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Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how Turkey's bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar have changed after the Arab Spring erupted and assesses how the Syrian conflict affected them. The paper argues that Turkey had developed excellent relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the 2000s, but eventually fell out with Saudi Arabia and strengthened its relations with Qatar as the Arab Spring unfolded. The Syrian conflict, in which the three countries colluded to overthrow the Assad regime, has alleviated the deleterious impact of the differences between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the bilateral relations or, to put it in another way, slowed down the deterioration of Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations. The paper also argues that the geopolitical landscape that pushed Turkey and Saudi Arabia apart also pushed Turkey and Qatar closer.

Keywords: Syrian Crisis, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bilateral Relations.

Katar ve Suudi Arabistan Arasında Türkiye: Değişen Bölgesel ve İkili İlişkiler

ÖZET

Bu makale Türkiye'nin Suudi Arabistan ve Katar'la ikili ilişkilerinin Arap Baharının ortaya çıkmasının ardından nasıl değiştiğini tartışmaktadır. Makale özellikle Suriye Krizinin Türkiye'nin iki ülke olan ilişkilerini nasıl etkilediğini ele almaktadır. Türkiye'nin Suudi Arabistan ve Katar'la ilişkileri 2000'li yıllar boyunca güçlenirken, Arap Baharı boyunca Suudi Arabistan'la olan ilişkileri kötüleşmiş, Katar'la ilişkileri ise daha da güçlenmiştir. Öte yandan Suriye Krizi boyunca üç ülkenin de Esad rejimini yıkmak için işbirliği yapması, Arap Baharı'nın Türkiye-Suudi Arabistan ilişkileri üzerine olan negatif etkisini hafifletmiş ya da ilişkilerin kötüleşmesi sürecini yavaşlatmıştır. Ayrıca Türkiye'nin Suudi Arabistan'la ilişkilerini kötüleştiren jeopolitik zemin, Türkiye ile Katar'ı birbirine daha da yakınlaştırmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Krizi, Katar, Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan, İkili İlişkiler.

“They will not be able to divide as long as there is a king called King Salman bin Abdul Aziz and a crown prince named Muhammed bin Salman, and a president in Turkey named Erdoğan.” This was the first ever reaction of Muhammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s powerful crown prince, to the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist, in the consulate of his own country in Istanbul on 2 October 2018. The prince, who was then, and still is, widely criticized and even held directly responsible for the journalist’s murder, must have been sarcastic. At the time he uttered the above statement Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations had been at their historical lows. To use the prince’s metaphor, there was already a divide between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and that divide was widening and deepening. Consider that Saudi Arabia established communication with Turkey-designated terrorist group, the YPG,¹ in May 2018 and even pledged to contribute \$100 million to the US for use in the YPG-controlled Northeast Syria three months later.²

Eight years ago, however, things were entirely different: Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations had been in their historical highs, a bright future in the bilateral relations seemed to be laying ahead. In March 2010, Turkey’s then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, received from the hands of the then king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the Kingdom’s highly prestigious ‘King Faisal International Prize for Service to Islam’. The press release announcing the prize boasted Erdoğan for his “judicious leadership in the Islamic world,” and “unyielding position on various Islamic and global issues.” The press release also stated that Erdoğan gained “the respect of the entire Islamic nation and the rest of the world” and “rendered an outstanding service to Islam by fiercely defending the rights and just causes of the Islamic nation, particularly the rights of the Palestinian people.”³ Almost two years after this award ceremony, both countries, joined by Qatar, began to collude to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria.

As Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations have been deteriorated in the last eight years, Turkey-Qatar relations have improved almost beyond recognition: the two countries can safely be considered each other’s closest allies in the region. When Saudi Arabia imposed a total blockade on Qatar in June 2017, Turkey strongly stood by the tiny emirate, sending planes of food supplies and speedily passing a law in the parliament to deploy troops in Qatar. In spite of Saudi Arabia’s dislike, Turkey still keeps a military base in Qatar and Qatar heavily invests in Turkey.⁴

This paper traces how and why Turkey’s bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken different paths in the last eight years and assesses how the Syrian crisis impacted the relations. The paper claims that if Turkey and Saudi Arabia had not colluded to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations would have taken a downturn much earlier than they actually did in the post-Arab spring geopolitical landscape. To put it in another way, the fact that Turkey and Saudi Arabia colluded in the Syrian crisis alleviated the deleterious impact on Saudi-Turkey relations of the

1 “Suudi Arabistan’dan YPG/PKK ile çalışan Arap güçlere destek”, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 28 May 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suudi-arabistandan-ypg-pkk-ile-calisan-arap-guclere-destek/1158870>, (Accessed on 20 March 2019).

2 “Saudi Arabia says it’s given \$100 million to northeast Syria”, *the Associated Press*, 17 August 2018. <https://www.apnews.com/606bf9d92f724c56a49a7f520e1bfdfb>, (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

3 The press release is available at <http://kfiip.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SI-2010-PR.pdf> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

4 “Qatar’s investment in Turkey crosses \$20 bn”, *the Peninsula*, 19 July 2018, [https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/19/07/2018/Qatar%E2%80%99s-investment-in-Turkey-crosses-\\$20bn](https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/19/07/2018/Qatar%E2%80%99s-investment-in-Turkey-crosses-$20bn), (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

new geopolitical realities that the Arab Spring created. The same geopolitical landscape also pushed Turkey and Qatar closer.

After Russia militarily intervened in Syria in September 2015 and effectively negated all the progress Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey made towards realizing their objective of overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria, the Syrian crisis became by and large irrelevant in driving Turkey's bilateral relations with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Since then the broader geopolitical context is almost singly responsible for the turns the relations have taken.

The paper first briefly discusses Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the 2000s. It then takes a look at how Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia came to collude to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. Finally, the paper elaborates how the bilateral relations among the three countries have changed in response to some major developments in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

Before the Arab Spring

Turkey had worked to nurture robust relations with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the 2000s.⁵ Until the end of 2010, for example, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Saudi Arabia nine times, once in 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2009, and twice in 2006 and 2010 and Qatar thrice in 2005, 2008 and 2010. Turkey's president Abdullah Gul also paid visits to Saudi Arabia in 2009 and Qatar in 2008. The rulers of both countries reciprocated these visits: King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia visited Turkey twice in 2006 and 2007 and Sheikh Hamad of Qatar once in 2009.⁶ It is noteworthy that King Abdullah's visit in 2006 came forty years after the last visit of any Saudi king.

In the same period Turkey could expand its trade with these two Gulf countries.⁷ Turkey's exports to Saudi Arabia, for example, increased fourfold from \$554 million in 2002 to \$2.2 billion and imports from Saudi Arabia tenfold from \$120 million in 2002 to \$1.3 billion in 2010. Turkey's exports to Qatar, on the other hand, increased close to eleven fold from \$15 million in 2002 to \$162 million in 2010 and imports from Qatar seventeen fold from \$10 million in 2002 to \$177 million in 2010. Turkey also succeeded to attract foreign capital from these two countries: Saudi Arabia and Qatar had been in the top 20 top countries that had directly invested in Turkey in the period 2002-2010.⁸

5 Turkey had no troubled relations with both countries until then and had often adopted similar stances on global and regional developments.

6 Muhammed Berdibek, "Türkiye-Ortadoğu İlişkilerinde Karşılıklı Üst Düzey Ziyaretler: (1923-2014)", *Akademik Ortadoğu*, Vol.10, No.2, 2016, p.73-89.

7 "T.C. Başbakanlık Kanun Tasarısı, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ve Körfez Arap Ülkeleri İşbirliği Konseyi Üyesi Ülkeler Arasında Ekonomik İşbirliğine İlişkin Çerçeve Anlaşma", 27 October 2005, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/d23/1/1-0322.pdf> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

8 The data on Foreign Direct Investments are available at <https://www.tcmb.gov.tr> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

Table 1. Turkey's Trade Relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar (in million \$)

	Exports		Imports	
	2002	2010	2002	2010
Saudi Arabia	554	2217	120	1380
Qatar	15	162	10	177
Total	569	2379	130	1557

Source: Turkish Statistics Institute, <http://www.tuik.gov.tr>

Since the 1980s Turkey especially sought to strengthen its trade relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf countries to expand its exports and attract capital from the region.⁹ Therefore the JDP had simply worked to expand the already existing relations Turkey had. But, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) governments had also strived to expand Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf countries beyond economic relations. In 2004, for example, Turkey led the launching of a NATO initiative, known as the Istanbul Initiative, to develop close cooperation in the field of security with the Middle East. Among those invited to join the initiative were also Saudi Arabia and Qatar, only the latter responding positively.¹⁰

A historical milestone in the relations, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), of which Saudi Arabia and Qatar are members, declared Turkey a strategic partner on September 2, 2008. It is noteworthy that this was the GCC's first such declaration of any country as a strategic partner. The GCC also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Turkey, which instituted annual meetings of High Level Strategic Dialogue to consult on political, economic, defense, security and cultural matters.¹¹

It should be added, however, that in the 2000s Turkey and Qatar had actually shared more than what they shared with Saudi Arabia. For example, both Turkey and Qatar had exceptional relations with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, developed working and even cordial relations with Iran, recognized Hamas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and finally nurtured outstanding relations with the Assad regime in Syria. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, differed from both Turkey and Qatar on all these issues. It had suspected the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology at least since the 1990s, saw in Iran a geopolitical rival and was alarmed by its nuclear program and increasing sphere of influence in places such as Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, was more pro-Fatah than Hamas in Palestine and finally had tension-full relations with the Assad regime for being Iran's main Arab ally and its meddling in Lebanon.¹²

Throughout the 2000s these differences had visibly no negative impact on Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia. With the Arab Spring the contrast began to matter and eventually affected the

9 See Birol Başkan, "Between geopolitics and economics: Turkey's relations with the Gulf", Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim (Eds.), *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

10 The other four Gulf countries were also invited to join the initiative. See the information provided by NATO at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_58787.htm (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

11 Mariam Al Hakeem, "GCC Names Turkey First Strategic Partner Outside the Gulf", *Gulf News*, 3 September 2008, <https://www.pressreader.com/uae/gulf-news/20080904/281814279662725> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

12 For an elaboration of these points, see Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.

relations. What prevented a total deterioration in Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations was their collusion in the Syrian crisis/civil war.

The Arab Spring and the Formation of the Tripartite Alliance in Syria

The Arab Spring, as it came to be so called, first erupted in Tunisia in December 2010 and then spread to other Arab countries in the succeeding months. Its waves also reached Syria, street protests first erupting in early March 2011 in a peripheral town, Daraa and then spreading to others with some time lag. The regime introduced some limited reforms to appease the protestors, but eventually resorted to violence. By late April the regime's violence had already been fully unleashed.

Yet, the regime's brutality triggered mass defection of especially Sunni soldiers and officers from the army. The defecting officers and soldiers had not dropped their weapons, but rather turned them against the regime, leading the formation of armed rebel groups. Civilians also joined these rebel groups or formed their own rebel groups. As armed rebel groups formed in Syria several defected officers founded in summer of 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to coordinate rebel groups against the regime, with which many rebel groups inside Syria eventually came to associate themselves.¹³

There also emerged other rebel groups, which had remained outside the Free Syrian Army (FSA) all along. Most significant rebel groups in this category were ideologically Salafi-Jihadist, most significant ones to be *Ahrar al-Sham* (the freemen of the Levant) and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (the Victory Front).¹⁴ *Jabhat Al-Nusra* is to be further distinguished within this category as an extension of *Al-Qaeda* (the Base), or more correctly, of *Al-Qaeda's* Iraq branch, which later became the notorious the Islamic State, or ISIS. Yet many other Salafi-Jihadist groups, most notably *Ahrar al-Sham*, were home grown, formed predominantly by the Syrian Salafis, some of whom, however, might have personal histories and connections with *Al-Qaeda*.

In the face of this unfolding crisis in Syria, Turkey had painfully avoided taking a decisive stance in the early months in large part because it had enviably cordial relations with Syria before the Arab Spring.¹⁵ It had therefore kept channels of communication with the regime and encouraged it to undertake political reforms. By the end of the summer Turkey's hopes that the regime would introduce reforms were ended with a frustration. In November 2011, nine months after the protests started, Turkey made its first call to the Syrian President to step down and introduced a number of sanctions against the regime. Four months later, in March 2012, Turkey closed its embassy in Syria and in May 2012 expelled Syria's diplomats.

13 For a succinct account of the history of the FSA, see Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand", *The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper, No.26, November 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army.pdf (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

14 For a detailed account of the emergence of these groups, see Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

15 On Turkey's changing rhetoric on and policy towards the Syrian crisis/conflict, see Gencer Özcan, "If the Crisis is What We Make of It: Turkey and the Uprisings in Syria", Fuat Aksu and Helin Sarı Ertem (Eds.), *Analyzing Foreign Policy Crises in Turkey: Conceptual, Theoretical and Practical Discussions*, Cambridge Publishing House, 2017, p.178-198.

Like Turkey, Qatar had also nurtured cordial relations with Syria before the Arab Spring and therefore had difficulty in making a decisive choice. In the early months Qatar had been mostly silent. Only after the pro-regime protesters attacked Qatar's embassy in Damascus in July 2011, Qatar closed its embassy and withdrew its ambassador. By the end of the summer Qatar began to be more active. In November 2011 it successfully maneuvered in the Arab League to suspend Syria's membership and impose a series of economic sanctions. Two months later, in January 2012, Qatar called other Arab states to intervene militarily in the Syrian conflict.¹⁶

Saudi Arabia had faced less serious a dilemma in Syria as it saw the Assad regime as Iran's main ally in the Arab World and Syria's meddling in Lebanon counter to its own interests. Joshua Jacobs captures it well: "toppling Assad and replacing his regime with a more ideologically symmetric Sunni Islamist government would thus be the greatest possible prize in Saudi Arabia's struggle with its Persian foe. Not only would it remove Iran's greatest Arab ally, but it could potentially sever Tehran's connection to Hezbollah and Hamas."¹⁷

Still Saudi Arabia needed time to take any stance on the unfolding Syrian crisis. Unlike Turkey and Qatar, Saudi Arabia was much more reserved in embracing the Arab Spring. The rulers of Saudi Arabia were concerned that the Arab Spring might embolden the opposition and even instigate the street protests inside the Kingdom. Indeed, many independent religious figures in Saudi Arabia enthusiastically welcomed the Arab Spring and even celebrated the overthrow of Zein Al-Abidin bin Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. Yet, for Saudi Arabia these rulers were the main pillars of the *status quo* in the region and more critically Egypt under Hosni Mubarak was its prime ally against Iran. Furthermore, the street protests that erupted in Bahrain and Yemen also kept Saudi Arabia busy in the first year of the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia especially stood politically and financially behind Bahrain and even militarily helped the regime suppress the protesters. Saudi Arabia's most dramatic action against Syria, therefore, came one year after the Arab Spring erupted. In February 2012, Saudi Arabia led other Gulf States to recall their ambassadors from Damascus and expel Syria's ambassadors.¹⁸

Severing diplomatic ties with the Assad regime was rather the easier part of the decision. More critical decision to be taken was of course what kind and level of support to extend to the armed rebel groups. As early as the summer of 2011 Turkey actually allowed the formation of the FSA in its territory. The FSA continued to coordinate the rebel activities inside Syria from Turkey in the ensuing months.¹⁹ But, it is unclear when Turkey began to provide actual weapons and money to the rebels. By the beginning of 2012, however, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey seemed to have independently or jointly come to the conclusion that the regime of Bashar Assad must go, or, if necessary, be brought down. By March 2012 they had begun to extend the financial

16 "Emir of Qatar Favors Arab Troops in Syria", *CBS News*, 15 January 2012, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/emir-of-qatar-favors-arab-troops-in-syria> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

17 Joshua Jacobs, "The danger that Saudi Arabia will turn Syria into an Islamist hotbed", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12 April 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/0412/The-danger-that-Saudi-Arabia-will-turn-Syria-into-an-Islamist-hotbed> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

18 "Gulf states recalling ambassadors in Syria", *Reuters*, 7 February 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-syria/gulf-states-recalling-ambassadors-in-syria-idUSTRE81618C20120207> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

19 "2011'den 2018'e Özgür Suriye Ordusu'nun dönüşümü", *BBC*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-42862756> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

and military support to the rebel groups in Syria, the FSA serving as their focal point to reach out to the rebel groups.²⁰

Yet, this outside financial and military support proved to be detrimental for the viability of the FSA as more and more rebel groups formed and vied for the rather easy, but limited resources these states provided. Coordination among ever-increasing number of armed groups became more and more a challenging task. As the FSA could not transform itself into a monolithic organization or a genuine army with a hierarchical chain of command, it rather became a label otherwise independent rebel groups adopted or dropped at will.²¹

The Rise of the Salafi-Jihadist Groups in Syria

By the end of 2012, the FSA had declined as a major fighting force in Syria and in its stead Salafi-Jihadist groups, such as, *Suqour al-Sham* (the Falcons of the Levant), *Jabhat al-Nusra*, *Ahrar al-Sham*, filled in the ensuing vacuum. These groups had enjoyed certain advantages that the FSA had not. First, they were ideologically more committed than the FSA, claiming to be fighting an infidel regime in the path of God and could therefore better motivate its fighters. Second, the Salafi-Jihadists were simply better at providing social services and local governance, hence therefore, could deepen their roots in the society by improving the daily lives of the ordinary people. Finally, Salafi-Jihadist groups had benefitted from their access to the international pool of kin groups elsewhere. They could therefore not only recruit fighters from, but also raise funds in other countries.

A number of journalistic reports suggest that Turkey and Qatar had at the very least benignly neglected the funding and recruitment activities inside their territories undertaken for Salafi-Jihadist groups in Syria.²² To be added as well is that Turkey had become a major transit road for international jihadists and turned a blind eye to their logistical efforts, such as, medical treatment inside its territories.²³ Saudi Arabia was more reserved than Turkey and Qatar in allowing Salafi-Jihadi networks to mobilize fighters and funds for what they called 'jihad' in Syria. In this vein Saudi Arabia took action in late May 2012 against private attempts to raise funds for Syria, for example, banning a private campaign to collect money for Syria and urged its citizens to deliver their aids through official channels instead.²⁴ In early June 2012, a member of the Saudi state's highest official religious body, Senior Council of Religious Scholars, stated that it was religiously forbidden to travel from Saudi Arabia to Syria to fight the regime, unless not forbidden by the authorities. A few months later, a security spokesman of the Interior Ministry openly stated, "it's illegal to go abroad and get involved in any ... military actions or fighting" and warned those who went to Syria that they could be investigated.²⁵

20 See Lister, "The Free Syrian Army", p.7.

21 Lister names eighty different groups affiliated with the FSA. The total number of FSA groups is most likely higher than this number. See the list in Lister, "The Free Syrian Army", p.34-38.

22 Elizabeth Dickinson, "The Case Against Qatar", *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/> (Accessed on 19 February 2019); Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey", *The New York Times*, 15 September 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

23 Doğu Eroğlu, "Jihadist Clinic on Turkey's Syrian Border", 22 September 2014, <http://dogueroglu.com/jihadist-clinic-on-turkeys-syrian-border/> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

24 Aron Lund, "Syrian Jihadism", *Swedish Institute of International Affairs UIbrief*, No.13, 14 September 2012, p.19, <http://www.sultan-alamer.com/wp-content/uploads/77409.pdf> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

25 Asma Alsharif and Amena Bakr, "Saudi steers citizens away from Syrian 'jihad'", *Reuters*, 12 September 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-syria-jihad-idUSBRE88B0XY20120912> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

Saudi Arabia's reluctance is understandable for it had faced a spiral of religion-inspired violence in 2003-2006, undertaken by a branch of *Al-Qaeda* called *Al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula. It turned out that most *Al-Qaeda* members who unleashed this violence on Westerners and security forces were those who went to Afghanistan in the second half of the 1990s to wage 'jihad' elsewhere, but came back to Saudi Arabia disgruntled after the US invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. The government of Saudi Arabia had worked and invested billions in its security forces to stop the violence and totally destroy the Salafi-Jihadi network inside the Kingdom.²⁶ Allowing mobilization inside Saudi Arabia for the Syrian conflict would simply re-energize whatever network Salafi-Jihadists had left inside the Kingdom. This does not suggest, however, that Saudi Arabia would be worried about similar mobilization elsewhere, be it in Qatar, Kuwait or Turkey, and make this an issue with these countries then. Hence, Turkey's and Qatar's rather benign neglect towards the Salafi-Jihadists could not do much harm to the relations. Yet, beyond Syria there was a critical development that would.²⁷

The Muslim Brotherhood Problem

The Arab Spring swept away old autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the political parties and figures affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood came to acquire a new prominence. In Egypt, the Brotherhood's political gains reached a peak. More spectacularly, the Brotherhood-affiliated Muhammed Morsi became elected in June 2012 to the presidency of Egypt.

Having excellent relations with the Brotherhood movement both Turkey and Qatar were content with the rise of the Brotherhood in Egypt and sought to capitalize on it, rushing to provide all diplomatic, economic and financial aid they could to Egypt. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, was concerned about the rise of the Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia had no formal Brotherhood branch, but had Islamist groups, some of which owed great intellectual debt to the Brotherhood, and the rise of the Brotherhood could embolden these groups. More importantly, perhaps, the Brotherhood could steer Egypt, its most valuable and long-time ally, Egypt, away from Saudi Arabia.²⁸

Fortunately for Saudi Arabia the Egyptian military staged a coup and overthrew Muhammed Morsi in early July 2013. When the Brotherhood refused to acknowledge the coup, the military initiated a brutal crackdown: many Brotherhood leaders were jailed and many others escaped Egypt. Turkey openly and harshly criticized the coup and the ensuing brutal crackdown on the protesters. Turkey's continued criticisms led even to a total collapse in Turkey's relations with Egypt: in late November 2013, Egypt declared Turkey's ambassador *persona non grata* and asked him to leave

26 Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

27 More detailed version of the following discussion can be found in Baskan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*.

28 On Saudi Arabia's position see "Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood: Unexpected Adversaries", *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 5 March 2012, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/saudi-arabia-and-muslim-brotherhood-unexpected-adversaries> (Accessed on 24 March 2019); Angus McDowall, "Rise of Muslim Brotherhood frays Saudi-Egypt ties", *Reuters*, 1 May 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-egypt-brotherhood/rise-of-muslim-brotherhood-frays-saudi-egypt-ties-idUSBRE8400ZM20120501> (Accessed on 24 March 2019); Giorgio Cafiero, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar: Dueling Monarchies", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 26 September 2012, https://fpif.org/saudi_arabia_and_qatar_dueling_monarchies (Accessed on 24 March 2019); Alain Gresh, "Gulf cools towards Muslim Brothers", *Le Monde Diplomatique -English Edition*, November 2012, <https://mondediplo.com/2012/11/02egypt> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

Egypt and also reduced the diplomatic representation in Turkey to *chargé d'affaires* level. Turkey also welcomed a number of the Brotherhood leaders who escaped Egypt and even let them run TV channels inside Turkey.²⁹

Qatar was less vocal in his criticisms of the military coup, even sent a letter of congratulations to the interim president, Adly Mahmoud Mansour. But Qatar was openly critical of the military's brutal crackdown on the protesters. More critically, Qatar became a safe haven for many Brotherhood leaders who escaped from Egypt and let its local media and Al-Jazeera openly criticize the military and the crackdown on the protesters. Qatar also condemned Egypt when the latter declared the Muslim Brotherhood terrorist in December 2013.³⁰

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, differed from Turkey and Qatar in its reaction to the military coup as it criticized neither the coup nor the crackdown. Going beyond recognizing the legitimacy of the coup, Saudi Arabia also extended generous financial aid to Egypt in the aftermath of the crisis. Saudi Arabia also differed from Turkey and Qatar in that while the two welcomed the Brotherhood leaders, Saudi Arabia declared the movement terrorist in March 2014.³¹

The Egyptian coup and its aftermath inescapably affected bilateral relations among Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.³² Having adopted similar stances Turkey and Qatar forged a special relationship in the aftermath of the coup: the sides signed a military cooperation agreement and agreed to form High Level Strategic Council in late 2014. It is illustrative that Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim visited Turkey four times in 2014, reciprocated by two visits by President Erdoğan in September and December in the same year. Saudi Arabia's relations with Qatar, on the other hand, seriously deteriorated and finally collapsed in March 2014 when the Kingdom withdrew from Doha its ambassador along with two other Gulf countries, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia did not collapse: Turkey's President Abdullah Gül even visited Saudi Arabia in October 2013. Yet, the relations visibly cooled down. Throughout 2014 Saudi Arabia had paid no high level visit to Turkey, except that Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs attended President Erdoğan's inauguration dinner in August 2014. More significantly, perhaps, the fifth joint ministerial meeting of the Turkey-GCC High Level Strategic Dialogue has not been held since the last one held in 2012. It was also rumored that Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, had led a campaign in 2014 against Turkey's candidacy for a non-permanent membership seat in the UN Security Council.³³

29 Shaimaa Magued, "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's transnational advocacy in Turkey: a new means of political participation", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.45, No.3, 2018, p.480-497.

30 "UPDATE 2- Egypt summons Qatari envoy after criticisms of crackdown", *Reuters*, 4 January 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/04/egypt-brotherhood-qatar-idUSL6N0KE0SS20140104> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

31 "Saudi Arabia declares Muslim Brotherhood 'terrorist group'", *BBC*, 7 March 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26487092> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

32 For more detailed discussions, see Muhittin Ataman and İsmail Akdoğan, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri ve Ürdün Politikası", Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnät and Ali Balcı (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yıllığı 2013*, SETA, 2014; İsmail Akdoğan, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri ve Yemen Politikası 2014", Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnät and Ali Balcı (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yıllığı 2014*, SETA, 2015.

33 Benny Avni, "Turkey Loses U.N. Security Council Seat in Huge Upset", *Newsweek*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.newsweek.com/venezuela-malaysia-angola-new-zealand-win-un-council-seats-277962> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

Even though Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had to tackle with the diplomatic fallout following the military coup in Egypt, they still had to collude in sustaining the anti-Assad fight in Syria. They continued to provide money and arms to the rebels in Syria; in fact, Saudi Arabia began to provide heavier weapons in early 2013 to what it considered moderate rebels.³⁴ In this period Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia also worked together to put more pressure on the armed rebel groups to merge and form bigger groups, such as, the Islamic Front and the Syrian Revolutionary Front so that they could more effectively stand against the ISIS, which had become even more serious challenge for the rebel groups than the Assad regime was.

Yet, it is difficult to assess how effectively Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had coordinated their efforts to sustain the rebels. To say the least, it was during this period that the FSA lost its lead in the fight against the Assad regime and that Salafi-Jihadi groups came to prominence its stead. It was also during this period that the regime began to recover its strength and advance against the rebels: this became possible thanks to the support it received from Iran and Hizballah. It was also possible thanks to the fact that a new actor entered Syria, the ISIS. Originated as Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq in the aftermath of the US invasion, the ISIS sent a few of its members in the summer of 2011 to Syria to join the fight against the Assad regime. Thus was founded *Jabhat al-Nusra*. But, as *Jabhat al-Nusra* grew in strength and began to act more independently, the ISIS directly intervened in Syria in May 2013 and in the succeeding months took control over a sizable portion of territory formerly held by the rebels. However, the direct entry of the ISIS into Syria did not help the rebel cause at all; quite the opposite, it seriously undermined the rebel cause as the ISIS targeted other rebel groups more than the regime.

Changing Regional Landscape

By the summer of 2014 the military regime in Egypt appeared to be consolidated and the Muslim Brotherhood seemed no longer to be a major concern. That summer saw the spectacular territorial advance the ISIS made in Iraq,³⁵ which pressured Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey once again turn their attention to the Syrian conflict. More specifically, it gave them the opportunity to make a case that while the ISIS was a problem, the Assad regime in Syria was its root cause. In an interview with CNN, Sheikh Tamim of Qatar, for example, said "The main cause of all this is the regime in Syria and this regime should be punished."³⁶ Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, also made a similar point: In Syria, he said, "there is a terrorist organization [the ISIS], but there is also Assad who spread state terror. It is not possible that an approach that does not take a stand against the Assad regime ... can fight ISIS."³⁷ Saudi Arabia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saud al-Faisal, proposed similar point: defeating the ISIS required, in Saud Al Faisal's

34 Amena Bakr, "Saudi supplying missiles to Syria rebels: Gulf sources," *Reuters*, 17 June 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-missiles-saudi/saudi-supplying-missiles-to-syria-rebels-gulf-source-idUSBRE95G0DK20130617> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

35 On ISIS, see Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, New York, Regan Arts, 2015.

36 Mick Krever, "Qatar's Emir: We don't fund terrorists," *CNN*, 25 September 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/qatar-emir/index.html> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

37 "Suriye'de sadece Kobani yok", *DHA*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.habervitrini.com/erdogan-suriyede-sadece-kobani-yok/260092> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

view, “combat troops on the ground.” To this end, al-Faisal claimed, “there is an urgent need to strengthen the forces of moderation represented in the Syrian free army and all other moderate opposition forces.”³⁸

Once again, therefore, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey found themselves on the same page. Mending of ties soon ensued. In November 2014, for example, Saudi Arabia sent its ambassador back to Doha, thus bringing to an end seven-month-old crisis. Two months later, in January 2015, Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, visited Saudi Arabia to attend the funeral of King Abdullah. This was Erdoğan’s first ever visit to Saudi Arabia since his last visit in 2012. One month after the funeral, in late February 2015, Erdoğan was in Saudi Arabia again, now on a scheduled visit to Saudi Arabia.³⁹

It was during this last visit that Erdoğan and Salman agreed to boost their support to the Syrian opposition so as, in Erdoğan’s words, “to yield concrete results” on the ground.⁴⁰ The agreement soon bore fruits. In late April 2015, two major Salafi-Jihadi groups, *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar Al-Sham*, and a number of FSA-affiliated groups, formed *Jaish al-Fath* (The Army of Conquest). Having allegedly received significant military aid from Saudi Arabia and Turkey *Jaish Al-Fath* scored a number of critical victories against the regime both in the south and the north, for example, capturing strategic towns such as Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour.⁴¹

Four months later Russia militarily intervened in the Syria conflict and changed the balance of power in favor of the regime. As the US had occupied itself more with the ISIS than the Assad regime and refrained from countering Russia’s intervention in Syria, the rebel cause in Syria seemed to have hit a wall.⁴² Turkey’s shooting down of a Russian jet in November 2015 met with a harsh Russian reaction, which in turn limited Turkey’s capability to intervene in Syria.

Furthermore, Turkey’s Gulf allies in the Syrian crisis had been struggling with their own problems. One problem had to deal with the oil prices. Starting in the summer of 2014, oil prices began to plummet, within a matter of few months, crude oil price decreasing from \$90-105 range to \$40-60 range. The decline in oil prices forced Saudi Arabia and Qatar to introduce budget cuts. Russia’s military intervention also seemed to have undermined their morale and willingness to further invest in the rebel cause in Syria. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Yemen and failure to bring out a speedy success further strained the Kingdom’s resources.

38 “Saudi Foreign Minister: Kingdom at forefront of fighting terrorism”, *Khaleej Times*, 4 December 2014, <https://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/news/MinistryNews/Pages/ArticleID201412314527346.aspx> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

39 It must be noted that the rise of the Houthis in Yemen must have played a more critical role in softening Saudi Arabia towards Qatar and Turkey.

40 “Erdoğan ve Selman Suriye için anlaştı”, *Takvim*, 2 March 2014, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2015/03/02/erdogan-ve-selman-suriye-icin-anlasti> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

41 Lina Sinjab, “Syria: How a new rebel unity is making headway against the regime”, *BBCNews*, 1 May 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32540436> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

42 On the reasons behind Turkey’s shooting down of a Russian jet, see Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk: Türkiye Rusya İlişkilerinin Değişen Dinamiği*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017, p.269-298.

Despite the unfavorable course of the Syrian crisis Turkey's relations with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar had still improved in the succeeding months.⁴³ Turkey and Saudi Arabia exchanged high level visits: King Salman visited Turkey in November 2015 to attend the G20 meeting and again in April 2016. Turkey's President visited Saudi Arabia in December 2015, the third one in the same year. During these meetings the sides signed a number of agreements in the diverse fields, including in military. It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia and Turkey joined to four different military exercises in 2016 and formed a partnership in a defense company, called Saudi Arabia Defense Electronics.⁴⁴

Turkey's already special relations with Qatar had further improved in this period, the sides exchanging a number of high-level visits and signing a number of agreements. Historically unprecedented, in one of these agreements signed in late 2015, the sides even agreed to Turkey's deployment of troops in Qatar to improve military cooperation. Turkey indeed built a military base in Qatar in 2016.⁴⁵

The Rise of the PYD and the Second Gulf Crisis

In the meantime, Russia's military intervention in Syria and the US's prioritization of defeating the ISIS provided the PKK-affiliated PYD a valuable opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in Northern Syria as it fought against the ISIS and thus turned itself into a useful ground force for the US in the latter's fight against the ISIS. The rise of the PYD alarmed Turkey. In retrospect, however, the rise of the PYD in Syria also provided Turkey a legitimate cause to militarily intervene in the Syrian conflict.

First Turkey reconciled with Russia in June 2016.⁴⁶ Two months later it militarily intervened in the Syrian conflict and effectively prevented the PYD's westward territorial expansion. More than a year later in January 2018, Turkey made another military incursion into Syria and expelled the PYD from its westernmost conclave in Northern Syria, Afrin. While targeting directly the PYD, Turkey also included the Syrian rebel forces in its military incursions and in the administration of these newly captured territories. By investing in the military and administrative capacity of the Syrian rebel forces and engaging in some welfare improving activities in territories it captured Turkey seemed to be actively helping the Syrian rebels build their own states in Northern Syria.⁴⁷

While Saudi Arabia kept its silence over both military interventions of Turkey in Northern Syria, Qatar announced its diplomatic support for the second intervention. Both countries should

43 For more detailed discussions, see Akdoğan, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri ve Yemen Politikası 2014"; Ahmet Üçağaç, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri Politikası 2015", Burhanettin Duran and Kemal İnat (Eds.) *Türk Dış Politikası Yılığ 2015*, İstanbul, SETA, 2016; İsmail Akdoğan and Ahmet Üçağaç, Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri Politikası 2016", Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnat and Mustafa Caner (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yılığ 2016*, İstanbul, SETA, 2017.

44 "Turkey's ASELSAN, Saudi TAQNIYA form joint venture", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 27 December 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/turkeys-aselsan-saudi-taqnia-form-joint-venture/715224> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

45 "Seeing shared threats, Turkey sets up military base in Qatar", *Reuters*, 28 April 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-turkey-military-idUSKCN0XP2IT> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

46 Krishnadev Calamur, "Turkey and Russia Reconcile", *The Atlantic*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/turkey-russia/488900> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

47 Serhat Erkmen, "6 Ay Sonra Zeytin Dalı Operasyonu ve Afrin", *Ortadoğu Analiz*, Vol.9, No.84, Ekim-Kasım 2018, p.61-62; Necdet Özçelik and Can Acun, "Rapor: Terörle Mücadelede Yeni Safha", *SETA*, 2018.

not, however, have any compelling reason to be worried about Turkey's intervention. As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia must have been relieved for such an intervention would definitely prolong the Syrian conflict and therefore potentially exhaust Iran's and the Assad regime's energies. Still though it is much safer to assume that the Syrian conflict has ceased to be a salient issue in driving Turkey's bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

More critical factor was the broader geopolitical context, which has been shaped and re-shaped at least since the 1979 Iranian Revolution by the ebbing and flowing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As discussed above the rise to prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood in several Arab countries troubled Saudi Arabia for it could revitalize the domestic Islamist opposition. Yet, Saudi Arabia was also troubled by the potential international complications, especially the formation of a regional bloc by the states allegedly sympathetic to the Brotherhood. King Abdullah of Jordan as a matter of fact prophesized precisely that in March 2013 when he stated, "I see a Muslim Brotherhood crescent developing in Egypt and Turkey."⁴⁸ Saudi Arabia saw in this a development that could also undermine its efforts to isolate and weaken Iran for the Kingdom suspected that the Brotherhood members felt sympathy towards Iran.

Qatar's alleged support and sympathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood had already created a crisis in 2014, which as mentioned above had to be shelved in the same year. By the summer of 2017, the Syrian cause seemed to be lost, the term of the Obama administration ended, and the US-led international coalition dealt a fatal blow to the ISIS. In other words, all the factors that shelved the Qatar crisis were simply gone. Saudi Arabia could revive the Qatar crisis. In June 2017, the Kingdom, joined by the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt known as the Arab Quartet severed their diplomatic ties with Qatar and took a number of punitive measures, including a total embargo on all sorts of traffic to and from Qatar.

During this second Qatar crisis Turkey adopted and since then has kept a neutral rhetoric, demanding the sides to resolve the crisis through dialogue. To this end Turkey praised Kuwait's efforts and engaged in its own extensive diplomacy. But, rhetoric aside, Turkey's actions were clearly pro-Qatar. It sent tons of food supplies to Qatar to alleviate any shortage the blockade might cause. More critically, two days after the crisis erupted, Turkey's parliament passed a law to deploy even more troops to Qatar. Turkey and Qatar also held a military exercise in August, clearly as a show of force.⁴⁹

It is illustrative that one of the demands the Arab Quartet submitted to Qatar to end the crisis was the closure of the Turkish military base in Qatar. In other words, Turkey's pro-Qatar stance must have seriously troubled Saudi Arabia and its allies. Turkey's action would eventually generate Saudi Arabia's reaction. As a matter fact very soon after the Qatar crisis erupted, Saudi Arabia held a meeting with the PYD officials in 10 June 2017. A photo of the meeting published by the pro-government newspaper in Turkey, *Yeni Şafak*, shows that the meeting was held in an office where a photo of the founder of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who is now serving a life

48 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Modern King in the Arab Spring", *The Atlantic*, April 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

49 See the discussion İsmail Akdoğan, "Türkiye'nin Körfez Ülkeleri ve Yemen Politikası", Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnat and Mustafa Caner (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yılığ 2017*, İstanbul, SETA, 2018.

sentence in prison in Turkey, was hanging on the wall.⁵⁰ Four months later, in October 2017, the Saudi minister of Gulf Affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, visited the then PYD-controlled Raqqa, with Brett McGurk, the US special envoy to the coalition against the ISIS, to discuss the reconstruction of the city.⁵¹ Just a few months after Turkey's second military incursion against the PYD, Saudi military officials, accompanied by those from the UAE and Jordan, visited a military base in the territories controlled by the PYD and met with the PYD leaders.⁵² Three months after this visit Saudi Arabia announced that it pledged to contribute \$100 million for stabilization projects in the territories formerly held by the ISIS, but now under the control of the PYD⁵³ and made the payment in October 2018.⁵⁴

All in all, therefore, there was already a deep divide between Turkey and Saudi Arabia by the time the Saudi crown prince Muhammed bin Salman claimed otherwise. That divide came into being with the eruption of the Arab Spring and has deepened in the succeeding years. There has been no dramatic collapse in bilateral diplomatic relations as the relations between Turkey and Egypt did. This was in part thanks to the role Turkey played in the ongoing Syrian drama.

Conclusion: A Speculative Big Picture

Foreign policy making in Saudi Arabia and Qatar is extremely secretive: individuals, not institutions, play highly critical roles in shaping and directing policies and they prefer not to speak much in public about what objectives they pursue and what means they employ. Therefore, any foreign policy analysis of Saudi Arabia and Qatar has to be based on anecdotal evidence empowered by deductive and speculative thinking. How academic such an analysis can get is questionable. But, unfortunately, that is all one analyst can deliver.

In terms of infrastructural means of power both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are weak states. Yet, they are also ambitious ones. Their extreme wealth thanks to oil and natural gas wealth give them overconfidence in pursuing objectives beyond their borders. To realize their objectives both Saudi Arabia and Qatar rely on proxies, most notably, religious movements. Saudi Arabia started it in the 1960s under King Faisal; the Kingdom had not only projected itself as a patron of the religious movements, but also worked to promote its own religious perspective, Wahhabi-Salafism. Yet, the Kingdom began to question the former policy in the 1990s when it began to face a religious opposition from the same groups it had extended patronage.

50 Yılmaz Bilgen, "Petrolü Paylaştılar", *Yeni Şafak*, 14 June 2017, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/petrolu-paylastilar-2720742> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

51 "Saudi minister visits north Syria for Raqqa talks", *Reuters*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-coalition/saudi-minister-visits-north-syria-for-raqqa-talks-idUSKBN1CO2HG> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

52 "Saudi-UAE-Kurdish military meeting in Northern Syria", *The Middle East Monitor*, 31 May 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180531-saudi-uae-kurdish-military-meeting-in-northern-syria> (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

53 "Saudi Arabia says it's given \$100 million to Northeast Syria".

54 John Hudson, "Saudi Arabia transfers \$100 million to U.S. amid crisis over Khashoggi", *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/saudi-arabia-transfers-100-million-to-us-amid-crisis-over-khashoggi/2018/10/17/22b23ae1-c6a4-43a4-9b7d-ce04603fa6ab_story.html?utm_term=.6d90d09312f6 (Accessed on 24 March 2019).

Starting in the mid-1990s Qatar replaced Saudi Arabia. Until then Qatar had pursued a foreign policy strongly aligned with that of Saudi Arabia. But, with the coming to power of Sheikh Hamad in 1995 and Qatar's extreme enrichment due to the export of liquefied natural gas it began to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Qatar's building ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement had been a nuisance for Saudi Arabia in the beginning. It was even desirable so Saudi Arabia could deport unwanted Brotherhood or Salafi figures to Qatar. But, the Arab Spring changed all that: as long-ruling autocrats were swept away or badly shaken and political parties and figures affiliated with the Brotherhood or the Salafi-Jihadi movement came to or were likely to gain, political prominence, Qatar began to be perceived as having gained extra-ordinary political influence across the region.

That must have alarmed both Saudi Arabia and its Gulf ally, the UAE. Both countries had striven to balance Qatar or unmake its gains in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, those countries that were badly hit by the Arab Spring. While in Libya the UAE led the project to balance Qatar, in Syria Saudi Arabia worked, rightly or wrongly perceiving the plausible gains of the Brotherhood and of the Salafi-Jihadists in Syria as those of Qatar.

It is quite plausible then that Saudi Arabia was also interested in balancing Qatar in Syria as much as overthrowing the Assad regime. Not surprisingly, from the very beginning the Syrian civilian and armed opposition complained about the lack of coordination, and even competition between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Knowingly or not Turkey has taken a role in this unfolding rivalry, one victim of which is Syria. In the years to come, not these two countries, but Turkey will suffer the most: from terrorism to refugees, a host of problems has already been troublesome for Turkey. Most likely the grave consequences of the Syrian drama will haunt Turkey in the years to come.