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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Saudi–Turkish Rapprochement: Background, Motives, Prospects

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2016

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Introduction

A recent visit to Turkey by Saudi monarch King Salman Bin Abdulaziz marked a milestone in what has become an almost year-long rapprochement between the two nations. This follows what had been a downward spiral in relations that saw a sharpening of the nations' proxy conflict in Egypt, as well as in a breakdown of coordination efforts in Syria. Work to redefine national interests and to identify common threats have brought Turkey and Saudi Arabia back together as each faces the risk of a complete collapse of the regional order. These external factors have ensured that officials in Ankara and Riyadh reconcile their differences.

Saudi-Turkish Tensions and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring created a flashpoint for disagreement between the two regional powerhouses. For Turkey, the popular uprisings in Egypt, and Syria in particular, provided a golden opportunity to project its power and prestige in the Arab region and to turn itself into a regional leader. In contrast, Saudi Arabia viewed these popular uprisings as a major threat and reacted in accordance with the conservatism of a traditional regime opposed to any sort of revolutionary change, especially in its regional backyard. At the same time, the Saudi response can also be traced to Riyadh's belief in the existence of a US-Turkish concord that would have permitted—not to say facilitated—the rise of political Islamists in the states stirred by revolution. For such Islamist movements, Turkey's ruling AKP presented a suitable template for how to leave behind opposition politics and move toward governance.

The developing regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey reached its crescendo in Egypt. Riyadh was a fervent supporter of the 2013 military coup that toppled the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammed Morsi. Saudi Arabia would later provide the economic and political support needed to see General Sisi's coup succeed. For Turkey's ruling AKP elite however, this Saudi-backed coup not only unseated a democratically elected, friendly government that Ankara was supporting, but it also reminded Turkish leaders of the periodic overthrows of democratic governments in Turkey's own history (the most recent alleged attempted coup, known as the Ergenekon incident, was planned in 2003, and the apparent conspirators were brought to trial in 2008).

Even in the Syrian conflict in which Ankara and Riyadh found themselves on the same side, motives for actions in the state differed. While the Saudi attitude was rooted largely in the need to contain growing Iranian influence, Turkey's intervention in Syria was the result of growing disillusionment in Ankara given the unwillingness of the Damascus regime to reform. As a consequence, the Turkish government offered support to Syrian political groups with which it felt an affinity, in a bid to influence the outcome of events as they unfolded on the territory of a strategically important neighbor. Eventually, Saudi-Turkish rivalry over Syria saw the two countries offer support to competing groups within the Syrian opposition, leading to a fragmentation of the opposition camp and the diversion of its resources toward marginal conflicts, ultimately prolonging the ongoing violence. This helped transform what was once a popular revolution for national liberation into a painful and costly civil war.

Reasons for a Rapprochement

With the fall of Sanaa to Houthi rebels in September 2014, the high cost of fighting a series of regional proxy battles on a number of fronts became a real concern for Saudi decision makers. Not only was the nation at loggerheads with Iran and its allies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen but it was also positioned against Turkey and the Islamist groups allied to it across the countries of the Arab Spring. Further to this, the change of guard within Saudi Arabia as the monarchic succession was initiated in early 2015, meant a realignment of foreign policy priorities and reevaluation of the country's national security considerations. Following the coronation of King Salman, the need to combat and confront the Iranian threat was given priority over all other Saudi foreign policy objectives. This was a reaction to an increasingly tight Iranian chokehold on Saudi Arabia, whose proxies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon were on the ropes.

Given the loss of Saudi confidence in continued US support, and in light of the near impossibility of confronting Iran's regional influence without the support of a powerful ally, the strategic depth of Turkey as a key ally and regional partner became clear. Reinforcing the decision to look to Turkey were a whole set of problems, foremost of which were the imbalances plaguing the regional Arab order, particularly as Egypt—formerly a cornerstone of regional politics—had become enmeshed in a complicated domestic crisis. For Egypt, enmity toward political Islamism would ultimately act as the guiding principle of domestic and foreign policies. Below is an examination of each of these factors, with the aim of parsing out the issues that underlie the current rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The American Factor

American foreign policy in the Middle East was a catalyst for the warming of Saudi-Turkish relations. Weakened by the 2008 financial crisis, Washington moved to limit its interventions in the region to the bare minimum. The US' increased isolationism was made possible in part by the growing significance of alternative energy sources and, in particular, unconventional fossil fuels (such as shale oil and shale gas). With its new-found energy independence Washington was able to free itself of obligations to its Saudi allies—whence previously the US was relied on to provide security in return for the flow of oil—and thereby unsettle an arrangement which had been in effect since the end of the Second World War. If the Obama Administration's abandonment of ousted Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was for the Saudis a harbinger of the change in tune in Washington, the White House's determination to reach a deal with Iran over its nuclear program removed any shadow of a doubt in this regard.

With the capture of large swathes of territory across the Fertile Crescent by ISIL throughout 2014, confronting Iran's regional posturing became even less of a priority for Washington, which now saw the rise of the militant group across the Iraqi-Syrian border as evidence of one of its greatest policy failures. Indeed, some figures within the Pentagon came to view Iran and its partners as natural allies in the battle against ISIL. This has served to create further anxiety within the Saudi government.

US policy in the region, and particularly in Syria, was also a source of worry for the Turkish government. Washington's has continuously refused to sign up to Turkish plans for a "safety corridor" along the Turkish-Syrian border and shown disregard for Ankara's call to provide the armed Syrian opposition with the weapons it would need to shift the balance of power and overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Turkish fears were heightened by Washington's decision to back Syria's Kurdish Democratic Union Party—the Syrian wing of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (the PKK), which Ankara regards as a terrorist organization—in the hope of using the group to battle ISIL. With American support, the Syrian Kurdish group has managed to secure territory across the Syrian-Turkish frontier and even went as far as declaring a "federalized" autonomous enclave across the north and northeast of Syria.

America's actions thus alienated its two former partners in the region, leaving Ankara and Riyadh with only the company of each other.

Counteracting the Russian–Iranian Axis

US policy on the Middle East and Syria were not the only drivers for change. Saudi Arabia and Turkey were further pushed together in their common goal of counterbalancing the Russian-Iranian alliance and its influence in Syria. Iran's growing power and regional influence had long been a source of concern for both Ankara and Riyadh, which only increased with Washington's indifference to Iran's domination of Iraq following the withdrawal of US combat troops in 2011. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have committed to never allowing these events to repeat themselves, and vowed to prevent Syria from becoming another Iraq and falling into Iranian hands. Despite the differences in their approaches to the Syrian revolution, today Turkey and Saudi Arabia are resolutely in agreement that Turkey should not be cut off from its Arab neighbors.

In the first four years of the Syrian revolution, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, working together with Qatar, were not only able to prevent the Iranian-backed Syrian regime from completely annihilating the popular uprising, but they also managed to strike back strongly enough so that the regime's territorial holdings were reduced to roughly one-fifth of Syria's landmass. With the failure of the Tehran-backed Assad regime to withstand the onslaught from the Syrian opposition, Russia resorted to direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict during the first six months of 2015, thereby increasing the burden on Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

One of the first consequences of Russia's military gambit was the collapse of a proposed security cordon along the Syrian-Turkish border meant to house Syrian refugees and as an operating base for the Syrian opposition. Moscow's direct military involvement in Syria has also erased the prospect of the outright military defeat of Assad's regime. Given this, Riyadh's main objective for the Syrian conflict –bringing Iran's influence in Syria to an end—has also been completely destroyed.

Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria has not only protected the future of the Assad regime but has also posed new challenges for the national security of both Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Today, Russia has become a strong backer of Kurdish political groups and parties which have their own plans for the federalization of Syria—and for eventual secession. Moscow's support for Kurdish armed groups became increasingly enthusiastic following the shooting down of a Russian fighter plane by Turkish air defenses in November, 2015.

Out of a fear that Russia and Iran would use the battle against ISIL to bring Damascus in from the cold and allow it to regain control of the border with Turkey, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia have offered to deploy their militaries to take the border strip stretching from Azaz to Jarabulus from ISIL forces, trying to pull the rug from under the feet of both Kurdish forces and the Syrian regime itself. In a similar vein, both countries took part in forming the "Islamic Coalition to Combat Terrorism," from which Iran was conspicuously left out.

The Collapse of the Arab Regional Order

The status quo of the Arab world, in place since the end of World War II, has been upended. Iraq collapsed following the 2003 US invasion, while Syria is now completely engrossed in a bloody, internecine conflict and has become the site of regional and global rivalries. Egypt's interests, once a mainstay of regional politics, are now limited to its own borders, as the country finds itself unable to lead the rest of the Arab world in a single policy or direction. The resulting vacuum has proven to be an irresistible attraction for the expansion of Iranian influence, but also a catalyst for greater Saudi-Turkish coordination. In today's world, Riyadh can no longer rely on the old Arab powers of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, nor can it rely on its traditional relationship with Washington. For Turkey, any illusions that it could depend on the US were quickly dispelled by Washington's declaration - in response to the suggestion of NATO military involvement in Syria given the threat the conflict posed to the country - that it would only honor its commitment to protect its fellow NATO member in a case of self-defense, whether that included a confrontation with Russia in the Black Sea or in Syria.

Conclusion

Based on purely geopolitical calculations, and sensing the considerable threats to their respective national securities, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have decided to put their differences aside and seek out points of common interest. It is an impressive alliance. While Saudi Arabia has found a militarily powerful ally in Turkey, which commands the second-largest military in NATO, the Kingdom brings energy security and economic support to the table. With Turkey presently reliant on Russia and Iran for 80% of its energy needs, this is a considerable asset for Ankara going forward. Even without these assets, there seemed no option for Turkey and Saudi Arabia to sit idly by as the Middle East is unsettled and Russia and Iran rush to fill in the vacuum left by the withdrawal of

the United States. Whatever the reasons that the states have found, they have no choice but to cooperate.

Saudi Arabia makes no secret of the role it played alongside the United Arab Emirates in killing the Arab democratic transition in its infancy. Riyadh continues to maintain an alliance with the Sisi-led junta in Egypt, and seeks to balance competing interests by maintaining good relations with both Cairo and Ankara. Displaying a newfound dynamism in its foreign relations, Saudi Arabia is now walking a regional tightrope to protect its national security and strategic interests.