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**Turkey Fears a “Limited” War with
Iran Would Never Stay Limited**

By

Gulf State Analytics



4 February 2026

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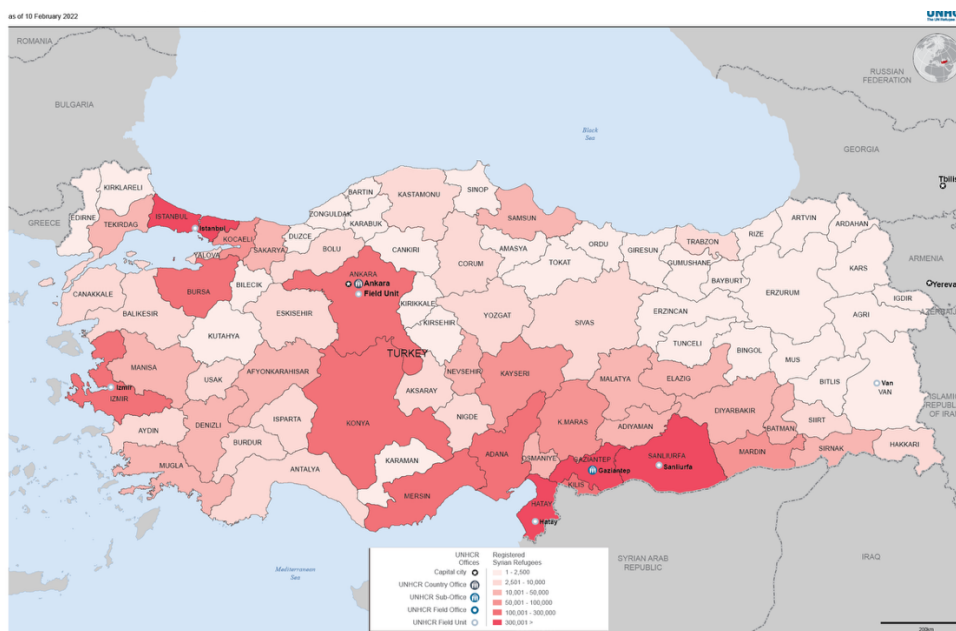
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Executive Summary

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- ✧ Turkey views a potential U.S.–Iran war as an immediate national security threat.
- ✧ Ankara believes even a limited or “surgical” U.S. strike on Iran would be highly prone to rapid regional escalation.
- ✧ Turkish officials assess that such a conflict could draw in Israel, GCC states, and Iran’s regional proxies, producing a multi-theater war.
- ✧ Concerns about the Iranian nation-state’s possible fragmentation, refugee flows, and energy disruptions drive Turkey’s categorical opposition to military action.
- ✧ Ankara’s position is not a defence of all aspects of Tehran’s foreign policy, but a rejection of regime-collapse scenarios that could add many new layers of instability to the Middle East.
- ✧ Turkey sees the current reopening of diplomatic channels as a narrow but critical off-ramp before escalation spirals out of control.
- ✧ Ankara’s mediation strategy focuses on lowering psychological and political barriers between Washington and Tehran.
- ✧ Turkey advocates a step-by-step diplomatic approach, prioritising the nuclear file over broader demands on missiles and regional surrogates.
- ✧ This incrementalism reflects Turkish sensitivity to Iran’s internal political and institutional constraints.
- ✧ Ankara effectiveness as a mediator rests on its rare dual access to both U.S. and Iranian leadership, reinforcing its self-image as a pragmatic regional power.

Key Picture: Provincial Breakdown of Syrian Refugee in Turkey



Source: [UNHCR](https://www.unhcr.org/)

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Introduction

Throughout early 2026, statesmen in nearly every Middle Eastern country, with the notable exception of Israel, have been worried about tensions between the United States and Iran spiraling out of control and erupting into a full-blow conflict. Turkey has been playing a critical role in pressing for diplomacy over war, while positioning itself, along with Egypt, Qatar, and Oman, as one of the regional states actively working to halt the slide toward conflict.

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From Ankara's perspective, a military clash between Washington and Tehran would not be a distant or containable crisis but a looming strategic disaster whose shockwaves would spill into Turkish territory. This assessment has driven the Turkish leadership to warn the White House that strikes on Iran would be both dangerously destabilising and counterproductive to U.S. interests. This year, Ankara has been leveraging its unique access to both Washington and Tehran for the sake of promoting renewed dialogue as Turkey takes on more of a mediation role.

Turkey's reading of the current moment is shaped by two simultaneous dynamics. On the one hand, the Trump administration's large-scale military buildup in the Gulf, coupled with increasingly explicit threats of intervention, keeps the military option firmly on the table. On the other hand, diplomatic channels—long frozen after the collapse of earlier nuclear negotiations and the 12 Day War of June 2025—have begun to reopen, albeit tentatively. Ankara views this narrow diplomatic opening as the last viable off-ramp before tensions becomes difficult, if not impossible, to contain.

Ankara Sees a U.S.-Iran War as a Strategic Catastrophe

From Ankara's vantage point, a war between its NATO ally, the United States, and its neighbor, Iran, would almost certainly be limited at the outset but dangerously prone to expansion. Turkish officials assess that even a "surgical" U.S. strike, which would likely target Iran's nuclear infrastructure, missile facilities, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s key assets, could rapidly spiral into a broader confrontation involving Israel, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, and Iran's regional surrogates such as Ansar Allah in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and perhaps pro-Tehran factions in Iraq.

Such a scenario would risk state fragmentation inside Iran, unleash new refugee flows, disrupt energy routes, and trigger instability stretching from the Caucasus to the eastern Mediterranean.^{1, 2} For Turkey, this is not an abstract fear but a concrete national security concern. This assessment explains Ankara's categorical opposition to any military intervention against Iran. Turkey's high-ranking officials have repeatedly warned that external attacks on Iranian institutions would produce consequences far worse than the problems they purport to solve. The Turkish position is not a defense of Iranian policies but a rejection of regime-collapse scenarios that could plunge the region into prolonged chaos. In Ankara's calculus, a weakened Iranian state is preferable to a sudden vacuum of authority next door.

Turkey's strategy, therefore, has centered on keeping diplomacy alive by lowering the political and psychological barriers between Washington and Tehran. The anticipated meeting, set for 6 February in Istanbul between U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, facilitated by Turkey alongside Egypt and Qatar, illustrates this approach.³ By convening a multilateral format that includes Arab and Muslim states, Ankara seeks to dilute the zero-sum logic that has long governed U.S.-Iran interactions and replace it with a framework oriented toward de-escalation and incremental compromise.

Incrementalism Versus Maximalism in U.S.-Iran Diplomacy

Crucially, Turkey recognises that the core deadlock lies not only in substance but in sequencing. The United States continues to press for a comprehensive deal covering Iran's nuclear program, ballistic missiles, and regional proxies, while Tehran insists that only the nuclear file is negotiable—and only under conditions free of military pressure. Ankara's diplomatic value lies in its effort to bridge this divide by advocating a step-by-step

approach. Turkish officials have urged Washington to prioritise the nuclear issue as an entry point, rather than insisting on an all-encompassing package that Iran views as politically and institutionally untenable.

This incrementalism reflects Ankara's sensitivity to Iran's internal dynamics. Turkish policymakers understand that meeting all of Washington's maximalist demands at once would pose severe challenges for Iran's internal balance, state prestige, and elite cohesion. By contrast, a phased process—beginning with limits on uranium enrichment and the transfer of highly enriched uranium in exchange for sanctions relief—offers a face-saving pathway that could stabilise the situation without forcing Tehran into a corner.

Turkey's Leverage: Dual Access and Regional Credibility

Turkey's ability to advance such proposals rests on its unusual diplomatic positioning. Unlike virtually all of the United States' other NATO allies, Ankara maintains open and sustained channels with Iran. Therefore, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's direct lines of communication with President Donald Trump, combined with Turkey's continued engagement with Iranian leadership, give Ankara real credibility. This dual access has already allowed Turkey to serve as a trusted interlocutor in other crises, from Ukraine to Gaza, reinforcing its self-image as a pragmatic regional power rather than an ideological actor.

At the same time, Turkey has been careful not to frame its mediation as an attempt to shield Iran from scrutiny. Ankara has consistently conveyed to Tehran that its conduct in the region, including the many years it spent working to prop up the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad only increased the risk of external intervention. In doing so, Turkey positions itself not as Iran's advocate, but as a broker of regional responsibility. Put simply, Ankara's argument is that security cannot be imported through foreign intervention but must be constructed through regional ownership and dialogue.⁴

Ultimately, Turkey's diplomatic push reflects the broader strategic conviction that another major war in the Middle East would overwhelm existing fault lines and render all actors less secure, including those who believe they could control its trajectory. By hosting talks, shuttling between capitals, and pressing for gradualism over maximalism, Ankara is attempting to translate that conviction into concrete diplomatic leverage. Whether these efforts succeed remains uncertain. But in a moment defined by brinkmanship and militarised rhetoric, Turkey's insistence on dialogue marks it as one of the actors making decisions on the assessment that a war between the United States and Iran is not inevitable.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/how-turkey-sees-protests-iran>

² <https://alhurra.com/en/12056>

³ [read://https_www.axios.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.axios.com%2F2026%2F02%2F02%2Firan-nuclear-talks-trump-military](https://www.axios.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.axios.com%2F2026%2F02%2F02%2Firan-nuclear-talks-trump-military)

⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-emerges-as-key-mediator-as-us-iran-tensions-rise>