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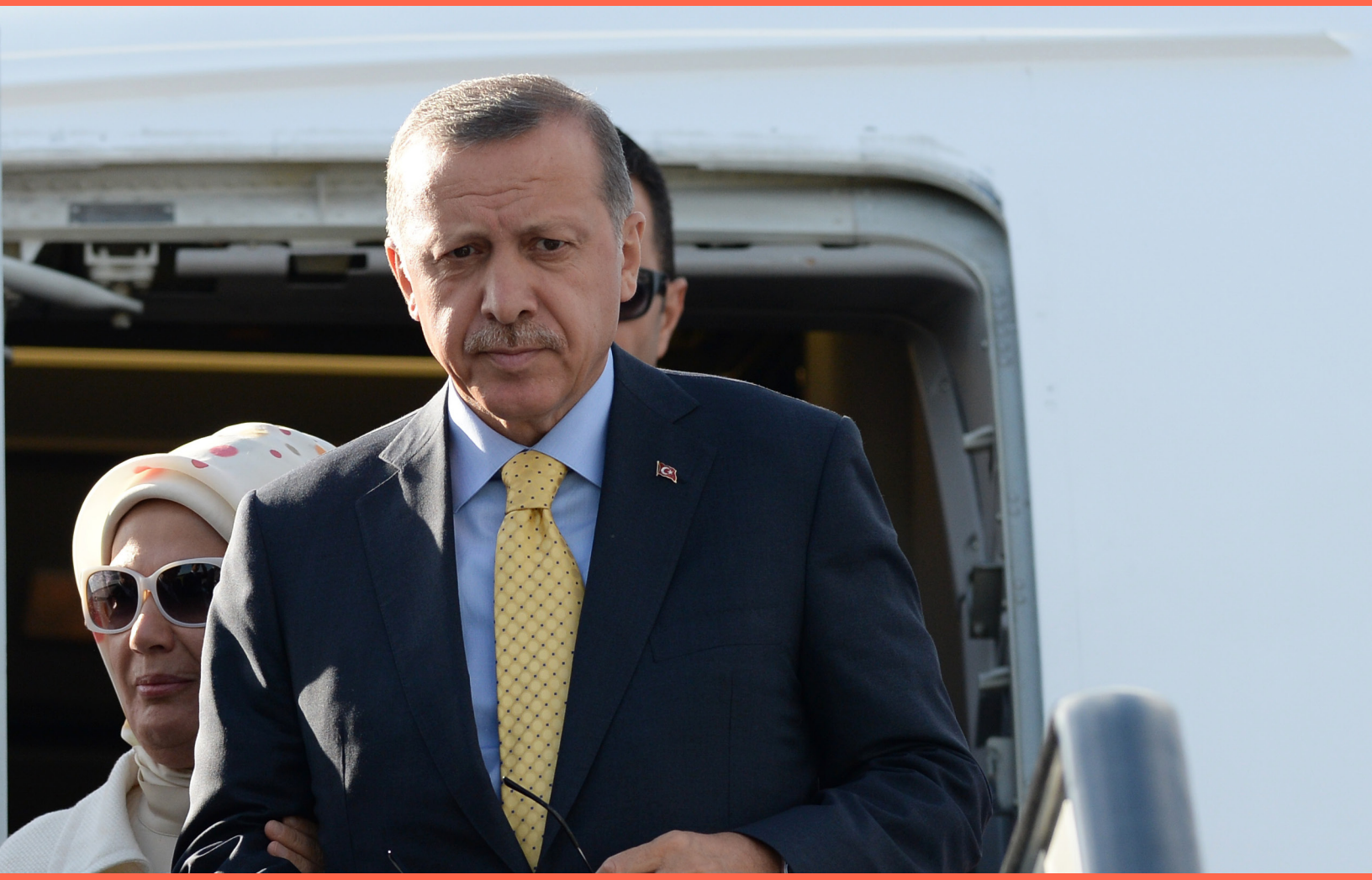

# Turkey and the Arab Gulf States: A Dance with Uncertain Expectations

Ömer Taşpınar

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# Turkey and the Arab Gulf States: A Dance with Uncertain Expectations

By Ömer Taşpınar

## Executive Summary


- Turkey's relations with the Arab Gulf states have significantly improved under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the last 13 years. The arrival of the AKP to power changed the negative image of secular Turkey in the eyes of important actors in the Gulf region. Under the AKP, Ankara gave up its traditional policy of "benign neglect" toward the Arab Gulf in favor of a policy of "active engagement." This was a welcomed development for major regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

- The threat of Iran looms large in the Saudi strategic calculation about Turkey. The Shia nemesis of Saudi Arabia is not only a regional rival for Riyadh, but also an existential security threat for Saudi interests in the Gulf and beyond. Riyadh considers AKP leaders such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul, and Ahmet Davutoglu as Sunni political actors, under whose leadership Turkey should play a much more aggressive strategic role in containing Iran. In other words, Turkey's strategic importance for Saudi Arabia is closely related to its Sunni identity and the AKP's willingness to join the Sunni-Arab front against Iran.

- Given the central role of Iran in Saudi threat perception and strategic calculations of partnership with Turkey, the most important question is whether Turkey shares the same threat perception. The short answer is no. Despite their historic rivalry, Turkey and Iran have managed to avoid adversarial relations for the last 350 years.

- Turkey's relations with Iran are much more complex and multidimensional because of an economic partnership, energy dependence, cultural ties, a sense of mutual respect for imperial-state traditions and Turkey's support for nuclear talks between Tehran and world powers. All of these elements are missing in the Saudi-Iranian context. While the Sunni-Shia rivalry is certainly part of a complex relationship between Iran and Turkey, it is not the only story. For Saudi Arabia, however, the sectarian rivalry seems to be the main, and often only, driver of all strategic calculations.

- Turkey's approach to Saudi Arabia goes beyond the need to contain Iran. The Gulf countries, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are major financial investors in the Turkish economy. Ankara also feels increasingly isolated in the wake of the civil war in Syria and the military coup in Egypt that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood-backed government in July 2013. There are currently no Turkish ambassadors in Syria, Egypt, or Israel – countries that Ankara enjoyed good relations with during the earlier years of the AKP under a policy of "zero conflicts with neighbors."

- Another reason Turkey is interested in improving relations with Saudi Arabia is related to Syria. The Turkish priority is to establish no-fly zones in Syria in an effort to help the moderate Syrian opposition and stem the flow of Syrian refugees. Turkey is also increasingly frustrated with the U.S. reluctance to target the Assad regime and wants Saudi support in changing the U.S. strategy in Syria. Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Turkey decided not to actively join the U.S.-led military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Kurdish question in Syria seems to trump the threat of ISIL in Turkish strategic calculations.

- Finally, an additional layer of complexity in Saudi-Turkish relations is the future of the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey has been a strong supporter of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been staunch defenders of the status quo. The divergence between Turkey and Saudi Arabia turned deeper in the wake of the military coup in Egypt. While Turkey is a strong supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia considers the movement detrimental to the stability of the region. Riyadh wants Turkey to reconcile with Egypt and join the Sunni front against Iran.

- There are some signals that Saudi King Salman Bin Abdel Aziz may soften the anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance of the kingdom. Though it is unclear whether this significant disconnect in Turkish-Saudi relations can be overlooked in the interests of a more united Sunni front against Iran and better bilateral financial and economic relations.

## Policy Recommendations for the Arab Gulf States

- Turkey has a historic rivalry with Iran. Yet, it wants stable economic and diplomatic relations with its neighbor. Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, need to develop a more realistic understanding of Turkey's threat perception in the region, particularly in the context of Iran.

- Arab Gulf states should carefully assess whether Turkey's traditionally non-sectarian strategic instincts toward the Middle East are changing, given the seemingly more pro-religious posture of the AKP.

- Turkey is primarily interested in strong economic and financial relations with Arab Gulf states. Turkey and the Gulf states should continue developing a multidimensional economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation strategy.

## Policy Recommendations for the United States

- Washington's failure to target the Assad regime in Syria is the main reason why Turkey is reluctant to open the Incirlik base for a military campaign against ISIL. Any flexibility on that front will change Ankara's strategic calculations.

- Washington should have a more robust strategic dialogue with Turkey about how to contain Iranian interference in the region without pushing Turkey to focus on the sectarian divide that thrives in the Arab Gulf states.

- Washington seems better placed to mediate between Egypt and Turkey than Saudi Arabia. Reconciliation between Egypt and Turkey should become a higher priority for U.S. policy.

# Background

Turkey's evolving relations with the Arab Gulf, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, need to be analyzed in the larger regional context. This analysis will therefore focus primarily on Turkey's relations with the Arab Gulf states in light of changing regional dynamics in the Middle East. The civil war in Syria, the military coup in Egypt, the rise of ISIL, Iran's regional influence and nuclear ambitions, Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions, and the future role of the Muslim Brotherhood are all critical factors impacting Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and other Gulf states.

Iran's nuclear ambition and Tehran's growing influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and, most recently, Yemen present the most daunting national security challenges for Saudi Arabia. That Saudi Arabia's regional rival is exerting increased influence through its allies in large swathes of Yemen, Syria, and Iraq has exacerbated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) concerns. In Iraq, the leading role of Iranian commanders in Baghdad's attempt to reconquer Sunni territories lost to ISIL is very alarming for Riyadh. Even more concerning are the growing prospects of a deal between world powers and Iran on Tehran's disputed nuclear program. To the Saudi security establishment, an Iranian nuclear program left intact and progressing toward a threshold capacity represents an existential threat.

In addition to such geo-strategic security concerns history, ideology, and ethnicity also affect Saudi-Iranian-Turkish relations. Iran is a Shia state, but more importantly it is an ancient Persian state. Turks and Iranians are linguistically and culturally different from Semitic Arabs. Ethnic rivalries between Persians, Arabs, and Turks go back long before Iran became a Shia state 500 years ago. The ethnic element in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is at least as weighty as any religious one. Although Turkey is not a direct player in this Arab-Persian rivalry, Persian regional hegemony has historically been a major concern for Turks since the early days of the Ottoman Empire. The perception of Turks in the Arab Gulf is also far from being universally positive despite recent positive trends.

The ideological rivalry between Iran, the GCC, and Turkey is equally significant. Saudi Arabia, with its Wahhabi religious apparatus, is the ultimate counter-revolutionary state in the Middle East and a staunch supporter of the status quo. Iran, however, became a revolutionary state in 1979 with the establishment of the Islamic Republic and has tried to export its revolution to neighboring Muslim countries, including to secular Turkey.

More recently, with the beginning of the Arab uprisings of 2011, the question of revolutionary democratic change gained further relevance. That the AKP has become a strong supporter of democratic movements in the Arab world, and perhaps more importantly, that Ankara has maintained close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, has troubled the Saudi national security establishment. One reason Riyadh is concerned about the Muslim Brotherhood is because the movement is an instigator for systemic change in the Arab world. While Turkey supports democratization and the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia is the staunch supporter of stability. The Saudi regime not only defends the status quo, but also clings to the West, and more specifically to Washington, for security.

This is mainly why Saudi Arabia deeply resented the Obama administration's support for regime change and democratization in Egypt under former President Hosni Mubarak.

## Iran as a common threat?

Turkey, a predominantly conservative Sunni Muslim country, is concerned about Iran's growing regional influence. Iran and Turkey are historic rivals for influence and prestige in the Middle East. Yet, as Turkish diplomats often point out, Turkey and Iran have also maintained a relatively stable relationship, and the 312-mile border between the two neighbors has remained unchanged since 1639. Following the rise of the AKP in November 2002, Turkey has pursued a policy of establishing "strategic depth" with "zero problems" with its neighbors, concepts put forth by former foreign minister and now Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Both President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Davutoglu believe that Turkish foreign policy was too heavily reliant on relations with the West to the detriment of other Turkish interests, and strive to correct this imbalance through improved diplomatic and economic ties with Muslim neighbors, including Iran.

Today, for instance, unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey strongly supports nuclear talks between Iran and the West. In addition, one of the most critical differences in the Saudi and Turkish approach to Iran is at the economic level. Turkey has strong trade relations with Iran and its dependence on Iranian oil makes it a strong supporter of a diplomatic solution that will loosen sanctions. Turkey depends heavily on Iran for its domestic energy requirements, causing a significant trade imbalance that Ankara tries to rectify by increasing Turkish exports to Iran. In 2012, Turkey imported 39 percent of its oil supply and 19 percent of its natural gas supply from Iran. The only significant alternative supplier of oil and natural gas has been Russia, complicating Turkey's energy import options. Given the lack of domestic energy resources and the resulting dependence on traditional rival neighbors Iran and Russia for imports, Turkey plans to pursue nuclear energy as a long-term alternative energy source.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the value of Turkish exports to Iran in 2014 was nearly $3.9 billion, while Turkish imports from Iran in 2014 were worth over $9.8 billion, a total bilateral trade of $13.7 billion. This is a significant reduction from bilateral trade that in 2012 totaled almost $22 billion, including nearly $10 billion in exports from Turkey to Iran.[1] Some Turkish business leaders believe that the end of sanctions against Iran would create an export and investment market for Turkey worth more than $90 billion.[2] This economic picture and Turkey's status as an export-oriented dynamic economy explains why Ankara, unlike Riyadh, sees a major business and commercial potential in relations with Tehran.

On the other hand, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have also enjoyed close ties under the AKP with flourishing trade and investment flows. Trade between Turkey and the Gulf took off during the 2000s, surging from $1.5 billion in 2002 to $14.9 in 2011. Economic and political ties significantly strengthened between Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the first two years of the Syrian civil war, when Ankara and Riyadh both threw their support behind the Syrian opposition in an effort to topple the Assad regime.[3]

Given the central role of Iran in the Saudi threat perception and strategic calculations of partnership with Turkey, the most important question is whether Turkey shares the same threat perception.

[1] Fuller, Graham, Turkey and the Arab Spring (Bozorg Press, 2014) p. 267

[2] Kirisci, Kemal and Keanels, Rob, "Is the Deal With Iran Bad For Turkey?" in The National Interest, January 21, 2014

[3] Fuller. Op Cit., p.254

Turkey's relations with Iran are much more complex and multidimensional, not only because of economic partnership, energy dependence, and cultural ties, but also because the two countries share a sense of mutual respect for imperial-state traditions. While the Sunni-Shia rivalry is only part of a complex relationship between Iran and Turkey, this sectarian divide seems to be the principal driver of rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iranian strategies in the Arab Gulf region, Lebanon, Syria, and, most importantly, Iraq. Although the AKP's neo-Ottomanism sometimes takes Turkey in a more pro-Sunni direction in relations with Iran, Syria, and Iraq, the Kemalist roots of Turkish foreign policy provide a counter-balance for pragmatic realpolitik in relations with Iran.[4]

## Syria as Common Ground?

The conflict in Syria is a significant factor in Turkish-GCC relations. Ankara quickly emerged as one of the principal supporters of the Syrian opposition, beginning in late 2011. Turkey allowed the Syrian National Council (SNC) – an umbrella political organization comprising most of the anti-Assad groups – to base itself in Istanbul and southern Turkey. Ankara began supplying the SNC with economic aid and diplomatic support. SNC representatives from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood were the original beneficiaries of Turkey's assistance, in keeping with Ankara's longstanding links to the group.

As the conflict evolved in 2012-13 and the battlefield prowess of Islamic extremist groups became more apparent, Turkish authorities reconsidered this approach and opted to look the other way as Islamic extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, which is linked to al-Qaeda, and Ahrar al-Sham transited Turkish territory. In 2013, the Obama administration publicly criticized then-Prime Minister Erdogan for doing too little to curb the flow of foreign fighters. Although Ankara publicly joined the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the ISIL in late 2014, it has been slow to offer concrete contributions and has frequently criticized the United States for ignoring the threat posed by the Assad regime.

Ankara is concerned that the U.S.-led campaign against ISIL will achieve two things. First, it will strengthen the Syrian Kurds, who maintain close ties with Kurdish separatists in Turkey. That the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is the main Syrian Kurdish group fighting ISIL appears to be a major sticking point for Turkey. Turkey is thus torn between two priorities: the need to play an active role against ISIL and the fear that doing so will empower Kurdish separatism. Second, Ankara is concerned that the defeat of ISIL will strengthen the regime in Damascus. These two factors help explain why Turkey is reluctant to play a major military role in the anti-ISIL coalition – beyond the current role of providing logistical support.

Since both developments run counter to Turkish national interests, Ankara is more likely to play an active role in the coalition only if it gets serious commitments about reversing these dynamics. The training of what is left of the Free Syrian Army within safe havens established in northern Syria would be a step in the right direction for Turkey. This would require a no-fly zone, which could potentially be enforced from the İncirlik base.

This Turkish position in Syria significantly differs from that of the GCC. Unlike Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are active participants with Washington in the anti-ISIL coalition. ISIL seems to represents a more serious national security threat for the Arab Gulf. Turkey's inability to solve its own Kurdish problem makes the Kurdish issue a top national security priority in

[4] For a good discussion on this topic, see Fahim Tastekin, "Are Turkey and Saudi Arabia Working Together Against Iran?" In Al Monitor, March 2015.

its policy on Syria. In that sense, in the eyes of Ankara, the fear of a PKK dominated northern Syria trumps the concerns about ISIL. During Erdogan's recent meeting with Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, the two leaders reached an agreement to increase Saudi-Turkish support for the Syrian opposition. Salman reportedly promised to support Turkey's demand for a no-fly zone in Syria. These new dynamics show that Ankara courts Riyadh with one eye to dynamics in Syria and Iraq.

This mismatch between Ankara's and Washington's approaches to the conflict in Syria only added to Turkey's frustration. In February, Turkey signed an agreement to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition fighters. As part of the plan, the United States will send more than 400 troops to Turkey and Ankara will host around 5,000 Syrian opposition fighters. Despite the deal, Washington and Ankara are still not on the same page on Syria, the former saying that the force will be used against ISIL while the latter insists it has to target the Assad regime.

## Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood?

Recent improvements in Turkish-Saudi relations must thus be analyzed within this regional context. Although Turkey and Saudi Arabia shared common objectives in terms of toppling the Assad regime in Syria, the Turkish-Saudi cooperation suffered a blow in summer 2013 when the two countries found themselves on opposing fronts in Egypt. Saudis became ardent supporters of Egypt's then-General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who led the coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi, and branded Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood group a terrorist organization. At the same time, Turkey and Qatar welcomed Brotherhood figures seeking refuge. Turkey's harsh criticism of Saudi Arabia and the UAE for supporting the coup in Egypt drove a further wedge between Ankara and the GCC, leading to a joint Saudi-UAE campaign against Turkey's bid for a U.N. Security Council seat in October 2014.

Turkey's failure to secure a seat in the Security Council illustrates its growing isolation in world affairs. The situation has gotten so bad that even Erdogan recently admitted that he is being snubbed by world leaders.[5] Frustrated by the United States' failure to heed its advice in Syria and Iraq, and Iran's growing clout in these countries, Turkey seems to have decided to mend its frosty relationship with Saudi Arabia. When Saudi King Abdullah died in January, Erdogan immediately cut short an African tour and flew to Riyadh to offer his condolences. He declared a period of mourning in Turkey and ordered the Turkish flag be flown at half-mast.

This new state of affairs was most visible recently during Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia, where the new king, Salman, apparently tried to reconcile Turkey and Egypt. This was not a very subtle move by the Saudis since Egyptian President Sisi was in Riyadh at the same time as Erdogan. In an interview with the Saudi media, Sisi, who Turkey accuses of staging a coup that unseated the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-backed government, said that his country has never insulted Turkey.[6] Erdogan, in turn, acknowledged to the Turkish media that the Saudi king wants to see better relations between Cairo and Ankara. He was quick to add that Turkey has no problems with the Egyptian people.[7] Beyond the question of whether this mediation attempt has any chance of success, that Saudi Arabia is trying hard to reconcile Turkey and Egypt is in itself very telling. In many ways, it is a clear sign of how regional dynamics are pushing Salman to become a more active player in regional diplomacy.

[5] "Erdogan Admits His Isolation in the World, Says He Doesn't Care," Today's Zaman, February 17, 2015

[6] "Leaders of Egypt, Turkey Visit Saudi Arabia," Agence France Press, March 1, 2015

[7] Beki, Akif., "Saudi Arabia Wants U.S. To Make Peace With Egypt, Says Turkish President," Daily Hurriyet, March 4, 2015

Iran's nuclear potential is seen as an existential threat for another country that has problems of its own with the Obama administration. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had no reluctance in trying to undermine the potential agreement between Iran and the United States in the speech he gave to a joint session of the U.S. Congress on March 3. The balance of power in the Middle East makes strange bedfellows. Yet, to have Israel on its side is little consolation for Saudi Arabia. The real challenge for the new king is to fully consolidate the Sunni front against Iran.

This is where the Egyptian-Turkish rift really hurts. Egypt and Turkey have a total population of 160 million. Egypt is seen as the most important country in the Arab world and Turkey is the only Muslim member of NATO. To have these two Sunni Muslim countries with the largest armies and economies in the region engaged in a diplomatic war at a time when the Shia populations appear to be uniting is a major setback for the Saudis. This is why it makes sense for Riyadh to mediate between Turkey and Egypt. But the more difficult challenge will be to convince the AKP government that the rapprochement between Iran and the West is not in Turkey's national interest. After all, as recently as in 2010, Erdogan delivered a similar nuclear proposal with Iran, which Washington angrily refused.[8] Turkey is likely to continue talks with the Saudis without changing much of its policies toward Egypt and Iran.

## Conclusion

Turning over a new page in its relations with Riyadh might break Turkey's circle of isolation in the region. But Turkey might soon find out that Saudi support might not go a long way toward convincing the West to establish a no-fly zone in Syria and switch Washington's priority to fighting the Assad regime. Without a recalibration of Ankara's stance vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood and Sisi, Turkey-Egypt relations are also unlikely to improve, leaving the so-called "Sunni bloc against Iran" weak. This is why the Turkish-Saudi attempts to counter Iran's influence and tip the balance in the Syrian conflict might prove unrealistic.

With the benefit of hindsight, the turning point in Turkey's grand strategic vision of pursuing a Neo-Ottoman sphere of influence may have come with the Arab uprisings in 2011. The hubris and euphoria behind AKP's neo-Ottoman vision projecting Turkey as the leader of a democratizing Arab world led to serious strategic miscalculations. Given the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the civil war in Syria, it is time for the AKP to give up on its overly idealist vision in favor of a more realistic approach.

Today, there is no doubt that the AKP's neo-Ottoman vision of leadership in the Middle East has failed. The situations in Egypt and Syria show that democratic change won't come easily to entrenched autocracies. The fact that Turkey has no ambassadors in Egypt, Syria, and Israel speaks for itself. Turkey needs to adopt a more realistic vision of the emerging balance of power in the region. This will require a better balance between neo-Ottoman and Kemalist tendencies in Turkish foreign policy by emphasizing national interests and objectives. The new orientation should do away with Sunni sectarianism and the Islamic romanticism linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

[8] Reinl, James, "U.S. Rejects Iran Nuclear Deal Brokered By Turkey and Brazil And Sets Up New Sanctions," The National Interest, May 20, 2010