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Weaving a Stronger Sunni Axis

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The nuclear deal signed between Iran and the P5+1 and the initial lifting of the economic sanctions on Iran in January 2016 were formative events for Saudi Arabia that strengthened the supporters in the kingdom of a proactive policy against Iran. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's declared objective, driven in part by sectarian fervor, is to stop Iran's growing influence in the region. To those in charge of making the necessary adjustments to Saudi Arabia's security and foreign policy in light of regional developments, Turkey is a key player. From Riyadh's perspective, Turkey is a Sunni regional power that has not realized its potential because it has failed to adopt a more aggressive policy toward Iran. For Turkey, Russia's military involvement in Syria and the crisis in Turkish-Russian relations following the downing of the Russian fighter jet prompted a adjustment of Ankara's foreign policy. More specifically, these developments have accelerated Turkey's drive toward a closer alignment with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. This process reached new heights with the deployment of Saudi fighter aircraft at the Turkish air base Incirlik (which may expand to the deployment of ground forces as well) – officially as part of the struggle against the Islamic State, but in effect, to signal inter-state unity.

Since King Salman Bin Abdulaziz ascended the Saudi throne in January 2015, there have been noticeable attempts to forge closer relations between Riyadh and Ankara. Already during President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Riyadh in December 2015 (which was the Turkish President's third visit to the kingdom that year), Turkey and Saudi Arabia decided on the establishment of a council for strategic cooperation. Soon after, Saudi Arabia executed Saudi Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and for Riyadh, a nation's reaction to the execution was akin to a loyalty litmus test. Speaking of the execution, Erdogan said it was "an internal [Saudi] legal matter," and Ankara condemned the subsequent arson at Saudi Arabia's missions in Tehran and Mashhad, calling the fire-bombings "unacceptable." Beyond the rhetorical support for Riyadh, Turkey joined the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, announced in December 2015 by Saudi Arabia, which includes 34 nations – but not Iran. In addition, as part of their attempt to

balance Iran's influence in Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have exhibited more public support than in the past for the autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq; this month Saudi Arabia will opening a consulate in Irbil (Turkey has had a consulate there since 2010). Furthermore, Turkey supported Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen and did not criticize the action's negative humanitarian repercussions.

Following the late January 2016 visit to Saudi Arabia by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who was accompanied by several ministers and the head of the secret service, there was renewed speculation about a possible strengthening of cooperation between the two nations. Particular emphasis may lie on coordinating positions in the (currently suspended) third round of talks in Geneva on efforts to end the civil war in Syria. It seems that both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are frustrated with US policy on Syria, in part because it does not completely rule out Syrian President Bashar al-Assad retaining his position, at least for an interim period, and are trying to use one another to change this policy. Pressure on the United States has already resulted in some success: the decision that representatives of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), though the dominant element among Syria's Kurds, would not be among those invited to the Geneva talks. This reflects Turkey's contention that the PYD is an extension of the PKK, the Kurdish underground operating in Turkey, and therefore unacceptable. Moreover, both Ankara and Riyadh are frustrated by Russia's military intervention in Syria, not only in that this intervention prolongs Assad's tenure, but also threatens the opposition forces supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the ability to send supplies and other assistance.

Along with its increased closeness with Riyadh, however, Ankara has called on Saudi Arabia and Iran to return to the diplomatic channel and work on reducing tensions between them, evidence of Turkey's desire to maintain correct relations with Iran and its reluctance to become overly involved in the Riyadh-Tehran conflict. This is not surprising, given Turkey's need for energy imports from Iran, especially natural gas (after Russia, Iran is the second most important provider of gas to Turkey; in 2014, Turkey imported about 18 percent of its natural gas from Iran), and Turkey's desire to increase the scope of trade with Iran with the lifting of the economic sanctions.

While Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its opposition to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime in Egypt are an obstacle to closer relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, Saudi Arabia itself is at present exhibiting a more pragmatic approach than in the past toward the Muslim Brotherhood. From its point of view, Iran's expansionism is the greatest threat, leading it to desire a large, cohesive Sunni bloc in the region. Moreover, alongside the parties' geostrategic considerations, the Gulf states – especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar – are significant investors in the Turkish economy.

For some years now, Turkey has enjoyed closer relations with Qatar; these reached a new peak in December 2015 when the nations announced the construction of a Turkish military base in Qatar for the stationing of some 3,000 troops. Although Turkey has soldiers stationed in northern Iraq, the construction of the Qatari base and the scope of forces to be stationed there set new precedents in terms of a Turkish military presence in the Middle East. Turkey also committed itself to continue military training for Qatar's army. In addition to this strategic security cooperation, the two enjoy joint economic and energy ventures. Indeed, Turkey would like to increase the amount of liquefied natural gas it buys from Qatar, but the size of its existing facilities makes this problematic.

Turkey is also making efforts to rebuild its relations with the UAE, and in particular to ease the same tensions that existed with Saudi Arabia, namely Ankara's intense criticism of Sisi and Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and, conversely, the UAE's support for the toppling of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013. Manifestations of these tensions are the standstill in the scope of trade between Turkey and the UAE (compared to the growth in trade between Turkey and the other Gulf states) and the fact that there has been no UAE ambassador appointed to Ankara for a long time, both prima facie evidence of Abu Dhabi's dissatisfaction with Ankara's policy. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu recently stated that he intends to visit the UAE soon, apparently in an attempt to turn over a new leaf.

Another reason for Ankara to want to forge closer relations with the Gulf states concerns its diplomatic isolation in the region. Turkey currently has no ambassador in Israel, Egypt, and Syria. Should Saudi Arabia succeed in leveraging the economic assistance it provides to Egypt into mediating between Egypt and Turkey, which would be manifested by the return of the ambassadors to Ankara and Cairo, this could lead to stronger relations between Turkey and other Gulf states, and thereby help weave a stronger Sunni front in the region. At the same time, some kind of rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo could also allow Israel to rebuild its own relations with Turkey. Currently, one of the deterrents to a normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey is the Egyptian concern that in the context of concessions Israel would provide Turkey, Ankara would gain a more significant role in Gaza, which would strengthen Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. A stronger Saudi-Egyptian-Turkish bond might mitigate some of that concern.

