



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



Turkey's Resurgence as a Regional Power Confronts a Fractured GCC

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Executive Summary

Turkey's relations with the Gulf Arab states have continued to intensify as Ankara and some Gulf Arab countries – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar – have steadily risen in regional prominence as traditional Arab power centers, such as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, have faded in significance.

For Turkey, the engagement in the Arab world is part of an evolving international agenda that has, at least for now, turned largely away from Europe and toward Eurasia and the Middle East. Some Turks close to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) openly envisage the country reclaiming the political and religious leadership role once enjoyed by the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Sunni-majority Arab world. But it is precisely these ambitions that have fueled increasing tensions with some Gulf Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They view Ankara's regional ambitions as effectively seeking leadership of a Sunni Islamist-oriented regional bloc. They also fear the resurgence of Turkish hegemony and Saudi Arabia, in particular, harbors resentment over past conflicts with the Ottoman Empire.

By contrast, Qatar has only grown closer to Turkey as the boycott by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, along with Egypt, isolated Doha within the Gulf region. Ankara and Doha are now among each other's closest allies, which has only exacerbated other Gulf Arab suspicions. These tensions were vividly illustrated following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. For the foreseeable future, it appears likely that Turkish-Gulf Arab tensions will persist, and even a rapprochement between Qatar and the boycotting countries might not do much to ease the situation. Despite areas of potential cooperation, including limiting Iran's regional clout, Turkey is likely to remain mainly at loggerheads with at least half of the Gulf Arab states in coming years.

Introduction

Turkish-Gulf Arab relations are rapidly evolving in the context of a highly unstable, dynamic, and interdependent Middle East strategic landscape, and, as always, in the broader historical context of centuries of Ottoman imperial rule that ended just over a hundred years ago. For most of the intervening period, Turkey and Gulf Arab countries had fairly distant and relatively amicable relations, especially since Turkey and the Gulf Arab states were broadly aligned with the United States during the Cold War era. However, with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as Ankara's governing party almost 20 years ago, Turkey's regional profile and its relations with various Gulf Arab countries have intensified and diversified.

Tensions with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates began to develop when Turkey identified itself with a generalized "axis of resistance," particularly in support of Hamas in Gaza, in the years following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In retrospect, this appears to have been Ankara's first major foray into projecting influence in the Arab world, and it brought Turkey into direct contradiction with the UAE and, eventually, Saudi Arabia. But it brought Turkey increasingly close to Qatar, with which it developed strong ideological affiliations.

Those developments became starkly evident during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-11, when Turkey and Qatar strongly supported popular rebellions in various Arab republics in hopes that Muslim Brotherhood parties would come to power as long-serving autocrats were toppled. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, by contrast, opposed the uprisings as dangerously destabilizing to the Arab state system. They also strongly opposed the political ambitions of Muslim Brotherhood parties, particularly when they were successful in Tunisia and Egypt. Given the sudden reversal of fortunes in 2013, with a second popular uprising prompting a military-led overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and the rapid collapse of the Ennahda-led coalition in Tunisia, these parties found themselves on opposite sides once again, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE supporting the new governments and Turkey and Qatar condemning what they called "counterrevolution."

Unless Turkish foreign policy makes a dramatic and implausible turn away from the Middle East and the Arab world toward Europe and the West, Ankara will remain among the most important external players in Gulf affairs.

This division has intensified in recent years with Saudi-Emirati ties growing ever stronger, including along ideological, anti-Islamist lines. Meanwhile, pro-Islamist sympathies deepened Doha's alliance with Ankara, particularly after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a boycott against Qatar in 2017, largely because of divisions over religion and politics, especially the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. These two groupings are in competition broadly throughout the region, at times sponsoring competing armed groups, notably in Libya, and as far afield as the Horn of Africa. The depth of antagonism between Turkey and Saudi Arabia was amply illustrated by the aftermath of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018, and relations with the UAE are at least as tense.

The quartet of countries boycotting Qatar, led by Saudi Arabia, views Turkey as the leader of a new strategic alliance in the Middle East. They believe it constitutes a Sunni Islamist bloc in competition with both a pro-Iranian camp (including the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and various militia groups) and a pro-U.S. camp (in which they include themselves, Egypt, Jordan, and others). Turkey, however, views itself as supporting reform and democracy, as well as its own national interests, in its alliance with Qatar. Turkey sees itself as returning to its historic leadership role in the Middle East – among Sunni if not all Muslims. Oman and Kuwait remain nervous bystanders as the formerly strong Gulf Arab coalition has fractured along ideological lines with Turkey as arguably the most important outside party to this disintegration.

Unless Turkish foreign policy makes a dramatic and implausible turn away from the Middle East and the Arab world toward Europe and the West, Ankara will remain among the most important external players in Gulf affairs. And, given the religious and financial significance of the Gulf states to Ankara, especially regarding investments in Turkey, Gulf Arab countries will remain significant considerations for Turkish foreign policy, especially given the centrality of the strong ideological alliance between Ankara and Doha.

This paper, informed by a workshop hosted by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, is a follow-up to an earlier AGSIW analysis, "Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests." It reviews how Turkish-Gulf Arab relations have developed in recent years, particularly in the context of the end of the war in Syria, the most recent crucial turning point

in Middle Eastern strategic affairs. First, Steven A. Cook, Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, examines these relations from a Turkish viewpoint. AGSIW Senior Resident Scholar Hussein Ibish then reviews Gulf Arab perspectives.

Turkey's Perspective

Background

Over the course of its 17 years in power, the leadership of Turkey's ruling AKP has sought to establish Ankara as an active and independent power in the Middle East. Within the party's intellectual circles there has been a long-held belief that Turkey must play a leadership role in the Middle East and among Muslim-majority countries. This ambition is drawn from a valorization of Ottoman history that resonates with the AKP's core constituency, which has long had an ambivalent relationship with the Turkish Republic.¹ The AKP's vision also appeals to a broader group of Turks, who – while not necessarily supportive of all the government's policies in the Middle East – harbor nationalist resentment toward the West, especially the United States.

"Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests" identifies three distinct phases of Turkey's Middle East policy.² Broadly speaking, the Turkish government held itself out as the region's problem solver and trouble shooter from 2002-06; the AKP then shifted to its Hamas phase, during which it publicly challenged Israel and the United States on the Palestinian issue. This lasted roughly until the 2010-11 uprisings around the Middle East when Turkish officials implicitly acknowledged that their country was the "model" for those in the Middle East undergoing transitions.³

Yet the Syrian civil war, differences with other regional powers over Libya, the coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013, and the Gezi Park protests at the same time undermined the Turkish position in the region, damaging relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. This tension has led to the most assertive and boldest phase of Turkey's engagement with the Middle East. This time, however, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has focused his attention not only on seeking a leadership role in the region, but also on shaping the region in line with Ankara's interests. And while his government has been active in the Levant, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa, it has been more focused on the Gulf in recent years.

From Erdogan's perspective, the U.S.-Israeli-Saudi order in the region has wrought havoc in Syria, Yemen, and Libya; denies justice for the Palestinians; enables repression; is unnecessarily provocative toward Iran; and, most important, constrains the exercise of Turkish power. The October 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul reinforced the

¹ Michael A. Reynolds, "The Key to the Future Lies in the Past: The Worldview of Erdogan and Davutoglu," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, September 3, 2015.

² Hussein Ibish and Steven A. Cook, "Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Diverging Interests," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, February 28, 2017.

³ Ibrahim Kalin, "Turkey and the Arab Spring," *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2011.

Turkish view that Washington's allies are a primary source of regional instability.⁴ Unable to convince either former President Barack Obama or President Donald J. Trump of the wisdom of his position, Erdogan and his advisors have begun building Turkey's own set of strategic alliances in the Gulf as a rival to the U.S.-Saudi-Emirati coalition that also includes Israel by association.

The centerpiece of this effort is, of course, the deepening of Turkish ties with Qatar. Toward that end the two governments and their supporters have advanced a narrative that emphasizes kinship between them going back to the 19th century and casts Turkey as protector of Qatari independence from the predations of the British and surrounding countries.⁵ This account draws parallels to Ankara's effort to support Doha and shield the Qataris from the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt that began in June 2017. The historical record is somewhat different, of course.

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Ottoman troops first arrived in the country in 1893 in response to Jassim bin Mohammed al-Thani's rebellion against the Sublime Porte, the central government of the Ottoman Empire. Those forces were defeated, but in an ensuing agreement, Qatar's status was enhanced – becoming an autonomous district of the empire – in exchange for permission for Ottoman troops to remain.⁶ The current Turkish and Qatari version of their past ties provides a quasi-historical overlay to present day geopolitical struggles in the Gulf and beyond.

Turkey, Qatar, and the Arab Uprisings

And while the boycott of Qatar has certainly reinforced and deepened bilateral ties with Turkey, the interests of these two countries overlapped for the better part of the preceding decade. In Ankara and Doha, leaders saw the uprisings around the Arab world that began in 2010 as opportunities to advance their influence. In Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia, the Turks and Qataris provided diplomatic and financial support to Islamist groups that joined the rebellions. The Turkish government gave refuge and support to the leadership of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and in places where leaders fell, the Turks positioned themselves as patrons and mentors of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia's Ennahda, and Libya's Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Construction Party.⁷ The Qataris have long provided

⁴ Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa: Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?" *Lawfare*, May 19, 2019; Birol Baskan, "Turkey and the UAE: A Strange Crisis," *Middle East Institute*, May 1, 2019; Seyma Nazli Gurbuz and Eralp Yasar, "U.S. Exploits Regional Instability to Legitimize Israeli Invasion," *Daily Sabah*, March 27, 2013; Gul Tuysuz, Schams Elwazer, and Hilary Clarke, "Erdogan Accuses US of Creating Kurdish Terror Enclave on Turkish Border," *CNN*, January 16, 2018.

⁵ Yunus Paksoy, "Turkish Military in Qatar: Bonds of Mutual Trust," *Daily Sabah*, June 12, 2018.

⁶ Olivier Decottignies and Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's New Base in Qatar," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 11, 2016.

⁷ Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroglu, "Ankara's Failure: How Turkey Lost the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2016; Gonul Tol "Erdogan's Arab Spring Tour," *Middle East Institute*, September 21, 2011; Steven A. Cook, "Erdogan's Middle Eastern Victory Lap," *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2011.

sanctuary for members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups around the region, arguing that Doha provides a location for parties that cannot speak to each other publicly to negotiate behind the scenes.

Of all of Turkey's ties with Islamist groups, the AKP's relationship with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was the most pronounced, even though it was not always smooth. The Brotherhood long considered Turkey's Islamists as too liberal and nationalist. Erdogan papered over these differences when he called upon then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to listen to his people and leave office, the first world leader to do so. When the then-Turkish prime minister visited Egypt in September 2011 during a post-uprising tour of affected states in the region, he angered the Brotherhood when he expressed his view that piousness within an officially secular political system was not inconsistent. Nevertheless, the Turks continued to maintain an influential political and economic role during Egypt's transition, especially after the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi became president in June 2012. The Qataris were also active in Egypt at the same time, investing an estimated \$5.5 billion in the year after Morsi took office.⁸

In Libya, the Turkish and Qatari governments supported the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, which is a coalition of groups that includes the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists.

In Tunisia and Libya, the Turks and Qataris also sought to shape political change. In the Tunisian case, Ennahda's leader subtly, but unmistakably, resisted Turkish mentoring. In early 2011, Ennahda's intellectual leader Rachid Ghannouchi told Al Jazeera that he regarded his own writings and worldview as "the reference point for the AKP."⁹ Even so, he went on in the same interview to affirm that Ennahda "admire[d] the Turkish case and those who are in charge of it are our close friends."¹⁰ In Libya, the Turkish and Qatari governments supported the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, which is a coalition of groups that includes the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists. It is the role of Islamists in that government that has come to define the role of outsiders in Libya's fragmentation. In the east, the House of Representatives claims to be the legitimate government and is aligned with General Khalifa Hifter, a former officer in Muammar al-Qaddafi's military, who has been engaged in a 5-year effort to oust the authorities in Tripoli and unify the country under his leadership. Hifter has positioned himself as anti-Islamist and, as such, he and the eastern government enjoy the backing of regional powers such as Egypt and the UAE, while Saudi Arabia promised money and diplomatic support. All of the countries have funneled weapons or money to their Libyan proxies, undermining U.N. efforts to bring an end to the fighting and forge a process of national reconciliation.¹¹

⁸ Mohsin Khan and Richard Lebaron, "What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in Egypt?" *Atlantic Council*, July 11, 2013.

⁹ Nazanine Moshiri, "Interview With Rachid Ghannouchi," *Al Jazeera*, February 7, 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Turkey Threatens Strongman Haftar as Six Citizens Detained," *BBC*, June 30, 2019; Samer Al-Atrush, "Libya's Proxy War Escalates as Government Gets Arms Shipment," *Bloomberg*, May 18, 2019; "Flow of Arms into Libya Risks Proxy War," *AFP*, May 20, 2019.

Although much has been made of the Qatari affinity for Islamist groups, it was the Turks who approached political upheaval in the Arab world with the confidence that events vindicated their worldview. Then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu regarded Islamism as the wave of the future and, as a result of the AKP's success, Turkey was uniquely positioned to lead newly empowered Islamist parties around the region.¹² In ways, Qatar's position was less ideological than it was opportunistic. The goal of Doha's decision makers since the mid-1990s has been to ensure Qatar's freedom to act independently of its much larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia. Along with Al Jazeera, its more nuanced approach to Iran, and its reluctance to accept Riyadh's self-endowed regional authority, Qatar's support for Islamist movements after the uprisings was a way of reinforcing this independence.

The Turkish and Qatari bid to enhance their regional influence through Islamist movements fared poorly. In July 2013 the Egyptian military overthrew Morsi and drove the Muslim Brotherhood leadership underground or into exile; many found refuge in Istanbul, Doha, and London. Violence and fragmentation have plagued Libya from almost the beginning and the two regional camps are currently supporting a military stalemate between Hifter's forces and those of the Tripoli government. And, Tunisia, which was long an outlier in the Arab world, has been largely impervious to the efforts of far-away powers that sought to leverage the momentous changes in the country for their regional advantage.

Turkey, Qatar, and the Boycott

After the imposition of the Saudi-led boycott of Qatar, Turkish-Qatari cooperation deepened. They were no longer merely partners in the effort to forge a new regional political order; Turkey provided Qatar with strategic depth. The Turkish government quickly established an air bridge to Doha, shipping food, medicine, and other critical goods that Qatar previously imported mostly from Saudi Arabia. There was also a military component to this support. In 2014, the two governments signed an agreement that provided for a Turkish military training mission in Qatar aimed at bolstering Qatari military capabilities and a forward base for the Turks in an area in which Erdogan sought to exert influence.¹³ Not long after the Saudis, Emiratis, Bahrainis, and Egyptians severed all ties with Qatar and essentially criminalized contact with Qataris, the Turkish Grand National Assembly approved the deployment of forces to Qatar.

Beyond the practical aspects of joint Turkish-Qatari training, Turkey's deployment is symbolically important to both countries. For the Qataris, the Turkish military presence – in addition to the vastly larger U.S. military mission – helps ensure Qatar's independence and deters against any potential military action by its neighbors. For the Turks, a military presence in the Gulf reinforces the idea, especially for Erdogan's domestic constituency, that Ankara is an influential player in the area. It also reinforces the idea – again, for a domestic audience – that Turkey is pursuing a principled foreign policy in support of allies and friends.

¹² Behlul Ozkan, "Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan Islamism," *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119-40.

¹³ Tom Finn, "Turkey to Set Up Military Base to Face 'Common Enemies,'" *Reuters*, December 16, 2015.

Kuwait and Oman

The Turks clearly see Qatar as a strategic partner and linchpin of their Gulf strategy, but Ankara's relations with Doha are not the extent of its efforts in the area. Erdogan regards other Gulf Arab countries as an opportunity in his effort to reshape the regional political order and has sought to leverage regional fissures to his advantage. As Kuwait and Oman have come under pressure from the Saudis and Emiratis for their different views of regional issues, such as the war in Yemen, the Qatar boycott, and how to respond to Iran, Turkey has presented itself as an alternative. In late 2018, for example, the Turks and Kuwaitis signed a number of agreements on defense cooperation, investment, and commerce.¹⁴ A similar dynamic is underway between Turkey and Oman. After years in which diplomatic and political relations were essentially moribund, the Turks have recently sought to reinvigorate ties through a range of bilateral defense and economic agreements.

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Turkey, along with both Russia and Iran, is vying for influence in the Middle East. And like the Iranians and Russians, the

Turks have sought to alter the regional political order that for years has benefited the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Using their growing ties with Qatar as a gateway, the Turks successfully positioned themselves as strategic depth for Kuwait and Oman, giving leaders in these countries capacity to resist or, at least, room to maneuver in response to Saudi and Emirati demands. The question going forward is whether Turkey can play the role it envisions in the Gulf with its economy in recession, the AKP weakened as a result of significant losses in March's local elections, and potential challenges to stability as Erdogan and the party try to reverse those losses. Gulf leaders should be wary of being left exposed by an overly ambitious Turkey that does not have the resources to compete with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

GCC Perspectives

Background

The rise in recent years of Turkey as a fully engaged and ideologically defined, if still aspiring, Middle East hegemon has split the Gulf Cooperation Council states into two broad camps. Saudi Arabia and its two closest Gulf allies, the UAE and Bahrain, are united in viewing Turkey as a crucial new regional and ideological threat, analogous to but, for now at least, less alarming than Iran. Nonetheless, these three countries, along with Egypt and Israel, increasingly view Turkey as the epicenter of a Sunni Islamist revisionist bloc in the Middle East that is competing with both Iran and the camp these states unofficially lead in cooperation with Washington. The other three Gulf Arab countries – Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman – view the emergence of a fully engaged Turkey under the leadership of Erdogan and the AKP as generally a positive development. In the case of Doha, this Turkish role is a godsend, while Kuwait and Oman have been quietly building their relations with Ankara.

¹⁴ Fehim Tastekin, "Gulf Countries Concerned as Turkey Cozies Up to Kuwait," *Al Monitor*, October 19, 2018.

This division among the Gulf Arab states on Turkey to a degree mirrors their varying perspectives on Iran, which is opposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain but has much better relations with Qatar and Kuwait and warm ties with Oman. If Saudi Arabia and its allies, along with Egypt and Israel, are right to view Turkey as a new major power that is both aspirationally hegemonic and strongly ideological, then the rise of Turkey only serves to underscore the weakness in the Gulf Arab camp since the other three Gulf Arab countries do not share this perspective. Indeed, it is precisely the division within the GCC over such issues that has allowed Turkey to slowly develop a noteworthy political and even military presence and profile in the Gulf region for the first time since the Ottoman era. Until these divisions are resolved, regional would-be hegemons, such as Iran and Turkey, will continue to effectively exploit them.

What is emerging as an ideological split in the Sunni Muslim-majority states of the Middle East over Islamism and the role of religion in political life may be of greater consequence to the long-term future of the region than the competition for power with Iran and its largely Shia regional allies. While the battle with Iran is essentially about the role the Iranian state will play in the Middle East in the coming decades, the struggle within the Sunni-majority states, with one side increasingly led by Turkey, will do much to define the parameters of mainstream Arab political culture and normative expectations within and between most Middle Eastern countries. If Turkey focuses its foreign policy in coming years on a Middle East resurgence under AKP leadership, rather than re-emphasizing relations with Europe and the West or Eurasia, then an intensification of tensions and competition with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, and possibly Egypt and Israel, is all but inevitable.

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Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain

While there are some nuanced differences in the views between Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward Turkey, they are not terribly significant, and Bahrain tends to defer to Riyadh on national defense and foreign policy issues. So, it is reasonable to refer to a "Saudi" view toward Ankara, although the ideological core of this perspective when it comes to the crucial dividing line on Islamism originates from Abu Dhabi. Essentially, this Saudi perspective holds that Turkey under Erdogan and the AKP has emerged as an aspiring hegemon in the Middle East with a clear ideological orientation. This perspective concludes that under its consolidated AKP Islamist and increasingly autocratic regime, Turkey has abandoned its long-standing efforts to join the European Union and its former commitment to prioritizing its NATO membership and alliance with Washington as central to its national interests. Instead, Turkey is perceived to have moved toward a neo-Ottoman agenda that turns Ankara's gaze firmly away from the north and west toward the south and east and seeks to restore former Turkish glory as a hegemonic power in the Middle East.

In the Saudi perspective, these national ambitions dovetail dangerously with the AKP's Islamist ideology, with Turkey once again seeking to establish itself as the leading Islamic, or at least Sunni Muslim, power among the global Muslim-majority states and the broader Muslim

community, especially in the Middle East.¹⁵ From this point of view, Turkey has emerged as a strong contender for global Islamic leadership, competing both with Saudi Arabia's traditional claims as the custodian of the two holy sanctuaries, the birthplace of the faith, and the "purest" Muslim state and Iran's revolutionary and revivalist Shia Islamist assertions.¹⁶ From this perspective, there is a strong religious component to Turkey's ambitions to revive its former role as a regional power since there are now effectively three claimants to political primacy in the Islamic world, each with a distinctive international, regional, ideological, and religious orientation.¹⁷ Simply put, this perspective holds that whereas over recent decades the Middle East has primarily been the site of a competition between two broad camps – pro- and anti-Iranian – it is increasingly split into three distinct groupings: pro-Iranian, pro-U.S., and pro-Turkish – with some overlapping and gray zones between them depending on the issue.

There is considerable alarm in these countries regarding the perceived emergence of Turkey as a Sunni Islamist and, in the Arab political context, Muslim Brotherhood Islamist gravitational center. Saudi apprehensions about the Arab Spring protests that resulted in the destabilization of states ruled by repressive governments, and especially the potential rise of Brotherhood-dominated regimes in Arab republics, gave way to a sense of relief when such regimes fell in Egypt and Tunisia in 2013 and failed to take root in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. Yet the sense that Islamist-oriented parties and ideology remain a potent danger in contemporary Arab political culture endures and there is a clear narrative identifying the alleged remaining power centers for this orientation.

From a Saudi perspective, post-failed coup Turkey is a focused and aggressive Islamist regional player in a way that it never has been in the past, because of the consolidation of power in Ankara by the president and his party.

In ascending order of importance, Islamist militias in Libya are viewed as politically and militarily potent Brotherhood-oriented forces; the Hamas regime in Gaza is seen as a small but effective Brotherhood government in a tiny but significant part of the Arab world; Qatar is regarded as effectively the megaphone (through Al Jazeera and other media outlets) and ATM (through soft and hard power financing) of the movement; and Turkey is cast as the leader of this Sunni Islamist regional bloc. Whether the Turkish regime uses Islamist ideology to advance a neo-Ottoman nationalistic and hegemonic agenda or Turkish and other Islamists are using the Turkish state and foreign policy to promote a broader revolutionary regional agenda is beside the point. From the Saudi perspective, both would merely be different aspects of the same generalized threat, whether predominantly characterized in terms of Turkish hegemony or Islamist subversion.

Several factors in recent years have served to bring this perception of Turkey's emerging role into sharp focus for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, as well as Egypt, Israel, and others. The concentration of power around Erdogan personally, and also his party following the failed 2016 coup, appears to have all but erased differences between the Turkish president's personal

¹⁵ "Only Turkey Can Lead Muslim World, Says Erdogan," *Ahval*, October 15, 2018.

¹⁶ Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2019.

¹⁷ Henri J. Barkey, "Restoring Religion's Role in Foreign and Domestic Policy in Erdogan's Turkey," *Hoover Institution*, December 6, 2018.

and political interests, as well as his party's ideology and the Turkish national interest. From a Saudi perspective, post-failed coup Turkey is a focused and aggressive Islamist regional player in a way that it never has been in the past, because of the consolidation of power in Ankara by the president and his party.

The fall of Aleppo to pro-Syrian regime forces in December 2016 to January 2017 effectively ended the main part of the Syrian war. This, in turn, completed the transition of Turkish foreign policy toward Iran: It had been one of indirect confrontation, especially in seeking the ouster of Syria's Iran-allied president, Bashar al-Assad, but shifted to a policy that required Turkey to negotiate and cooperate with Russia, the Syrian regime, Iran, and Hezbollah to secure its anti-Kurdish policy interests in postwar Syria. The development of the Astana negotiating process on Syria, the deconfliction zone agreements among these parties, and a range of other forms of cooperation in Syria involving Ankara, Tehran, and Moscow effectively removed Turkey from the bloc of countries that fundamentally opposed Iran's immediate agenda in the Middle East. Consequently, Turkey and Iran have emerged as rivals and competitors, but are no longer antagonists. Moreover, increasing Saudi and Gulf Arab sympathy with and support for Kurdish nationalist movements in Syria and Iraq has aggravated relations with Ankara since 2018.¹⁸

From a Saudi perspective, this transformation of Turkey's attitudes compelled and enabled Ankara to become the epicenter of a third ideological bloc in the Middle East that conflates a Sunni Islamist agenda with Turkish neo-imperial or hegemonic ambitions. Untethered from practical aspirations regarding Europe and NATO, animated by dreams of former glory and Islamist zeal, and no longer a major player in a U.S.-led anti-Iranian camp, Ankara seemed poised to embrace its growing regional and ideological aspirations.

The boycott of Qatar in June 2017 by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt provided a relatively early indication of the Turkish determination to intensify its new regional role. While somewhat panicked at first, Doha was relieved to discover that Washington, in particular the Pentagon, was not siding against it, and that Qatar could rely on significant practical and moral support from Ankara and some help from Tehran. While the alliance with the United States, and the presence of major U.S. military assets in Qatar, was the biggest factor allowing Doha to weather the boycott, Turkey's role was important. One of the purposes of the boycott was to isolate Qatar. The extent to which Ankara flew into action to send aid and offer diplomatic encouragement and other forms of reinforcement to Qatar played a significant role in the early stages of that country's successful efforts to move past the crisis both practically and in terms of national morale.¹⁹

Turkey's relationship with, and military presence in, Qatar was among the bill of particulars against Doha by the boycotting countries and an important part of the motivation for the boycott. However, the practical effect of the boycott was to drive Turkey and Qatar closer

... the practical effect of the boycott was to drive Turkey and Qatar closer together ...

¹⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, "Saudi-YPG Partnership: Implications for Ankara-Riyadh Relations," *Inside Arabia*, March 5, 2019.

¹⁹ "Turkey and Qatar: Behind the Strategic Alliance," *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2018.

together, deepening the Turkish presence in that part of the Gulf, and more firmly establish the hierarchy within the relationship, clarifying that Qatar is, in effect, a junior partner and Turkey an aspiring and potentially formidable regional power.

These anxieties came to a head in the aftermath of the murder of U.S.-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Many of the latent tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia boiled over in a cascade of mutual recriminations and accusations. Indeed, the murder itself may well have been partially caused by a belief in parts of the Saudi government that Khashoggi was poised to become a potent political and ideological arrow in a Turkish and Qatari quiver increasingly aimed at critiquing the regional order and the Saudi regime.

The repercussions of the murder gave full public vent, for the first time on a grand scale, of the degree of alienation and hostility that had developed between Ankara and Riyadh.²⁰ Saudi Arabia was on the defensive almost the entire time, and Turkey took full advantage of the opportunity to humiliate and weaken a regional and Islamic rival,²¹ and especially to undermine the viability of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.²² Yet Erdogan was careful not to precipitate a complete rupture of relations – potentially including a withdrawal of Saudi investment from the Turkish economy, including in real estate, which would have further undermined the already weakened lira.²³ Saudi Arabia did coordinate an economic pullback from Turkey, with various contracts not renewed and tourism discouraged, but a concerted effort to try to cripple the Turkish economy did not materialize. Yet when the dust settled, the antagonisms set in motion by Turkey's expanded post-Aleppo regional role that were strengthened by the boycott of Qatar, were further sharpened by the Khashoggi murder.

This perceived Turkish transformation is largely bad news from the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini point of view, which sees the emergence of a more coherent and independent Turkish-led Sunni Islamist bloc as disturbing. But the emergence of Turkey as a fully engaged and, they believe, deeply ideological major player in regional affairs will probably prevent any return to the pre-Arab Spring “axis of resistance” narrative in the Arab world, another menacing potential post-Syrian war scenario.²⁴ That mythology, which was especially powerful in the middle of the last decade, lumped both Sunni Islamist actors, like Hamas and other Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties, together with Iran and its Shia Islamist allies, like Hezbollah, in a revolutionary and revisionist camp supposedly motivated by a “culture of resistance.”²⁵ Resistance to what was usually not defined, although Israel was certainly a constant implicit referent; the United

... the rise of a Turkish-oriented camp should prevent its members from serving, even in theory, as core constituents of an Iranian-oriented bloc.

²⁰ Yaroslav Trofimov, “The Long Struggle for Supremacy in the Muslim World,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2018.

²¹ Tolga Tanis, “Why the Khashoggi Case Is a Battle Over Leadership of the Islamic World,” *Yahoo News*, October 18, 2018).

²² David Kirkpatrick and Ben Hubbard, “Khashoggi Case Raises Tensions Between Saudi Prince and Turkish President,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2018.

²³ Emily Hawthorne, “Why Turkey Isn’t Burning Bridges With Saudi Arabia Over Khashoggi,” *Stratfor*, October 29, 2018.

²⁴ Robin Wright, “Iran Entrenches Its ‘Axis of Resistance’ Across the Middle East,” *The New Yorker*, September 20, 2019.

²⁵ Hussein Ibish, “Axes of Fable: The Paling Mythologies of the ‘Axis of Evil’ and ‘Axis of Resistance,’” *Ibishblog*, October 17, 2013.

States and the regional order also were often invoked, along with some pro-U.S. Arab regimes. The rhetoric made no sense beyond objecting to the status quo and quickly collapsed when confronted with the clarifying force of the Arab Spring, particularly the conflict in Syria, where Sunni and Shia Islamists found themselves on opposite sides of a shooting war.

Now that the main war in Syria is over, however, efforts are being made by Iran and Hezbollah on one side and groups like Hamas on the other to revive this notion. If the Saudi perspective about the new Turkish role is correct, that will probably render any practical cooperation very limited in most cases and prevent the widespread revival of a “culture of resistance” ideology.²⁶ In other words, the rise of a Turkish-oriented camp should prevent its members from serving, even in theory, as core constituents of an Iranian-oriented bloc. This means that the future of both the rhetoric of a “culture of resistance” and a continuation of an essentially bipolar Middle East depend on Turkey not making headway in developing its own alliance in the region. Despite ongoing financial, political, and diplomatic difficulties, the chances of Turkey abandoning the project or failing abjectly seem slim and it appears that the Middle East is now largely split at the regional level into three identifiable and distinct camps.

Qatar

Qatar takes a very different view to the above narrative. From Doha's perspective, Turkey's newly assertive regional role and commitment to its allies is a crucial factor in allowing Qatar to maintain its independence. Qatar sees Turkey as a responsible and engaged regional power that has, like itself, supported human rights, democracy, and accountability in the Arab world by backing Arab Spring revolutionaries. Qatari leaders point out that they are not Islamists themselves and do not have an Islamist agenda for their own country.²⁷ They merely want, they insist, those Arab countries with strong, populist Islamist movements to have the chance to embrace that political orientation if majorities so desire. They cast the Saudi camp as counterrevolutionary and bent on propping up a corrupt regional order at all costs. The role of the United States is not coherently narrativized in Qatari-funded media such as Al Jazeera, as many of Qatar's critics have been pointing out for decades. Washington is at times depicted as Qatar's steadfast ally yet is also often portrayed as a neo-colonial and imperialist, even predatory, force in the Middle East.

Essentially, Qatar denies that it is part of a bloc of regional powers that backs Sunni Islamists at all. It ascribes its close relations with Turkey to the responsible character of the Ankara government. And it tends to focus on the alleged shortcomings of the boycotting countries, especially Saudi Arabia, asserting, for example, that Khashoggi's killing would help the world to start “understanding what we have been going through.”²⁸ Qatar casts itself as not merely an idealistic power surrounded by corrupt and brutal reactionaries, but also as a victim of inexcusable bullying. In this narrative, Turkey, along with the United States, serves as a

²⁶ Hussein Ibish, “Turkey's Rise Nixes Any Resurgence of the Old ‘Axis of Resistance,’” *Ibishblog*, March 23, 2019.

²⁷ David B. Roberts, “Reflecting on Qatar's ‘Islamist’ Soft Power,” *Brookings*, April 2019.

²⁸ Paul Waldie, “Qatar Hopes Khashoggi's Death Will Be Wakeup Call for Countries Dealing With Saudis,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 22, 2018.

reasonable regional and global counterweight to out-of-control local despots. In both cases U.S. and Turkish support is cast as simply friendship, but in the case of Turkey there is even more of an affectionate patina in Qatari rhetoric.

Undoubtedly, the U.S. military presence in, and diplomatic and political support of, Qatar is the most important factor in allowing Qatar to survive what it calls “the blockade.” But the Turkish role, while practically much more modest and far less decisive, appears to be valued at least as highly because it represents a regional and Islamic component and because there is, in fact, a degree of ideological affinity. Qatar is not an Islamist power, and it does not have an Islamist government or domestic political ideology, unlike Turkey. However, for decades Qatar has sought to project its political and soft power influence in the Middle East primarily through support for a range of populist movements, notably the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Sunni Islamist parties. It has remained committed to this agenda despite not sharing this orientation within its own borders. But, for their own disparate reasons, both Turkey and Qatar want the same, or similar, outcomes in the Arab republics: the emergence of Brotherhood-dominated governments.

While Qatar denies that it supports extremists, it does not deny that it is sympathetic to Brotherhood-affiliated movements in other Arab countries. Rather, it denies that these movements are extremist. While a UAE-derived narrative holds that the Brotherhood is the “gateway drug” that draws Muslims into a process that eventually can easily result in al-Qaeda-like fanaticism, Qatar counters that only “moderate” Islamist groups like the Brotherhood can effectively counter more extreme and violent Islamist movements. The first narrative casts the Brotherhood as not merely a part, but the key source of the ideology of terrorism, while the second posits it as the only effective solution for it. Qatar and its vast and potent media empire are profoundly committed to

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this narrative about terrorism and, implicitly, the appropriate parameters for normative Arab political culture in coming decades. This makes Doha and Ankara natural allies, especially insofar as Turkey is emerging as the leader of a new and viable third ideological bloc in the Middle East just as Qatar is being squeezed out of the mainstream Gulf and Arab fold, in large part precisely because of its commitments. Therefore, as long as Doha maintains this approach to regional affairs, the problem of terrorism, the role of politics and religion, and the contemporary spectrum of mainstream Arab political culture, its relationship with Turkey will likely only grow closer.

Turkey maintains a sizable and growing military base, originally staffed with 300 but now expanded to accommodate up to 5,000 troops, inside Qatar, and military ties have intensified since the boycott began.²⁹ Trade between the two countries exceeded \$2 billion in 2018³⁰ and

²⁹ Stasa Salacanian, “Turkey Expands Its Military Base and Influence in Qatar,” *The New Arab*, September 10, 2019.

³⁰ “Qatar-Turkey Trade Surges to \$2bn Amid Gulf Tensions,” *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2019.

there are frequent pledges of friendship and alliance between them.³¹ Crucially, Turkey and Qatar have been partners in trying to extend their influence into areas such as the Horn of Africa and Sudan. Before the Sudanese government of President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in April, Ankara and Doha were making considerable progress in efforts to woo Sudan away from the Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian orbits and into their own.³² Notably, Qatar had signed a \$4 billion agreement to develop the Red Sea island of Suakin³³ where Turkey was simultaneously developing a naval base.³⁴ Following the uprising in Khartoum in April and the establishment of a new military-civilian joint transitional government in Sudan, the continued influence of Qatar and Turkey appears highly questionable,³⁵ particularly given that Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped to stabilize conditions in Sudan and strengthen relations with the new regime by pledging \$3 billion in aid and supplies to the country.³⁶ Qatar and Turkey have also jointly sought to expand their interests in Somalia,³⁷ securing ties with the Mogadishu government, while Saudi Arabia and, especially, the UAE have grown closer to regional governments in Puntland³⁸ and Somaliland.³⁹ Qatar was accused of backing a bombing in the Somali port of Bosaso in May,⁴⁰ allegedly with the intention of driving out UAE loyalists and replacing them with Qatari- and Turkish-backed supporters.⁴¹

Turkey and Qatar have long collaborated to support the de facto Hamas regime in Gaza, with Qatar of late propping up Gaza's economy with regular transfers of cash to Hamas, mainly to pay public employees, with Israel's approval.⁴² Turkey and Qatar are seeking, among other goals, to limit efforts by Iran to regain a measure of the influence over Hamas it lost in the context of the Syrian war, and by efforts of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt to promote Fatah in Gaza at Hamas' expense.

Ankara and Doha have also been closely collaborating to intervene in Libya on behalf of a coalition dominated by Islamist groups based in Tripoli and allied with the U.N.-backed Government of National Accord, which also represents many non-Islamist groups.⁴³ They are

31 "Turkey, Qatar Sign a Number of Agreements to Cement Ties During Emir Al Thani's Visit," *Daily Sabah*, November 26, 2018.

32 Ghassan Ibrahim, "Turkey Loses Strategic Ally With the Removal of Sudan's Bashir," *Ahval*, April 12, 2019.

33 Engin Ozer, "Qatar to Build 4 Billion Dollar Red Sea Port in Sudan," *Voice of Africa*, March 28, 2018.

34 Ali Kucukgocmen and Khalid Abdelaziz, "Turkey to Restore Sudanese Red Sea Port and Build Naval Dock," *Reuters*, December 26, 2017.

35 Hesham Alghnam and Jihad Mashamoun, "Why There Is No Room for Qatar in Post-Uprising Sudan," *The National*, May 5, 2019.

36 Khalid Abdelaziz, "Saudi Arabia, UAE to Send \$3 Billion in Aid to Sudan," *Reuters*, April 21, 2019.

37 Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa: Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?," *Lawfare*, May 22, 2019.

38 Maggie Fick, "Harboring Ambitions: Gulf States Scramble for Somalia," *Reuters*, May 1, 2018.

39 Yusuf Selman Inanc, "Qatar, Saudi Arabia Rift in a New Stage Over Somalia," *Daily Sabah*, August 23, 2019.

40 "Turkey-Ally Qatar Behind Terror Attack in Somalia - New York Times," *Ahval*, July 23, 2019.

41 Ronen Bergman and David D. Kirkpatrick, "With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019.

42 Adam Rasgon, "Gaza Banks to Dole Out Qatari Cash, but 40,000 Cut From Recipient List," *The Times of Israel*, June 19, 2019.

43 David Gauthier-Villars and Jared Malsin, "In Libyan War, Turkey Takes Sides Against Mideast Rivals," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2019.

opposed to the Libyan National Army forces led by Hifter and supported by France, Russia, the UAE, and Egypt. Turkey and Qatar's rivals accuse them of backing not only Islamists but also terrorists, in effect facilitating the resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.⁴⁴ Turkey initially sought a much greater degree of neutrality than Qatar in Libya, seeing it as a potential source of reconstruction contracts and revenue. However, when Hifter launched a campaign to take Tripoli in April, Ankara quickly became one of the most enthusiastic interventionist forces in Libya.⁴⁵

Turkey views the Libyan Islamist militias as crucial allies, among the few remaining political and military forces vying for national power in the Arab world with which it might find ideological compatibility. In a somewhat desperate quest for Arab and Middle Eastern allies, therefore, Turkey, and by extension Qatar, is banking on the Libyan Islamist militias and providing them increasing support.⁴⁶ The UAE⁴⁷ and Egypt, by contrast, predictably see the defeat of the Libyan Islamists as a crucial goal in the ideological campaign against Islamism, particularly armed extremists.⁴⁸ The conflict in Libya, therefore, is not merely a civil war but is seen as another proxy campaign in the battle between the two Sunni-majority blocs in the contemporary Middle East, even though Hifter has cultivated Safafist allies of his own.⁴⁹

Kuwait and Oman

Kuwait and Oman are caught in the middle of this bitter Gulf Arab confrontation, that is, to some extent at least, over Turkey and its regional agenda.⁵⁰ Both have sought to distance themselves from regional conflicts and assume mediating roles, and have paid a price for that stance. Oman was already somewhat marginalized within the GCC because of its close relations with Iran and, in particular, its key role in facilitating the talks that led to the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement with Iran. Yet it was largely forgiven, partly because Muscat was seen as marginal to other Gulf interests, partly because it has long been viewed as a cultural, religious, geographical, and political outlier within the GCC, and partly because its role in these negotiations gave the other Gulf countries at least some degree of access to conversations from which they would be otherwise excluded. It seemed that Oman's maverick role, including on Iran, was neither a surprise nor an utterly unacceptable breach of faith. However, the boycott of Qatar rang alarm bells loudly in Oman, intensifying the sense that Saudi Arabia was not only able, but prepared, to act as an enforcer to get its way with the smaller Gulf states.

⁴⁴ Emile Amin, "Exclusive - Turkey, Qatar and the Return of ISIS to Libya," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 22, 2019.

⁴⁵ David Gauthier-Villars and Jared Malsin, "In Libyan War, Turkey Takes Sides against Mideast Rivals," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2019.

⁴⁶ Bulent Aras, "The Reasons Behind Turkey's Ongoing Military Support of Libya," *Middle East Eye*, July 30, 2019.

⁴⁷ Zvi Barel, "Libya is Now a Battleground Between Turkey and the UAE," *Haaretz*, September 4, 2019.

⁴⁸ John Irish, "Egypt, Qatar Trade Barbs at U.N. on Libya Conflict Interference," *Reuters*, September 24, 2019.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Goodman, "The Coming Proxy Wars Between Turkey and Saudi Arabia," *BrandeisNOW*, September 6, 2019.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Schanzer and Varsha Koduvayur, "Kuwait and Oman are Stuck in Arab No Man's Land," *Foreign Policy*, June 14, 2018.

Kuwait, too, was alarmed by the boycott and concerned that Saudi Arabia's power poses a potential long-term threat to its own independence of policy and action. This was heightened when Saudi and other Gulf Arab media outlets took to criticizing Kuwait and Kuwaiti leaders for trying to mediate an end to the boycott. Some of this rhetoric cast Kuwait as insufficiently opposed to Qatar and implied that there was some sort of covert Kuwaiti preference for the Qatari position. This was especially alarming because Kuwait was convinced that its own interests required the quick resolution of the crisis and its leaders believed they had been empowered by the other Gulf countries to try to broker such a resolution. Yet Kuwait was criticized for doing precisely that. It was a replay, to some extent, of the criticism Kuwait had received for taking GCC negotiating positions to Iran on behalf of the other member states. Like Oman, Kuwait was animated by serious concerns that it, too, could face similar pressure if Saudi and Emirati anger ever boiled over.

Oman and Kuwait have been intensifying outreach to Turkey in exactly this context, and therefore with full knowledge of the negative impact that will have on the remaining goodwill toward them among the boycotting countries.⁵¹ They do so because they think strengthened ties with Turkey are more important and essential under the current circumstances than the ire this will cause in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Oman and Kuwait are seeking to diversify their relationships and insulate themselves from possible intra-Gulf pressure, particularly from Saudi Arabia.

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In Kuwait's case, this has even included a military cooperation agreement signed with Ankara in November 2018, along with numerous other efforts to strengthen the existing relationship.⁵² Oman is also seeking to strengthen relations with Ankara,⁵³ including a robust increase in bilateral trade.⁵⁴ By no means are either of them turning toward Turkey and away from Saudi Arabia. But they are clearly struggling to acquire room to maneuver and increase their options under the current circumstances and minimize the chances of becoming the object of any intra-Gulf confrontation.

Although neither Oman nor Kuwait sees Turkey as an indispensable player in the Gulf region as Qatar does, both view Ankara as a regional actor that cannot and should not be ignored. Rather than viewing the rise of Turkey with alarm as Saudi Arabia and its allies do, Kuwait and Oman are choosing to see it as another opportunity to diversify their alliances, multiply their options, and hedge their bets. This casts Turkey as just another large outside power developing influence in their area with which they need to deal, neither particularly threatening nor an indispensable ally. But that, in itself, is an indication that, for the first time since Ottoman days, Turkey is a significant and growing factor in the Gulf region.

⁵¹ Giorgio Cafiero and Cinzia Bianco, "Kuwait Looks to Turkey, But Hedges Its Bets," *Inside Arabia*, November 13, 2018.

⁵² "Turkey, Kuwait Sign Military Cooperation Agreement for 2019," *Daily Sabah*, October 12, 2018.

⁵³ Ali Bakeer and Giorgio Cafiero, "Will Geopolitical Instability Strengthen Omani-Turkish Relations?," *Al Sharq*, October 5, 2018.

⁵⁴ "Omani-Turkish Trade Volume Rose by 55 Per Cent Last Year," *Times of Oman*, April 30, 2019.

Conclusion

The intensification of Gulf Arab-Turkish interactions, relations, and competition over the past decade is an inevitable byproduct of the growing regional role that both sides are playing in the Middle East. Turkey has increasingly turned its attention away from Europe toward Eurasia and the Middle East. And, since the Arab Spring uprisings and, especially, the end of the main civil war in Syria in 2017, Turkey has begun to carve out a space for itself as the leader of a budding Middle Eastern pro-Sunni Islamist alliance. With the dwindling influence of traditional Arab power centers, such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, leadership in the Sunni-majority Arab countries has devolved to the stable and wealthy Gulf Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, but also the UAE and Qatar. The split among the GCC countries pitting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain (along with Egypt) against Qatar has at its heart a dispute over Islamism, and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. The growing Turkish-Qatari alliance was deeply connected to, and part of, the bill of particulars leveled at Doha by the boycotting countries. But the effect of the boycott was only to intensify the Ankara-Doha alliance and draw Turkey even deeper into its re-engagement with the Gulf region and Arab world. The depth of tensions between Ankara and Riyadh were amply illustrated and exacerbated by the controversy over the Khashoggi murder.

Yet Turkey's continued domestic political volatility and economic woes, along with its focus on combating Kurdish influence in northern Syria, over the past year have served to impede Ankara's rise as a regional power center and ideological pole. The Turkish political and foreign policy establishment does not appear to have reached a lasting, fundamental consensus about whether to pursue a Western-, Eurasian-, or Middle Eastern-oriented policy agenda. Yet, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain continue to view Turkey as a rising and significant potential threat. Qatar has the opposite perspective, seeing Turkey's developing regional prominence as a vital lifeline and an ongoing opportunity. Kuwait and Oman lie somewhere in between.

Insofar as both Gulf Arab countries and Turkey continue to occupy positions of regional leadership, their engagement can only intensify. However, tensions are unlikely to surpass those manifested during the Khashoggi scandal. In that bitter confrontation, Ankara was careful not to provoke a complete collapse of relations with Riyadh, and Saudi Arabia did not attempt to thoroughly sabotage the Turkish economy or destroy the value of the lira. The fundamental contradictions between these powers are almost certainly containable. However, if Turkey stabilizes its internal political and economic volatility and develops more allies in the Arab world, particularly if it is able to do so by empowering Islamist parties and militias beyond Gaza and Libya, ideological competition and even proxy conflict is possible. Yet both sides continue to view Iran with a strong degree of suspicion, which could provide a measure of common ground. The most likely scenario in the immediate future between Turkey and the anti-Islamist Gulf Arab countries, therefore, is a mixture of competition, especially at the ideological level, and limited cooperation in specific circumstances. Recent overtures on both sides of the Gulf Arab rift suggest growing interest in finding a path back to more normal relations. However, as long as the split within the GCC persists, Turkey will almost certainly be able to continue to develop its presence and role in the Gulf by expanding and institutionalizing its ideological and strategic alliance with Qatar.

