

**A Dysfunctional Family: Disagreements and Clashes in the Sunni
World**

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Tension and rivalries within the Sunni camp are a defining aspect of the Middle East. The Sunni states are divided in part according to their respective levels of support for different shades of political Islam. In addition, Sunni states contest for status and influence in the region, and this rivalry also necessarily involves economic interests. The tension is reflected in the ongoing siege against Qatar, in the support of rival parties in the civil war in Libya, and in the competition over control of strategic locations along the Red Sea coast. Over the years, Israel has gone from a force that unifies the Sunni world to one that divides it: Turkey and Qatar are critical of Egypt and the Gulf states for not doing enough to stop Israel from taking unilateral actions in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Israel, for its part, seeks to maintain good relations with all the Sunni states. However, regarding rival parties in the Sunni world, Israel has a clear interest in the Gulf states and Egypt having the upper hand.

Although it is customary to divide the regional system in the Middle East along Sunni and Shiite sectarian lines, one significant element of this system that influences the conduct of the regional players is the tension and rivalry within the Sunni camp itself. Likewise separate from the Shiite-Sunni divide is the division stemming from the level of a state's support for the different shades of political Islam. In addition, the Sunni countries are in competition with one another over status and influence in the region, which also involves economic interests relating to access to natural resources and to the control of ports.

The challenges facing these countries, including the challenge posed by Iran, ostensibly constitute a foundation for intra-Sunni cooperation. Indeed, early in the decade, Turkey's wish to have a larger role in regional politics, the need for economic investments within its borders, and Saudi Arabia's desire to bring Turkey into the anti-Iran camp led to an attempt to warm the relations between the countries. Turkey also declared its support for Saudi Arabia, albeit with reservations, in the first stages of the war in Yemen. In addition, Turkey has joined the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition, which was initiated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2015. The Saudi and Turkish leaders

have made widely covered official visits and have established a joint council for strategic cooperation.

At the same time, however, Turkey's regional aspirations pose a problem for most Sunni and non-Sunni actors, as well as for Israel. The reality of a number of regional powers in the Middle East has meant that each of them regards itself as worthy of senior status. The Gulf states, with the exception of Qatar, regard Turkey under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a destabilizing force with neo-Ottoman aspirations that supports political Islam movements in the region. Concern about Turkey and Qatar increased in Riyadh over the past decade against the background of the regional turmoil, following their support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and for Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Gulf states view Turkey's policy as posing a genuine threat, not only on the regional level but first and foremost as a threat in their internal arenas, because political Islam constitutes a governing alternative for those interested in both religious rule and the right to elect the political leadership. Neither Riyadh nor Abu Dhabi is pleased with Qatar's ties to Israel, even if they are intended to alleviate the humanitarian plight in the Gaza Strip.

The tensions between Turkey and the Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, intensified in 2017, with Turkey's provision of support for Qatar after the Arab Quartet (Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Cairo, and Manama) imposed a siege against it. Earlier, Turkey and Qatar implemented a joint agreement to build a Turkish military base in Qatar. Closure of the Turkish base, which today houses some 5,000 military personnel, was one of the 13 original conditions for lifting the embargo against Qatar (this condition was subsequently omitted). Turkey also objected to the warmer relations between Israel and Gulf states, and in the past few years Erdogan has voiced severe criticism of Egypt and the Gulf states for not doing enough to prevent Israeli unilateral actions vis-à-vis the Palestinians. On the other hand, bin Salman has been quoted in the Egyptian media as including Turkey in the "axis of evil" in the Middle East, alongside Iran and radical Islam, and as accusing Erdogan as striving to revive the Ottoman caliphate at Arab expense. Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, has accused Erdogan of having "colonialist delusions" in the Arab world. In May 2020, in response to the denunciation of Turkey's involvement in Libya, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu labeled the United Arab Emirates as the primary destabilizing force in the region, due to its involvement in Libya, Yemen, and also Somalia.

Erdogan in fact blames the United Arab Emirates, alongside Saudi Arabia, for involvement in toppling the regime of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2013, an attempted coup in Qatar in 2017, and support for the attempted coup against him in 2016. Turkish-

Saudi relations continued to deteriorate in 2018, following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, and Erdogan's charge that bin Salman was responsible for the murder. Saudi Arabia's attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood, and especially Hamas, following previous pragmatism, has worsened under bin Salman's rule. The Kingdom outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood in 2014, and in 2019 it arrested dozens of Hamas members operating in its territory. These individuals are about to face trial on charges of "membership in and funding of a terrorist organization." This development will make it even more difficult for Riyadh and Ankara to reach a compromise.

The struggle within the Sunni camp has also had an economic dimension, although the parties have more meaningful trade partnerships and therefore a limited capacity for mutual injury. After Khashoggi's murder, Saudi Arabia tried to reduce its investments in Turkey and the scope of tourism there, but with limited success. Turkey's economic relations with the United Arab Emirates have suffered more marked negative impact since 2017. A degree of compensation for the damage to Turkey's relations with these countries came in the form of increased Turkish trade with Qatar, even though given the relatively small scale of the Qatari economy in comparison to that of the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, it cannot serve as a replacement for them. In 2018, Qatar undertook to provide assistance to Turkey through \$15 billion in investments and credit. In May 2020, in light of the sharp decline in Turkey's foreign currency reserves, Qatar agreed to increase the line of credit between them to include foreign currency swaps of up to \$15 billion.

The Red Sea arena has also become a focal point of competition: in addition to the littoral countries, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Qatar also maintain a military presence there. These actors are competing over convenient access to more distant areas for the sake of furthering economic interests and for projecting power far from their borders. Like the situation in Libya, this competition has the potential to exacerbate existing and create new tensions between the countries involved.

Relations between the camps also assumed military importance due to their support of rival parties in the civil war in Libya. The militias operating in the western part of the country, some of which have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, receive military and financial support from Turkey and Qatar, while the militias from the east, led by military leader Khalifa Haftar, receive financial support, weapons and military assistance, primarily from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Russia.

The struggle between the sides also surfaces in the media and in the public arena. In April 2020, Saudi Arabia announced that it would block Turkish news websites, as well as that

of the official Turkish news agency. The following week, Turkey blocked comparable websites of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. From time to time in recent years it has also been prohibited to screen Turkish television series in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, and fatwas against viewing them have been issued.

Israel and the Intra-Sunni Tension

Israel would prefer to enjoy good relations with both competing sides in the Sunni world. However, in the current state of affairs, it has an interest in the Gulf states and Egypt having the upper hand. The tension in recent years between Jerusalem and Ankara may also have played a role in expanding Israel's cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Nonetheless, Jerusalem has no interest in intensifying the hostility with Ankara resulting from issues that are largely internal Gulf issues, and it therefore must exercise caution in taking sides. This is particularly so given that the Riyadh-Cairo-Abu Dhabi triangle itself has witnessed disagreements in recent years, including vis-à-vis the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen.

The recent renewed signals regarding thawing the tension among the Gulf states, first and foremost between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Qatar on the other hand, also raise questions regarding Turkey's regional standing. Compromise between the Gulf states is liable to do away with at least some of Qatar's financial support for Turkey and for the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the region, and may distance Ankara from the Gulf arena. Israel must consider whether it is possible and worthwhile for it to play a mediating role among the Gulf states, in light of its good relations with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, given its regional aspirations, Ankara may continue posing a threat to these states, as well as to Israel.