

# Turkish-Saudi Arabian Relations During the Arab Uprisings: Towards a Strategic Partnership?

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the development of Turkish-Saudi Arabian relations from the beginning of the struggle of the al-Saud family to gain power in the Arab peninsula to today. As a result of negative perceptions from both sides, bilateral relations were distant for decades. However, Turkish-Saudi relations began to improve remarkably under the AK Party and King Abdullah governments and a rapprochement started in 2005. Many agreements were signed during visits by political leaders from both sides. After the Arab uprisings began at the end of 2010, both countries took their cooperation further. As the two countries least influenced by the uprisings, Turkey and the Saudi Kingdom have been supporting the newly emerging political elites (Islamic groups) in Egypt, Libya and Syria; they have been maintaining close relations with the Western countries; and they have been trying to preserve regional stability and balance against Iran and its allies. However, there are some differences in their regional policies, such as their perceptions on the pace and scope of changes.

The Arab Uprisings have changed the course of history in the Middle East, the history of the Arab peoples in particular, and have been determining Middle Eastern politics since they started at the end of 2010. Most regional countries have been strongly affected by these revolts and regimes have been changed in many countries, such as in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Other countries have had to restructure their political and economic systems, or at least promise to. Although Turkey and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have not been influenced directly by the Arab revolts, they have had to rethink their regional and global power calculations.

The Arab revolts have required further cooperation between Turkey and the Kingdom, the two most significant and stable countries in the region. In spite of the “otherization” of each other on some matters, Riyadh and Ankara

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have started cooperating on a number of issues and have developed a pragmatic and institutionalized policy orientation. This has changed conditions and understandings, leading to a rapprochement between the two countries.

In this paper, the reactions of Saudi Arabia and Turkey towards the Arab revolts will be analyzed. In order to examine the last few years of Turkish-Saudi Arabian relations, it is necessary to provide an overview of bilateral relations since the emergence of the al-Saud family in the political scene. Therefore in the first part of this study, bilateral relations are examined from the rise of the al-Saud family up to the AK Party era. Turkish and Saudi approaches towards the Arab uprisings will be analyzed in the second part.

### **Turkish-Saudi Arabian Relations during the Ottoman and Republican Eras (1745-2002): A Period of Revolts, Silence and Rapprochement**

Turkish-Saudi relations began with the emergence of the al-Saud family as a political actor in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The al-Saud family revolted many times against the Ottomans from the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1920s, when they established the independent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the wake of World War One. With the acceptance of the Wahhabi understanding by the al-Saud family in 1745, which provides the required legitimacy for their authority, the Wahhabi movement emerged as the most important religious and political threat to Ottoman rule in the Arabian Peninsula. The Wahhabis, who tried to establish a state based on the radical and revolutionary religious thoughts of Ab-

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dulwahhab, fought many times with the traditional Sunni Ottomans. When Abdulaziz bin Saud invaded most of the Arabian Peninsula, including the Hejaz, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans attacked the Wahhabi forces with the help of Muhammad Ali of Egypt. Wahhabi forces were defeated and some of their leaders were sent to Istanbul where they were executed. However, in a very short period of time, Turki bin Abdullah gathered his fellow Wahha-

bis and declared the "first" Wahhabi state in 1821, which survived until 1891. Although it was not an independent state, it was not under Ottoman domination. The "second" Saudi state was established in 1902 by Abdulaziz bin Saud. During the Balkan War and World War One, he made an agreement with the British

government that he could keep all the lands that he occupied during his struggle against the Ottomans as a result of his pro-British stance and support against the Ottomans. Abdulaziz bin Saud, who captured the Hassa region in 1913 and the Hejaz after World War One, proclaimed himself “the King of Najd and Hejaz.” This “third” Saudi state was recognized in 1927 and was renamed in 1932 as “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

With the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, the Republic of Turkey had a status quo-oriented foreign policy and accordingly recognized the independence of the states founded on the former territories of the Ottoman State. Turkey became one of the first countries to recognize the Saudi Kingdom and signed a friendship treaty with the government. Nevertheless, due to their different regime types and ideologically-oriented foreign policies, neither Turkey nor Saudi Arabia expended much effort on improving bilateral relations; as a result, relations between the two countries did not further improve throughout the Kemalist period. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only King Faisal visited Turkey in 1966, and then for just a few hours to attend an international conference. No other Saudi king paid an official visit to Turkey throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Özal period, Turkey comprehensively restructured its economic and political systems. As a result, Özalist Turkey improved its relations with Muslim countries, those in the Middle East in particular, and had a positive attitude towards Saudi Arabia in order to achieve its export-oriented economic model and to secure oil supplies. Improving relations were followed by bilateral visits between the two countries. While President Kenan Evren and Prime Minister Turgut Özal visited Riyadh in 1984 and 1985 respectively, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz came to Turkey in 1984. Turkish private actors, such as construction companies, also began to invest in the Kingdom.

Bilateral relations between Ankara and Riyadh entered a new phase during the First Gulf War. As Turkey’s regional policy was in line with the UN Security Council Resolution and the American position, Saudi confidence in and appreciation of Turkey increased. Saudi Arabia gave \$1.2 billion to Turkey, plus another \$1 billion to a Turkish defense fund, in order to compensate for Turkey’s economic losses due to its anti-Saddam and pro-UN policy. As a sign of improving bilateral relations, then Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel visited the Kingdom in 1993. With the end of the Cold War, both countries pursued similar foreign policy orientations. That is, while they continued to ally themselves with the West, both Ankara and Riyadh began to diversify their foreign policy orientations.

Due to the domestic political instability in Turkey in the 1990s, there were ups and downs in bilateral relations. Relations improved, at least rhetorically, during Erbakan’s short government in 1996, but the strained political climate

in the aftermath of February 28 post-modern coup caused another rupture. The radical secularist understanding of the military-backed coalition government in Turkey reversed the course on bilateral relations and Ankara returned to its traditional approach of mistrust and neglect. Some low-scale crises, such as the demolishment of Ajyad Tower, built in Mecca during the Ottomans, created further resentment between Riyadh and Ankara. However, when the AK Party came to power in 2002, a new period in bilateral relations began.

### **Turkish-Saudi Arabian Relations under the AK Party Government (2003-2012): Restructuring and Rapprochement**

The AK Party began its time in government by restructuring Turkey's domestic politics and foreign relations, including its relations with Muslim countries. The AK Party reoriented its foreign policy by declaring significant principles, such as zero-problem with neighbors and maximum cooperation, and by introducing a pro-active, dynamic and multidimensional foreign policy. In this sense, Turkey tried to solve bilateral problems and to increase cooperation with other countries, neighboring countries in particular. Parallel to this new understanding, the AK Party improved its relations with Saudi Arabia which was still dependent on the West.

Both Ankara and Riyadh attempted to decrease their dependence on global powers. Therefore, each country pursued a regional policy that did not alienate the other and did not increase their dependence on the West. While Turkey

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was following a *regional* policy that attempted to solve *regional* problems through *regional* dynamics and bringing in regional countries, Saudi Arabia pursued a regional policy that did not marginalize Turkey in the Middle East. Saudi leaders thought that if Turkey was marginalized because of its increased regional initiatives, Ankara would get closer to

Israel and the West and thereby turn its back on regional countries, which was generally contrary to the interests of the Arab peoples and the Kingdom. The Saudi government also feared the re-establishment of a new Turkish-Israeli alliance in the region. Throughout the Kemalist period, the more Turkey improved its relations with Israel and the West, the more it turned its back on the Arabs. Therefore, Saudi Arabia preferred to improve its cooperation with Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership and to pursue similar policies in the region.<sup>1</sup>

In addition the new leadership of the AK Party, other national and regional developments have contributed to both the normalization and the improvement in relations between the two countries since 2003. With both suffering from terrorist activities, located in a region full of disputes and trying to play a regional role, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have adopted relatively independent regional policies and have agreed to cooperate in maintaining regional stability. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, one of the reasons for the deterioration in Saudi Arabian relations with the West, when al-Qaeda began to challenge the authority of al-Saud family, the Kingdom decided to cooperate with Turkey against regional transnational threats. As the struggle against

transnational terrorism was a concern for both Saudi and Turkish authorities, they began to understand and recognize each other's political differences. While Saudi Arabia began to acknowledge Turkey's pro-Western policy and its secular political system, Turkey gave up its otherization of the Kingdom. Although they were unable to stop the US invasion of Iraq, both countries were concerned and adopted similar stance in the Iraq's Neighboring Countries Platform.

After the increase in mistrust between Western countries and Saudi Arabia as a result of the September 11 attacks, the Kingdom began to look for other countries it could work with, especially in investment and economic cooperation. Turkey, as one of the fastest growing economies in the world and as an emerging regional power, was and is considered one of the best candidates for economic and political cooperation. The Saudi government began to see Turkey as a regional military power that could balance regional threats and prevent instabilities, and as an economy that it could increase bilateral trade and initiate joint projects with.

As a result of these developments, Saudi Arabia and Turkey launched many economic initiatives and signed a treaty establishing the Turkish-Saudi Business Council in 2003, which has been operating since 2004. In May 2005, Ankara and Riyadh decided to establish an investment fund in order to encourage private and governmental investments from the Gulf countries in Turkey, which was to be governed by an international body and coordinated by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce and the Jeddah Chamber of Trade and Commerce.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Turkey and Saudi Arabia agreed to cooperate on regional political and social problems and to try to solve these problems regionally. They signed a coopera-

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tion agreement on February 12, 2005, according to which the two countries agreed to cooperate in the fight against transnational terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the political elites in the Kingdom have tried to benefit from Turkey's military, political and economic leverage in their dealings with regional political, economic and cultural problems.

One of the best indications of the improvement in bilateral relations between the two capitals has been the high-level visits by officials from the two countries. The first visit by King Abdullah to Turkey in 2006 should be considered a milestone in Turkish-Saudi relations. This visit was historical for several reasons. First of all, this visit was the first top-level visit from Saudi Arabia to Turkey, except for the several hours King Faisal spent in Istanbul while attending an international conference.<sup>4</sup> The participation of a large delegation made this visit even more significant. Unlike traditional royal visits, King Abdullah went to Ankara with a large delegation, including ministers, businessmen, bureaucrats and family members.<sup>5</sup> During the visit the governments signed many political agreements and Turkish and Saudi businessmen and entrepreneurs signed many investment agreements.<sup>6</sup> Businessmen from the two countries exchanged information on investment opportunities and generally improved commercial relations, which led to plans by Saudi public and private institutions to invest \$25 billion in energy, finance, tourism and petroleum chemicals industry and communications in Turkey. After his meeting with King Abdullah, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that Turkish businessmen and companies handled about

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\$30 billion in projects in Saudi Arabia at that time.<sup>7</sup> The visit of 32,000 businessmen and tourists to Turkey in 2005 also indicates the increasing Saudi interest in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> Just before the global economic crisis, bilateral trade volume between Ankara and Riyadh increased to more than \$5.5 billion. While it decreased due to the global economic crisis, it is still

much higher than it used to be. While Turkey sells industrial materials, textiles, agricultural products, machines, automobiles and similar industrial goods, it mainly imports oil from the Kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, this visit was considered a turning point in terms of improving political and economic relations between the two countries since several significant agreements were signed. Saudi Arabia and Turkey signed six agreements regarding political consultation, cooperation in exchanging state archives, encouraging and maintaining investments, the prevention of double taxation, coopera-

tion in the health sector, and for the transportation of passengers and cargo. It was expected that this visit would not only improve Turkey's relations with the Kingdom, but would also attract the interest of other Arab countries, especially those in the Gulf, to come to Turkey.

Fourthly, the King's visit added a new dimension, security, into the bilateral relationship. National and regional security questions were another major issue discussed during King Abdullah's visit since the regional security vacuum had increased insecurity for most Middle Eastern countries as a result of developments in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Palestine. The Kingdom had been trying to reduce its dependency on America in the wake of the 9/11 attacks due to the increasing criticism directed at Wahhabi Islam and the Saudi government by the West. As a result of its concerns about the American unilateral and conflictual Israeli-centered regional policies, the Saudi government has improved its military and political relations with Turkey. Although Saudi Arabia remains dependent on American weaponry, the Saudi authorities began to consult and exchange views with their Turkish counterparts, particularly on such regional problems as Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq.

The revolts in the region has changed the regional power configuration and influenced Turkish-Saudi relations

King Abdullah visited Turkey again in 2007 in order to congratulate Abdullah Gül on his election to the presidency and to exchange views with Turkish authorities about the Middle East peace process. President Gül welcomed the King at the airport and awarded him the State Medal of Honor, which has been granted to only seven foreign statesmen. In return, in a ceremony held at Çankaya Presidential Palace, King Abdullah awarded the King Abdulaziz Medal of the First Degree to President Gül and awarded the Abdulaziz Legion of Honor to Prime Minister Erdoğan.<sup>10</sup> During this second visit, the two countries emphasized the need for diversifying and improving relations. President Gül and King Abdullah signed a memorandum of understanding for strengthening political and economic cooperation between the two countries and a convention on the avoidance of double taxation. Having similar views on the problems in the Middle East, Riyadh and Ankara agreed on the Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Kurdish issues, and opposed both the Iranian regional dominance and the US intervention into regional issues.

Turkey, a country that has criticized the regional system while remaining in the same system, has been pursuing a policy that does not alienate Iran on regional issues. Although both Ankara and Riyadh continue to be in contact with Iran, they have also initiated a process of establishing a Sunni-based cooperation against an Iran-led Shiite regional block. For example, upon the invitation





Photo: REUTERS, Susan Baaghil

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah (C) and Turkey's President Abdullah Gul (R) pose for the official photo before the opening ceremony of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit in Mecca August 14, 2012.

of Pakistan, another Sunni state, ministers of foreign affairs from seven Sunni countries, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt and Jordan, gathered in Islamabad on February 25, 2007 to discuss forming a common front against regional problems. In their joint declaration, the priority was given to the Palestinian issue, the territorial integrity of Iraq, and Lebanese politics.

### **Saudi Arabia and Turkey prefer the maintenance of regional stability and for a deliberate process of reform**

The seven countries also stated that the problem of Iran's nuclear energy development must be resolved through peaceful means.<sup>11</sup>

Parallel to closer relations between the public institutions of the two countries, cooperation increased in the private sector and leading companies from the two countries formed partnerships. For instance, the National Commercial Bank, the largest bank in Saudi Arabia, paid \$1.8 billion and acquired 60 percent of the shares of the Türkiye Finans Katılım Bankası, owned by the Ülker and Boydak groups.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the Turkish construction firm Yüksel Construction was awarded the Saudi Arabia Eastern Region Water Pipeline



Project tender of \$372 million in March 2008.<sup>13</sup> Ziraat Bank was granted fully authorized banking license in 2008 and announced that it would establish seven branches in the country in addition to its first branch in Jeddah.<sup>14</sup>

Good relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey have continued in recent years. The multilateral foreign policies that have been adopted by Turkey and Saudi Arabia have compelled the two countries to cooperate on a number of regional and bilateral issues. High-level visits between the two countries continue to reinforce this strong relationship. For example, in 2009 Saudi Arabia's Chief of the Naval Forces, Admiral Fahd bin Abdullah Mohammed al-Saud, and the head of Shura

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Council, Abdullah Bin Mohammed Bin Ibrahim al-Sheikh, paid official visits to Turkey. In addition to these official visits, in the same year the head of Saudi Arabia's Security Council Prince Bender Bin Sultan Bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and Prince Abdulaziz Bin Mohammed Bin Fahd al-Saud spent their holiday with their families in Turkey. From Turkey, Ali Babacan, then Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, accompanied a delegation that visited Jeddah in September 2008 to participate in the first ministerial meeting of the high-level strategic dialogue mechanism between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Turkey,<sup>15</sup> the first regular consultation process between the GCC and a single country. Babacan underlined that the institutionalization of relations with the GCC countries would serve common interests and pave the way for cooperation. Babacan also took part in the Organization of Islamic Conference meeting in Jeddah at the beginning of 2009 while Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a one-day visit to Riyadh.<sup>16</sup> On February 3-6, 2009 President Abdullah Gül paid a visit to Saudi Arabia together with a large delegation in order to discuss the regional and international issues that concern the two countries. Gül called on the Saudis to prefer Turkey for economic investment, education, tourism and health services. President Gül, who was welcomed at the airport by the King, became the first president of a Muslim country to address the Saudi's Shura consultative assembly.<sup>17</sup>

Political, economic and social relations between Turkey and the Kingdom continued to improve in 2010 and 2011 with even more regular visits. Among others, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the Kingdom twice in 2010, in January and March. During his second visit, Erdoğan was awarded the King Faisal International Prize, which is considered the Nobel Prize of the Arab world. This prize was awarded for his services to Islam, mainly as a result of Erdoğan's courageous attitude towards Israeli President Peres during the Davos

meeting in 2009.<sup>18</sup> Authorities from both countries exchanged views and looked at pursuing similar policies concerning regional developments. Ankara and Riyadh signed a military cooperation agreement during Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Sultan's visit to Turkey in May 2010. After signing treaties to protect mutual investments and to avoid double taxation, Turkish-Saudi trade had increased to \$4.65 billion by the end of 2010. According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the number of bookings by Saudi tourists increased by 75 percent in one year.<sup>19</sup>

Turkey and Saudi Arabia had both been strongly dependent on Western, especially American, support for decades. Recently both countries have tried to diversify their foreign relations without abandoning their friendly relations with the West. For this reason, they have tried to improve their relations with other global powers to decrease their dependency on the West, and at the same time they have tried to improve bilateral and multilateral regional cooperation to reduce their dependence on these global powers.

### **Saudi and Turkish Approaches toward the Arab Revolts**

With its large population and land mass, as well as its rich natural resources, Saudi Arabia will continue to remain a significant player in Middle Eastern politics. King Abdullah, who initiated a comprehensive reform program upon taking the throne, has been pursuing for a more pragmatic, rational and economy-oriented foreign policy. He has declared that "Saudis cannot remain the same while the world changes"<sup>20</sup> and he accordingly has built up a regional and global network "to develop bilateral and multilateral relations with countries all around the world in all fields by scattering dependencies or "managed multi-dependence."<sup>21</sup>

Since King Abdullah came to power, the Kingdom has restructured and diversified its foreign policy and initiated a process of integration with the world community through internal and international openings and membership in international organizations. For example, King Abdullah visited many countries including the communist China and the Pope, the leader of the Catholic world, in order to diversify its foreign policy and to improve the integration of the Kingdom with the world community. While Riyadh emphasizes the regional context, it also tries to be more effective at the global scale, and as a result it has begun to pursue a more flexible foreign policy.

There are several factors that have influenced both Saudi and Turkish regional policies since the outbreak of the Arab revolts. The ramification of the revolts in the region has changed the regional power configuration and influenced Turkish-Saudi relations.

*The continuation of the status quo and the pace of the changes*

While both Turkey and the Saudi Kingdom do not support radical changes in the regional political system, they do not have the same opinion about the continuation of the status quo and the pace of regional changes. Any political instability in a regional country will not only harm that country but also all regional countries, including Turkey and the Kingdom. Even though they differ on the speed of change that is needed, both Saudi Arabia and Turkey prefer gradual change and reform in the regional system rather than revolutions which may lead to chaos. They both prefer the maintenance of regional stability and for a deliberate process of reform. Whenever they think that political and social change is unavoidable, they do begin to support popular demands. Therefore, both countries have developed their relations with all regional states and all regimes, secular or traditional, in order to maintain regional stability. While Saudi Arabia has been supporting Islamic groups, which are leading actors of the revolts, in general, Turkey has been developing good relations with ethnic and sectarian groups, including the Islamic ones.

Saudi Arabia has been spending huge amounts of money, and in the Bahraini case sending military troops, in order to keep the wave of revolts as far away from its country as possible. It will continue to try to buy allies and regional stability by spending even more money. However, the Saudi leaders will soon learn that there are many things that money and the wealth of the country cannot buy, such as freedom, ethnic and cultural values. While the Kingdom is quite successful in providing “bread,” it does not have the political will to provide freedom for its own people.

Turkey, on the other hand, wants regional countries, including Saudi Arabia, to initiate comprehensive reform programs in order to provide both wealth and freedom for their people. With its strong economic structure, its stable political system and its influential soft power, Turkey encourages Riyadh, one of its potential partners, to be more responsive to its people’s demands. However, cooperation with the pro-status quo Riyadh will erode Turkey’s power in the eyes of the Arab revolutionaries. Therefore, for Saudi Arabia, acting with Turkey requires supporting the revolutionaries, as in the case of Libya, Tunisia and now Syria. In the end, cooperation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia will more likely benefit Saudi Arabia than Turkey.

*Regional power balances and the threat from Iran*

One of the main pillars of Saudi and Turkish regional cooperation is the fear of Iran and the need for balancing a possible Iranian hegemony. For instance, in Iraq both countries tried to contribute to its reconstruction and supported Iyad Allawi during the Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2010 in order to ensure Iraq

stays out of Iranian control. However, Ankara and Riyadh pursue different policies regarding Iran. While Turkey mainly follows a supra-sectarian regional policy and opposes Western military intervention, the Kingdom encourages the West to punish Iran. The Kingdom is concerned about the Iranian objective of

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creating a Shia region (the so-called Shia Crescent) in the Middle East that will contain Saudi activities and compel it to make all its regional plans based upon anti-Iranianism.

As a result, Saudi Arabia wants to increase cooperation with Turkey,

another regional Sunni state that has concerns about Iranian regional hegemony. Saudi leaders are convinced that without Turkey's cooperation, a country which nowadays has claims for influence in global power calculations as well as on the Arab streets, it will be quite difficult to overcome its regional rivalry with Iran. At the same time, the long-standing regional balance between the Riyadh-Cairo moderate axis and the Tehran-Damascus radical axis ended with the 2011 revolts. The Arab revolts struck countries from both axes and harmed both sides. The loss of Egypt meant more for Saudi Arabia since it was not only the loss of an ally but also changed the regional balance of power which up to then was in favor of the Kingdom. For today's regional power calculations, the Kingdom needs Turkey, the only possible regional power to fill the gap as an ally in its struggle against Iran, which still uses a discourse of conflict in its relations in the Middle East.

*The types of political regimes: New circumstances, new political elites*

A new source of tension between Islamic and secular groups has emerged in the region. So far all the regimes overthrown by the rebels were secular authoritarian republican ones such as in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Two other secular republics (Syria and Yemen) are faced with strong popular protests and opposition movements. If the emerging Islamic governments exclude secular groups and national minorities, this means that they will continue the ethnic or sectarian politics of the previous regimes under another guise, which may cause further political, economic and social instability in their countries. With the possibility of criticism from global powers, especially the Western powers, Saudi Arabia may turn to Turkey for support in its regional policy of consolidating traditional administrations. Turkey, which is concerned about the regional chaos which could influence its domestic and foreign policy, may support the Saudi regional policy and prefer a gradual reform of the traditional monarchies and a slow evolution of the regional political system.

Saudi Arabia had been supporting Islamic movements against secular republican regimes until very recently. However, one of the main concerns of Saudi leaders, who do not want any alternatives to their traditional monarchy, is the success of the Islamic movements, which could lead to an erosion in the belief of the supremacy of monarchical political systems. The emergence of elected Islamic governments could erode the legitimacy of regional hereditary administrations. Therefore, in the long run, the Kingdom could fall apart as a result of the “popular” and democratic” Islamic movements. Cooperation with Turkey, the most democratic country in the region and another country that has close relationships with Islamic movements, would strengthen Saudi relations with the newly emerging “Islamic” regimes. Saudi Arabia and Turkey need to act together if they want conciliation between the new political powers and the political elites of the old regimes. However, the political participation of youth and women, which account for up to 65 percent of the total population, remains to be solved. And the Saudi authorities are reluctant to speed up social and political reforms.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey have parallel policies towards the regional Islamic movements that, along with other parts of society, have been leading the Arab revolts. While the Kingdom has been supporting Islamic movements for decades, Turkey only began to improve its relations with these groups after AK Party came to power. While Saudi Arabia was supporting the status quo during the Cold War era, it can lead the powers of change through the Islamic movements by offering huge amounts of money to help with internal stability and for their political legitimization. Only with this could Saudi Arabia be able to persuade the Islamic movements to move away from the Iranian discourse of conflict and build active regional cooperation. Saudi Arabia and Turkey can (and should) work together in convincing Western powers that the Islamic movements are legitimate political actors and not involved in illegitimate actions.

The emergence of elected Islamic governments could erode the legitimacy of regional hereditary administrations

#### *Close relations with the West*

Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey have had close relations with the Western world, the US in particular, for decades. Both countries benefitted from the American nuclear umbrella throughout the Cold War. However, as the US security umbrella increasingly loses its influence in the region, and with the souring of Saudi-American relations after the September 11 attacks, both Saudi Arabia and Turkey began to develop regional policies to solve regional problems, giving

priority to regional dynamics rather than to preferences of global powers. Therefore, both countries increasingly need one another in order to solve regional problems. However, the Western powers have to revise their regional policies as a result. During this transition period, they should not support the corrupt regimes in exchange for oil and natural gas, nor should they give unconditional support to Israel's aggressive policies. In sum, the Western states also need to take the new regional dynamics into account. Changes in the policies of Western states, who are still dependent on Turkish and Saudi support, will permit Turkey and Saudi Arabia to further improve their cooperation.

When taking the popular demands of the Arab revolts into consideration, one may infer that the process of change could cause the revival of a civilizational political discourse. It is indispensable that states which want to take part in the reconstruction of Islamic civilization be more flexible, open to change, and to propose non-Western as well as Western solutions to regional problems. Considering its economic wealth, political stability, social development and human resources, Turkey will play a decisive role in this reconstruction.

## **Conclusion**

Although Saudi Arabia has initiated reforms in many areas, it still represents a traditional regional political system, namely monarchy. The Kingdom has begun to take regional and global developments into consideration and to open its economy and politics to the world. Compared to previous kings, Abdullah has achieved significant restructuring in both the domestic and foreign policies of the country. He has also tried to reduce the uni-dimensional dependency on the US. For this, while he continues to maintain close relations with the US, he has begun to improve relations with other Western countries, primarily European countries, and with other global powers such as Russia, China and India. Furthermore, after the start of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia has consolidated its relations with other countries with traditional political systems, such as the Gulf monarchies.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey did not have friendly relations for a long time. One of the reasons for this was that Saudi Arabia was established as a kingdom after a long struggle against the Ottoman state, and Turkey was established as a Western-style republic representing the modern face of the Middle East. While Turkey recognized the Kingdom immediately after it was declared, it did not enter into close relations as a result of its Western policy orientation. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, representing the traditional political system (traditional monarchy), has had close relations with the West, but has kept its traditional institutions. However, changing conditions and regional developments have increasingly forced the two countries to cooperate.



With the spread of the Arab revolts throughout the Middle East, the regional political, economic and social system will have to be restructured. After the fall of the republican regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and the increasing instability in Syria and Yemen, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have remained the two most politically stable and economically well-off countries in the region. While cooperating in dealing with regional problems, Turkey and Saudi Arabia need to use an inclusive political discourse. Therefore, Turkey should convince Saudi Arabian leaders to stop using sectarian rhetoric and to change their priorities accordingly. Similar to Turkey, Saudi Arabia also should initiate dialogue with political and social groups that belong to different sects and religions. Organizing and financing intercultural international meetings would be a symbolic indication of a change in the Saudi Arabian political discourse.

They can both oppose the development of nuclear weapons and work toward a nuclear-free region, including both Iran and Israel. Turkey and Saudi Arabia should be in contact with Iran, while at the same time trying to balance its influence. They should not repeat the Western (American and Israeli) discourse of conflict and should not otherize Iran. As two significant Sunni states, they can improve relationship with other regional Muslim and Arab countries and pioneer coordination among Muslim countries. They can also work together in solving regional problems using regional instruments such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, the headquarters of both of which are located in the Kingdom, and by cooperating with regional actors, including regional states and transnational actors. They also should act in tandem with global powers since it is quite difficult to achieve regional stability without the consent of the global powers.

Ankara and Riyadh have to put the differences between their two states aside as they work through this transition period. Democratic and secular Turkey and monarchical and religious Saudi Arabia should continue consultations regarding regional developments, for example on Syria. Saudi Arabia and Turkey can exert more pressure and influence when their efforts are combined. Turkey cannot be successful in its unilateral regional policies; it needs Saudi Arabia more than ever, especially after the regime changes in Iraq and Egypt and the failure of other states in the region, since Riyadh is one of the few regional states that has maintained the stability of its state structure.

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