

## *Turkey's blossoming alliance with Saudi Arabia*



Far from heralding an end to the bloodshed in Syria, the recent ceasefire brokered by the US and Russia collapsed a few days later and highlighted the intractable nature of the conflict. Russian air strikes in Aleppo are bolstering President Bashar Al-Assad, who remains convinced he can regain control of the entire country, and the only agreement possible in the international community at the moment appears to be on the need for urgent humanitarian assistance to Aleppo.

Continued military action in Syria poses a serious threat to Turkey's security and risks worsening the refugee situation – of which Turkey has borne a hugely disproportionate burden. Furthermore, the West now appears hesitant and unsure, no longer adamant that Al-Assad must go and even more reluctant to take any decisive action to address the root causes of the crisis.

Instead, the most vociferous opposition to Al-Assad remaining now comes from two countries directly and adversely affected – Saudi Arabia and Turkey – whose expanding partnership could have lasting repercussions across the Middle East.

Riyadh and Ankara are united in their determination to see Al-Assad go, and to bolster opposition groups in strategic border locations. They have channelled funds and arms to some of these groups. And they have also been mulling for months the possibility of committing ground troops to the fight against Islamic State. Indeed, this might already have taken place had it not been for the failed coup in Turkey in July, which distracted President Erdoğan and pushed him into a cleansing of top-level military chiefs.

The Euphrates Shield operation Turkey has started and achieved success so far might include Saudi Arabia at least politically as a latest manifestation of the two countries' strategic partnership, which has mushroomed dramatically in just a decade.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia have very different histories, political structures, religious influences and economies. But this 'marriage of convenience' is also based on the similarities of both countries: large land masses, young and growing populations, ambitious leaders and a shared Muslim and Ottoman heritage – although that heritage has been interpreted by each nation, at times during the past decades, in diametrically opposed fashion. Nevertheless, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are now concentrating on areas of common interest to build a formidable geopolitical and economic partnership.

Both countries are members of the G-20, and both will mark their centenaries as independent countries within the next two decades. Where Turkey differs from Saudi Arabia – its secular constitution, democracy, market economy and Western security orientation – represents both a risky example and at the same time an attraction for the Al-Saud dynasty, which is struggling to confront the pent-up religious and political undercurrents in the kingdom in a low oil revenues climate.

Relations were not always so cosy. In the years after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, diplomatic contact was formal and rare – Turkey's secular political class sought to distance itself from the Arab world, looking instead to Europe for inspiration.

But the rise of the Islamist-leaning AK party in Turkey prompted a transformation in ties. In 2005 King Abdullah made the first-ever visit of a Saudi monarch to Turkey, where he inked a series of commercial agreements investing around \$25 billion in the Turkish economy.

Since then, Turkey's banks and construction companies have exploited opportunities in the lucrative Saudi market – and with Turkey's arms industry now developing rapidly, the defence sector offers fresh prospects for cooperation, and fresh challenges to the dominance of US and UK contractors. A visit by President Erdoğan to Riyadh in December 2015 cemented this alliance further by the establishment of a permanent strategic cooperation council. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was in Ankara in early October 2016 to cement this blossoming relationship.

The rise of the Riyadh-Ankara axis has also coincided with Turkey's rise to international prominence under the assertive Erdoğan, and Saudi Arabia's own energetic diplomacy led by the deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. They are determined to position their countries as economic and political hubs, drawing on the diversity of their multi-dimensional strategic relationships.

Curbing Iran's expansionist ambitions in the region – especially in Syria, Iraq and the Gulf – is a common strategic goal for both countries, which are wary of Iran's tendency to stoke sectarian strife. But President Erdogan has also been keen to assert Turkey's character as a democratic, Muslim country with aspirations to leadership within the Islamic world – and such an aspiration is impossible to realise without the support and encouragement of Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam.

It is important to understand the limits of the two countries' cooperation. Turkey, as a major energy importer and consumer, can do little to help Saudi Arabia in international oil markets, and it cannot help address domestic tensions resulting from Saudi Arabia's uneasy balance of power between religious hardliners and reformists in the royal family. But there is much scope for cooperation on regional security in the Gulf, leveraging relations with Russia – the Saudis' big rival in terms of oil production – and forging some semblance of order and reconstruction in post-war Syria, assuming the conflict does indeed end one day.

Arguably, Turkey's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia could be seen as the natural result of decades of uncertainty and frustration over its ultimate relationship with the European Union – uncertainty for which the EU must take the lion's share of the blame. Both countries also find common ground over their uneasy relations with the United States and Russia. The patching-up of frayed ties between Ankara and Moscow is nothing more than a cynical alliance of convenience that suits the political purposes of both countries' strongman leaders.

To Turkey's critics, and to those sceptical of its EU membership credentials, the country's friendship with Saudi Arabia is a sign of where some of its real geopolitical priorities might lie. However, Turkey's supporters in the EU lament this orientation for a different reason – because it will drag Turkey and its dynamic, \$900 billion economy, further away from Europe's struggling economy and introspective politics.

In truth, Turkey is making hard-headed decisions about its long-term future. Saudi Arabia is important, but so too is Qatar, not least as a source of investment capital and as a gas provider for Turkey's energy-hungry economy. Indeed, Turkey's careful courting of both countries has created a delicate balance: Saudi Arabia views with distaste the support Turkey and Qatar have shown to the Muslim Brotherhood but both Gulf states need Turkish economic and military might.

The recent vote by the US Congress to override a veto issued by President Obama, clearing the way for families of 9/11 victims to file a lawsuit against the Saudi Arabian government, will also bring both countries closer together. Turkey has sided with Riyadh, condemning this decision and blasting it as a deliberate act against Islamic countries. It is worth recalling that Turkey has had similar issues with the US Congress, most notably over recognition of the 1915 mass killings of Armenians as genocide.

Meanwhile, Turkey has mended fences with Israel following the Gaza flotilla fiasco. Israel will undoubtedly play an influential but silent role in this alliance, and will use it as a platform to enhance its own security. And Saudi Arabia is trying to heal the open sores in the Turkey-Egypt relationship that erupted in 2013 after President Morsi was overthrown and the Muslim Brotherhood outlawed.

A Sunni triangular alliance of Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia across the Middle East is Riyadh's goal – but neither Cairo nor Ankara seem keen on making the first move towards rapprochement with the other.

The EU complains loudly that Saudi Arabia and its neighbours are not doing enough and should take in more Syrian refugees. Brussels would be wise to encourage a more productive dialogue between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (and other GCC nations) in this regard. But then failing to view Turkey through strategic eyes has long been one of Europe's principal shortcomings.

***by Mehmet Ögütçü  
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