Turkey-Saudi Relations in the Middle East

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Key Points

- Turkey and Saudi Arabia will likely continue their co-operation in Syria but it is unlikely that the Turkish contribution to Saudi efforts in Yemen will extend beyond logistical support.
- President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will continue to balance relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran but may be more cautious in supporting Islamist groups after his party lost its majority in the 7 June general election.
- Looking long-term, however, Turkey may be persuaded to forfeit its relationship with Iran in favour of increased Turkey-Saudi economic relations if the new government fails to address Turkey’s slowing economic growth.

Summary

As developments unfold in the Middle East, there may be an unlikely alliance forming between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. During visits between President Erdoğan and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud on 28 February and 2 March, the two leaders discussed developments taking place in Syria, Iran, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt and Iran. After the visit, Erdoğan told reporters that ‘our goal is to anchor Turkish-Saudi relations for [the benefit of] the Middle East and Islamic world’, validating suspicions of closer Saudi-Turkey relations. At the same time, however, Ankara is working on resolving tensions in its relationship with Tehran.
**Analysis**

**Policy Differences in the Region**

For Saudi-Turkish relations to progress, the two countries may need to accommodate their differing policies for the Middle East. A major difference that emerged between the foreign policy objectives of Turkey and Saudi Arabia was seen in Egypt during the beginning of the Arab Spring. Turkey’s strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood contrasted with the Saudis’ stark opposition and put the two countries at odds – a situation that was highlighted by the media in both countries. This was especially noticeable in Turkey, where pro-government media referred to the Saudi-Gulf alliance against Mohamed Morsi, leader of the Freedom and Justice Party that was founded by the Muslim Brotherhood, as the ‘collaborator’s evil alliance’. As a result, public perceptions of Saudi Arabia fell, with only 26 per cent of those surveyed having a favourable view of Saudi Arabia in 2013, compared to 40 per cent in 2007.\(^1\) Erdoğan has been careful, however, to not let this impair relations with Saudi Arabia, stressing that this should not cast a shadow over the bilateral relationship.

Although both countries have similar objectives for Syria and both are opposed to Syrian President Bashar Assad, there are still points of difference. According to Aaron Stein from *Foreign Affairs*, while both countries support the insurgency in Syria, they fail to agree on all issues. This has led to a fragmentation of the insurgency, in which Saudi Arabia favours the more nationalist Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm, while Turkey leans towards the more Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. Over time, however, Saudi Arabia has gradually endorsed the Turkish preference, allowing both sides to co-operate more closely. Three developments are responsible for the Saudi change of heart. First, Riyadh’s opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood has softened with the accession of King Salman. Second, the Saudi-backed rebel groups SRF and Harakat Hazm have weakened, depriving Riyadh of effective allies in the region. Finally, Saudi Arabia is growing increasingly concerned over recent events in Yemen and Iraq, raising fears in Riyadh of being encircled by Shia rivals. This has led to a push from Riyadh for greater co-operation in Syria with Turkey, as well as Qatar.

**Co-operation within Syria?**

The growing convergence of the Turkish and Saudi approaches to Syria could bring increasing opportunities for co-operation between the two in the troubled country. The Syrian conflict is likely to persist for some time to come and, as the humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, Riyadh and Ankara may feel growing pressure to end the conflict. There are, however, a number of obstacles that need to be overcome. An effective joint campaign will require a high level of co-operation between the two countries at a time when their relationship is still thawing. The Turkish Government also lacks popular domestic support for its position in Syria, while both countries suffer from limited capabilities, especially without US support. There are also a number of significant risks facing Turkish intervention in Syria. According to a Turkish security officer speaking under anonymity to *Al-

\(^1\) ‘Saudi Arabia’s Image Falters among Middle East Neighbours’, Pew Research Centre, 13 October 2013.
Monitor, a possible ground invasion in Syria would strain the Turkish military, which is already facing serious internal issues, including the difficulties of compelling the Turkish military to co-operate with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. It would also threaten Turkey’s global image if it is seen to be co-operating with radical Islamist groups. Apart from sending in ground troops, other options still remain for Turkey-Saudi co-operation in Syria, such as intelligence sharing, the use of Special Forces to aggressively support rebel groups, and increasing weapon provisions to rebel groups. Any co-operation independent of the US “train and arm” programme would have to be in conjunction with efforts to limit the fragmentation of rebel groups. Uniting and empowering rebel groups, however, may have ramifications for power struggles in the future and the resulting instability – not to mention the possible objectives of those groups – would be of concern to the international community.

Co-operation within Yemen

As noted previously by Future Directions International, the link between the Houthi rebels and Iran has been acknowledged by Erdoğan, who demanded in a televised interview with France 24 that ‘Iran and the terrorist groups must withdraw’. He also declared that ‘Iran is trying to chase Daesh [Islamic State] from the region only to take its place’. In the context of such comments, as well as the logistical support that Turkey has agreed to provide Saudi Arabia, it would seem that Erdoğan has a clear preference for Saudi objectives over Iranian ones. A recent visit by Erdoğan with Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef also appeared to confirm this. It is, however, unlikely that Erdoğan’s support for the Saudi-led campaign will extend beyond the logistics. Deploying ground troops or air support to Yemen will simply strain Turkish resources (which are already being used to deal with Islamic State fighters and insurgents from the armed wing of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party armed wing along Turkey’s southern border) without making any significant contribution towards security. As noted by Aaron Stein, Turkey’s support for the Saudi-led campaign ‘overshadows key policy differences... Turkey’s regional interests, therefore, require it to tread a fine line between Iran and Saudi Arabia’. 2 This will hold true for the situation in Yemen: while providing logistical support for Saudi Arabia, Turkey has continued to find common ground with Iran.

The Iran Factor

Erdoğan’s initial support for Saudi Arabia and sharp criticism of Iran called Ankara’s relationship with Tehran into question and raised concerns over whether Turkey was about to abandon its balanced approach to Saudi Arabia and Iran. It seems, however, that that position was short-lived. In early April, Erdoğan met with Iranian President Hasan Rouhani for talks, despite calls by the Iranian parliament to cancel the visit. After the talks, Rouhani played down any tensions between the two countries during a joint press conference telling reporters that ‘We had a long discussion about Yemen. We both think war and bloodshed must stop in this area immediately and a complete ceasefire must be established and the strikes must stop’. Erdoğan also made similar statements, adding that ‘I am not concerned

about Shi’ite nor Sunnis… we must come together, sit, talk, negotiate the matter and put an end to this bloodshed, these deaths’. The Iranian ambassador to Turkey, Ali Reza Bikdeli, has since stated that there will be further meetings between the two countries on the situation in Yemen in an attempt to resolve the conflict. This seems to be a step back from Turkey’s earlier strong support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, but it is more likely an attempt by Turkey to appeal to all parties in the region. This approach could hold consequences for any broader Saudi-Turkish co-operation in the region as, given the widely differing regional objectives of Saudi Arabia and Iran, it would be difficult for Turkey to closely co-operate with either side without damaging relations with the other.

Recent Elections

In the lead up to the 7 June general elections, Erdoğan openly campaigned for greater presidential powers which required his Justice and Development Party (AKP) to win 330 seats to be able to push through the constitutional changes. Following the elections, however, the AKP only won 258 seats, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) managed to cross the ten per cent threshold and entered parliament for the first time. The election results were a significant blow to Erdoğan and saw the AKP lose its parliamentary majority. This is likely to have ramifications for future Turkish foreign policy as, according to Soner Çağaptay, a Turkish-American political scientist at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Turkey’s foreign policy will be no longer be solely driven by the ambitions of the AKP and may ‘take Turkey’s anti-Assad policy down a notch’. It is likely that Turkey will continue to balance its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran but it may, however, become more cautious in its support for Islamist groups throughout the Middle East. Additionally, it will now be impossible to ignore Kurdish politics and the aspirations of Turkey’s Kurds will have to be taken into account, although just how that may play out in terms of the effects on domestic stability and foreign policy is unclear.

Economic Relations

Given the current internal debate surrounding the condition of the Turkish economy, Erdoğan may wish to push for closer economic ties with Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Turkish bilateral trade has grown steadily over the past ten years, with annual trade figures increasing from US$1.1 billion in 2004 to US$5.4 billion in 2014. Turkey, however, is not a particularly significant trading partner for Saudi Arabia, accounting for less than one per cent of Saudi exports and three per cent of its imports, according to 2012 figures. The same could also be said for the significance of Saudi Arabia in Turkey’s overall trade, making up two per cent of Turkey’s exports and one per cent of its imports. 3 This is noteworthy as Saudi Arabia boasts the largest GDP in the Middle East, and yet, Turkey maintains stronger trade relations with Iran. Although the Iranian economy is broader than its Saudi counterpart, there are plans to diversify the Saudi economy that Turkey could capitalise on.

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Saudi exports are largely limited to polymers of propylene and ethylene plastics, which account for 71.2% of the total value of exports to Turkey. Consequently, there is room for the expansion of Saudi exports to Turkey, especially in regard to oil. Currently, Turkey imports around 13 per cent of its refined petroleum from Saudi Arabia, while 35 per cent comes from Iran and 17 per cent from Iraq. Given the recent surge in oil consumption within Turkey, there is opportunity for Ankara to source a greater amount of its refined petroleum from Saudi Arabia instead of other Gulf countries. This is, however, largely dependent on Saudi efforts in developing oil refinery infrastructure. Another area to expand trade could be motor vehicles. Currently, cars make up a large portion of Saudi Arabia’s imports (9.8%) and a significant portion of Turkey’s exports (4.5%), but only constitute a minor portion of overall Turkish exports to Saudi Arabia (0.35%). Addressing this could significantly boost Turkey’s exports to Saudi Arabia.

There was little significant foreign direct investment (FDI) flows between the two countries prior to 2008. That year, there was a major spike in Saudi FDI outflows to Turkey of US$1.3 billion, accounting for 6.7% of Turkey’s total FDI inflow and 37.5% of total Saudi FDI outflows. It was, however, not sustained, with the next three years seeing very little additional investment between the two countries. Although FDI flows have increased since then, there is still room for further improvement. Latest statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development show that while Saudi Arabia is putting significant resources into investing in Turkey (ten per cent of total Saudi FDI outflows go to Turkey), most Turkish investments are directed towards Europe. Given the current state of the oil market and the need to diversify the Saudi economy, Saudi Arabian businesses may welcome investment in other high potential sectors such as franchising, tourism and banking. In boosting economic relations between the two countries, it may also aid Turkish influence in the region.

Conclusion

While there are opportunities for Turkey to develop closer relations with Saudi Arabia, it will be difficult to avoid the possibility of repercussions for Ankara’s relationship with Tehran. In Syria, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are heavily involved. Close Turkey-Saudi co-operation in Syria, therefore, would be directly opposed to Iran’s strategic objectives. The same could be said about Yemen, albeit to a lesser extent. While Saudi Arabia is actively involved there, along with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Iran’s role in aiding the Houthis is more covert. Nevertheless, furthering Saudi-Turkish co-operation beyond the provision of logistical support in Yemen could also strain Turkey’s relations with Iran. In the longer term, the state of the Turkish economy could push Ankara closer to Riyadh, and there is certainly scope to improve bilateral trade, as well as FDI flows, between the two countries.

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