



Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi (İSMUS), I/1 (2016), s. 43-69

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## THE ARAB SPRING AND ITS IMPACT ON TURKEY-GCC STATES PARTNERSHIP\*

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### Abstract

With the beginning of the 21st century, style and substance of Turkish foreign policy changed to a large extent. The most important one was the fact that Ankara started to follow “security building” rather than “desecuritization” policies towards her neighbors. In this context, the mottos adopted by the Özal Administration such as “less geopolitics, more economics” or “trade but not aid” depicted Turkey’s such policies very well. Turkey’s relations with the GCC states improved against this background. This article, after giving a short historical past of the bilateral relations, will focus on the reasons for improving relations between both sides with beginning of the 2000s. Second aim of the article is to analyze whether Turkey’s improving relations with Iran had a negative impact on Turkey GCC States especially after the outburst of the Arab spring. Lastly, the evaluation of the impact of Turkey’s policies towards the revolts in Egypt, Libya and Syria on Turkey-GCC states relations will be another concern of the study.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Syrian Crisis, Security Building, Desecuritization, Islamic Awakening.

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\* This article has been written owing to the scholarship granted by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) 2219 BİDEB, Ankara, Turkey. My gratitude is extended to Prof. Dr. Raymond Hinnebusch.

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## ARAP BAHARI VE TÜRKİYE-KİK ÜLKELERİ ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİLERE ETKİSİ

### Özet

21. yüzyılın başından itibaren Türk dış politikasında önemli değişim ve dönüşümler ortaya çıkmıştır. Bunlardan belki de en önemlisi askeri yöntemlerin dış politika araçları içinde eski önemini yitirmesi ve Ankara'nın "güvenlikleştirme" politikalarından ziyade "güvenlik inşası" öncelikli bir dış politika izlemeye başlamasıdır. Bu çerçevede 1980'lerden itibaren Özal döneminde benimsenen "daha az jeopolitik daha çok ekonomi" ya da "yardım değil daha çok ticaret" sloganları Türkiye'nin dış politikasında ortaya çıkan değişimi çok güzel özetlemektedir. Türkiye ve KİK ülkeleri arasındaki ilişkiler de Türk dış politikasında ortaya çıkan bu gelişme paralelinde ivme kazanmıştır ve daha ziyade AK Parti döneminde 2005 yılında yeni bir aşamaya gelmiştir. Bu çalışmada Türkiye-KİK ülkeleri arasındaki ilişkilerin kısa bir arka planı verildikten sonra karşılıklı ilişkilerin özellikle 2000'lerin ikinci yarısından sonra olumlu yönde gelişmesinin nedenleri üzerinde durulacaktır. İkinci olarak, Türkiye'nin İran ile gelişen ilişkilerinin özellikle Türkiye-Suudi Arabistan ilişkilerine ne yönde yansıtıldığı incelenecektir. Son olarak, Türkiye'nin Arap Baharı sonrası Mısır, Libya ve Suriye ayaklanmaları karşısında izlediği politikaların ve Rusya, İran ile çıkarları doğrultusunda yakınlaşmasının Türkiye'nin KİK ile ve özelde de Suudi Arabistan ile ilişkilerini nasıl etkilediği makalenin önemli bir kısmını oluşturacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Baharı, Suriye Krizi, Güvenlik İnşası, Güvensizlikleştirme, İslami Uyanış.

## Introduction

With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, style and substance of Turkish foreign policy changed to a large extent. Apart from being a ‘security provider’ in its larger neighborhood, Ankara aimed to realize a European style of Turkish politics which led to an increase in a number of interests groups. These interests groups became very active in shaping the priorities of Turkish foreign policy, for example, the mass demonstrations in big cities took place reflecting public sensitivity against the legitimacy of the US decision to occupy Iraq and exerted a great influence over the decision of the Turkish parliament not to permit the deployment of Turkish troops in Iraq. This was actually not only related to the EU harmonization process but also to rapidly growing internalization of desecuritization policy in Turkish society prioritizing economy and democracy which the JDP governments realized.

For example, the motto adopted by the then Prime Minister Özal during the late 1980s, “trade but not aid” gained momentum and continued with a new slogan of TUSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) “less geopolitics, more economics” which openly prioritize economic interests in shaping contours of foreign policy. In parallel with those developments, the JDP government has developed trade based relations with the GCC States and the neighbouring countries such as Iran and Syria. The idea was that growing role of the bureaucrats such as the Undersecretary of the Prime Ministry for Foreign Trade (DTM) engaged in shaping the economic and trade dimension of Turkish foreign policy rather than the military bureaucrats, put differently growing role of trade and diplomacy rather than military security would lead to stability in Turkey’s neighborhood and the Middle East.

After a brief historical background of bilateral relations between Turkey and GCC States, in the first part of the article, the reasons for the rapprochement between the two sides will be analyzed. Turkey’s trade based foreign policy will be explained with respect to understanding the reasons why the AKP government wanted the bilateral relations with the GCC States to take a new turn beginning with 2005. Secondly, the study will explain the impact of Iran on Turkey-GCC relations so as to understand whether Turkey’s improving relations with Iran had a negative impact on Turkey-GCC relations. Lastly, Turkey’s posture towards the

revolts in Libya, Egypt, Syria and its impact on Turkey-GCC relations will be among the main concerns of the article so as to understand the sustainability of the strategic partnership between Turkey and the GCC members. The most important of all, the study will discuss the impact of Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and Iran on Turkey-GCC relations balance.

### **Historical Background of Turkey-GCC Relations**

The two important developments enhanced significance of the Gulf region for security reasons in the eye of Turkey. One was the Islamic revolution in Iran; the other was the Iran-Iraq war. Both developments set the alarm bells in the United States and Gulf countries principally Saudi Arabia so as to enhance Turkey's importance in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia was among the countries who celebrated the generals of 1980 coup d'état in Turkey and the leader of the military coup Evren paid a visit to Saudi Arabia in 1984 during which the two countries signed the Military Education and Cooperation Agreement (Mercan, 2008). It can be said that the outburst of the Islamic revolution in Iran became the turning point in improving relations between Turkey and the Gulf countries because of common fear concerning aggressive Iranian policy of exporting its Islamic regime to the neighboring countries. One of the basic reasons for the foundation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in May 1981 was the growing need for collective security in the face of assertive Iranian foreign policy. Another reason was that the Gulf countries were alarmed by the probability of the spread of war to the Gulf region which came out between Iran and Iraq in 1980. The Iran-Iraq war and the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union also became an impetus for growing military presence of the United States in the Gulf region. For example, as Brzezinski clearly stated that the Rapid Deployment Force was founded for the protection of the American vital interests in the Persian Gulf and "any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf would be regarded as an assault on the United States" (Stork & Wenger, 1991).

This clearly shows that interference of an external party to balance an expansionist and aggressive local power has always been viewed as normal although this led to further complication of the existing problems and

polarization between local conflicting parties. After the occupation of Iraq which resulted in destruction of Saddam's Sunni regime and pacification of Sunni and al Qaida allied opponent to the Shiite Iranian regime, Iran whose regional rivals were weakened by US military campaigns emerged as the most threatening local rival of the GCC States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to growing unbalanced Iranian threat, sectarian terrorism and state fragmentation made the GCC States more vulnerable in the new century (Kostiner, 2009: 249). This urged the big members of the GCC such as Saudi Arabia to seek for more diversified relations in international system and to develop their own military capabilities, preferably within a common GCC defense system (Başkan, 2011: 162).

In parallel with these developments, at a time when the anti-Americanism gained momentum and the Arab countries such as Egypt harshly criticized Saudi Arabia and some other GCC States' close alliance with the United States, Turkey has emerged as a country not judging the GCC States' regimes and their close relations with the United States especially in military terms. Turkey, who offered an alternative to Iran in the region, developed its relations with the GCC States in an unprecedented way from 2005 onwards.

### **Reasons for Rapprochement between Turkey and the GCC States**

With the accession of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power, the place of trade and foreign markets in Turkish foreign policy became more remarkable. With the disillusionment Turkey reaped from Washington and Brussels, Ankara stopped seeing existential threats through the lens of its Trans-Atlantic allies and saw that even though Turkey unconditionally complies with the American strategic interests in its own environment; its interests do not always converge with those of Washington. This became very evident after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Apart from rising anti-Americanism, Turkey's disillusionment by the open-ended nature of European Union (EU) accession talks and Brussels' accusation of Turkey not meeting the democratization standards pushed Turkey to reinvent new markets, and strengthened the belief that there was no longer a convincing Western axis.

The expansion of ties with the Gulf States should be viewed against this background of Turkey's weariness of the West. Apart from the AKP

government's objective of securing new investments and markets for Turkey's growing economy, the strong Islamic sentiment of AKP's support base, which identifies more closely with the Muslim Arab world than with the West also played an important role in expansion of relations between GCC States and Turkey (Habibi & Walker, 2011: 6). The trade volume between Turkey and the Gulf increased four-fold from 2.1 billion US dollar in 2002 to 8 billion US dollar in 2009. (Biberoviç, 2008: 15-21) In 2005, both sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Manama, Bahrain, to support economic cooperation, encourage exchange of technical expertise and information, improve economic relations, and initiate negotiations to establish free trade zones. (Radikal, 2005) It is also noteworthy that Turkey and Saudi Arabia signed the Security Cooperation agreement in February 2005 which included cooperation against the international terrorism and drug smuggling. A Turkish scholar, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu's election to the chairmanship of the Islamic Conference Organization became an impetus for the improving bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and after 40 years interval; King Abdullah visited Turkey in 2006 and 2007 (Ataman, 2009: 77). President of Turkey, Abdullah Gül, responded with an official visit to Saudi Arabia in 2009. That the GCC Foreign Ministers declared Turkey as strategic partner on September 2008 was a turning point in Turkey-GCC relations since Turkey has become the first country outside the Gulf to be given the status of strategic partner of the GCC (Hakeem, 2008).

In addition, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in Jeddah, December 2011 laid the foundation of a regular dialogue at the ministerial level (Larabee, 2011: 690) between the two parties and from Turkey's perspective, it was an important step taken on the way of building institutionalized relations with the Gulf countries. In accordance with the MoU, A Framework Agreement for Economic Cooperation was signed and it was aimed to form a free trade area between Turkey, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia so as to ease visa procedures of the citizens of the Gulf States and Turkey (Radikal, 2005). Throughout the 2000s, Turkey has become an increasing magnet for Gulf-based investors while the GCC region, led by Saudi Arabia has become one of the leading providers of energy to Turkey. Due to the financial crisis in 2008, "Muslim Neighborhood's" share of Turkish

exports rose to 26%, while for the first time; the European Union's share fell below 50 % in 2009.

According to Habibi and Walker, the financial crisis in 2008 did not have a negative impact on Turkey-GCC relations because the oil-exporting countries in the Gulf and the Middle East had accumulated large oil revenue reserves during 2002 and the first half of 2007; they could maintain their level of imports despite a sharp decline in oil revenues in the second half of 2008 and the first half of 2009 (Habibi & Walker, 2011: 6). However, there has been a long delay in the conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement with the GCC which Turkey has been spending a great effort to finalize negotiations since 2005. As Larabee notes that “one of the main obstacles to the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement has been the GCC members' concern to prevent the flood of cheap Turkish steel and iron products into the GCC market” (Larabee, 2011: 692).

Another point worth to be mentioned is the fact that much of the Gulf investment has been in the agricultural sector, with the aim of increasing strategic food reserves. While the GCC remains critically dependent on food imports in most key categories, Turkey is a leading regional producer of food products and unique in the Middle East in terms of its net exporter status. There is a growing GCC interest in Turkish agriculture so as to show that Turkey and the GCC have important potentialities of being complementary partners with each other (Arab News.Com, 2011).

Although many analysts allege that economically driven reasons such as seeking markets and economic benefits were the main impetus for Ankara's furthering relations with the region, looking more specifically, it can be said that the security concerns were outweighing and both sides' common fear was concerned with the growing US military presence in Iraq so as to change the balance of power in the region. For example, “although the main military balance to Iran in the Gulf has always remained the USA, Turkey has signed military agreements including training, technical and scientific cooperation with a number of Gulf States including Saudi Arabia” (Altunışık&Martin, 2011: 576).

What made Turkey sympathetic in the eyes of the GCC states was Turkey's policy of charting an independent foreign policy, and its capability of maintaining a balanced approach between Western policies

in the region and the concerns of local countries on controversial issues (Kardaş, 2009: 13). This policy of Ankara changed to a large extent after the Davos Summit during which Turkish president Erdoğan revealed his anger towards Israel first and walked out and shouted “You Israelis know how to kill.” The policy shift from “balancing the sides” to “choosing sides” enhanced much more Turkey’s popularity in the eyes of the Arab people especially of the masses on the street. The two TV channels; Al Jazeera broadcasting from Qatar and Al-Manar broadcasting from Lebanon worked very influentially in the enhancement of Turkey’s popularity in the Gulf. They showed the mass protests against Israeli attacks on Palestinians held in many cities of Turkey especially, Istanbul (Ayhan, 2009: 52).

Turkey’s denouncement of Israeli attacks on the Palestinians (the Gaza incident) had several effects. First Turkey showed its enthusiasm to play a leadership role in the Arab world by following independent policies from the United States so as to give the impression that it was siding with the oppressed masses and coming against the tyrants. While doing this, Ankara was very cautious not to act in accordance with the sectarian and religious division, on the contrary, Ankara, on every occasion, emphasized common identity based on the belonging to Islamic culture.

As such, Ankara’s policies were welcomed not only by Sunnis but also the Shiites. From the GCC states’ perspective, this gave Turkey supremacy over Iran. It was emphasized that Turkey rather than Iran adopted a more proactive policy at a time when the Palestinians were bombed during the Gaza incident in Arab media. For example, according to Sayed Zahra who is a journalist from the *Akhbar Al Khaleej* (el-Haliç) journal from Bahrain mentioned that it would be more difficult for Egypt and Iran to play a leadership role after Erdoğan stormed out of a debate in Davos with Peres on 29 January 2009. In addition, as one of the leaders of the Shiite opposition in Bahrain stated that the Gulf states perceived Turkey’s rising profile as balancing Iranian influence in the region so as to ease the security concerns of the Gulf ruling elite (Ayhan, 2009: 55). Another important issue worth to be mentioned is that Turkey can play a leading role in construction of strategic security cooperation between GCC States and NATO as it became evident in Istanbul Cooperation



Initiative (ICI) launched at 2004 NATO Istanbul Summit.<sup>1</sup> This initiative not only aimed at enhancing interoperability among NATO and the Gulf Countries, but also further strengthening security and stability in the Middle East. Terrorism, energy security, piracy, trafficking in small arms and light weapons and proliferation of nuclear weapons are the main areas of common interests between the ICI countries and NATO (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), which constitutes the institutional framework for the relations between NATO and the four Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates) became more important at a time when Iraq ceased to be a buffer zone between Iran and GCC.

### **Impact of Iran on Bilateral Relations**

Turkey's rapprochement with the Gulf states inflamed a hot debate whether the strategic partnership aimed to contain Iranian influence. "Turkey and the GCC have carefully avoided giving any impression that their strategic dialogue represents an anti-Iranian axis in the region" (ASAM, 2008). Addressing this concern, the then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu emphasized during his press conference that this initiative was not "a new bloc or counter-bloc in the region. Rather it was a step toward deepening regional integration." Hamad Abdul Rahman Al Attiyah, Secretary-General of the GCC also emphasized that, "the term 'strategic' should not irritate anyone. This strategic dialogue is a peaceful strategy to achieve further development and economic progress" (Hakeem, 2008).

From Ankara's point of view, it would be unreasonable to build close relations with the Gulf States at the expense of its relations with Iran for several reasons. First, Ankara wants to maintain dialogue with all the regional actors without antagonizing others. The trade volume with Iran had already increased to a large extent, Ankara and Tehran committed to an ambitious 30 billion dollar target. Not only have Turkey's exports to Iran doubled, but also Turkey has become quite dependent on Iranian oil and gas (Associate Press, 2009). Most important of all, both countries also shared a common interest in containing Kurdish nationalism and

<sup>1</sup> This would integrate the Gulf Cooperation Council states into NATO's global army so as to bring the GCC nations not only under the U.S.' missile and nuclear umbrella, but effectively under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense provision.

preventing the emergence of an independent state (Sabah, 2011). Lastly, “Turkey certainly has no interest in an increase in oil prices that would certainly be the case should a crisis between the West and Iran escalate” (Oğuzlu, 2007: 94). Due to the reasons mentioned above, Ankara currently wants to “maintain cordial relations with Tehran and avoid being drawn into an overtly anti-Iranian axis” (Larabee, 693).

Most important of all, “the ‘new’ Turkish foreign policy which conceptualized Turkey as a ‘central country’ in the midst of Afro-Eurasia with a vast ‘strategic depth’, prioritized dialogue and cooperation over coercion and confrontation. As such, Davutoğlu’s zero problems’ with its neighbors aimed to transform Turkey into a strong regional and even global actor through the exercise of soft power (Kirişçi, 2011: 711). This is best evident in Ankara’s efforts to build interdependent trade relations with Iran. Turkey’s increasing dependency in energy sector on Iran currently urge Ankara to continue its diplomatic relations with Tehran despite diverging interests after the outburst of the uprisings in Syria (Oktav, 2011).

The main factor which currently limits the maneuvering capability of Turkey in following full scale of good neighborhood relations has been its institutionalized relations with the international society whereas its neighbors such as Syria and Iran have been excluded from and categorized as “rogue states” by the international society- the West- whose patron is the United States.

In this context, it can be said that Turkey’s enthusiasm to maintain its neighborhood relations with Iran might have a negative impact on Turkey-GCC relations. Today, Iran with its growing influence over the Shiite minority and radical Islamic groups has been perceived as the biggest potential threat to the stability of the region although this is not voiced openly by the GCC members during the meetings held by the GCC two times a year. Put differently, Iran rather than Israel stands as a power having a Damocles’ sword over the GCC states with its capacity of provoking the Shiites against the Sunni rulers and closing the Hormuz strait so as to block the flow of oil to the Western markets. However, the GCC states have never criticized Ankara’s close economic and political relations with Iran overtly. On the contrary, from regional countries’ perspective, Turkey’s continuing diplomatic relations with Iran at a stable

level might have a positive effect on maintenance of a dialogue between the GCC states and Iran in the long run. Another reason why the GCC States did not care about Turkey-Iran rapprochement was that they have already been aware that Turkey, as a NATO ally, has a limited capacity of improving relations with Iran as it became evident when Turkey consented to the deployment of defense shield system in Kürecik, Malatya under NATO's command.

For different reasons, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia opposed to the UN sanctions to be applied on Iran under the US leadership in 2010. While the Saudi Kingdom viewed "sanctions as a long-term solution which would not respond to Saudi Arabia's needs for an immediate resolution (The Telegraph, 2010), Turkey objected sanctions on Iran on the ground that they would make Iran more isolated and have a negative effect on improving trade relations so as to lead to chaos and war, as it did in Iraq.

It is also noteworthy that some GCC members' (Qatar and Kuwait) threat perception concerning Iran have been quite different from that of Saudi Arabia. As Başkan notes that Qatar has long been interested in developing good relations with Iran. The relations have developed to the point that the Iranian Parliament speaker, Ali Larijani, described Qatar as a strategic partner during his visit to Qatar in July 2009. During the same visit, Emir of Qatar, said, "Iran is always standing behind Arabs and the people of Palestine, but some wants to make minds turn against the country while we have no problem with it. Iran is always our friend and we won't allow any ill-will person to create problems between us" (Farrar&Wellman, 2010).

However, the unfolding events which started in Tunisia and lasting with the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt represented a turning point in the dynamics of not only in the Middle East and North Africa but also in the Gulf region including Bahrain and Yemen. Put differently, the Arab awakening has become a litmus test for Iran-Turkey and GCC relations. The posture of Iran, GCC states and Turkey towards the Arab awakening clearly showed that a Cold War type new balance of interests have come to the surface.

## **The Arab Awakening/ Syrian Crisis and Its Impact on Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey**

The mass demonstrations on the Arab streets have crystallized the three countries'-Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey-vulnerabilities of/ambivalence in their foreign policies and forced them to reshape their foreign policy calculations in the Arab world. For example, while Iran viewed these movements as Islamic awakenings inspired by its own 1979 Islamic revolution and supported the opposition groups in Yemen, sought influence within the Bahraini opposition under the mantra of protesting injustice against the Shiite community, it did not support the opposition groups in Syria, on the contrary, Tehran sided with the Asad regime whose repression methods are completely inhumane. As Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Ramin Mehmanparast openly stated: "Syria is an exception for Iran" (Akhlaghi, 2011).

When it comes to Turkey, as Larrabee notes that "Ankara's "zero problems with its neighbours" policy assumed that the political status quo in the Middle East and Gulf would remain largely intact and that Turkey would be dealing with a known set of leaders" (Larabee, 694). However, the Arab uprisings, especially the Syrian one made it evident that Turkey would be no more able to continue to "be nice to everyone" and therefore has to "make *ad hoc* adjustments on the fly" (Larabee, 694). Put differently, the uprisings in Arab countries such as Libya clearly showed that Ankara preferred the status quo because of its economic interests. For example, at first, Ankara objected to a military interference in Libya, mainly because it would dynamite lucrative construction contracts in Libya and its large investments in the country. The then Turkish president Gül openly stated Ankara's suspicions concerning the hidden agenda of the coalition forces whose main partners are the United States and EU (TV 24, 2011). In the face of the increasing support given to the Libyan rebels by the Western countries, Ankara recalled its ambassador from Tripoli and recognized the rebel Transnational National Council (Habibi&Walker, 2011).

The uprisings in Syria presented a far more serious dilemma for Turkey. That Asad resisted to initiate reforms and turned a deaf ear to Ankara's warnings to stop crackdown on opposition protests led to the deterioration of the relations between Turkey and Syria. The then Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visit to Damascus which lasted for

six hours (BBC 2011) and Turkey's final warning to Syria on August 15 (Shadid marked the end of an era in Turkish-Syrian relations based on the slogan of "common destiny, history and future."

Looking closely, when compared with the Gulf states and Iran, Turkey's situation in the face of Syrian revolts, as a front country, is the most difficult of all due to some reasons. First of all, the number of Syrian refugees who have crossed into Turkey since the start of the conflict in Syria has climbed to over 1.000,000. Over 200,000 Syrians are currently being hosted in the 21 temporary sheltering centers located in 20 provinces. (Özel, Habertürk, 2014) Secondly, Ankara has been extremely uneasy about Baath regime's big potentiality to use Turkey's Kurdish separatism as a tool for retaliation to Turkey's sheltering of Syrian people flooding the Turkish frontier, Free Syrian Army members and opposition groups. For example, Bashar al-Assad, made a sudden move and withdrew his forces from Kurdish areas in the country's North so as to enable the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is in line with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to fight against the al-Qaida affiliated armed groups such as al-Nusra. This tactical step taken by the Assad regime enhanced Turkey's threat perception concerning the probability of the foundation of an independent Kurdish state (Sabah, 2013). Turkey who conducted a military exercise on the Syrian border in October 2011 warned the Assad regime that it could intervene militarily. However, Ankara has not taken any initiative for a military intervention in Syria so far since it has been aware that a dual Russo-Iranian support for Assad makes a unilateral Turkish intervention in Syria costly (Ünver, 2012). Most important of all, a probable military intervention could lead to internationalization of Turkey's Kurdish issue (Gürsel, Milliyet, 2012).

As time passed Turkey's situation got worse due to the low profile policies of the United States and EU which showed that they were tilting towards a diplomatic solution rather than cooperating with Ankara in ousting Assad as soon as possible. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in late 2011 that NATO has "no intention whatsoever to intervene in Syria, "many experts have asserted that "Syria is not Libya," referring to the different terrain, the nature of the conflict there, the lack of physical protection for opposition forces, and the general volatile regional environment (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012).

Put differently, Ankara whose investment in Syria came to a halt and economic losses have been increasing with each passing day (Sağlam, *Hürriyet*, 2012), (Turkish Foreign Ministry) (Aras, *Middle East Quarterly*, 2012) prioritize immediate overthrow of Asad and thinks that diplomatic endeavors such as Annan plan only retards the solution and is a way for Asad to buy time (İdiz, *Milliyet*, 2012). Even at a time when it has been concluded that Syria carried out chemical weapons attacks against its people, the members of international society, principally the war weary United States has “not made a decision” about whether to conduct a military strike in Syria (Smith & Cohen, *CNN Politics*, 2013). This not only puts Turkey into an awkward situation because Ankara gives the impression that it favors a military strike against Syria but also weakens Turkey’s trust in international society and organizations, principally the United Nations and NATO (*Türkiye Gazetesi*, 2013).

With the outburst of the Syrian uprising, Turkey’s previous Middle East policy prioritizing to be in equal distance to all groups and emphasizing belonging to Islam as a culture so as to challenge every kind of division; on sectarian, ethnic and national basis came to a halt. Ankara started following pro-Sunni policies in the region. In parallel with this, relations with the GCC monarchs whose rulers are basically Sunni came to the fore. Currently, there are two strong incentives urging Ankara to maintain close ties with the Gulf States, principally Saudi Arabia. One is to contain increasing Iranian influence in Iraq which could lead to a shift of balance in the Gulf and Levant. Second, Ankara seeks new markets replacing its economic losses due to the declining economic relations with Syria and Iran.

In a similar vein, there are important incentives for the GCC States, especially for Saudi Arabia to cooperate with Turkey at a time when it is under increasing pressure for change unleashed by the Arab uprisings. One of the incentive is related to Saudi Arabia’s increasing enthusiasm to diversify its relations with countries such as Turkey because Riyadh has been disappointed by the United States’ low profile policies in the face of mass protests on the Arab streets. For example, US’s remaining indifferent to toppling of Mubarak who had been an important and loyal US ally came as a shock for Saudis. The biggest fear in Riyadh is the probability of having a domino effect of Arab spring on the Arab

Peninsula countries so as to undermine the legitimacy of the monarchies. That the Saudis intervened in Bahrain to crush the uprising and prop up the ruling dynasty in mid-March 2011 without consulting to Washington is a conspicuous example with respect to understanding how Riyadh distrusts towards Washington.

Put it bluntly, that Mubarak was demanded by the United States to leave office set the alarm bells in Riyadh on the grounds that in the event of a widespread revolt, Obama would demand that King Abdullah leave office, just as he did to Mubarak. However, just the reverse happened and Obama granted exception to Saudi Arabia and could not trumpet universal rights (Oktav, 2011: 65-95) mainly because “Saudi Arabia is the world’s largest oil producer and the only one with sufficient excess production capacity to moderate rises in the price of oil. Instability in Saudi Arabia, from Washington’s perspective, could produce panic in the oil markets and an oil shock that could put an end to America’s economic recovery (and the president’s hopes for reelection)” (Arabia Today, 2011).

Another incentive for Riyadh to improve relations with Ankara is related to Iranian attitude towards the mass protests taking place in the parts of Bahrein and Yemen where the Shiites were living intensively. Iranian spiritual leader Khamenei’s words (Tisdal 2011), in Persian New Year message in March 2011 which surfaced the existing deep rooted cleavage and competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia also set alarm bells in Riyadh. The attitudes of Riyadh and Tehran in the face of the revolts in Yemen as well as Bahrain exemplified both Riyadh and Tehran’s competition in exporting their religio-political ideologies in the region and globally.

In this context, Turkey stands as one of the most important regional actors for the Sunni GCC states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar to bring down the Bashar al-Assad regime, a long-time ally of Shiite Iran so as to contain Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the region especially in Iraq and Levant. Another common interest between Turkey and the GCC States is that both sides favor the ousting of the Asad regime as soon as possible. However, while Turkey has been quite cautious about the probability of transnational jihadists to assume power (Sabah, 2013), Riyadh has viewed the jihadists as an effective tool that can be used against the Iranians and their Arab Shia allies. Therefore, it adopted a more hawkish attitude

and wanted Washington to cope with the Alawite government so as to undermine Tehran and its two pre-eminent allies, Iraq and Hezbollah (BBC Turkish, 2013).

In a nutshell, common threat perception concerning rising Iranian influence in the Middle East by extending its soft power and filling in the vacuum left by declining U.S. influence in the region became the main factor having gluing effect between Turkey and GCC states. While Qatar and Saudi Arabia were siding with Turkey whose policies favored the Sunnis in Iraq after Maliki increased pressure on Sunni politicians and attempted to sideline them in Iraqi politics, Iran tried “to consolidate Shiite Iraq into a satellite ally since Iraqi airspace and land ties connecting Iran to Syria are of crucial significance” (Ne’eman, 2012).

Although it seems that Iran-Syria-Iraq on one hand and Turkey - Saudi Arabia- Qatar on the other are competing with each other on the basis of sectarian division, the current dynamics of the region are based on immediate state political interests. From Turkey’s perspective, what is most alarming is the fact that Maliki has been drafting a new foreign policy which would help consolidation of his power in domestic politics. Put differently Ankara views Maliki’s pro-Syrian and Iranian policies as destabilizing the region on the basis of Shiite-Sunni divergence and putting unity of Iraq at risk. Therefore, Ankara continues to keep high profile in Iraqi politics which Maliki complained as interfering domestic Iraqi affairs (Sabah, 2012). At a time when Ankara is having serious problem fine tuning in its Syrian politics, and trying to close the gap between itself and Tehran in Syrian issue, Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s siding with Turkey in Iraq is of immense importance to prevent the emergence of a solid Shiite axis which will put Turkey in a more difficult position (Bacık, 2012).

The increasing Iranian threats concerning the missile defense shield system in Turkey and closure of the Hormouz strait by muscling its capacity to be a nuclear power (Oman Tribune, 2012) brought Turkey and GCC states closer. Ankara, at a time when Iran was under the threat of Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities and was suppressed by heavy sanctions imposed by the members of international society, was aware of the difficulty of following good neighborhood relations and therefore preferred to ally with Saudi Arabia and Qatar so as to undermine



Syrian-Iranian alliance. Most interesting of all, despite a lot of historical baggage concerning Turkey's Ottoman past, the GCC states carry, and Riyadh's weariness about Turkey's bid for influence in the Arab world, the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar allied with Turkey in remoulding the regional dynamics after the Syrian crisis, however, this lasted until the downfall of Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi.

With Morsi's ouster by military coup, the diverging interests of Turkey, Qatar on one hand and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait on the other became more visible. The Saudi government felt extremely threatened by the support given by Qatar and Turkey to Muslim Brotherhood (Ihvan) both in Egypt and Syria because from Riyadh's perspective, the probability of Muslim Brotherhood's (Ihvan) coming to power in Syria just as they did in Egypt would lead to a change of the status quo in Jordan so as to strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood's Jordanian wing, Islamic Action Front. According to Saudi government, this might have a domino effect and would lead to destabilization of the Gulf region so as to provoke the Shiites against the ruling families in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen. Looking closely, the current rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia is concerned with the fact that Riyadh supports Salefis against Muslim Brotherhood while Turkey does just the opposite (The New York Times.Com, 2013)

Another point worth to mention is the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Qatar's ambitious plans in the region, its policies favoring the Muslim Brotherhood and building close relations with the Palestinian factions, especially Hamas and its support for Syrian rebels, especially the takfiri groups were seen as threatening by the Saudi officials. This, at the same time, led to the rift between Turkey and Saudi Arabia so as to devastate Turkey's plans to have an alliance with Egypt under Morsi in dealing with the regional issues such as Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Syrian civil war. Turkey who had allocated \$ 2 billion credit to Egypt under Morsi mainly aimed to have a maneuvering capability in the region as its political and economic relations with Syria and Iraq came to a halt. With the downfall of Morsi, Turkey's economy was extremely effected in a negative way, Turkey's export to Egypt declined (Larabee, World Report, 2013).

Moreover, Turkey's vocal insistence that Morsi return to power and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's harsh rhetoric (Al-Rasheed, Al Monitor, 2013) towards the interim government in Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia endangered Turkey's efforts to build energy and trade based relations with the region. For example, the suspension of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) \$12 billion investment in a coal-based energy project in Turkey had a shower effect on Ankara at a time when exports to Syria and Egypt directly - and via Turkey to other countries - were steadily declining. Ankara, being alarmed by the probability of that Saudi Arabia might have played a part in the cancellation of the UAE investment, came face to face with losing the complete support of the Gulf capital (Sağlam, Al Monitor, 2013). In addition, that Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait took decision of making financial aid of 12 billion dollar to Egypt's military rulers after Morsi was ousted prompted Ankara to mend the bilateral relations (Nordland, 2013). For example, Erdogan, aiming to limit the economic costs of picking the losing side in the regional power struggle over Egypt stopped criticisizing Saudi Arabia instead blamed Israel for Morsi's downfall (Veinthal, Jerusalem Post, 2013) (Al Arabiyya, 2013). Davutoğlu paid a one day visit to Saudi Arabia in order to ameliorate the declining relations that were beginning to hurt the economy as soon as possible (Taştekin, Radikal, 2013). The rift over Egypt is a noteworthy example with respect to understanding how the relations between the GCC States- especially Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates- and Turkey are fragile due to the volatile political dynamics of the region.

Leaving aside the prolonging uprisings in Syria, the tectonic changes taking place with the occupation of Mosul and Telafer by Sunni al- Qaeda affiliated organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its probable advance towards the Shia holy places of Najaf and Karbala urged Turkey to recalibrate its international politics towards the Middle east.

At a time when the Iraq-Syria border is increasingly immaterial, Iran has gained importance as a counterweight to Sunni radicalism in the region. The Obama administration's reluctance to interfere militarily in the region created an authority gap in the region. Ankara, therefore, has started to adopt more independent policies from the West in order to protect its borders. Another reason why Turkey has adopted independent policies from the West in the Middle East is related to the fact that Turkey

has been feeling betrayed by the United States who insistently sheltered the coup plotter, Fetullah Gülen after the coup attempt on the 15<sup>th</sup> July. This urged Turkey to mend relations with Russia and to strengthen its ties with Iran both of whom supported Erdoğan unreservedly during the coup attempt. (Hürriyet Daily News, 2016) This has had an important impact not only on Turkey's relations with the West but also on Ankara-Riyadh and Ankara-Doha relations. First of all, it was alleged that "a Saudi Emir and a top Emirati military official have been aware of an imminent plot to topple the Turkish President through their participation in the Anatolian Eagle maneuvers held in May 2016. However, they refrained from informing the Turkish authorities." (Sputnik International, 2016)

Moreover according to Al-Masdar News agency, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi supported the failed coup in Turkey. (AMN, 2016) Although Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates leadership denied those allegations, the latest rapprochement between Turkey and Iran has not been welcome by especially Riyadh.

Looking from a different angle, however, Iran has some concerns about the latest overtures of Turkey in the region. For example, Syrian regime and Iran are not very pleased with the three agreements reached on 29 December in Ankara between Turkey and Russia as those agreements, according to Tehran, lack clarity regarding the position of Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra). (Al Monitor, 2016) In a nutshell, as the situation in Syria is getting more and more obscure, Ankara and Riyadh, despite some diverging strategic interests in Syria, have been spending much effort to continue bilateral cordial relations and not to be embroiled into a further sectarian war in the Middle East. For example, during Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir's visit to Ankara in September 2016, al-Jubeir declared that Riyadh supports Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria and is very determined eliminating any Gulen movement networks in the Gulf or Saudi Arabia, al-Jubeir said, "We have very extensive cooperation with Turkey when it comes to counter-terrorism and law enforcement. And we have extensive exchanges of information between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey." (Al Arabiya English, 2016)

Currently, Turkey has been the sole regional power who has cordial relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia simultaneously despite so

many turmoil in the region. This shows that Turkey still has power and potentiality of functioning as a soft power in the region.

### **Conclusion**

The Arab spring started a new era of political relations in the region from which neither Turkey nor the GCC States and Iran can separate themselves. The game is now out of bottle and the tectonic changes have been taking place both in the foreign and domestic policies of the regional countries. Most important of all, both Turkey and the GCC States can no longer trust the United States and the NATO members as permanent allies to smooth the area as a “wait and see” approach has been applied by Washington and Brussels so far.

With the outburst of the Arab spring, Turkish and the GCC States’ political interests overlapped further especially on the basis of containment of the Iranian hegemonic aspirations in the region. In this context, toppling of Assad regime, the most important ally of Iran in its struggle against the United States and Israel by means of forming a Shiite crescent in the Levant was top common interest of Turkey and GCC, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The containment of Iranian nuclear aspirations was another main concern of both sides. Moreover, the relations with the United States of both Turkey and GCC are quite blurry and volatile for different reasons. While Turkey feels being sandwiched between Washington and Tehran, Obama’s support for Mubarak’s toppling gave the signal to Riyadh that Washington might make a volte face toward the ruling families in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain or become more balanced. Saudi officials viewed US shift in Syria as an attempt which will strengthen the Iranian position and therefore “feels misled (Morris, The Washington Post, 2013). Because Trump adopted a more harsh attitude towards Iran during his campaign, Iran is not expecting betterment of the relations with Washington. This will, no doubt, have a positive impact on Saudi Arabia’s relations with the United States.

Last but not least, Turkey and GCC were both uneasy about the increasing Iranian influence in Iraq under Maliki who feared that in case majority Sunnis take power in a post-Assad Syria, an alliance between the Sunnis of Syria and Iraq could undermine his leadership (The Jordan Times, 2013). Currently, Iran is highly influential over the central

government in Baghdad especially after “Maliki’s Reform Group captured 100 out of total 328 seats in parliament, which made the Tehran-friendly Maliki the most powerful person in parliament. Iraqi parliament decided that Turkish military presence at Beshiqa Camp 15km outside Mosul-for training Iraqi forces to fight ISIS, which was in fact requested by Prime Minister al-Abadi-was now an “occupying force” (Ataş, 2016) These developments in Iraq also reveal competing/diverging interests of both sides (Turkey and Iran) in the region (Daily Sabah, 2016).

From Ankara’s perspective, Iraq’s independence and territorial integrity is of immense importance in order to keep regional balance of power in the Gulf and the Middle East, therefore, maintaining close ties with the GCC States on security-containing Iranian nuclear and hegemonic ambitions-currently outweighs the economic benefits Turkey receives from the GCC States. However the danger emanating from this partnership is the strategic encirclement of Iran and Iraq on the basis of sectarian divergence which will make harder for Ankara to maintain the current level of cordial ties to Tehran and create further strains in Ankara-Tehran relations so as to damage Turkey’s energy security. Currently Turkey seeks to mend relations with Iraq under al-Abadi. For example, “the two reached some sort of an understanding, if not an agreement, during a two-day visit by Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım to Iraq. Although the details are still unknown, both Yıldırım and his Iraqi counterpart, Haider al-Abadi, expressed their intention to overcome the difficulties between the two countries with special emphasis on the mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2017). This shows that Ankara has been extremely cautious not to overly antagonize Iran and Iraq in the region at a time when the deployment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to the zone that extends from eastern Syria to north-Western Iraq erased the current Syrian- Iraqi frontier.

The new power struggle in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Middle East led to an “intra-Muslim Cold War” (Kalın, Daily Sabah, 2014) through sectarian tensions and identity politics. In such a sectarian and identity based war atmosphere, Turkey has no option but to keep cordial relations with both Shiite Iran and the Sunni GCC States. This absolutely requires to keep “sichtum” until the optimal time to speak arrives as Syrian crisis has already clarified that Turkey’s soul searching in its foreign policy which was described as “new activism” has become too costly.

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