

Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective

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ABSTRACT *With the growing need for more cooperative relations in the face of Iran's assertive foreign policy following Saddam's fall, Turkey's importance as a counterbalancing country in the region increased in the eyes of the GCC states. In a similar vein, Gulf markets, and energy resources offered great opportunities for Turkey's expanding economy. Both sides, therefore, managed to keep cordial relations despite some diverging interests following the Syrian crisis. However, the Qatar crisis brought the existing problem areas between Turkey and the GCC states, to the surface. This article will focus on these problem areas by taking into consideration the reasons for dramatic changes in both sides' relations following the coup attempt in Turkey and Trump's visit to Riyadh.*

The startling photograph of Donald Trump, King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi placing their hands on a glowing orb at the summit in Riyadh in May 2017 and the following Qatar crisis clarified how the cards are being reshuffled in the Gulf. Trump's visit to Riyadh, during which an arms deal amounting to nearly \$110 billion was made with Saudi Arabia, had four purposes. First was to exclude Iran from the region, second was to strengthen Saudi Arabia's role in the Gulf and Middle East. Third was to boost Israeli stakes in the face of the increasing influence of the Russian Federation and Iran in Syria. Fourth was to challenge the alliance of Iran, Turkey and Russia as they came together seven times in Astana for peace making in Syria.

Developments following Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, specifically the Qatar crisis left no room to doubt that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were directing their alliance with Washington against Ankara. Therefore, Turkey's efforts to continue cordial relations with these two Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states remained fruitless. This article will focus on the reasons why Turkey's relations with the GCC states, primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE,¹ have been increasingly strained, even though only a few years ago relations were at full speed

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The driving motives behind Ankara's enthusiasm to build relations with the GCC states were mostly the economic ones, as Turkey was in need of new markets, foreign capital and diversification of energy resources

with the Turkish-GCC Strategic Dialogue and ongoing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations. After a brief historical background of Turkey-GCC relations, the article will focus on the problem areas between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the UAE especially after the onset of the Syrian crisis. The Qatar crisis and its impact on Turkey and the GCC states will be among the concerns of the study as the cri-

sis showed the changing parameters of the GCC security understanding and brought the ideological, strategic differences between Turkey and the GCC to the surface. Last but not least, the fragmentation within the GCC and its impact on Turkey-GCC relations will be analyzed.

Background

Over the last decade, tectonic changes, such as the 9/11 incidents, occupation of Iraq, the outburst of the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis fostered a gradual rapprochement between Ankara and the Gulf monarchs. Put differently, with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime which resulted in the empowerment of the Shia majority of Iraq and rise of Iranian influence, Turkey's role as a counter-balance to rising Shiism became crucial in the eyes of the Gulf monarchies, principally Saudi Arabia, as Riyadh had a twofold aim. One was to create "a sort of Sunni alliance to oppose the so-called 'Shia arc,' that from Iran through Iraq extended up to Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah."² Second was to avoid the spillover effect of rising Shiism on its Shia minority concentrated in the oil-rich eastern provinces.

From Turkey's perspective, the driving motives behind Ankara's enthusiasm to build relations with the GCC states were mostly the economic ones, as Turkey was in need of new markets, foreign capital and diversification of energy resources.³ In this context, as Talbot noted that "trade tremendously increased. While in 2002 the Turkish trade volume with the Gulf monarchies as a whole amounted to \$1.49 billion (1.7 percent of total trade), in 2012 it reached \$19.6 billion (5.0 percent of Turkish global trade)."⁴ In 2005, both sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Manama, Bahrain, to support economic cooperation, encourage exchange of technical expertise and information, improve economic relations, and initiate negotiations to establish free trade zones.⁵ It is also noteworthy that Turkey and Saudi Arabia signed the Security Cooperation agreement in February 2005 which included cooperation



Turkish President Erdoğan is welcomed by Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim al-Thani during his visit to Qatar on November 15, 2017.

KAYHAN ÖZER /
AA Photo

against the international terrorism and drug smuggling. A Turkish scholar, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu's election to the chairmanship of the Islamic Conference Organization became an impetus for the improving bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and after a 40 years interval King Abdullah visited Turkey in 2006 and 2007.⁶ The President of Turkey at that time, Abdullah Gül, responded with an official visit to Saudi Arabia in 2009. That the GCC Foreign Ministers declared Turkey as strategic partner on September 2008 was a turning point in Turkey-GCC relations, since Turkey has become the first country outside the Gulf to be given the status of strategic partner of the GCC.⁷

In addition, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in Jeddah, December 2011 laid the foundation of a regular dialogue at the ministerial level⁸ between the two parties. From Turkey's perspective, it was an important step taken on the way of building institutionalized relations with the Gulf countries. Throughout the 2000s, Turkey has become an increasing magnet for Gulf-based investors while the GCC region, led by Saudi Arabia became one of the leading providers of energy to Turkey. When looking closely, however, latest developments following the Syrian crisis have had a negative impact on creeping relations between the GCC states and Turkey and led to the emergence of new problem areas between the two sides. Put differently, Turkey's ultimate preference for the Russian-Iranian alternative for the sake of coping with the PKK affiliated PYD/YPG, rather than containing Iranian expansion-

ism in the region led to the deterioration of the existing problem areas between Turkey on one hand, and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates on the other.

Problem Areas between Turkey-GCC States

The diverging interests became most evident after the fall of Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013 when the Saudis and Emiratis sided with putschist Sisi and were angered by Turkish (and Qatari) patronage of Morsi. Erdoğan, who was puzzled by Saudi backing of the coup in Egypt, openly asked Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, "How could a country claiming to uphold Islam and Sharia support the overthrow of an elected Islamist president (Mohammed Morsi) who came to power after fair elections?"⁹ Turkey's vocal insistence that Morsi should return to power and then Turkish Prime Minister, Erdoğan's harsh rhetoric towards the interim government in Egypt, however, endangered Turkey's efforts to build energy and trade based relations with the region.¹⁰ For example, the suspension of the UAE's \$12 billion investment in a coal-based energy project in Turkey had a cold shower effect on Ankara at a time when direct exports to Syria and Egypt –and via Turkey to other countries– were steadily declining. Ankara, being alarmed by the probability that Saudi Arabia might have played a part in the cancellation of the UAE investment, was afraid of losing the complete support of the Gulf capital.¹¹ In addition, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait's decision to provide financial aid, of \$12 billion to Egypt's military rulers, prompted Ankara to mend the bilateral relations.¹² The rift over Egypt showed the limits of Turkey's norm diffusion policies, such as standing against the putschists in Egypt, as economic priorities rather than politics have shaped the Turkey-GCC states relations.

Leaving aside economic reasons, Ankara also wanted to mend the relations for strategic reasons as it viewed the GCC states as a counterweight to Iran, whose influence in Syria and Iraq as a warrior against Sunni extremism in the form of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham), had been increasing since 2015. For example, Erdoğan openly stated: "Iran is trying to dominate the region to chase ISIS," "Could this be allowed? This has begun annoying us, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. This is really not tolerable and Iran has to see this."¹³ In an interview with the *France 24 TV* channel in 2015, Erdoğan took an open stance against Iran by supporting Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and said that "Iran and the terrorist groups must withdraw" from Yemen. "Iran is trying to chase ISIS from the region only to take its place."¹⁴

Turkey's ultimate preference for the GCC alternative over the Iranian one in the region was partly due to dramatic change in Saudi foreign policy after King Salman bin Abdul Aziz's ascendance to power in January 2015. King Salman's

decision to reconstitute an alliance with Muslim Brotherhood against Iran,¹⁵ while previously in March 2014 the Kingdom under Abdullah had designated the Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist” group, led to a rapprochement with Turkey. In other words, the common threat perceptions, i.e. the Iranian nuclear deal and rise of the ISIS, had a gluing effect in bilateral relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Both defended the idea that moderate and mainstream political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular should have been supported against

ISIS whose brutality had promoted the status of Iran in the eyes of the West as a warrior against the Sunni radicalism, ISIS, in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

The alarm bells of Saudi Arabia regarding Turkey’s new role in the region as a country having neo-Ottoman aspirations, such as having a military presence in Qatar, might have been a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in the formation of a Turkey-Russia-Iran alliance beginning with the Astana and Sochi meetings

The Kingdom spearheaded the creation of an ‘anti-terrorism’ coalition together with 34 other, mainly Sunni, countries including Turkey and Egypt in December 2015 to confront Iran and ISIS. However, this move of Riyadh remained fruitless because, as many analysts alleged, Saudi Arabia’s anti-terrorist alliance was not a real one and it only served to the sharpening of the split between Sunnis and Shias.¹⁶ In parallel with the failure of Riyadh’s leadership to create an anti-terrorism coalition and to adopt a policy of tolerance toward Muslim Brotherhood, the Jordanian Brotherhood’s Hamam Saeed, and other moderate Sunni groups, Turkey’s Syria policy also appeared to shift. Erdoğan implied that “Turkey could potentially accept a transition process, with the Assad regime temporarily remaining.”¹⁷ As the year progressed, Ankara left its regime change agenda it had been pursuing with Saudi Arabia and Qatar and prioritized to prevent the growth of the PKK affiliated PYD/YPG in northern Syria. This automatically led to closer relations with Russia and to a lesser extent with Iran which culminated in the formation of a partnership between the trio to develop a cease-fire in Syria beginning with the Astana process in 2016 and continuing with the Sochi meeting in 2017.

Currently, if there is one single issue that has had a negative impact on Turkey-GCC relations, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it is the Iranian one. While Turkey was viewed as an indispensable Sunni ally and counterweight to Iran by Saudi Arabia until very recently, Turkey’s shifting focus on the Kurdish issue and tilting towards Russia and Iran to obtain a long term cease-fire in Syria beginning with the Astana process, have strained relations. As Cook noted that “Turkey’s view of Iran as a problem to be managed rather



Erdoğan, Putin
and Rouhani:
during their talks
in Sochi to discuss
the situation in
Syria.

MIKHAIL SVETLOV /
Getty Images

than resolved placed Ankara at odds with the Gulf Arab states.”¹⁸ Although containing Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the region, especially in Iraq and Levant and the ousting of the Assad regime had a gluing effect between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two factors played a negative role in Turkey’s relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE. One was Turkey’s support to the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) both in Egypt and Syria and the second one was Saudi Arabia remaining silent and not adopting a clear stance towards the coup attempt in July 2016, in Turkey.

In sum, three points should be stressed: First, anxieties regarding Iranian expansionist role in the region predated Turkey’s efforts to align with the GCC states; second, the lack of any strategic partnership among Turkey and the Sunni Arabs –Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt under Sisi– might have even contributed to Erdoğan’s words: “I don’t look at the sect. It does not concern me whether Shia or Sunni, what concerns me is Muslims.”¹⁹ Finally, the alarm bells of Saudi Arabia regarding Turkey’s new role in the region as a country having neo-Ottoman aspirations, such as having a military presence in Qatar, might have been a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in the formation of a Turkey-Russia-Iran alliance beginning with the Astana and Sochi meetings. Turkey has

been extremely estranged from its Gulf allies who tilted towards the U.S. and remained silent in the face of the July 15 coup attempt in 2016, whereas the Iranian leadership publicly condemned the coup attempt within hours²⁰ and supported Erdoğan unreservedly during the coup attempt.²¹

Riyadh condemned the coup attempt 15 hours after the event and only after things settled. It was alleged that “a Saudi Emir and a top Emirati military official was aware of an imminent plot to topple the Turkish President through their participation in the Anatolian Eagle maneuvers held in May 2016. However, they refrained from informing the Turkish authorities.”²² Moreover according to news covered by Turkish and foreign media, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi supported the failed coup in Turkey. David Hearst, for example, wrote that “the UAE’s government collaborated with coup plotters in Turkey before the unsuccessful attempt was launched, using exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan. Dahlan was alleged to have transferred money to the plotters in Turkey in the weeks before the coup attempt. Throughout the night of the coup attempt on July 15, pan-Arab media based in Dubai including *Sky News Arabic* and *Al Arabiya* reported that the coup against Turkish President Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party had been successful.”²³

Interestingly, the Turkish reaction was appeasing and low key as Erdoğan did not want to mar relations with the Saudis at a time when 940 Saudi companies had invested \$6 billion in Turkey.²⁴ Only a few months before the coup attempt, King Salman had paid a visit to Turkey during which Turkey bestowed its highest honor, the Order of the State, on King Salman as a rare mark of respect.²⁵ Both sides had already established the strategic cooperation council in December 2015.²⁶ Despite the rift over Egypt and Riyadh’s remaining neutral in the face of YPG’s /PKK’s activities in northern Syria with the support of the U.S., both sides had continued friendship at key moments. For example, Turkey’s foreign minister attended an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation foreign ministers in Jeddah in January 2016 to discuss the mob attacks on Saudi missions in Iran following the execution of a dissident Saudi Shia cleric.²⁷ Turkey opened İncirlik airbase in southern Turkey to Saudi Arabia’s warplanes participating in the battle against ISIS forces, led by the United States.²⁸ Six months after the coup attempt, the Turkish president made a Gulf tour which started with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain but did not stop in the UAE.²⁹ This tour mainly aimed to further and strengthen ties, keep-



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ing open its own lines of communication with Saudi Arabia, while preventing the escalation of tension with Egypt and the UAE.

However, with the outburst of the Qatar crisis, this policy of turning a blind eye to the Saudis' and Emiratis' alleged support of the coup attempt became unsustainable as Turkey was openly targeted by a Saudi-led coalition during the crisis.

Qatar Crisis and Turkey-GCC Relations

Qatar's alignment with Turkey and Iran was one of the main reasons for the outburst of the Qatar crisis as Saudi Arabia and its allies demanded that Qatar to curb diplomatic ties with Iran, terminate the Turkish military presence in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside the country. The Qatar crisis and 13-point ultimatum³⁰ as the price for lifting the trade and diplomatic embargo of the country came soon after Trump's visit to Riyadh. During the visit, the slogan "together we prevail,"³¹ was adopted and the startling photograph of Trump, King Salman and Sisi placing their hands on a glowing orb was taken.

Ankara's immediate response to the blockade on Qatar was to stand by Doha. Turkey sent military forces to Qatar to deter any invasion as a symbolic gesture, given the unlikelihood of an overt attack, but one which crystallized the sharp division between the two camps. On the one side were Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies (the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) who are against Doha, and on the other side were Turkey, Iran and, to a lesser extent, Russia, who support Doha.³² Although Moscow tried to remain silent and neutral during the crisis, as it was categorically against the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, whose members are allegedly sheltered by Qatar, it can be said that the crisis led to a further rapprochement between the two countries. The foremost reason for Russia's neutrality throughout the crisis was mainly due to the fact that Qatari investments helped the Russian economy at a time when Russia was experiencing economic embargoes from the West due to Moscow's problems with Ukraine. For example, "in 2016 the Qatar Investment Authority received a 19 percent share of Russian state oil company Rosneft worth \$10 billion. In the same year, Qatar received a 25 percent share of Germany's Forport and Greece's Copelouzos joint venture company for the Vnukova Airport located in Moscow."³³

Interestingly, while Trump voiced his support for Riyadh's maneuver and implicitly accused Qatar of being a sponsor of terrorism,³⁴ then the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called on the Saudi-led coalition to ease its blockade of Qatar, saying the cutoff was hindering the fight against ISIS and provoking

food shortages.³⁵ Washington's confused policy toward the crisis soon ended with the signature of a \$12 billion deal to sell Qatar dozens of F-15 jets as Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East.³⁶ Both for economic and strategic reasons, Qatar has been an indispensable ally for Washington in its struggle against ISIS. In addition, the United States has been able to have indirect talks with the groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Taliban and al-Qaeda who are hosted by Qatar.³⁷

The gas field's vast reserves which have given Qataris the highest per capita income in the world and tacit agreement between Qatar and Iran on sharing these vast reserves meant the upsetting of the balance of power in the Gulf whose patron is Saudi Arabia

Doha's deepening relations with Turkey amidst the crisis showed the limits of the quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) blockade on Qatar. Turkey and Qatar had their first joint exercise on August 1, 2017 with the participation of over 250 Turkish soldiers and 30 armored vehicles.³⁸ Ankara provided Qatar with food supplies and Erdoğan openly denounced the blockade on Qatar as inhumane and against Islamic values.³⁹ These statements of Erdoğan could be predicted as a desire to be an arbiter of Islamic leadership in the region by appealing to the shared religious identity of all parties (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Iran). However, five days after the start of the crisis, Erdoğan's statement in reference to the UAE, "We know very well who in the Gulf was happy when the coup attempt took place in Turkey. If somebody has intelligence organizations, we also have an intelligence organization"⁴⁰ showed the limits of Turkey's bid to play a role of an arbiter throughout the crisis.

The UAE's attempts to escalate relations with Turkey also proved why Erdoğan's shuttle diplomacy as a mediator soon after the crisis was met with a cold response by Riyadh. UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, for example, visited the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan in July 2017.⁴¹ Sheikh Abdullah also shared a post on *Twitter* that accused Fahreddin Pasha –an Ottoman governor of Medina from 1916-1919– of committing crimes against the local population, including stealing their property. Turkey retaliated by changing the name of the street where the embassy of the UAE is located to Fahreddin Pasha.⁴²

In sum, three points should be stressed: First, the Qatar crisis happened to be a litmus test for Turkey's increasingly strained relations with the Saudis and Emiratis after the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey. Ankara's efforts to stand at an equal distance from Tehran on one hand, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi

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on the other, was perceived by the Saudis and Emiratis as not trustworthy. Second, the establishment of a joint military base hosting 200 Turkish soldiers and having the capacity to accommodate as many as 5,000 in Qatar set the alarm bells in Washington and Riyadh for several reasons. One was uneasiness about Qatari preference of following policies independent from Riyadh as

Doha seeks to diversify its alliances and views Saudi Arabia as an overbearing neighbor that does not always respect the smaller GCC states' sovereignty.⁴³ The other one was the paranoia among the Saudis and Emiratis that Qatar's interest in lucrative arms deals with Turkish defense firms would boost Turkey's economy. Much more threatening was the symbolism behind the Turkish military presence in the Gulf given the history of Ottoman rule in the Gulf's southern shores.

The third and the most important point is related to the energy issue which triggered the Qatar crisis. Energy was part of the general perception regarding the strategic threat posed by Qatar, Iran and Iranian gas dependent Turkey, against Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This threat seemed to have been intensified with Qatari and Iranian officials' decision to establish a joint technical committee to coordinate on the volume of gas production from the South Pars gas field located on the two countries' maritime border.⁴⁴ Qatar and Iran share a massive offshore natural gas field, called the South Pars Field by Tehran and the North Field by Doha. The gas field's vast reserves which have given Qataris the highest per capita income in the world and tacit agreement between Qatar and Iran on sharing these vast reserves meant the upsetting of the balance of power in the Gulf whose patron is Saudi Arabia. According to some analysts, "If Qatar and Iran were to mutually cultivate the South Pars natural gas field, this could be a new energy monolith in the region which could further cut into the energy market shares of Saudi Arabia's state-owned energy company Aramco."⁴⁵

Warming relations between the Trio, Qatar-Turkey-Iran, disturbed not only Saudi Arabia but also its ally, Israel. Tel Aviv, whose priority is to isolate Iran and to bring a certain thaw with Turkey as the largest potential buyer of Israeli gas, wants to build a pipeline stretching from Israel to Turkey.⁴⁶ The aim is to export natural gas from Israel to Turkey through which the Israeli gas could be delivered to Europe and to the Balkans.⁴⁷ Many analysts like Kirill Semyonov, an expert on the Middle East, therefore, allege that Israel might have put pressure on the White House to bring Qatar to heel.⁴⁸



Turkish and Qatari Ministers of Economy and Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade sign an agreement to ease transportation and transit passages of trade goods between Turkey, Iran and Qatar on November 26, 2017.

FATEMEH BAHRAMI / AA Photo

The expansion of the Qatar crisis to Libya also shows that energy is the main factor in Abu Dhabi and Doha's proxy war as both are in opposing camps over controlling Libya's crude oil exports. Eastern Libya military commander, Khalifa Haftar, has been supported by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt whereas Qatar, Turkey and Sudan support grassroots Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*), which from the Emiratis and Saudis' perspective, has the potential for anti-government activism in the GCC.⁴⁹

All in all, the Qatar crisis and blockade on Qatar opened the Pandora's Box and showed how the GCC is fragile and distant from being united, as the region has witnessed a number of highly unusual events especially in Saudi politics. Following Trump's visit to Riyadh, a top national security aide Greenblatt and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and his special advisor, paid an unannounced visit to Saudi Arabia's 32-year-old Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), aiming to push a new Israeli-Palestinian "peace" deal.⁵⁰ Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel soon after this visit and Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman's jailing many members of his country's ruling elite, including from his own family on corruption charges⁵¹ were commented as developments proving America's interference in Saudi inner politics and efforts to reshape the region in accordance with Israeli interests. Worse still, the U.S.-Saudi alignment was bound to upset the balance of power in the region setting into motion the process of polarization by enabling Israel to maintain its absolute superiority over the Arabs.

Trump, King Salman and Sisi placing their hands on a glowing orb at the summit in Riyadh in May 2017 brought about closer relations between Qatar, Iran and Turkey

The above-mentioned developments had a direct impact on Turkey-Saudi led axis (the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt) relations as Ankara was extremely uneasy about their tilting towards Washington, especially when the Jerusalem issue came to the agenda. For example, Bahraini Foreign Minister stated that Palestine was a side issue⁵² and the Saudi mufti avoided any reference to the question of Jerusalem during the Friday sermon.⁵³ The developments following the U.S. decision on Jerusalem openly showed the deep polarization within the Islamic world. While non-Muslim countries such as Venezuela have insisted on taking part as an observer in the summit of the Organization of

Islamic Cooperation held in İstanbul, the Saudi-led axis avoided sending high ranking delegations to the emergency Jerusalem summit. This was perceived as a betrayal to the Islamic world by Turkey at public as well as official level.⁵⁴

Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto Saudi ruler's describing Iran, Turkey and Islamic militant groups as the axis of evil in his statement to Egyptian journalist Lamis Elhadidy during his visit to Egypt aroused the wrath of Turkish public opinion. Although the Saudi Embassy in Ankara released a statement refuting Elhadidy's allegations after the backlash from Turkish social media users mainly on *Twitter* and *Facebook*,⁵⁵ Turkey's being lumped into the triangle of evil by MbS, according to some analysts, aimed to accuse Turkey of siding with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁶ This epitomizes the duality and ambivalence prevailing in Saudi-Turkey relations. This ambivalence is due to the fact that the crown prince's harsh rhetoric towards Turkey, along with Saudis' deteriorating reputation among the Islamic world brought about a rapprochement between Iran and Turkey, although Ankara's tilting towards Muslim Brotherhood in Syria was a major bone of contention between Turkey and Iran. Put differently, Saudi policy of categorizing Turkey –a Sunni country favoring Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*)– and Iran –a Shia country favoring Hezbollah– as axis of evil led to removal of ideological barriers between Iran and Turkey. On the contrary, it had a gluing effect between the two of them and led to a further questioning of Wahhabism as an ideology serving only to the interests of Israeli aspirations rather than Muslims in the region as these words of MbS typically reflected the view of Netanyahu, who has insisted repeatedly that the Iranian Islamic Republic and Sunni groups such as Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS should be seen in the same light.⁵⁷

Conventional wisdom has it that alliances bring about the formation of counter-alliances. Trump, King Salman and Sisi placing their hands on a glowing

orb at the summit in Riyadh in May 2017 brought about closer relations between Qatar, Iran and Turkey. For example, on November 26, Qatar's Economy Minister, Jassim al-Thani, paid a visit to Iran to boost trade relations. Following the talks, Iranian Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade, Mohammad Shariatmadari, stated that Qatar wanted to boost bilateral trade five-fold to \$5bn a year.⁵⁸ That Qatar, Turkey and Iran signed a three-way trade agreement⁵⁹ by which Iran would be a transit country between Turkey and Qatar is also noteworthy with respect to understanding how the Qatar crisis and the following developments pushed Qatar towards Iran and Turkey and led to a sharp division within the GCC.

This became most evident with the 38th GCC summit which was cut to just a few hours instead of the planned two-day event. The low level of representation at the December 5, 2017 summit in Kuwait City demonstrated the negative impact of the Qatari crisis on the GCC. A few hours before the commencing of the summit, the UAE announced that it was forming a military and economic committee with Saudi Arabia outside the GCC.⁶⁰ It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into details of the reasons for the GCC states' failure to restore their interstate unity. Suffice it to say that the Qatar crisis had far-reaching political and strategic ramifications as it created awareness of the serious challenges facing the Gulf region and clarified the malfunctioning GCC.

Concluding Remarks

In his opening remarks at the 38th GCC meeting, Kuwait's Amir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, said "After 37 years, it would be a shame if all of our efforts and what we have achieved were to come to an end."⁶¹ These words of al-Sabah reflect the latest atmosphere among the GCC states which have been facing substantial challenges since the beginning of the Arab revolutions and insurgencies. The outburst of the Arab Spring in Egypt and the Syrian crisis brought to the fore the severe fragmentation of Arab states, thus threatening the balance of power among the GCC states. The threefold fear was that the fragmentation of Syria and Egypt would have a domino effect in the Gulf, enhance the Iranian regional role at the expense of the Arabs, and finally, if the Muslim Brotherhood would successfully stay in power in Egypt and rule Syria, it would promote the debate on Islamic democracy which is, from Saudis' perspective, a grave danger to the security of the GCC.

If there is one single issue that has bedeviled Turkey-GCC relations, it is Turkey's firm belief that Islam and democracy are compatible with each other whereas Saudi Islamic rhetoric sees democracy as an encroachment on the fundamentals of Islam. According to al-Buluwi, "the current "cold war" in the

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Middle East has taken two forms. It involves the Shia-Sunni war being fought in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf, as well as a parallel Sunni-Sunni conflict involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia and political Islamic forces to control and dominate the politics of Sunni Islam.⁶² From the outset, the model of Islamic democracy practiced in Turkey with Ankara's standing by Morsi in Egypt and Turkey's pro *Ikhwan* policy in Syria aroused the wrath of the Saudis for two reasons. One

was that Ankara's insistence on Islamic democracy was perceived as a hidden agenda of Turkey, whose neo-Ottoman aspirations, from Saudis' perspective still persist. Second, Turkey's policies tilting towards the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Saudi Arabia sees the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, make it evident that the two Sunni actors differ a lot from each other in their assessments of the dangers at hand. For example, while Saudi Arabia issued a decision banning such symbols as the four-finger Rabia sign, used to signal support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, this is used by the Turkish president Erdoğan at public events as a symbol of supporting the oppressed Muslims. These differences illustrated the intra-Sunni cold war by which Iran has benefitted the most in the region. Although Erdoğan criticized "Persian expansionism" in the Middle East, called for Saudi Arabia to "show its leadership," and thus, to put an end to the Qatar crisis very recently,⁶³ the situation later evolved bringing Turkey and Iran closer to each other, another important source of friction between Turkey and the Saudi-Emirati led axis.

Saudi Arabia is currently losing its credibility and prestige for a number of reasons. First is the ongoing war in Yemen –Operation Decisive Storm– as a result of which 10,000 people have been killed and at least seven million Yemenis are close to starvation. The second reason is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's miscalculations concerning Qatar which has been pushed towards Iran more than ever by the crown prince's aggressive opposition to Iran. Third is the failure of Saudi efforts to weaken Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon as Prime Minister Saad Hariri was summoned to Riyadh, not allowed to depart and forced to resign his position. This, however, led to the empowerment of both Hezbollah and Iran. Last but not least, Saudis and Emiratis saw that United States under Trump is not a reliable partner as the U.S. made a volte face and did not back the Saudi confrontation with Qatar or did not attempt to get Hariri to resign as Prime Minister of Lebanon.⁶⁴

Under these circumstances, Turkey should play a very delicate and intricate role between the Saudi/UAE bloc and Qatar, as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are moving more into the American orbit, so as to boost the Israeli stakes in the Middle East where there is no longer a united and integrated Arab bloc against Israel. Additionally there is an urgent need for the GCC states specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE to develop sustainable cooperation with Turkey at a time when the GCC is about to fall apart, as Turkey remains as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism in the region. ■

Endnotes

1. Because the Qatar crisis will be an important part of the article, Turkey's relations with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates rather than the other GCC states will be analyzed.
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