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**Trying to Square the Circle:
Can Saudi Arabia Form a United Sunni Front?
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The visit by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Saudi Arabia in early March 2015 to meet with the new Saudi king, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, prompted talk in both Riyadh and Ankara that the time has come to turn over a new leaf in Saudi-Turkey relations. Yet significantly, Erdogan is only one of several heads of state who came to Riyadh for meetings with the new king. His appearance followed a visit by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and afterwards the king met with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. There are also reports of contacts between Hamas and Saudi Arabia and an expected visit by Khaled Mashal to the kingdom. The series of meetings, held against the background of Iran's rising regional stature, has led commentators to discuss anew Saudi attempts to create a Sunni alliance that will obstruct the growing regional influence of Iran and its satellites. Indeed, the meetings in Riyadh were the basis for the mobilization of support for the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen.

On a symbolic level, the order in which the visits to King Salman took place can be seen as reflecting the past, present and future of Saudi foreign policy – the meeting with el-Sisi represented the priorities of the late King Abdullah, the meeting with Erdogan reflected the current attempt to construct a Sunni alliance, and the meeting with Sharif can also be seen as an “insurance policy” in the event that the attempt to promote the alliance fails. More specifically, however, the agreement that is currently taking shape between Iran and the superpowers concerning Iranian nuclear capabilities, as well as the growing strength of the Houthi-Shiites in Yemen and Iran's active role in Syria and Lebanon – through Hizbollah and in Iraq – in the fight against ISIS, are all factors that have led Riyadh to recognize that it needs Turkey as a participant in its anti-Iran alliance. Following his visit to the kingdom, Erdogan said that “Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – this trio – are the most important countries of the region. We all have duties to carry out for the peace, calm and welfare of the region.” Yet if a Sunni alliance of this kind is to rest primarily on Turkey and Egypt alongside Saudi Arabia, the current sharp rivalry between Turkey and Egypt may well undermine its foundation.

Saudi Arabia is continuing its policy of investing massively in Egypt, in order to bolster the stability there and to acquire influence over the el-Sisi regime. Thus at the Egypt Economic Development Conference held in early March in Sharm-el Sheik, Saudi Arabia pledged – together with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates – an additional \$12 billion to Egypt; this raises the total amount of the Gulf assistance to el-Sisi to some \$23 billion. The investment is already bearing fruit in the form of Egypt's active involvement in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Indeed, in light of the good relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it is clear that Turkey's tough stance toward Egypt is the weak point in the Sunni alliance that the Saudis are trying to create. During the course of Erdogan's visit, there were those who expected that King Salman would be able to bring about a meeting between Erdogan and el-Sisi, but no such meeting took place. "Are you kidding me?" Erdogan said to a journalist who asked him if he was planning to meet with el-Sisi during his visit in Riyadh. However, Erdogan also noted that Saudi Arabia wanted Turkey to reconcile with Egypt and that this issue was, in effect "the only disagreement" between the two countries. At the same time, he added, "of course they want this, but there is no insistence."

For its part, Turkey is seeking an association with Riyadh to help end its isolation in the region. Signs of a desire for improved relations with Saudi Arabia could already be seen when Erdogan interrupted his trip to Africa in order to attend King Abdallah's funeral, and Turkey declared a day of national mourning for the King's death. Given its many foreign policy failures, Turkey needs Saudi Arabia, and out of economic considerations Turkey needs Saudi investment. Trade between Turkey and Saudi Arabia amounted to \$7 billion in 2014 and there is potential for further growth, such that both countries have set a 2018 goal for themselves of trade amounting to \$20 billion by that year (However, if the agreement between Egypt and Turkey allowing for Turkish trucks to pass through Egyptian territory and thereby bypass the need to go through the Suez Canal is not renewed in April 2015, the cost of the bilateral trade will rise considerably and its economic viability will be reduced accordingly.). Tourism has grown by 30 percent since 2013, with more than 300,000 Saudi tourists visiting Turkey last year.

Saudi Arabia has outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, but reports indicate that the new king is considering a more open approach to Hamas, a derivative of the Brotherhood – with the objective of bringing it into the anti-Iranian alliance in formation. The possible softening of Saudi Arabia's position vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood is a good basis for improving relations between Turkey and the kingdom. However, it is too early to see any change in the el-Sisi regime's hostility to the Brotherhood.

Turkey expressed public support for the military intervention in Yemen under Saudi leadership, and in unusual form, Erdogan noted that the Iranian attempts to achieve dominance in the region were "intolerable." However, Turkey effectively qualified its

support for the Saudi actions by saying that it backs those actions only if they lead to an internal political dialogue in Yemen, and Turkey gave no further assurances beyond vague promise of possible logistical support. Indeed, in the long term, the King's chances for bringing Turkey into the desired anti-Iran coalition appear to be minimal. Erdogan's unusual comment regarding Iran can be understood as resulting more from Iran's increased influence in Iraq than from its position in Yemen. Moreover, Turkey and Iran have in the past recognized that they needed to limit the impact that various disputes had on their relationship – for example, they knew how to cooperate even when they held completely opposite positions regarding events in Syria. Furthermore, Saudi commentators warned Egypt not to attempt to dictate Saudi foreign policy, but it is difficult to see how there will be any real improvement in the Turkey-Saudi Arabia relationship without there also being some movement with regard to Turkey-Egypt relations. Following the civil war in Libya, the Saudis (and the Egyptians) supported the Tobruk government, while the Turks supported the government in Tripoli. Additionally, while it appears that there has been some change in the Saudi position regarding Hamas, it is doubtful that this will genuinely mitigate the Saudi opposition to the strong support that Turkey gives to the organization.

An improved relationship between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, even if it is intended to curb Iran's strengthening position in the region, is not necessarily a positive development for Israel. In light of the crisis between Israel and Turkey, Ankara's entry into the Saudi-led Sunni coalition can increase the points of friction between the coalition and Israel. The pragmatic relationship that aligned Israel with the moderate Sunni states can be harmed, unless Israel and Saudi Arabia understand how to maintain the delicate channel of quiet coordination between them. Yet in any event, the likelihood for success of the current Saudi efforts in connection with Turkey remains in question. If the Saudi efforts fail, the possible harm to Israel relations will be temporary.

The attempt to establish a Sunni pact against the background of the challenges created by the turmoil in the Arab world and the strengthening of Iran's power in the region is not new. Efforts began already in 2011 but were unsuccessful, in part due to the failure to bring down Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. The subsequent regime change in Egypt, with the military's seizure of control from the Muslim Brotherhood, further obstructed the attempt to form a Sunni alliance. Moreover, Turkey and Saudi Arabia do not have a tradition of good relations in order to forge stronger relations at the current time. There have been some periods in which their relationship has been closer, such as the period between 2005 and the first signs of turmoil in the Arab world, but these were exceptions, not the norm.

The Saudi foreign minister was recently quoted as saying that Saudi Arabia does not have any problem with the Muslim Brotherhood – only with certain elements within the

movement. It is therefore not impossible that because Riyadh sees the Iranian threat as real and increasing in strength, the kingdom now understands that it may be worthwhile to swallow the bitter pill that is the Muslim Brotherhood, if only for the purpose of building up an anti-Iranian Sunni alliance. The challenge for Saudi Arabia will therefore be to bring Egypt – which views the Brotherhood as a serious threat to its internal stability – to cooperate with forces identified with the Brotherhood, with Turkey being the primary one of these forces.

