

Turkey and the Gulf Dialogue in the Middle East

Şaban Kardaş



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Turkey's relationship with the Gulf has gained visibility in its foreign policy agenda recently, parallel to its new proactive approach to foreign policy. As Turkey has sought to reintegrate with its immediate neighbourhood and develop partnerships with the regions beyond its immediate reach, its relationship with both the individual Arab Gulf countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has entered into a new phase of dynamism. Previously, as part of Turkey's opening to the Middle East in the 1980s, the Gulf made an appearance on Turkey's foreign policy agenda, which, however, failed to turn into a sustained engagement. The new current wave has been propelled largely by an economic rationale, which was facilitated by certain Gulf countries' economic-minded approach to international relations on the one hand, and the growing place of commercial considerations in the making of Turkey's foreign policy, on the other. While the trade volume between Turkey and the Gulf expanded, Gulf capital flowing into Turkey also increased, forming the backbone of a flourishing relationship.¹

Turkey and the Gulf countries, however, have progressively developed strategic dialogue on pressing Middle East issues in an effort to achieve policy coordination, including the civil war in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion, the Palestine issue, the Iranian nuclear

programme and the Syrian uprising. Reflecting this determination to further bilateral cooperation and develop common positions on regional and global issues, Turkey and the Gulf countries have also taken steps towards institutionalising political dialogue. In 2008, Turkey and the GCC launched a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC), which provides the framework within which the relationship is conducted on a multi-lateral basis. A new mechanism in Turkey's foreign policy toolkit to coordinate relations with neighbouring countries, the HLSCCs are structured around periodic intergovernmental meetings, complemented by ministerial and working group meetings in the intervening period. From the perspective of the GCC, this development was unique, because, with this initiative it described Turkey as a strategic partner. Under this framework, an action plan was announced in 2010 to bolster bilateral relations in commerce, investment, agriculture, transportation and communications, energy, etc., that has resulted in several diplomatic exchanges. Turkey has also undertaken numerous initiatives with individual Gulf countries. Moreover, Turkey played a very active role in the launching of NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative of 2004, which provides a framework within which strategic dialogue takes place between NATO and certain Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The relationship is still nascent and it is too early to tell how it will evolve. The leaders from

Dr. Şaban Kardaş works as an Associate Professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara. He has published scholarly articles and book chapters on Turkish domestic and foreign policies, human rights, energy policies and international security and has been an occasional contributor to Turkish and international media. He is the assistant editor of the quarterly journals Insight Turkey and Perceptions and writes analyses for the German Marshal Fund's On Turkey series and the Jamestown Foundation's Eurasia Daily Monitor.

¹ Muhittin Ataman and Nuh Uçgan, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri, Yemen, Mısır, Ürdün ve Lübnan Politikası," *Türk Dış Politikası Yıllığı 2009* (Ankara: SETA Publications, 2011), pp.189-222.

the two sides often emphasise that their visions fully overlap in the desire for creating an area of peace and prosperity in their shared neighbourhoods.² However, more often than not, despite their agreement on broad outlines, the parties' positions on regional issues are beset with divergence and subtle policy differences, if not direct confrontation.³ On Iran they have been on different pages for some time, while the developments in Syria might potentially drive a wedge between Turkey and some Gulf actors. While strategic dialogue is indeed taking place between Turkey and the Gulf actors, they will have to overcome many other obstacles to turn it into a meaningful and solid strategic partnership moving forward.

Similarly, it is hard to say that the parties have fully exploited the backbone of the partnership, namely economic exchange. Compared to ten years ago, the transformation of bilateral trade and investment patterns definitely seem groundbreaking in figurative terms, but taken together with the overall expansion of Turkey's foreign economic relations, and the international operations of the Gulf countries, they are hardly impressive. For example, Gulf foreign direct investment into Turkey is far less than the investments from the West and makes up only a miniscule amount of Gulf capital worldwide, while trade

with the Gulf accounts for a small fraction of Turkey's overall trade.⁴

Enhancement of the Turkey-Gulf relationship is definitely in the interests of both parties. The two sides have complementary economic structures, which offer a good basis to deepen the economic and trade connections. A constructive partnership in neighbourhood issues is also warranted, as both sides have overlapping interests to achieve a more equitable and sustainable settlement to regional disputes. Aware of those imperatives, the interactions are continuing at various official levels to build a solid partnership. While the Turkey-GCC HLSCC is working to develop an action plan for the next two years, direct diplomatic contacts between Turkey and individual Gulf countries are becoming more frequent.

Such a multi-dimensional strategic dialogue is especially urgent at the current juncture, as the Middle East is going through a period of turmoil in the age of political transformation. The popular uprisings sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa have not only toppled the regimes in some key countries but also set in motion a process whereby the foundations of the regional order are eroding very fast. The security externalities produced by the regional reordering are so enormous that they can only be addressed through coordinated action on the part of relevant stakeholders. As the two regions that have managed to withstand the revolutionary storm in the region, Turkey and

2 See for instance the statements by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his Saudi counterpart Suud El-Faysal during the joint press briefing following the Turkey-GCC Foreign Ministerial meeting held in Istanbul on 28 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-korfez-isbirligi-konseyi-.kik.-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi-cercevesinde-duzenlenen-ortak-basin-toplantisi.tr.mfa>

3 For an extended analysis of the complicated relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, for instance, see: Meliha Altunışık, "Bitter Frenemies: The Not-quite Alliance between Saudi Arabia and Turkey," 15 May 2012, *Foreign Affairs*, available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137639/meliha-benli-altunisik/bitter-frenemies>.

4 For instance, in 2011, the FDI inflows from the Gulf amounted to USD 205 million out of USD 15.877 billion. The year when the FDI inflows from the Gulf reached its peak was in 2008. Of the total of USD 14.747 billion FDI inflow into Turkey in 2008, the inflows from Gulf were only USD 1.9 billion. See the figures compiled from Central Bank data at: <http://www.invest.gov.tr/tr-TR/investmentguide/investorguide/Pages/FDIinTurkey.aspx>. Also see: M. Emin Erkaçar and Erdal Tanas Karagöl, *Türkiye'de Doğrudan Yabancı Yatırımlar* (SETA Analiz, January 2011).

the Arab Gulf countries are perfectly positioned to develop joint positions to stabilise the region.

As the Turkey-Gulf relationship is charting its course amidst the painful regional transformation process in the Middle East, it deserves closer attention from the academic and think-tank community. The TESEV-Derasat workshop on 5 September 2012 provided an important venue for shedding light on the issues on the agenda of the Turkey-Gulf relationship. Experts attending the workshop were drawn from academics, journalists and think-tankers, with expertise in regional affairs and foreign policies from the respective sides. During a day-long workshop, the risks and opportunities presented by the current regional environment, the diverging and converging views on regional issues, the implications of Turkey's growing involvement in Gulf affairs and the policy options available to the sides were discussed at length. Most remarkably, the exchanges between experts from both sides also helped expose the mutual misunderstanding and misperceptions, which also was indicative of parallel misunderstandings shared by policy makers from both sides.

WORKING TOGETHER IN A VOLATILE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND OVERLAPPING INTERESTS

The workshop participants shared similar opinions on the growing volatility of the regional security environment, fuelled most remarkably by the unfolding civil war Syria, ongoing tensions in Iraqi domestic politics and the dispute surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme. For its part, the rising instability on its southern borders forces Turkey to closely follow developments in Syria, Iraq and Iran, as these cases pose immediate security externalities to Turkey's national interests. Though at varying degrees, the Gulf countries also do perceive threats from these regional flashpoints.

In the wake of a damaging low intensity conflict in Iraq following the US intervention in 2003, the ongoing conflict in Syria since the start of popular uprisings and the revolutionary transformation in the region, participants noted that the Arab regional order has been seriously undermined. As the ethnic and political identities have been politicised to such an extent, the sustainability of the existing territorial boundaries is open to question. The erosion of the Arab regional order is accompanied by the undermining of national identity in key regional states such as Iraq, as the dominant ideology and the political systems built around a ruling party or a leader are shattered. Against such an environment, the participants raised the possibility of the disintegration of Iraq or Syria along with the now politicised inter-communal boundaries, and debated how such a development might even further undermine the regional order.

In this volatile and risk-prone environment, both sides work to minimise the damage to their interests. It is at this juncture that they have overlapping interests to coordinate their policies. As it was emphasised during the workshop, Turkish and Gulf approaches to regional issues are based on similar principles of non-intervention, respect for international law, diplomacy and dialogue. Both sides also believe in the idea of a nuclear free Middle East, and have interest in working together to draw attention to the perils of proliferation in the region. Especially since the Gulf countries see Iran as exporting its own problems to the region and foment instability, Turkey emerges as a natural partner to work with. Interestingly, both Turkey and the Gulf actors also work closely with the United States which facilitates policy coordination. Although the Gulf participants noted the importance of developing a joint strategy, the disagreements throughout the day also revealed the remaining challenges before the realisation of joint action in the region.

TURKEY: A WELCOME ACTOR IN THE GULF AND ARAB AFFAIRS?

It might be worthwhile to discuss the relations between Turkey and the Gulf in two different but interrelated contexts: Turkey-Gulf encounters in the overall scope of Arab/ Middle Eastern affairs and Turkey's involvement in Gulf affairs. In both respects, Turkey appears to be treated as a newcomer by the Arab Gulf states.⁵ As a matter of fact, such Gulf perceptions are understandable and are based on objective reasons. Given the particular historic background and the physical distance, Turkey had limited involvement in Gulf affairs. Also, given the low profile Middle Eastern issues occupied on Turkey's international relations agenda for many decades, Turkey was not considered a major actor in Arab issues in general, and its growing involvement in the last decade has naturally aroused interest on the part of the Gulf states. Obviously, this perception has been strengthened by the fact that together with Iran and Israel, Turkey has been the other major non-Arab actor in the Middle East.

Generally speaking, the participants from the Gulf described Turkey's involvement in the region as a welcome development. Especially compared to what they described as 'Iranian meddling in Arab affairs', Turkey's engagement in Middle Eastern crises through the utilisation of its soft power assets is seen as a virtuous contribution toward peace and stability. With the exception of Turkey's attempts to mediate in the dispute surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme, Turkey's diplomatic initiatives in recent years, some of which have been carried out in concert with the Gulf actors, have earned it applause.

Granted, as the several caveats throughout the debate illustrated, Gulf observers still harbour

many questions about the motivations driving Turkey's interest in the Middle Eastern affairs, as well as its determination and capabilities to sustain its involvement through credible commitments. The Gulf participants underlined that they want to develop a sustainable partnership but it must be built on the right foundations of mutual interest and mutual trust. In their view, Turkey and the Gulf should deal with each other in Middle Eastern affairs, but avoid dealing with each other's domestic affairs. Given this sensitivity regarding the involvement of outside actors in domestic affairs or 'intra-Arab' or 'Gulf' affairs, especially, Turkey's 'sudden' advance in Arab affairs prior to the onset of the Arab spring, and its rather ambitious desire to interject itself in several issues ranging from the Iranian nuclear programme to Arab-Israeli conflict and Lebanese politics have generated questions as to what Turkey was seeking to accomplish in the region.

Such lingering questions have gained new meaning after the recent transformations in Turkish foreign policy in the wake of the Arab spring. As it is increasingly debated whether Turkey has abandoned its 'zero problems with neighbours policy' and has been more inclined to intervene in its neighbours' affairs, regional observers also raise questions about whether Turkey's intentions are benign. Defining Ankara's growing ties and controversial energy deals with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil as an infringement on Iraq's sovereignty, one participant from the region maintained that such actions are greatly undermining Turkey's positive image in the region and putting it in the same category as Iran in the sense that it might also be seen as a destabilising element in the region. Although Turkish participants argued that Turkey's main concern was to reduce the risks posed by Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's centralisation efforts at the expense of a healthy evolution of the nascent democratic structures in this country, the participants from the Gulf insisted on their position that Turkey's

5 On the prospects of Turkey-GCC security cooperation see: Birol Başkan, "Turkey-GCC Relations: Is there a Future?" *Insight Turkey* (Vol.13., No.1, 2011), pp.159-173.

approach to Iraq might have a destabilising impact in this country.

Moreover, although both sides might have the same objectives in their handling of Arab affairs, the subtle differences may at times be inflamed such that they might undermine mutual trust. Even in the case of the Palestine issue, in which both sides are joined in their objective to find a just settlement to the Palestinians' demands, there appears to remain major policy differences below the surface. Despite Turkey's recent policy of isolating Israel for its maltreatment of the Palestinians, the Gulf countries have appeared less willing to pursue a similar course, and are content with a *modus vivendi* with Israel.

In its future interactions with the Gulf, the Turkish side will be well advised to maintain the analytical distinction between its policies in Arab affairs in general and towards the Gulf in particular. Turkey needs to keep in mind that its regional policies are closely observed by the Gulf countries and its actions have direct ramifications on its future relations with the Arab Gulf states. Perhaps, it might be wise for Turkey to send clearer signals as to its objectives in Gulf affairs, narrowly defined. As the debate at the workshop attested, it still remains an enigma whether Turkey has a well-articulated policy towards the region and whether it could deliver on the expectations the Gulf countries have of Turkey. Moreover, it is also the case that in Middle Eastern affairs more generally, the Gulf actors are also new comers, as they are using their newfound wealth to support a proactive foreign policy agenda. In that sense, they both realize the benefits of policy coordination and sharing experiences in their Middle Eastern engagements.

ARE THE GULF AND TURKISH PERSPECTIVES OF EACH OTHER REALISTIC?

As the foregoing sections hinted, one major impediment before the furthering of strategic

cooperation between Turkey and the Gulf countries is the lack of knowledge and comprehensive understanding of each other's priorities, agendas and capabilities in the region and beyond. Since Turkey and the Gulf actors are rather newcomers to regional affairs, it is understandable that the parties have such limited degree of comprehension of each other's positions. The workshop in that regards served as a valuable venue to facilitate exchange of opinions.

Gulf analysts' limited knowledge of Turkey's foreign policy dynamics were clearly observed in the case of *the Gulf perceptions of Turkish policy towards the Syrian uprising*. Some of the participants from the region criticised Turkey's Syria policy on the grounds that Turkey fell short of delivering of the high expectations it had raised in terms of backing the Syrian uprising. Given its powerful rhetoric, it appeared that in some quarters in the Gulf there emerged a perception that Turkey might have also been militarily forthcoming and even carried out military operations to stop the regime's brutal killing machine.

Although there might have been some truth to that argument, interestingly those analysts failed to take note of Turkish involvement in international efforts to enforce a regime change in Syria, which generated a lively exchange among the participants. One analyst from the region argued that most of the burden of supporting the Syrian uprising is borne singlehandedly by the Arab Gulf countries, to which Turkish participants responded by pointing at Turkey's sheltering of the Syrian opposition from the beginning of the uprising, and its enormous diplomatic efforts in the way of forming the Friends of Syria platform to generate greater international support behind the opposition. Granted, one participant from the Gulf did acknowledge Turkey's contributions in respect to sheltering of and providing military assistance to the armed opposition. Such a

limited acknowledgement of Turkey's support to the Syrian uprising might partly be products of policy differences between Turkey and the Gulf, especially to the extent that they support different elements within the Syrian opposition. Nonetheless, as it emerged in the ensuing debate, Turkey's Syria policy was far from fully understood by the Gulf participants.

More importantly, there was even less comprehension of the constraints on the conduct of Turkey's Syria policy, which, as a matter of fact, largely explains the gap between rhetoric and action. In particular, the failure of the United States to take a more proactive position and the domestic political constraints on the government's Syria policy were not fully understood and appreciated by the participants from the Gulf. Turkish participants underlined the role of democratic mechanisms in Turkey, noting that the government had already incurred significant costs with its policy on Syria, and it could hardly justify any action that might involve use of force.

A corresponding case is *Turkish perceptions of the Iranian nuclear issue and the Gulf reactions to it*. Some Turkish participants, reflecting thinking that is prevalent among analysts and policy makers in Turkey, noted that the Iranian nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes and Iran did not have aggressive intentions against its neighbours. More remarkably, they found the Gulf countries' approach to this issue -and in particular the threat perceptions from Iran- somewhat exaggerated. The Gulf participants, however, underlined repeatedly how Iran presented real and immediate threats to the security of the Arab Gulf countries.

As one participant from the region noted, given its nuclear programme and its intermingling in regional affairs, Iran is seen as an existential threat by the elites in the region. He went on to say that Turkey has to accept that it is a life and death issue for the Arab Gulf states.

Therefore, Iran will continue to remain a major point of divergence between the two sides. In the words of one participant from the region, the Gulf countries have the strategic objective of downsizing Iran because it has overreached in the Middle East, and the Gulf and Iran have almost a zero sum relationship in regional balances of power. Supporting this interpretation, another participant noted that the only value of Turkey in Gulf affairs would be its potential role as a counterbalancing force against Iran. He suggested that Turkey needed to be clearer about its contributions towards containing the Iranian nuclear programme, and, in particular, to clarify its position towards potential military action against Iran.

Although in recent years Turkey has grown more concerned of the security challenges presented by the Iranian nuclear programme, it still is far from viewing it as a major threat, let alone an existential threat, to its interests in the Middle East. Turkey has managed to work out its differences with Iran as its relationship to that country has evolved through various periods of cooperation and conflict. Reiterating this fundamental truth in the Turkish approach towards Iran, Turkish participants argued that Turkey would not let itself be instrumentalised in others' calculations of counterbalancing Iran, and especially through a military showdown with it.

As one Turkish participant elaborated, such differences are obviously products of differences in historical experience with Iran as well as their relative size and power position vis-à-vis its neighbour. Having a better understanding of each other's positions, concerns and capabilities is a must for the evolution of the relationship on a more solid ground. If Turkey and Gulf actors fail to develop realistic understanding and expectations of each other, this situation might lead to a delivery deficit and eventually undermine the mutual trust needed for furthering cooperation.

THE ARAB SPRING, SYRIA AND THE QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY

The Arab upheavals and their impact on the region also occupied a large part of the discussions. Participants, in particular, debated the implications of the uprisings in Syria which had taken on a military dimension and risk a full-blown civil war with immediate repercussions for other regional actors. Despite occasional differences, Turkey and the Gulf actors shared similar positions on the Syrian uprising, but as the discussions during the debate attested, there were still questions about Turkey's approach. In particular, some Gulf participants questioned whether Turkey was acting on the basis of humanitarian considerations or strategic calculations in Syria. Others also questioned the gap between Turkey's rhetoric and actions, which was mentioned earlier. Again, some Gulf participants expressed their reservations about the sincerity of Turkey's motivations, by pointing out its close association with certain groups within the Syrian opposition. Turkey's approach was found divisive in this respect and some participants even suggested that Turkey could have acted in a different manner to unify the opposition.

Turkish participants put great emphasis on the roots of the Arab Spring. Reflecting the Turkish government's position on this subject, they emphasised that the Arab people's demand for justice, equality and better governance propelled the wave of the popular uprisings and this wave would likely affect all countries in the region in one way or another. This emphasis on the democratic wave in the region raised the issue of 'Gulf exceptionalism', since, bar Bahrain, the revolutionary wave has not hit the region. Gulf participants referred to strong legitimacy of the regimes in the sub-region which helped them withstand the regional wave. The extent to which Turkey puts democratic considerations at the centre of its foreign policy will continue to shape the dynamics of the relationship between

Turkey and the Gulf. Given the nature of the regimes in the region, Turkey will have to tread a fine line between championing democracy and improving its strategic dialogue with the Gulf.

WHERE GOES THE TURKEY-GULF RELATIONSHIP?

As the workshop participants agreed, the potential room for cooperation in the economic sphere and regional security is enormous. The coalescence of several factors creates a facilitating environment for deepening strategic dialogue: the lack of historic baggage, the lack of any major mutual threat perceptions and bilateral disputes as well as Turkey's relationship with the United States and the West. Both parties seem to converge on the idea that Turkey and the GCC need to work toward regional mechanisms for conflict prevention and peace building, which may also evolve in the broader context of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The parties also have expressed interest in expanding efforts toward denuclearisation of the Middle East. Any constructive step towards a nuclear free Middle East may eventually help the regional countries transcend the security dilemma which seems to be at the centre of many of the current regional crises, especially the Iranian nuclear issue. The parties also see room for coordinated Turkish-Gulf action towards helping reduce the growing politicisation of sectarian divisions, as they may increase the risk of conflict in the already polarised security environment in the region.

Granted, security cooperation can evolve only if the parties have realistic expectations from each other. It emerged during the discussions that given its fundamental pillars of its regional policy, such as nurturing good relations with Iran, Turkey will not act in a way to counterbalance Iranian power in the region. Also, if Turkey is increasingly perceived as interfering in the internal affairs of regional countries, this may also reduce the appetite of

Gulf countries in cooperating with Turkey. Moreover, the future direction of the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian uprising may have significant implications for Turkey-Gulf relations. The actors with which Turkey would prefer to work within the countries that are going through transition will also affect Turkey-Gulf cooperation in the age of the Arab spring.

As has been often argued, Turkey's visibility in 'Arab affairs' was aided by the weakening of the traditional centres of Arab regional order, namely Egypt, Iraq and Syria. It is also true that the same alleged vacuum also facilitated the emergence of certain Arab Gulf nations, such as Qatar, on the Middle Eastern scene as influential players. It was no coincidence that Turkey and Qatar coordinated and orchestrated some joint diplomatic initiatives on the Palestine issue or Lebanon. As two stable sub-regions in the Middle East, Turkey and the Gulf countries have managed to work together to help pacify the region in the midst of the Arab Spring. This will likely strengthen their positions in regional affairs in the years to come. Granted, Egypt's potential drive for leadership of the Arab world and restoration of Arab order in the wake of the Arab Spring is an expectation of many observers of regional affairs and how both Turkey and the

Gulf countries will react to this development will remain to be seen.

Domestic politics and the democratic accountability of the government in conducting foreign policy is one issue that has to be carefully observed while analysing the future of Turkey-Gulf relations. Despite the relative autonomy of the Turkish government from electoral constraints given its large support base in successive elections, it still has to take into account the public's view in formulating its foreign policy strategies. The Gulf countries need to develop a good grasp of the subtleties of Turkish domestic politics as they assess the prospects of not only joint cooperation in regional issues but also enhancing the bilateral relationship.

For its part, at the same time, the Turkish government would be well advised to take a careful note of the perceptions of its foreign policy rhetoric abroad, which at times might generate expectations that are incompatible with its actual policies. This naturally raises the issue of the gap between rhetoric and capabilities, and if it cannot be managed delicately the widening of the gap might undermine Turkey's credibility in a region which it is only recently discovering.



TESEV

Bankalar Cad.
Minerva Han, No: 2 Kat: 3
34420 Karaköy İstanbul
T +90 212 292 89 03
F +90 212 292 90 46
www.tesev.org.tr

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