تروریسم





## INTRODUCTION

The fight against terrorism requires some complementary components along with the primary and ontological conditions. The ontological requirements refer to the struggle strategies of the target state, its theme of military struggle, and its intervention on the social factors which produce and reproduce terrorism. These elements represent the precondition and the foundation of the fight against terrorism. Apart from them, there are also several complementary factors for the struggle against terrorism. Besides their complementary nature, these factors have the potential to affect the success of these struggles. The military strategy and the efficiency of a state to eliminate the conditions which reproduce terrorism are significant in this context. Furthermore, this efficiency ensures total success if it is coordinated with the other relevant factors. In this regard, the elimination of the external support to terrorism through complementary factors such as the unity of the definition, perception, and approach between the states is the key for the success in the fight against terrorism. The internationalization of terrorism by the spread of terrorist organizations and their activities that target different regions in several states increases the significance of these factors. Thus, regional and global cooperation and partnership in the struggle against terrorism arise as one of the most critical requirements of the 21st century.

One of the important examples that shows this situation at the regional level is the Iran-Turkey regional rivalry and the PKK's position in this context. While Turkey has been defusing the PKK domestically, which it has struggled against for many years, the need for regional cooperation on the issue as a complementary requirement has become more visible. The transformation of Turkey's understand-

ing of the fight against terrorism since 2016 and its adoption of a model which aims to counter the threat of terrorism outside of its borders have reinforced this need. In this regard, Iran represents the primary actor in Turkey's fight against the PKK. The regression and the stack of the PKK in the line of the Iran-Iraq border, as a result of Turkey's operations, has brought expectations towards the Iran-Turkey cooperation to the agenda, which has come into prominence periodically for many years.

This expectation has become a current issue again thanks to Turkey's Operations Claw Eagle and Tiger that targeted the PKK in June 2020. The statement and warning of Turkey's Minister of Internal Affairs Süleyman Soyly about Iran on June 6, 2020, regarding "more efficient struggle against PKK" (Anadolu Agency, 2020) paved the way for high expectations. The statement has strengthened the expectations for a joint struggle against the PKK. Soyly's simultaneous remarks with the operations concerning the PKK's presence in Iran have raised questions about the possibility of a common ground for the fight that would provide Iran's participation. The statement of the Minister of Internal Affairs, which refers to the expectations from Iran for a more efficient struggle against the PKK, along with the Eagle Operations, urged Iran to adopt an attitude in this context. In this era, Iran launched artillery attacks against the targets in Northern Iraq. Even though the relevant attacks caused speculations regarding "an Iran-Turkey joint operation against the PKK" immediately, the operation has appeared to target PDKI in Iraq instead of the PKK. It has deepened the ambiguity of a possible Iran-Turkey joint operation against the PKK.

Following this process, Azerbaijan's Karabakh Operation on September 27, 2020, to rescue its occupied territories, has brought Iran's attitude



towards the PKK to the agenda again. There was some noticeable information in the process about the PKK militias who joined the Armenian Army via the Iran line (TRT News, 2020). This strategy of Iran was interpreted as an attempt to restrain Azerbaijan, which Iran sees as a regional rival.

Lastly, Iran's direct and indirect reactions to Turkey's great emphasis on the PKK/YBŞ presence in the Sinjar region of Iraq have provided one of the most obvious reflections of Iran's attitude towards the PKK. The statements from the Iran-backed militias and Iran's ambassador to Iraq as a response to Turkey's preparation for an operation in Sinjar have made the Iran-PKK relation visible. It put the "Iran-Turkey partnership against the PKK" phenomenon into question, which has been discussing for several years.

### 1. The Conditions of the Cooperation Between States for the Struggle Against Terrorism

Every cooperation and partnership between states on any subject are based on a common perception and approach. The common perception and the approach that resulted from it refer to two categories: the common interest and the common threat. It suggests that states firstly make cooperation if there is any acquisition that the cooperation will provide. In such a situation, every party gets some gaining. Secondly, states cooperate if there is a common perception of threat. In the context of this common perception of threat, two or more states can choose to answer to the common threat together and build a joint security area. Consequently, the relevant states develop a common defense behavior and reflex against the common threat.

The struggle against terrorism has examples of cooperation in both categories. The cooperation

between states is directly linked to the factors of these two categories. It is also possible to argue that these categories are interlocked with each other in the states' cooperation against terrorism. Therefore, it is necessary for two or more states to have a common interest and a common perception of threat for making cooperation against terrorism. If one party or parties perceive a terrorist organization as a primary threat against its interests and security while the others see it as an instrument to reach their interests and perceive it as a secondary or tertiary level of threat, then the possibility of cooperation disappears (Micklous, 1989).

The lack of a common perception that disables the possibility of cooperation for the struggle against terrorism paves the way for the different definitions and approaches. The difference of definition and approach between states in the fight against terrorism seems in two different ways. The first one refers to the situations in which a state does not define an armed organization as a terrorist organization and embraces a supportive attitude for the organization (Boylan, 2015). In the second category, on the other hand, a state continues its positive, supportive, or neutral attitude towards the organization, even though it defines it as a terrorist organization (Boylan, 2015). In this category, the supportive attitude of the states indicates a deliberative choice, while the neutral attitude may be a result of the inadequacy in the struggle against terrorism. Still, these two main situations represent the basis for the cases of "externally sponsored terrorism" and "terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy" (Berkowitz, 2018). The differences of the definition or/and approach in the struggle against terrorism between states cause states to have relations with the terrorist organizations as instrumental actors.



It disables the potential of cooperation between states against terrorism.

The cooperation between states against terrorism requires additional conditions that are based on the common perception and approach. These additional conditions include the states' harmony of the strategies in the struggle against terrorism and the cooperation between their institutions as a result of this harmony. The success of the cooperation is significantly high between the states which embrace a holistic concept of the struggle against terrorism, coordinate their armed forces, i.e. the police and the intelligence, apply similar struggle strategies inside and outside of the country, and have a perspective that is based on national security. The proximity of the level of experiences of the states' relevant institutions also increases the chance of success.

On the other hand, if the parties of the cooperation deal with terrorism through the hegemony of a singular institution, interpret

terrorism in terms of other forms of political violence such as revolt and counter-revolution, and prioritize the safety of the regime instead of the national security, then the success of the cooperation will be in jeopardy. Furthermore, institutions' differences in the level of experience may harm the potential of success.

## 2. Iran's Perception and Approach Towards the PKK and Its Function

Iran's perception towards the PKK and key features of its approach on the issue is based on its paradigm of relationship with the non-state armed actors since the Islamic Revolution. After the Islamic Revolution, relations with several non-state armed actors have become a significant part of Iran's regional policy. This situation has been shaped by two main aims and motivations which determined Iran's relations with non-state armed actors. These aims and motivations include having regional influence and export of revolution along with the regional rivalry.

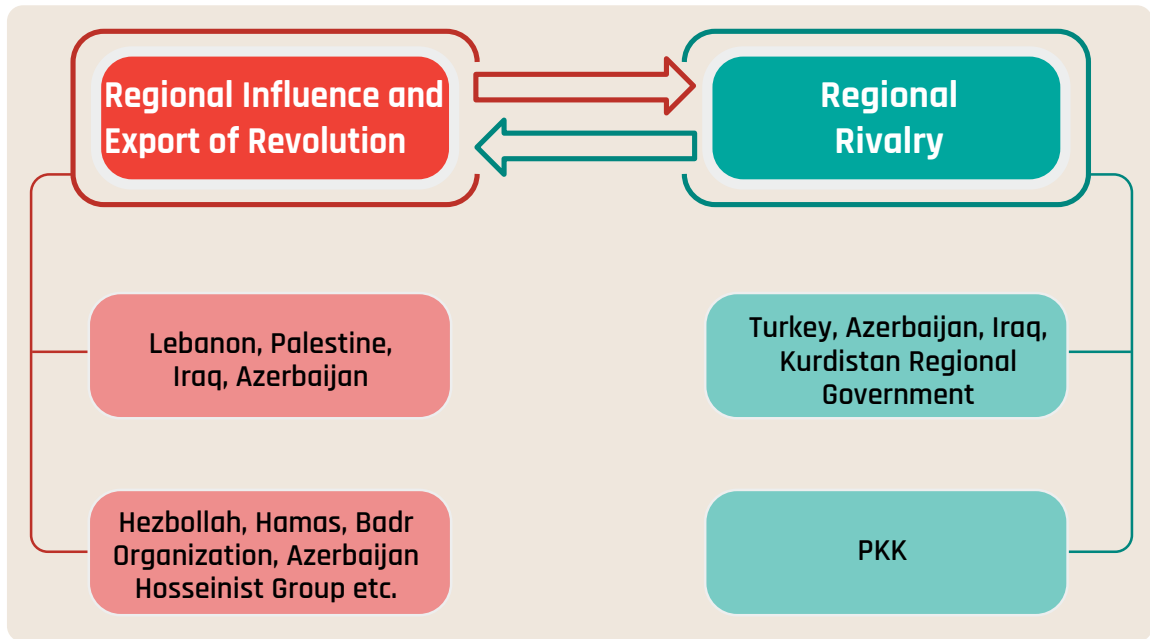
**Figure 1:** The Conditions of the Cooperation Between States for the Struggle Against Terrorism







**Figure 2:** The Motivations and the Examples of the Relationship Between Iran and the Non-State Actors in the Middle East



Iran started to develop relations with non-state armed actors in the region after the Islamic Revolution in the context of its ideological aims; the export of revolution and the regional influence. The most visible examples of this may be seen in the networks that are based on the armed groups in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. Since the early 1980s, Iran has been supporting groups, which are close to itself ideologically, in terms of military and economy. By doing so, it targets to gain influence in the region and the regions of these groups. It also aims to strengthen the actors, which are devoted to the Islamic Revolution (Özcan, 1999, p. 227). The ideological relations of the relevant groups with Iran represent the distinctive characteristic of the first motivational category of this relationship.

Apart from seeking regional influence and motivation of export of revolution, the regional rivalry forms the second motivational category that shapes Iran's relations with the non-state armed actors. In this context, Iran has developed relations with

several non-state actors without consideration of their ideological support. Iran's relationship with the PKK constitutes the most significant example of these type of relations. Iran perceives the PKK as an instrument in the equation of its regional rivalry with Turkey (Özcan, 1999, p. 225). Although there is no ideological familiarity between the two, there is a pragmatical interaction in the context of regional rivalry. In this regard, the PKK is a deterrent and deranging factor for Iran to use in the processes in which Turkey's regional role and efficiency are growing (Darkamazi, 2020a).

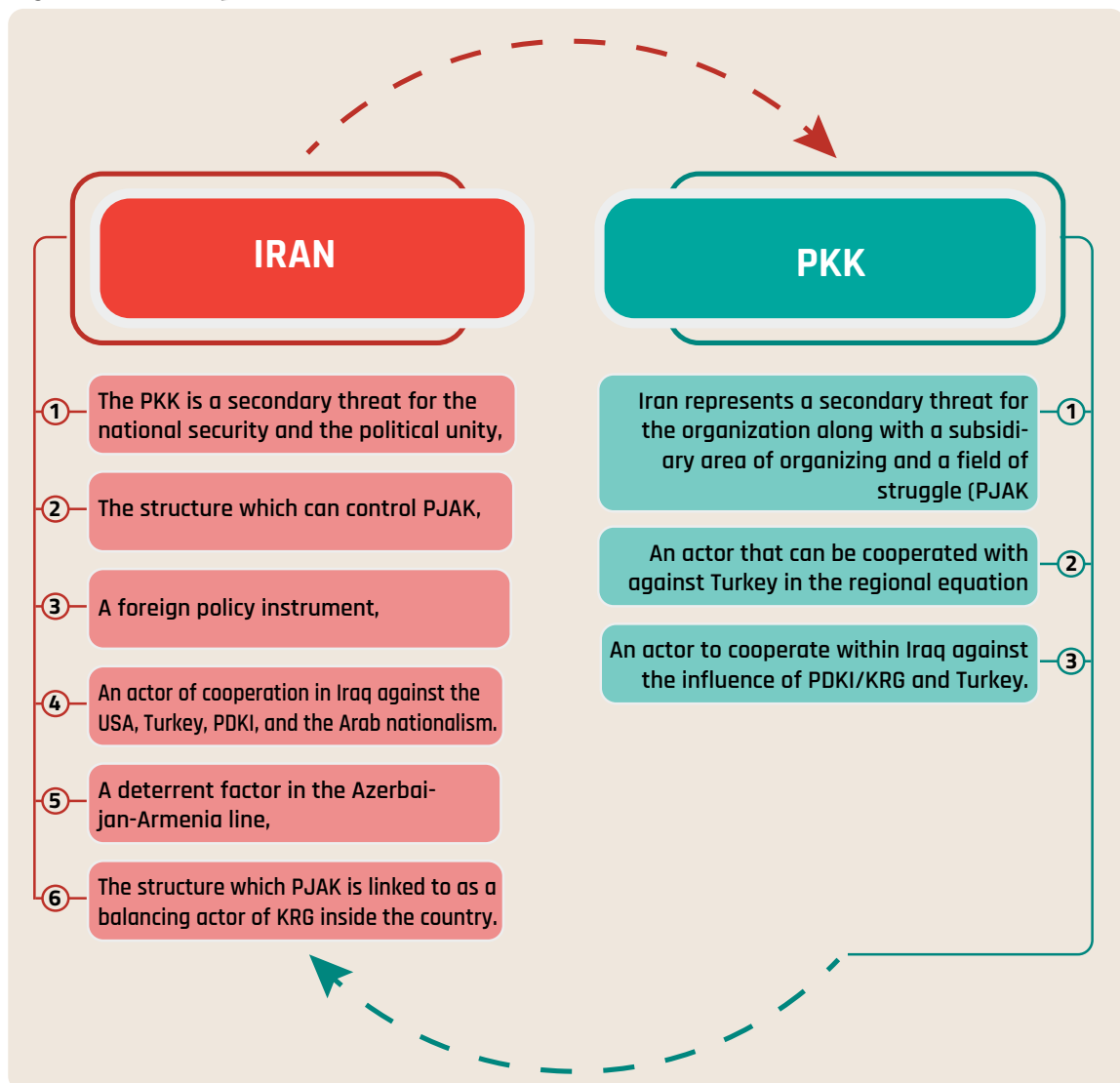
The regional equation, along with Iran's and the PKK's positioning in this equation, shapes the general characteristics of the Iran-PKK relationship. The primary codes of the relationship between the two actors started to take shape in the early 1980s, while these codes were crystallized in the 1990s and gained a professional and strategical characteristic in the 2000s. It is possible to list these codes as follows:



- To limit and weaken Turkey in the regional equation
- To limit the efficiency of the USA in the region, especially by the impact of the regionalist and Iran supporter factions of the PKK
- To weaken the Arab nationalism and the influence of Turkey and PDKI/KRG in the Iraq line (Ali, 2017).
- To support Armenia against Azerbaijan in the Southern Caucasian

These elements show the pragmatic characteristic of the Iran-PKK relationship along with Iran's approach to the PKK. This approach locates the PKK as a foreign policy instrument for Iran in a wide region from Iraq to Azerbaijan. Thus, the PKK is not only used as a deterrent factor against Turkey but is also used to weaken the influence of Arab nationalism, Turkey and PDKI in Iraq. It serves as a deterrent factor also for Azerbaijan, which represents another regional rival for Iran, via dispatching the militias to Karabakh.

**Figure 3:** The Perception of Iran and the PKK Towards Each Other





Nevertheless, Iran sees the PKK as a secondary threat to its internal security. The People's Mujahedin Organization, the Jaish al-Adl, and the KRG represent the primary threats to Iran in terms of terrorism. PJAK as the Iran faction of the PKK occupies an exceptional place in this context. PJAK, which was established in the era of the organizational transformation of the PKK, has become a significant part of the Iran-PKK-USA/Israel equation. Between 2003 and 2004, the conflicts between the US supporters and the regionalists/ Iran supporters in the PKK affected the establishment of PJAK. The efficiency of the US supporter factions reflected on the PJAK administration and the cadre. It paved the way for the USA-PJAK cooperation against Iran between 2004 and 2010 which has made the Iran supporter faction of the PKK more cautious. In this context, the growing influence of the Iran supporter faction in the PKK since 2010 has updated the Iran-PKK-PJAK equation.

In this process, the PKK has become a crucial actor for Iran because of PJAK's organic link with the PKK. In this regard, Iran has had the opportunity for defusing the PJAK through the PKK. The continuity of the positive relationship between Iran and the PKK, PKK's strategy to not target Iran directly, and Iran's tolerant and supportive attitude towards the PKK have made PJAK less active (Alaca, 2015). The changes in the administrative staff of PJAK and the influence of the Iran supporters in the PKK in the process have also affected the situation (Darkamazi, 2020b).



The advantage, which is provided by the PKK regarding PJAK in the context of internal security, is one of the most important elements of the method of controlled conflict between the organizations. This method arises as a part of the strategy towards

Kurdish separatism in Iran (Alaca, 2015). There are several organizations and factions in Iran that act in the line with Kurdish separatism, such as PDKI, Komala, KDP-I, PJAK, and PAK. The prestige and the power of these organizations in the Kurdish movement in Iran direct Iran to a different strategy. Iran supports the rivalry between the organizations, especially for balancing the PDKI, as the most powerful and efficient organization among the separatist organizations. This strategy requires continuity of the presence of the PJAK against PDKI. The presence of the PJAK, which is based on ethnic nationalism and the ideology of the PKK, limits the PDKI as the representative of Sunni Kurdish nationalism, in terms of prestige and regional efficiency. It paves the way for Iran to let the PJAK's ideological activities against PDKI and adopt a strategy to balance ethnic separatist Kurdish organizations, especially PDKI.

The PKK is also an instrument of narrative and propaganda for Iran. Iran tries to attribute the "Kurdish question" only to Turkey through the PKK, especially in the international public opinion and identifies Turkey with the Kurdish question. By doing so, Tehran is able to shade Iran's Kurdish question as one of the most significant socio-political issues which have had a broader impact on Iran more than Turkey (the Republic of Mahabad, PDKI's field control in the 1980s etc.). Consequently, the Kurdish issue is represented as an identical and unique element of Turkey, while Iran's Kurdish issue is ignored. Correspondingly, Iran puts a lot of effort into showing Turkey's operations against the PKK as "attacks against the Kurds" in the international arena. One of the current examples of this situation has been seen in Iran's strong opponent behavior and statements towards Turkey's operations against PYD/YPG and the PKK in Northern



**Table 1:** PJAK and PDKI

	PKK/PJAK	PDKI
		
<b>Ideology</b>	Marxist-Leninist	Social Democracy, Traditional Nationalism
<b>Aim</b>	Democratic Confederalism	Autonomy for Kurdistan, Federation for Iran
<b>Type of Action</b>	Armed Attack	Armed Attack
<b>The Regions in which it is active</b>	Marivan, Maku, Sardesht, Senendec, Khoy	Urmia, Sardesht, Marivan, Oshnavieh, Piranshahr
<b>The Armed Faction and the Related Groups</b>	Eastern Kurdistan Units (YRK), Women Defense Forces (HPJ)	PDKI Peshmerga, Zagros Freedom Hawks
<b>The Image and the Quality</b>	An alternative actor in the ethnic separatist Kurdish movement in Iran. A structure that can be controlled through the PKK	Historical leader of the Iran Kurdish Movement. Effective cadres of militias, organizational experience. A structure that is difficult to control.

Syria and Iraq. The similarity between the official statements and the discourses of the broadcasts in Iran and the statements of the PKK in the process has drawn attention.

Lastly, Iran instrumentalizes the PKK as a propaganda tool for the Turkish public opinion by arguing it is a “common enemy”. Iran brings discourses of “Turkey-Iran Partnership Against the PKK” or “Common Enemy PKK/PJAK” into the agenda, especially in the times when it needs Turkey’s support, the tension between the USA and Iran is growing, and there is an increase in the activities of PJAK. Through its messages and the public diplomacy strategy, Iran aims to gain the support of the Turkish public opinion and keep its close relation with the PKK in the background.

### 3. The Possibility of a Joint Struggle

Iran’s perception and approach towards the PKK is an indicator that shows the potential of Turkey-Iran cooperation against the PKK. In the

context of the conditions of cooperation between states for the struggle against terrorism, which has been examined in the first part, such a possibility seems unrealistic. The first criteria for the evaluation of the possibility of Turkey-Iran partnership and cooperation against the PKK are the perceptions and approaches of the two states towards the PKK. Any two states need to have a common approach and perception towards the relevant terrorist orga-

**Figure 4:** The Common Discourses and Arguments that Reflect the Common Perception of Iran and PKK Towards Turkey



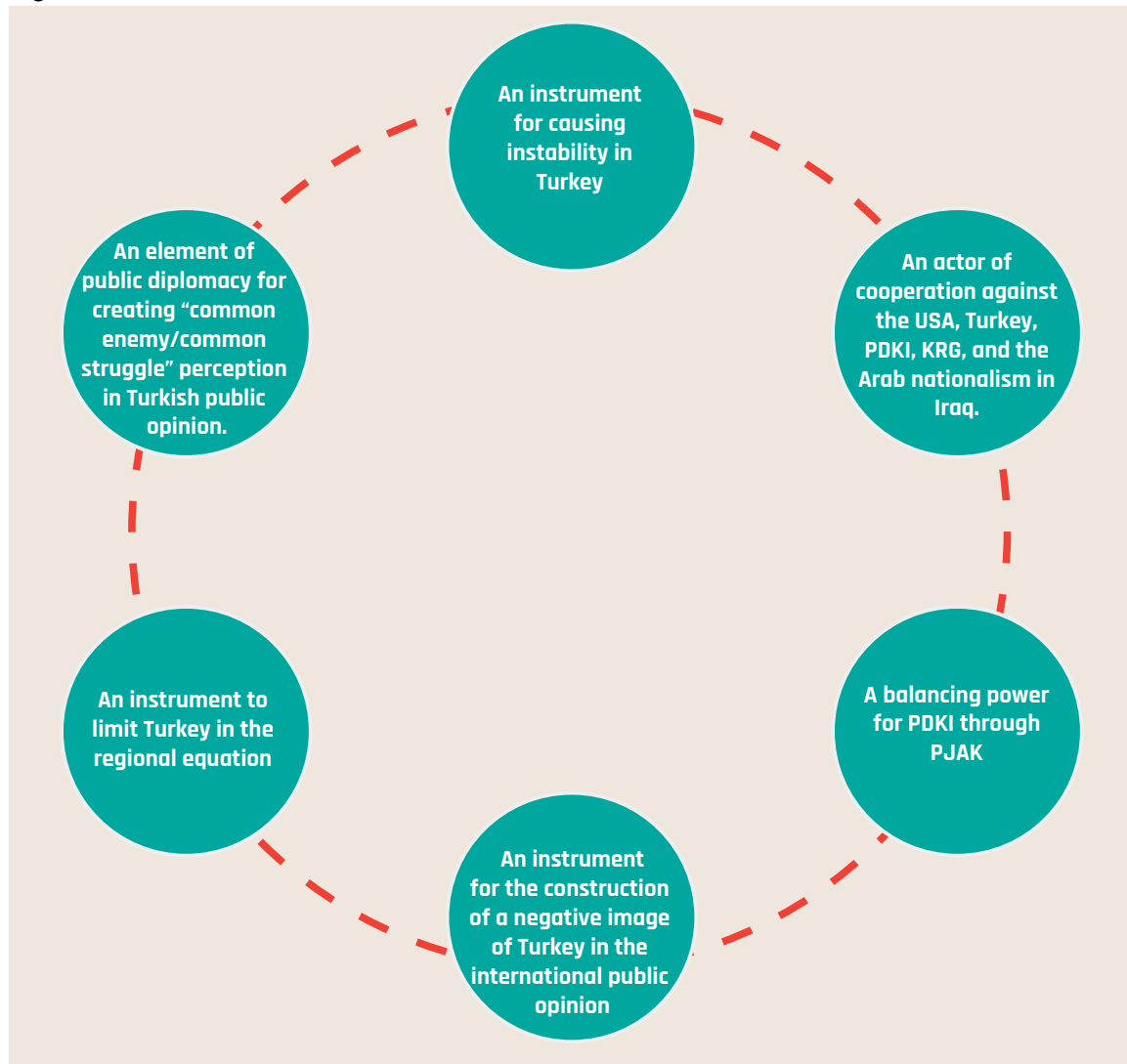


nization as a primary condition to conduct a joint struggle against it. When the Turkey-Iran-PKK triangle is seen in this context, significant differences of approach and perception appear. In this regard, the two states are similar only in terms of the definition of the PKK. While Turkey perceives the PKK as an element of primary threat, Iran understands it as a secondary threat. In addition, the PKK represents a pragmatic ally for Iran.

The possible cooperation between Turkey and Iran for the struggle against terrorism is lack of foundation also because of the differences of strategies.

In contrast to Iran, Turkey acknowledges a “perpetual struggle” approach within the country in which all of its institutions are coordinated. It also adopts a “countering the threat outside of the borders” strategy for the external threats. Iran’s strategy for the struggle against terrorism seems to be dominated by the IRGC as a hegemonic actor and it is understood in terms of “suppression of the riot” or “counter-revolution”. In this context, the major difference in the strategies of the two states forms the second factor which limits the potential of the cooperation. Lastly, it is possible to mention the lack of possibility for cooperation between the states’ ins-

**Figure 5:** Functions of the PKK for Iran





titutions because of the differences in the strategies of the struggle against terrorism.

When the limitation of the possibility for a Turkey-Iran joint struggle against the PKK is discussed, the strategic importance of the PKK for Iran should not be overlooked. If Iran supports Turkey against the PKK openly, 1) The PKK would target Iran through PJAK, 2) The PKK would lose its control over PJAK and consequently, PJAK would be an actor to be used against Iran by other countries, especially by the USA. It would cause dangerous problems for Iran.

Furthermore, if Iran became a part of an operation that damage the PKK, it would harm Iran's strategy for internal security. The PJAK could be affected by the PKK's loss of power and it would pave the way for the PDKI to strengthen in the region. The decreasing control of the PKK over PJAK could cause intensification of the PDKI-PJAK rivalry and an increase in the number of armed conflicts. It indicates a critical threat for Iran. Iran strategically chooses the presence of PJAK that can be

controlled through the PKK instead of PDKI that is seen as the most dangerous separatist threat for Iran in historical and organizational terms.

The Turkey-Iran cooperation against the PKK represents a low possibility because of these conditions and reasons. In this context, Turkey is the country that defends the necessity of partnership and tries to motivate Iran for cooperation. Iran, on the other hand, has a different perception and approach towards the PKK, uses the PKK as a foreign policy instrument and a balancing power for the separatist Kurdish movements in Iran. This situation obstructs the possibility of cooperation. Any potential cooperation between Iran and Turkey for the struggle against terrorism would be a weak one also in technical terms. Due to the fact that Iran has less experience in the fight against terrorism than Turkey does, there would also be problems of coordination and unity. The current situation that is resulted from these issues shows the difficulty of cooperation between Turkey and Iran against the PKK.

**Table 2:** The Comparison of Turkey and Iran in terms of Conditions for a Joint Struggle Against the PKK

		<b>TURKEY</b>	<b>IRAN</b>
Common Definition	√	PKK is a terrorist organization.	PKK is a terrorist organization.
Common Perception and Approach	×	PKK is an issue of national security.	PKK is a secondary threat. PKK is a pragmatial ally in the regional equation.
Harmony in the Strategies of the Struggle Against Terrorism	×	Holistic struggle, cooperation between institutions, the concept of countering the threat outside of the borders	Dominated by the IRGC, the concept of suppression of the riot, insurgency and the counter-revolution, lack of the concept of struggle outside of the borders
Cooperation Between the Institutions	×	-	-





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“Tanıtım nüshasıdır, para ile satılamaz.”  
“Bandrol Uygulamasına İlişkin Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmeliğin 5’inci maddesinin  
2’nci fıkrası çerçevesinde bandrol taşıması zorunlu değildir.”

## About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Turkey, border-sharing, and comprehensive business relations makes it necessary for Turkey to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies (İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Turkey. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.



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