

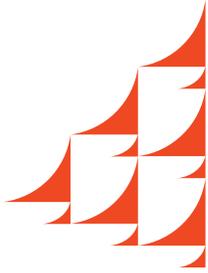
The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding



## The AGSIW *Gulf Rising* Series

Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid  
Diverging Interests

Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish



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February 28, 2017

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## The AGSIW *Gulf Rising* Series

Over the last decade the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have energized their role in regional politics, from the use of military intervention, to increased bilateral foreign assistance, to more robust regional coordination. This, combined with a perception of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, has prompted GCC countries to seek and establish strong relations with other centers of power – regionally and globally.

This paper was developed as part of AGSIW's *Gulf Rising* series analyzing the energized role of the Gulf Arab states in the international system. The series looks beyond GCC relations with the United States to examine ties with other key countries and regions. Additionally, it investigates motivations behind Gulf Arab states' foreign policy choices and evaluates the implications for U.S. foreign policy toward the GCC states and the region.

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## Executive Summary

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002, Turkey's relations with the Gulf Arab countries have fluctuated between varying degrees of cooperation and mutual suspicion. From the Turkish perspective, these dramatic shifts have been driven primarily by changing political needs of the AKP's leadership against the backdrop of a political worldview that sees Turkey as a natural leader in the Muslim world. This has led to moments of unprecedented cooperation between Turkey and some of the Gulf states, as well as instances of mistrust and competition. This pattern is likely to continue as the Turks cope with multidimensional security threats and domestic political challenges that threaten to further destabilize the country.

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries view Turkey as an indispensable Sunni ally and counterweight to Iran, but a difficult, and at times unreliable, partner. This has been especially evident in Syria, where, until recently, Turkey joined Saudi Arabia and Qatar as the main outside powers pressing for regime change. However, this partnership has been strained as Turkey has shifted its focus to Kurdish issues and partnered with Russia on a long-term cease-fire effort. Further, Turkey's view of Iran as a problem to be managed rather than resolved places Ankara at odds with the Gulf Arab states. Additionally, the Gulf states are divided on the Turkish government's Islamist leanings, with the United Arab Emirates especially concerned about its regional ideological influence. Gulf Arab countries also have some long-term concerns about Turkey's regional ambitions. Therefore, Gulf Arabs seek to ensure that Turkey remains an engaged regional power, but not too engaged, playing a major regional role, but not an overbearing one. However, if Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's effort to consolidate domestic political power leads him back to a more active and less constructive approach to the region, Turkey and the Gulf Arab countries could once again find themselves on different sides of various regional issues.

## Introduction

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002, relations between Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have varied, swinging from cooperation, to hostility, to rapprochement. From the Turkish side, Ankara's foreign policy has become consistent with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political needs and, as such, is highly variable. And while the Gulf Arab countries have concerns that at times Turkey is unreliable, they view Ankara as an indispensable counterweight to Iran, and as a Sunni ally in the sectarian battle against pro-Iranian, and largely Shia, forces in the Middle East.

This paper, informed by a workshop hosted by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, explores GCC relations with Turkey, examining the regional and domestic issues that have defined the Gulf states' foreign policy choices toward Turkey and vice-versa, as well as the implications for regional stability and U.S. foreign policy. First, Steven A. Cook, Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, evaluates the relationship from the Turkish perspective. AGSIW Senior Resident Scholar Hussein Ibish then offers the GCC point of view, as well as evaluating bilateral relations between Turkey and individual Gulf Arab states.

## GCC-Turkish Relations: The View from Ankara

*By Steven A. Cook*

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in November 2002, Turkey's relations with the Gulf Arab countries have gone through four distinct phases: from good neighbor and problem-solver to a bid for leadership, then estrangement, and, finally, rapprochement. The swings in ties over a relatively short period reflect the changing political needs of the AKP's leadership against the backdrop of a worldview that places Turkey at the center of the Muslim world. This has led to moments of unprecedented cooperation between Turkey and some Gulf states, as well as some instances of hostility toward Ankara. This pattern of cooperation, engagement, and mistrust with the Gulf Arab states, and the Middle East more broadly, is likely to continue as the Turks seek ways to cope with multidimensional security threats and domestic political challenges that threaten to further destabilize the country. For the moment, the combination of these problems is driving a more constructive approach to the region. At the same time, it is as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accumulated personal political power, Ankara's foreign policy has become consistent with Erdogan's political needs and, as such, is highly variable. It would thus not be surprising if relations with the Gulf Arab states were to change relatively quickly should Erdogan perceive a domestic political benefit from altering these ties.

### Background

Turkey was never as distant from Middle Eastern politics as some observers assume. The decade during which former leader of the Motherland Party Turgut Ozal dominated Turkish politics between the early 1980s and his untimely death in 1993 was a period when the Turks were active in the region. There were other moments in the 1950s and 1970s when Ankara demonstrated an interest in the affairs of countries to its south and east, but overall the Turks took a decidedly detached approach to the region, fearing entanglements in the politics of the Arab world. With the exception of the brief periods noted, Turkey's foreign policy during the Cold War was geared toward meeting the Soviet threat, competing with Greece, managing the conflict in Cyprus and supporting Turkish Cypriots, ensuring Turkey's place within NATO, and advancing Turkey's relationship with what became the European Union. After the Cold War, Turkish foreign policymakers were enthused by the idea of developing Ankara's ties with Central Asia, where there are linguistic similarities and cultural affinities.

This is not to suggest that Turkish-Gulf ties were underdeveloped or hostile. There had long been significant financial investment from wealthy Gulf countries in Turkey. So much so, in fact, that in the mid- and late-1990s, there was considerable suspicion among Turkey's secular elites that the emergence of Anatolia-based businesses associated with religious conservatives benefited from what was referred to as "green investment" from the Gulf Arab states – the term "green" denoting Islam, not the color of U.S. money. There was also Turkey's abiding interest in Iraq, which was, alternately, a gateway to the Gulf and, given first its aggressive regional policies and then its post-2003 chaos, a security problem for the Turks. Overall,

however, Turkey's relationship to the Gulf states reflected a deep ambivalence about Ankara's place in the world, which was geographically and culturally in the East, but oriented politically, diplomatically, militarily, bureaucratically, and economically toward the West.

## AKP Ascendant

The AKP came to power amid a period of Turkish malaise. Turkish society was still dealing with the aftereffects of the June 1997 "postmodern" coup; the continuation of the war with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); seemingly unchecked official corruption; a financial crisis; and a directionless foreign policy, except for Turkey's strategic relationship with Israel. Those ties were themselves a product of the unhealthy balance in Turkey's political system between military officers, who pushed the alliance despite popular misgivings, and civilians, who lacked the power to attenuate the ties. The AKP's vision, which emphasized religious values and identity, prosperity, and Turkish power, resonated deeply with Turks. Included among the reforms necessary to achieve its vision, the AKP went about renovating Turkey's foreign policy. In addition to making a significant effort to align its domestic political and economic institutions with those of the European Union, play a more active role in the Balkans, and re-establish itself as an influential power in Central Asia, the Turks placed special emphasis on building prestige and power in the Middle East and the larger Muslim world. As a result, Ankara shifted away from Israel in favor of better ties with Arab countries, especially Syria. The AKP's approach to Damascus was based on three policy priorities, two of which were directly related to the Gulf Arab states: promoting economic development in Turkey's southeast via an open border policy with Syria, establishing a land bridge from Anatolia to the Gulf via Syria and Jordan for Turkish trade after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and peeling the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad away from Iran.

The Turks also presented themselves as problem-solvers in places that were of geostrategic significance to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey's partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>1</sup> For example, after the war in Lebanon in 2006, the Turks sought a peacekeeping role there. The Turks not only saw themselves as a brake on further hostilities between Israel and Hizballah, but also as a counterweight to Iran. Again, in 2008, Erdogan's effort to broker an agreement among Lebanese factions – working with the Qataris and Iranians – helped avoid a conflict that might have undermined the relative calm that had prevailed in Lebanon since the early 1990s. In the Gaza Strip, Turkish efforts to bring Hamas under the AKP's wing rankled both the Egyptians and the Israelis, but also positioned the Turks as an alternative to Iranian power in the region.

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*In the Gulf Arab states, elites regarded Turkey as an experiment in how the West would respond to the political power of a party that espoused a worldview rooted in Islam.*

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In time, the Turks saw themselves less as partners of other Middle Eastern powers and more as the leaders of the region. This was, in part, helped by Erdogan's ability to capitalize on Turkey's relationship with Hamas and his willingness to criticize Israel forcefully, giving Ankara

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2010.

considerable soft power throughout the Arab world. At about the same time, the United States began to tout Turkey as a “model” for the Arab Middle East in which Islamists could accumulate power, oversee democratizing reforms, and grow the economy.<sup>2</sup> This was not some Washington-based flight of fancy. Throughout the Middle East, people from across the political spectrum were intrigued by and eager to learn from Turkey’s success. In the Gulf Arab states, elites regarded Turkey as an experiment in how the West would respond to the political power of a party that espoused a worldview rooted in Islam. The very fact that the AKP consciously presented itself as an Islamist “Third Way” or as a Muslim analogue to Europe’s Christian Democrats encouraged U.S. foreign policy experts to advance the idea that Turkey could lead the Middle East, which was of course consistent with Ankara’s goals.

## From Engagement to Isolation

The relationship between Arab countries, but especially Gulf heavyweights like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, was likely to come under strain as the Turks sought to reinforce their newfound influence and prestige in the region. The Turks consistently misread the Arab leaders who, despite whatever cooperative ties they had developed with Ankara on a variety of regional issues, were unwilling to submit to Turkish power in their own region. This mattered little to Turkish leaders who were benefitting politically at home from their regional activism and were thus unable to distinguish between the mythology of themselves as new Ottomans and the way in which Arab rulers began responding to Turkish power. It did not help matters that leading AKP theoreticians and foreign policymakers, including then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, articulated their belief that the states of the region were ephemeral with the exceptions of Iran, Egypt, and, of course, Turkey.<sup>3</sup> It was for these reasons that Davutoglu, in particular, sought to cultivate Islamist movements, which he regarded as natural allies of Turkey and the wave of the future.

That future seemed to begin on January 14, 2011, when Tunisia’s longtime strongman, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, fled his country for the safety of Saudi Arabia. The ignominious end of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s three-decade-long rule a month later, Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi’s demise the following October, and the protests that threatened rulers across the region was a triumphant moment for Turks who positioned themselves as the leaders of a new regional order based on a combination of Islamism, elections, and Turkish economic power. Erdogan’s tour of North Africa in September 2011 was intended to establish Ankara as the region’s new leader.<sup>4</sup> It demonstrated, as the pro-Erdogan media reported during his visits to Cairo, Tripoli, and Tunis, that the Turkish leader was the new “king of the Arab Street.” At the time, many young Arabs were eager to learn from Turkey, which – cultural and historical differences aside – offered a positive vision for the future, especially in contrast to the two other regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Kenyon, [“The Turkish Model: Can It Be Replicated?”](#) *NPR*, January 6, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Behlul Ozkan, [“Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,”](#) *Taylor and Francis Online*, July 23, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Steven A. Cook, [“Erdogan’s Middle Eastern Victory Lap,”](#) *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2011.

The goodwill did not last very long. The Gezi Park protests in the spring and summer of 2013 revealed Erdogan to be an authoritarian not unlike those who had been deposed in the Arab world two years earlier. This soured young Arabs on Turkey, which no longer offered lessons for people in the region who wanted to believe in democracy. It was, however, the mass demonstrations and coup d'état that brought the presidency of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi in Egypt to an end in July 2013 that also marked the end of Turkey's bid for regional leadership. This gave way to a period of Turkey's estrangement from its former Gulf Arab partners. Given Turkey's long history with military interventions, the AKP's profile as an Islamist party, and the ruling party's narrative that it was a central player in the Middle East's transition to democracy, Erdogan fiercely opposed the coup and the new Egyptian leadership under then-Defense Minister and now President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The Turks welcomed members of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>5</sup> who suddenly found themselves on the run and gave them a media platform<sup>6</sup> from which they sought to delegitimize Sisi and his government. The four-fingered Rabaa sign became common in certain places in Istanbul and, ironically, in republican and officially secular Ankara.

This placed Turkey in conflict with the Saudis and Emiratis who had been deeply concerned about the uprisings, alarmed at the rise of the Brotherhood in Egypt, and angered at Turkish (and Qatari) patronage of Morsi.

After the coup, the Saudis and Emiratis sought to punish the Turks, freezing them out of regional diplomacy and cancelling investments in Turkey. This had little impact on Erdogan who made the most at home

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politically out of Turkey's "principled position" on the coup. Still, by late 2013, it was hard to ignore that Ankara's entire strategic position in the Middle East had collapsed. The once aspiring regional leader was isolated. At the time, Turkey had difficult or no relations with all of the major countries of the Middle East save Qatar, and Ankara's ties with Doha, which had its own fractious relations with its GCC partners, only made matters worse.

## Rapprochement?

By mid-2016, it was clear that Turkey's policy of "principled isolation" from the Middle East was not working. Ankara looked on as Sisi enjoyed – for a time – the largesse of the GCC, the Muslim Brotherhood was greatly weakened, Hamas was battered, Assad hung on in Damascus, Israel established unofficial but important ties with the Gulf, and Iran reinforced its influence around the region. Against the backdrop of these developments, Turkey became a target of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant as well as Kurdish terrorism. Although Davutoglu, who had become prime minister, was pushed from office in the spring of 2016 for a variety of reasons, he was conveniently blamed for Turkey's suddenly problematic foreign policy. The Turks then went about repairing their ties with the Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz, who came to power after King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's death in January 2015

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<sup>5</sup> Umar Farooq, "Turkey Nurtures Egypt's 'Terrorist' Muslim Brothers," *The Daily Beast*, April 15, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> David Lapeska, "Istanbul: An Unlikely Refuge for Exiled Journalists," *The Atlantic*, December 27, 2013.

and who sought regional unity against the twin threats of Iran and the ISIL, helped the Turkish cause immeasurably. The Turks and the Saudis have increased cooperation and coordination on Syria and Turkey has also worked to repair ties with the UAE.

Despite the progress that the Turks have recently made with the major Gulf Arab states, there remains potential trouble. Although the two countries seemed fated to be strategic competitors, Turkey and Iran have demonstrated an ability to compartmentalize their relations, separating their disagreements over Syria and Iraq from the benefits of economic cooperation. At the very least, that the Turks regard Iran as a problem to be managed rather than resolved places them at odds with the Gulf Arab states.

Saudi and Emirati officials are suspicious of Ankara's ties with Doha, particularly with the new Turkish military base in Qatar. Then, of course, there is Turkey's domestic politics. The GCC states were supportive of Erdogan

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after the failed July 2016 coup d'état and care little about the widespread purge underway in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> If, however, Erdogan's drive to consolidate his power at home leads him back to a more active and less constructive approach to the region, Turkey could once again find itself on the opposite end from the Gulf Arab countries on a variety of regional issues.

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<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "[The GCC Response to Turkey's Failed Coup](#)," *Atlantic Council*, July 20, 2016.

## GCC-Turkish Relations: Gulf Arab Perspectives

*By Hussein Ibish*

The relationship of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries with Turkey operates on several complex registers simultaneously, however, the Gulf Arab states overwhelmingly see Turkey as an indispensable, but difficult and at times unreliable, partner on many vital regional issues. The Gulf states generally view Turkey as a crucial counterweight to Iran, and as a Sunni ally in the sectarian battle against pro-Iranian, and largely Shia, forces in the Middle East. This has been especially evident in Syria, where, until recently, Turkey joined Saudi Arabia and Qatar as one of the main outside powers trying to unseat the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. This partnership has been greatly strained by recent developments, with Turkey focused on Kurdish issues and partnering with Russia to try to end the conflict. Gulf Arab countries have long-term concerns that Turkey might eventually develop into a regional military and economic power with its own potential hegemonic, and even neo-Ottoman, ambitions. Moreover, the Gulf states are divided on the Turkish government's Islamist leanings, with the United Arab Emirates especially concerned about Turkey's ideological influence in the Middle East.

Since a failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey has succumbed to a relative political introversion, though that has done little to assuage the Gulf states' long-term concerns. To the contrary, it has attenuated Turkey's willingness and ability to perform the regional role the Gulf Arab countries would like Ankara to play, particularly in Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's<sup>8</sup> February tour<sup>9</sup> of Gulf states signaled Ankara's eagerness to balance<sup>10</sup> its improved relations with Russia (and by extension, Iran) with continued strong ties<sup>11</sup> with the Gulf countries.<sup>12</sup> For their part, Saudi Arabia and Qatar continue to hope that, as the post-coup Turkish focus on domestic politics finally subsides, Ankara might again work with them to secure an outcome in Syria that they deem acceptable. Even if that cannot be fully realized, a range of other policy imperatives<sup>13</sup> will motivate GCC countries to try to keep Turkey on their side<sup>14</sup> but not exercising the kind of ambitious and broad regional leadership that Ankara has sometimes imagined as its birthright.

The Gulf Arab states have long sought to cultivate Turkey as an important regional partner. The countries established a Strategic Dialogue<sup>15</sup> during a 2008<sup>16</sup> ministerial summit meeting in Jeddah. The program stipulated annual meetings, but they have only met five times since.

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8 ["President Erdogan Goes to Bahrain,"](#) Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, February 12, 2017.

9 ["Turkey's Erdogan in Saudi on Gulf Tour,"](#) *Yahoo News*, February 13, 2017.

10 Ibrahim Kalin, ["Turkey, the Gulf and Regional Ownership,"](#) *Al Arabiya*, February 18, 2017.

11 Manuel Almeida, ["Turkey's Economy and a Timely Gulf Trip,"](#) *Arab News*, February 17, 2017.

12 Muhittin Ataman, ["Turkey and the Gulf States: Sustainable Cooperation is Needed,"](#) *Daily Sabah*, February 14, 2017.

13 Cetiner Cetin, ["What do Turkey and Gulf States Aim At?"](#) *Middle East Observer*, February 18, 2017.

14 Sabahat Khan, ["Closer Ties between Turkey and Gulf Countries,"](#) *The Arab Weekly*, January 22, 2016.

15 ["GCC-Turkey: MoU on Strategic Dialogue Signed,"](#) *Inter Press Service News Agency*, September 3, 2008.

16 ["Could Turkey and Saudi Arabia Build a Resilient Alliance?"](#) *Turkish Think Tank*, accessed February 27, 2017.

In November 2016, the dialogue did convene in Riyadh, and approved a 38-point statement<sup>17</sup> advocating stronger economic and military ties, expressing support for the current Turkish regime, shared commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, and a determination to join forces in the fight against terrorism. Following a meeting with the Turkish foreign minister in October 2016 the GCC designated the Gulen movement, a religious group the Turkish government blames for the July 2016 coup attempt,<sup>18</sup> as a terrorist organization.

## Turkey as a Counterweight to Iran

The Gulf states' national security concerns mainly center on the threat of Iran, both directly to their interests and territorial integrity, and, more broadly, to the spread of Iranian hegemony. This generalized concern applies even to Oman, which maintains much better relations with Iran than its GCC partners do. Kuwait, too, has recently taken the lead in GCC outreach<sup>19</sup> to Iran, with the approval of other member states. In both cases these varying approaches are more a matter of strategy than a strong difference in threat perception among GCC members. Therefore, the Gulf Arab states are interested in almost all potential regional counterweights to Iran and its allies, and they view Turkey as a crucial part of this equation. Moreover, Turkey is regarded, particularly by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as an important ally in a Sunni Muslim coalition in the Middle East to oppose potential Shia or Persian hegemony. They view Turkey as a key ally in the emblematic and decisive<sup>20</sup> test of this rivalry: the war in Syria. These two Gulf countries, and to a lesser extent their GCC allies, regard the outcome in Syria as essentially determinative of the Middle East regional strategic landscape for the foreseeable future.

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While there has been a great deal of frustration with Ankara's relationship with Tehran, from the Gulf Arab perspective Turkey has served to help counterbalance Iran's rising influence in the region. Examples of this abound. In March 2015 Erdogan condemned Iranian interference in Iraq and said "Iran is trying to chase Daesh [the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant] from the region only to take its place." He also expressed support<sup>21</sup> for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and claimed that Iranian troops were in the country supporting the Houthi rebels and their allies. "Iran is trying to dominate the region," he said, adding<sup>22</sup> "Could this be allowed? This has begun annoying us, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. This is really not tolerable and Iran

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<sup>17</sup> "[Joint Statement of 5th Ministerial Meeting of GCC-Turkey Strategic Dialogue](#)," *Bahrain News Agency*, October 13, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Daren Butley, "[Turkey Officially Designates Gulen Religious Group as Terrorists](#)," *Reuters*, May 31, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Hussein Ibish, "[Is an Iranian-Gulf Arab Rapprochement in the Works?](#)" *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, February 2, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Hussein Ibish, "[What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?](#)" *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 30, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Humeyra Pamun, "[Turkey's Erdogan Says Can't Tolerate Iran Bid to Dominate Middle East](#)," *Reuters*, March 26, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

has to see this.” Such pronouncements illustrate why and how Turkey became a crucial component of the Gulf countries’ regional strategy for checking Iranian influence in the Middle East.

## Syria

Turkey has been a crucial ally of Saudi Arabia and Qatar during much of the war in Syria. Their tripartite effort got off to a good start, from the Gulf point of view, in 2011, when Turkey expressed growing anger at the Assad regime’s brutal suppression of pro-democracy protesters, calling it “unacceptable,”<sup>23</sup> and with Turkey’s foreign minister visiting Ankara’s former allies in Damascus to demand an end<sup>24</sup> to the repression. In August 2011 one of the main umbrella opposition political groups, the Syrian National Council, was formed in Istanbul,<sup>25</sup> and in December opened a major office there. In September 2011 Turkey cut diplomatic ties with Syria in protest of the government’s refusal to implement reforms or accommodate the demands of the protesters. In October 2011, a nationalist militia, the Free Syrian Army,<sup>26</sup> established its first headquarters in the southern Turkish province of Hatay, near the border with Syria. This meant that Turkey had not only broken decisively with Assad, but had, in effect, joined the war as a key supporting actor against the regime.

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Tensions continued to mount. In November 2011, Erdogan, who was then Turkey’s prime minister, called on Assad to step down,<sup>27</sup> instructing him to “Just remove yourself from that seat before shedding more blood, before torturing more and for the welfare of your country, as well as the region.” The Turkish role in Syria probably reached a high point from a Gulf perspective in the aftermath of June 2012, when Syrian forces shot down<sup>28</sup> a Turkish fighter jet, allegedly in international airspace.<sup>29</sup> Syrian regrets were dismissed by Erdogan as hypocritical<sup>30</sup> and he stepped up Turkey’s engagement against the regime.

But Turkey’s situation soon became more complicated. Syrian forces withdrew<sup>31</sup> from Kurdish-majority areas in northeastern Syria in the summer of 2012, allowing forces aligned with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – which for decades has fought a bloody struggle for Kurdish independence from Turkey – to begin to establish power centers along Turkey’s southern border. The Assad regime, having concluded that it could no longer retain control of all of Syria, was choosing to strategically cede control of territory to anti-Turkish forces in order to

<sup>23</sup> “Syria Unrest: Assad Defiant Despite Growing Pressure,” *BBC News*, August 10, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> AK Group, “Turkish Foreign Minister Receives Chilly Welcome in Syria,” *Gatestone Institute*, August 11, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> “Syria’s Opposition Opens Office in Turkey,” *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Primoz Manfreda, “Who Are the Syrian Rebels,” *About News*, accessed February 27, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Sebnem Arsu, “Turkish Premier Urges Assad to Quit in Syria,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Gul Tuysuz, “Syrian Downing of Turkish Plane Condemned: Nato to Meet,” *CNN*, June 25, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> “Syria Shot Down Turkish Jet in International Airspace, Claims Foreign Minister,” *The Telegraph*, June 24, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Sebnem Arsu and Rick Gladstone, “Downed Turkish Plane and Dead Pilots Found with Aid of Titanic Explorer,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Aaron Stein, “An Evolving Challenge: Deconstructing Turkey’s Syria Policy,” *Turkey Wonk*, November 27, 2014.

bedevil Ankara. Since then, Turkey has had to try to balance interests such as its close relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq or support for ousting the Assad regime, with its overriding imperative: containing PKK power along the Syrian border and, especially, inside Turkey itself.

Turkey's Syria policy appeared to shift in 2015 when Erdogan implied<sup>32</sup> that Turkey could potentially accept a transition process with the Assad regime temporarily remaining in power. In August 2016, Turkey's Prime Minister Binali Yildirim<sup>33</sup> hinted that Ankara could live with the continuation of the regime, although the statement was quickly walked back. However, most of Turkey's major armed interventions<sup>34</sup> in Syria in 2016 were aimed primarily at checking the power of Kurdish groups rather than attacking ISIL or undermining the power of the Assad dictatorship.

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*Turkey's Syria policy appeared to shift in 2015 when Erdogan implied that Turkey could potentially accept a transition process with the Assad regime temporarily remaining in power.*

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As the year progressed, Turkey grew closer to Russia and inched further away from the regime change agenda it had been pursuing with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, focusing on containing and reversing the growth of Kurdish and PKK influence in northern Syria. In August 2016 Erdogan visited Russia<sup>35</sup> to underscore his determination to improve relations, and in October Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Turkey.<sup>36</sup> By that point Turkey and Russia were openly talking about forming a partnership to develop a cease-fire<sup>37</sup> in Syria. Particularly since the December 2016 fall of Aleppo<sup>38</sup> to pro-regime forces, and the profound strategic loss<sup>39</sup> that delivered to the Syrian rebels, Turkey has moved toward a Kurdish-centered policy that hinges on dialogue with Russia,<sup>40</sup> and to a much lesser extent Iran,<sup>41</sup> on precisely such a cease-fire<sup>42</sup> in, and outlines for the future of, Syria.

Peace talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana<sup>43</sup> (a symbolically and politically significant location with historical ties to Russia and cultural links to Turkey) have so far been essentially a Russian-Turkish negotiation,<sup>44</sup> with some Iranian participation, but neither the Gulf Arab countries nor

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<sup>32</sup> Galip Dalay, "[Despire Challenges, Turkey's Syria Policy Remains Unchanges](#)," *Middle East Eye*, October 8, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Murat Yetkin, "[Turkey Changes Syria Policy with Al-Assad Move](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 22, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Euan McKirdy, Jason Hanna, and Isil Sariyuce, "[Turkey Sends Tanks into Syria Against ISIS: Rebels Reportedly Capute Town](#)," *CNN*, August 24, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "[Russia and Turkey Vow to Repair Ties as West Watches Nervously](#)," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "[Warming Relations in Person, Putin and Erdogan Revive Pipeline Deal](#)," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> "[Turkey and Russia 'Agree' on Nationwide Syria Ceasefire](#)," *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Lindrea, "[Turkey: Aleppo Evacuations Could be Completed by Wednesday](#)," *CNN*, December 20, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> "[Bashar al-Assad: Aleppo Victory will be a 'Huge Step'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, December 8, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> "[Turkey's Snuggling up to Russia is Likely to Hurt It](#)," *The Economist*, February 16, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Saeid Jafari, "[Is Turkey Ditching Saudi Arabia for Iran?](#)" *Al Monitor*, October 12, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Lister, "[How Russia and Turkey Brokered Peace in Syria – and Sidelined the US](#)," *CNN*, December 30, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> "[Start of Syria Talks in Astana Delayed by One Day](#)," *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> "[Syria Talks in Kazakh Capital Delayed, Delegations Downgraded](#)," *Reuters*, February 15, 2017.

the United States have participated. Turkey and Russia have also collaborated on attacks<sup>45</sup> on ISIL targets in Syria, a campaign that Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries might join if they conclude doing so would not strengthen Iran's hand. Turkey even dismissed the killing<sup>46</sup> of three of its soldiers in a Russian airstrike in Syria as a "tragic incident" caused by "friendly fire," just as Russia dismissed the assassination<sup>47</sup> of Moscow's ambassador in Ankara as the work of a lone extremist and accepted Turkey's belated apology<sup>48</sup> for the downing<sup>49</sup> of a Russian warplane in 2015. The tense relations<sup>50</sup> between Turkey and Russia, especially over Syria, of 2015 and early 2016 metamorphosed into real forbearance.

Turkey's rapprochement<sup>51</sup> with Russia does not necessarily mean a complete reversal of policy on Syria, but Ankara's once apparently rock-solid commitment to regime change<sup>52</sup> in Damascus is now plainly negotiable,<sup>53</sup> if not abandoned.<sup>54</sup> Saudi Arabia and Qatar remain committed to this goal, and can only regard the evolution of Turkey's position as the potential loss of a key ally in a crucial project. Yet they are keeping their concerns quiet, understanding that Turkish foreign policy is now being driven primarily by domestic concerns such as Erdogan's political interests and Kurdish issues, and by events in Syria such as the fall of Aleppo that are realities facing all parties.

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*In the post-Aleppo environment, driving a wedge between Russia and Iran in Syria is high on the agenda for the Gulf countries and the United States...*

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Riyadh and Doha still hope that Turkey will eventually re-evaluate<sup>55</sup> its interests and resume its place in the effort to push for a post-Assad future in Syria. Further, they hope Ankara can serve as a conduit for this perspective to Moscow, which is perceived as not particularly committed to Assad, or to Iran and Hizballah's interests in Syria. In the post-Aleppo environment, driving a wedge<sup>56</sup> between Russia and Iran<sup>57</sup> in Syria is high on the agenda<sup>58</sup> for the Gulf countries and

45 "Syria Conflict: Russia and Turkey 'in First Joint Air Strikes on IS,'" *BBC News*, January 18, 2017.

46 "Syria War: Russian 'Friendly Fire' Kills Turkish Soldiers," *BBC News*, February 9, 2017.

47 Catherine E. Shoichet, Nick Thompson, and Emanuella Grinber, "Russia's Ambassador to Turkey Assassinated in Ankara," *CNN*, December 20, 2016.

48 Jack Stubbs and Dmitry Solovyov, "Kremlin Says Turkey Apologized for Shooting Down Russian Jet," *Reuters*, June 27, 2017.

49 Elliot C. McLaughlin, Don Melvin, and Jethro Mullen, "Turkey Won't Apologize for Downing Russian Warplane, Erdogan Says," *CNN*, November 27, 2015.

50 Markus Becker, et al., "NATO Concerned over Possible Russia-Turkey Hostilities," *Spiegel Online*, February 19, 2016.

51 Kathryn Schmidt, "The Turkey-Russia Rapprochement," *The McGill International Review*, January 19, 2017.

52 "Turkey's Deputy PM Rejects Comments on Assad," *Anadolu Agency*, January 20, 2017.

53 Rod Nordland, "Russia Signs Deal for Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept Assad," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2017.

54 Mehmet Simsek, "Turkey Says Not 'Realistic' to Exclude Assad from Deal," *Gulf Times*, January 20, 2017.

55 Serkan Demirtas, "An End to Turkish-Russian-Iranian Bid in Syria," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 18, 2017.

56 Eli Lake, "Syria's Opposition Wants Trump to 'Drive a Wedge' Between Iran and Russia," *Bloomberg*, December 15, 2016.

57 Ellie Geranmayeh and Kadri Liik, "The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 13, 2016.

58 Brenda Shaffer, "US Can Exploit Fault Lines to Drive Wedge Between Iran, Russia," *The Hill*, February 6, 2017.

the United States,<sup>59</sup> both of which still wish to see Assad gone and, especially, Iran not emerge as the big winner from the Syrian conflict. One reason Turkey cannot be written off in this context is that even in the context of Astana negotiations, Turkey continues to accuse<sup>60</sup> Iran of pursuing sectarian policies and playing a negative regional role.

For his part, Erdogan stressed<sup>61</sup> during his recent Gulf tour that the GCC states will continue to play a significant role in shaping the future of Syria. How that can play out remains to be seen.

## Turkey's Relations with Specific Gulf Arab Countries

### Saudi Arabia

Sharing the overall assessment of the GCC states, Saudi Arabia has attempted to maintain strong relations with Turkey, especially vis-à-vis Iran and regional problems such as the Syria and Iraq conflicts, as well as security, trade, economic, and military cooperation. Riyadh welcomed Erdogan for a two-day visit<sup>62</sup> at the invitation of King Salman bin Abdulaziz in December 2015, and he made a second two-day visit in March 2016. The Saudi king<sup>63</sup> and crown prince<sup>64</sup> both visited Turkey in 2016, and Turkey bestowed<sup>65</sup> its highest honor, the Order of the State,<sup>66</sup> on King Salman as a rare mark of respect. During the visit, the countries agreed to create a bilateral strategic cooperation council. The Turkish-Saudi Coordination Council<sup>67</sup> held its first meeting in Ankara in February and the two countries committed to working together to try to establish a free trade agreement<sup>68</sup> between Turkey and the GCC in 2017.

Both Riyadh and Ankara have taken opportunities to signal their continued friendship at key moments. Turkey's foreign minister attended an extraordinary meeting<sup>69</sup> of Organization of Islamic Cooperation foreign ministers in Jeddah in January 2016 to discuss the mob attacks on Saudi missions in Iran following the execution<sup>70</sup> of a dissident Saudi Shia cleric. Saudi Arabia's warplanes participating in the battle against ISIL forces, led by the United States, have often operated out of Turkey's Incirlik<sup>71</sup> airbase. Saudi Arabia expressed support<sup>72</sup> for the Turkish

<sup>59</sup> Jay Solomon, "[Trump Administration Looks at Driving Wedge Between Russia and Iran](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Semih Idiz, "[Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Hits Peak as Syria Talks Kick Off](#)," *Al Monitor*, February 22, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> "[President Erdogan Talks Turkey-Gulf Ties, Syria](#)," *News.az*, February 16, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> "[Foreign Minister Cavusoglu Accompanied President Erdogan During His Visit to Saudi Arabia](#)," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed February 27, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> "[Saudi King Salman Visits Ankara to Strengthen Ties](#)," *Daily Sabah*, April 10, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> "[Saudi Crown Prince Meets Turkey's Erdogan](#)," *Al Arabiya*, September 20, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> "[Turkey Bestows Highest State Medal on King Salman](#)," *The National*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> "[King Salman Decorated with the Order of the State](#)," *Yeni Safak*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Hasan Ay, "[Booming Economic Ties, Further Cooperation Focus of Erdogan's Gulf Tour](#)," *Daily Sabah*, February 15, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Said Abdul Razzak, "[Turkey Seeks Free Trade Agreement with GCC](#)," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 23, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> "[Turkish Foreign Minister Attends OIC Meeting to Discuss Recent Riyadh-Tehran Rift](#)," *Daily Sabah*, January 21, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Merrit Kennedy, "[Who Was the Shiite Sheikh Executed by Saudi Arabia?](#)" *NPR*, January 4, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> "[Saudi Fighter Jets Deployed to Turkey's Incirlik Base](#)," *Al Jazeera*, February 14, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> "[King Salman Congratulates Erdogan, Riyadh Arrests Turkish Military Attaché to Kuwait](#)," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 18, 2016.

government after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016. Saudi investment in Turkey has also greatly expanded, rising<sup>73</sup> over the past 10 years from 4 billion riyals to 22 billion riyals (from approximately \$1.07 billion to \$5.87 billion), and encompassing at least 800<sup>74</sup> Turkish-Saudi joint venture companies working in Turkey in many fields.

## Qatar

Because of strong ideological affinities<sup>75</sup> with Erdogan and Turkey's ruling AKP party, particularly their shared support of Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamist groups, of all the GCC countries, Qatar has developed the closest ties<sup>76</sup> with Ankara. Not only have they strongly cooperated in Syria, in November 2016 the two countries signed a deal<sup>77</sup> to boost economic and political cooperation. Turkish companies have invested an estimated \$11.6 billion<sup>78</sup> in Qatar, much of it connected to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and there are 99 Turkish companies operating with Qatari partners.

Perhaps most significantly, Qatar is allowing Turkey to establish its first major military base<sup>79</sup> in the Gulf region on its territory. In December 2015, the Turkish and Qatari defense ministers signed an agreement<sup>80</sup> permitting Turkey to deploy its troops on Qatari territory. The countries agreed to "open their territories to each other's military forces for joint military exercises" and be "able to use each other's ports, airports and air space, to deploy forces on each other's territory and thus mutually benefit from facilities, camps, units and institutions." Since then Turkey has been building<sup>81</sup> a military base<sup>82</sup> that is due, once completed, to house 3,000<sup>83</sup> Turkish troops, including infantry, as well as air and naval forces. A hundred Turkish troops have already been training the Qatari military. This military

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*Qatar is allowing Turkey to establish its first major military base in the Gulf region on its territory.*

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<sup>73</sup> Safed Al-Khotani, "[Erdogan's Riyadh Talks to Focus on Anti-Terror Push](#)," *Arab News*, December 29, 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Nur Cetinoglu Harunoglu, "[Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar and its Implications for Turkish-American Relations](#)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal* 20, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>76</sup> Feyza Gumusloughu, "[Why Qatar is Hosting a Turkish Military Base](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, April 15, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Fatih Erkan Dogan, "[Turkey, Qatar Ink Trade Deal](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, November 10, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Feyza Gumusloughu, "[Why Qatar is Hosting a Turkish Military Base](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, April 15, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Serkan Demirtas, "[Turkey to Deploy Troops in Qatar in Line with Military Deal](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 9, 2015.

<sup>81</sup> "[Turkey Signs Deal to Deploy Forces in Qatar](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 28, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Tom Finn, "[Turkey to Set up Qatar Military Base to Face 'Common Enemies'](#)," *Reuters*, December 16, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Heather Murdock, "[Turkey Opens First Mideast Military Base in Qatar](#)," *VOA News*, May 10, 2016.

alliance<sup>84</sup> bespeaks close relations<sup>85</sup> and a sense of shared threats.<sup>86</sup> It also represents a real breakthrough<sup>87</sup> for Turkey's regional presence and its potential ability to project power beyond its immediate borders.

### United Arab Emirates

Turkey's biggest disputes and deepest tensions with a GCC member have been with the UAE over Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood. These long-simmering disagreements intensified following the Arab uprisings in 2011, several of which were encouraged by Turkey but opposed by the UAE. They came to a head over the ouster of the former Egyptian president and Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohammed Morsi, in 2013, which was stridently opposed by Turkey and warmly welcomed by the UAE, and the UAE recalled its ambassador from Ankara. Despite these strong differences<sup>88</sup> and some drop off in commerce as relations frayed, the UAE has maintained fairly robust trade relations<sup>89</sup> with Turkey. Turkey exports almost \$5 billion in goods and services annually to the UAE, and in 2015 trade volume between the two countries reached \$8 billion,<sup>90</sup> expected to rise to \$10 billion in coming years. Around 9,000<sup>91</sup> Turkish expatriates reportedly live and work in the UAE, and 500 Turkish companies operate in that country, mostly in construction.

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In 2016 Turkey and the UAE moved to restore<sup>92</sup> normal diplomatic ties. When he visited Abu Dhabi<sup>93</sup> in April 2016, Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu,<sup>94</sup> became the first senior Turkish official to travel to the UAE since 2013. The UAE dispatched a new ambassador<sup>95</sup> to Ankara in June 2016, followed by a visit<sup>96</sup> to Turkey by foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed<sup>97</sup> in October. The UAE was reportedly<sup>98</sup> responding to Turkey's

<sup>84</sup> Menekse Tokyay, "[Turkey Diversifies Allies with First Mideast Military Base in Qatar](#)," *Al Arabiya*, December 15, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Olivier Decottignies and Soner Cagaptay, "[Turkey's New Base in Qatar](#)," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 11, 2016.

<sup>86</sup> "[Seeing Shared Threats, Turkey Sets up Military Base in Qatar](#)," *Reuters*, April 28, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Tom Finn, "[Turkey to set up Qatar Military Base to Face 'Common Enemies'](#)," *Reuters*, December 16, 2015.

<sup>88</sup> "[UAE Criticism of Turkey's President 'Unacceptable'](#)," *World Bulletin*, September 27, 2014.

<sup>89</sup> "[Turkey-United Arab Emirates \(UAE\) Economic and Trade Relations](#)," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed February 27, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> "[\\$10bn in UAE-Turkish Trade Expected in 2016](#)," *The Big 5 Hub*, December 2015.

<sup>91</sup> "[United Arab Emirates-Turkey: Bilateral Relations](#)," Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Ankara, accessed February 27, 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Emre Ozom, "[UAE to Restore Ties with Turkey](#)," *Daily Sabah*, January 28, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> "[Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Meets Turkish Foreign Minister](#)," *Qatar News Agency*, April 25, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Serkan Demirat, "[Turkey Steps up Ties with GCC, Ends 3-Year Row with UAE](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 27, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> "[UAE Ambassador Presents Credentials to Turkish President](#)," United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, June 15, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> "[Sheikh Abdullah Visits Kemal Ataturk's Mausoleum in Ankara](#)," *The National*, October 17, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> "[Abdullah Bin Zayed Renews UAE's Rejection of Failed Coup Attempts in Turkey](#)," *UAE Interact*, October 17, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Taimur Khan, "[Turkey Serious about Improving ties with AE, Says New Ambassador](#)," *The National*, December 5, 2016.

moves away from a regional agenda of aggressively promoting Muslim Brotherhood groups and the replacement of former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who was widely seen as the public face of that policy. An unusually high-level<sup>99</sup> delegation from the UAE was dispatched to Ankara for the ninth session of the Joint Economic Committee between the two countries, further underscoring the restoration of closer ties between them and the centrality of trade<sup>100</sup> in their relations. Yet Erdogan did not stop in the UAE during his recent Gulf tour, which should be noted but not overread, and criticism<sup>101</sup> of Emirati attitudes can still be readily found in the Turkish media. There still appears to be room for improvement in Turkey's relations with the UAE, despite the evident progress in the past 12 months.

### Other GCC Countries

Kuwait and Turkey enjoy strong diplomatic relations<sup>102</sup> and robust trade.<sup>103</sup> Trade volume between them was expected to reach \$1 billion<sup>104</sup> in 2016. Turkey claims<sup>105</sup> its companies have been involved in \$6.3 billion worth of projects in Kuwait as of 2016. Turkey and Bahrain reportedly enjoyed a nine-fold increase in trade volume since 2003, reaching \$300 million<sup>106</sup> per year. Bahraini tourism in Turkey has also reportedly increased 700 percent over the past decade, reaching almost 25,000 visitors a year<sup>107</sup> by 2014. Oman, too, has significant trade with Turkey, including Turkish investment worth \$5.5 billion<sup>108</sup> in its economy. Bilateral trade is nearly \$600 million<sup>109</sup> per year, and both sides have agreed to try to increase it to \$1 billion<sup>110</sup> per year.

### Neo-Ottoman Anxieties

The Arab uprisings, which caused deep anxiety in much of the Gulf, were something of a high point for Turkey's ambitions in the contemporary Middle East. Some quarters in Turkey, the Arab world, and the West held that the Turkish/AKP approach to mosque-state dynamics could serve as a model for Arab republics. Many also argued that, by championing ascendant Muslim Brotherhood parties, Turkey would become the leader of a regional "Green Wave" that would transform Arab republics like Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria into not only Islamist states,

<sup>99</sup> Nezaket Yalman, "[Joint Economic Committee Meeting Between UAE and Turkey to be Held in Ankara](#)," *Middle East Observer*, February 6, 2017.

<sup>100</sup> "[UAE, Turkey Discuss Knowledge, Investment Opportunities](#)," *Gulf News Journal*, February 14, 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Muhittin Ataman, "[Turkey and the Gulf States: Sustainable Cooperation is Needed](#)," *Daily Sabah*, February 14, 2017.

<sup>102</sup> "[Turkish, Kuwaiti Security, Stability the Same: Erdogan – Turkey Aspires to Boost Trade Cooperation with Kuwait](#)," *Kuwait Times*, April 26, 2015.

<sup>103</sup> Mehmet Ali Berber, "[Improving Political and Trade Ties Between Turkey and Kuwait Reflected in Warm Reception](#)," *Daily Sabah*, April 28, 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Erdal Celikel, "[Turkey Looking to Invest in Kuwait's \\$150B Projects](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, September 20, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> "[Istanbul Hosts Turkey-Bahrain Investment Summit](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, February 29, 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Habib Toumi, "[Bahrain Tourists to Turkey Numbers grow by 700%](#)," *Gulf News*, May 26, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> "[Turkey to Increase Trade Volume to \\$1 Bln with Oman: Turkish FM](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, October 23, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Mobin Mathew Blesson, "[Oman-Turkey Trade Touches \\$600 Million, says Ambassador](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, October 31, 2015.

<sup>110</sup> "[Turkey to Increase Trade Volume to \\$1 Bln with Oman: Turkish FM](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, October 23, 2013.

but also Turkish allies and possibly clients. It was not to be.<sup>111</sup> Both Turkey and Qatar appear to have overestimated<sup>112</sup> the popular appeal of Brotherhood-style politics in the Arab world, while the relative skepticism of Riyadh, and even the absolute skepticism of the UAE, seem largely vindicated by events.

However, Turkish neo-Ottoman<sup>113</sup> or pan-Islamic<sup>114</sup> aspirations remain a vital part of the contemporary<sup>115</sup> Turkish political scene<sup>116</sup> and, at least from the point of view of many<sup>117</sup> of its neighbors, among the most worrying ambitions<sup>118</sup> of its leaders and ruling party. This is especially true following the recent failed coup in Turkey and the rise of ultra-nationalism, combined with paranoia, chauvinism, and widespread purges. These phenomena have been accompanied by an outpouring of nationalistic and irredentist maps<sup>119</sup> in Turkey suggesting resurgent territorial ambitions in former Ottoman territories, particularly in areas of Greece and Iraq. But the Gulf Arab states, like much of the Arab world, have a long history with Ottoman dominance, and the idea of a resurgent, potentially hegemonic, and even neo-Ottoman<sup>120</sup> Turkey is, in the long run, an alarming<sup>121</sup> one for most of them. Therefore, while Turkey is seen as an essential counterbalance to Iran, an important trading partner, and a vital ally in certain conflicts, including the battle against ISIL and other extremist groups, there is a broader, long-term wariness about Turkish ambitions in the region.

Turkey may not represent the “double-whammy” that Iran constitutes of being both a Shia, not Sunni, and a Persian, not Arab, power. But Turkey is decidedly a non-Arab power, and one with a long imperial history. Most of the territory of the GCC was once under Ottoman rule. Even though Turkey’s regional attention focuses on the Balkans and Albania, the Levant and Iraq, and Greece and Cyprus, rather than the Gulf region, like many other Turkish neighbors, Gulf Arabs also regard the potential resurgence of a hegemonic Turkey as a cause for long-term concern. Therefore, the Gulf Arab goal is the subtle arrangement of ensuring Turkey remains an engaged power in the Middle East, but not too engaged, and committed to helping shape regional developments, but not excessively committed. The balancing act the Gulf states must execute is for Turkey to play a major regional role, but not an overbearing one. That’s a delicate equilibrium to achieve and maintain in any relationship.

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<sup>111</sup> Behlul Ozkan, “[Can Turkey Lead the Islamic World and Still Be a Western Ally?](#)” *The World Post*, January 15, 2015.

<sup>112</sup> Hussein Ibish, “[Brotherhood’s Fiasco in Egypt will Change Future of Islamism](#),” *The National*, July 21, 2013.

<sup>113</sup> Behlul Ozkan, “[The Failure of a Neo-Ottoman Foreign Policy](#),” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Behlul Ozkan, “[Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism](#),” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>115</sup> Elif Batuman, “[Ottomania](#),” *The New Yorker*, February, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> “[The AKP’s Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of ‘Neo-Ottomanism’](#),” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 24, 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Ali Vaez, “[Turkey and Iran’s Dangerous Collision Course](#),” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Pinar Treblay, “[Have Turkey’s neo-Ottomans Abandoned Yemen?](#)” *Al Monitor*, October 26, 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Nick Danforth, “[Turkey’s New Maps are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire](#),” *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Abdullah Al-Otaibi, “[Opinion: The Turkish Republic or the Ottoman Empire?](#)” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 24 2013.

<sup>121</sup> Hussein Ibish, “[Turkey’s Role in Mosul Prompts Reassurance and Anxiety in the Gulf](#),” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 26, 2016.

## Conclusion

Though relations between Turkey and the Gulf Arab states have shifted over the past decade, common interests have helped them to develop and maintain a positive working relationship and, often, partnership. The GCC states have worked to preserve these strong relations with Turkey, especially vis-à-vis Iran and regional conflicts such as the wars in Syria and Iraq, balancing security, trade, economic, and at times even military, cooperation. Additionally, facing regional security threats and domestic political challenges, Turkey has been trying to pursue a less confrontational regional foreign policy. However, despite the progress Turkey has made with the GCC countries, there remain several issues that could strain relations. As Erdogan has accumulated political power, Ankara's foreign policy has become a reflection of his individual interests. Therefore, relations with the Gulf states could quickly change should Erdogan perceive a domestic political benefit from altering these ties. For many of the Gulf states, Turkey's support for Islamist parties in the region has been disquieting and Turkey's long-term regional aspirations remain a concern for Gulf Arab leaders. Yet, both sides have a clear interest in continuing to pursue political and economic cooperation, and therefore generally positive relations will likely persist for the foreseeable future.

