



# TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE QATAR CRISIS

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## Introduction

The recent shuttle diplomacy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been yet another futile attempt to resolve the ongoing crisis between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Bahrain. The resurfacing of the intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis has turned out to be another setback for Ankara's regional ambitions. Dubious and cautious about the Trump-led, anti-Iranian Arab-Israeli coalition, the Turkish preference to stand straddled between the Arabs and Iranians has lost further ground as Turkey and Qatar have voiced similar geopolitical reasoning in regional policy and formed alliances on a number of regional issues including the Syria crisis and the Palestinian question. Overall, the cornering and eventual isolation of Qatar from Arab geopolitics not only largely undermines Turkish access to the Gulf region but also dilapidates Turkey's ability to support like-minded groups and movements from Syria to Egypt and Libya.

This policy paper seeks to examine Turkish-Qatari relations against the backdrop of the unfolding Gulf crisis. It aims to understand whether this alliance will be sustainable after the Qatari crisis. The study also investigates the limits of Turkey's hard and soft power capabilities in the Middle East and GCC area by drawing on its recent advances in establishing a military base in Qatar and its mediation attempts in the crisis. It argues that Turkey's limited leverage in the crisis is due to the imbalance between hard and soft power projections and diminishing mediation capabilities in the region. As such, a more balanced and low-profile attitude would give Turkey more credibility in the region.

## Background

The Arab Spring resulted in the weakening of traditional players in the region such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the initial reluctance of the United States to interfere in the region created a power vacuum that aspiring regional players such as Turkey and Qatar have since attempted to fill. The latter was further encouraged by the short-lived U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, which created

a perception of decreased Saudi influence. While Qatar attempted to exploit this perception as a lesser but ambitious player, this sounded alarms in Saudi Arabia. Early developments of the Arab Spring also raised hopes for Turkey and Qatar about the potential winners of the uprisings. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the uprisings of Sunni groups in Syria fed into their ideological expectations. The inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood into mainstream Arab politics together with the post-Arab Spring accord to do away with regional strongmen was met with support from both Ankara and Doha as proponents of change in regional geopolitics. This stance eventually pitted both countries against the status-quoist Saudi-UAE line, which categorically opposed the overthrow of fellow dictators. With early support from the Obama administration, the Turkish-Qatari position seemed to have trumped alternative regional visions up until mid-2013.

Turkey and Qatar's foreign policies also bore similarities with respect to their independent stances during the Arab Spring. While Turkey acted rather independently of its Western allies in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, Qatar acted independently of the Gulf countries in Syria and to a certain extent in Yemen. Turkey positioned itself against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Libya, strongly favored the Muslim Brotherhood against the Sisi regime in Egypt, and supported anti-Assad groups in Syria. Qatar sided with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Yemen and also supported anti-Assad rebels in Syria.

While the conversion of interests brought Turkey and Qatar closer, it also provided Turkey with much-needed access to the Gulf region in the post-Arab Spring era. Before 2011, relations were at full speed with the Turkish-GCC Strategic Dialogue and ongoing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations. In fact, UAE-Turkey economic relations were far ahead on a bilateral basis. Access to Gulf money and investments proved an alternative source of stability to prop up Turkish economic growth against the backdrop of global recession. However, the unfolding events of the Arab Spring and the emerging differences in perceptions and interests have strained relations.

There is now an increasing perception in Turkey that the UAE has shown a willingness to perpetuate the Qatar crisis. There had been implications of Emirati involvement in anti-Turkey initiatives even before the Qatar crisis.<sup>2</sup> Yet, two developments mark a structural UAE attempt to seek escalation with Turkey: first, the UAE support for Israeli-Greek cooperation to bypass Turkey in defense and energy cooperation; second, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah's recent visit to Armenia, particularly his visit to the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan, giving a warning signal to Turkey.<sup>3</sup> While Turkey has refrained from direct confrontation with the UAE, the increased tone of animosity has the potential to spark Turkish retaliation, starting with the three islands dispute with Iran and escalating into a broader geostrategic confrontation from Libya to Syria to isolate Emirati interests.

Erdoğan, in due course, has thus adapted a pro-Qatari line towards the most recent crisis. The issue is now a priority in pro-Erdoğan media and government circles in Turkey as evident from the articles and statements defending Qatar and attacking Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There are speculations that Turkey could be next to be threatened after Qatar if this problem is not solved in a short period of time. Some even argue that Turkey is the real target and Qatar is just a diversion.<sup>4</sup> In turn, the political opposition in Turkey has questioned the Erdoğan administration for its strong support for Qatar and argues that there may be some secret reasons that motivate the Turkish government to put regional policy at risk.<sup>5</sup> As such, the crisis has also turned into yet another topic of domestic politics.

### Turkey's Hard Power in the Gulf?

The recent crisis between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition erupted against the background of already rising tensions. The coalition blames Qatar for supporting terrorist groups in the region, broadcasting propaganda on its popular news agency Al-Jazeera, and fostering close relations with Iran, an actor that is traditionally considered the primary threat to the Gulf countries.<sup>6</sup> Although the blockade of Qatar erupted suddenly, these accusations accumulated throughout the course of the Arab Spring.

While the Turkish-Qatari line has clashed with both sides of the Saudi-Iranian and U.S.-Russian geostrategic rivalries and has largely been losing ground since 2013, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that Doha is still the last stronghold of Turkish clout in the Middle East. This was the main reason why Turkey quickly sided with Qatar in the recent crisis and moved to speed up the establishment of its military base in Qatar following the recent crisis. Turkey currently has over 100 soldiers serving in Qatar, with the ultimate aim of expanding this base to hold 3,000 troops in the future. The two countries had their first joint exercise on August 1, 2017 with the participation of over 250 Turkish soldiers and 30 armored vehicles.<sup>7</sup>

The agreement to establish a military base in Qatar was signed and ratified in 2014 in an attempt to establish the first Turkish military installment in the Middle East. The deal is reciprocal and allows for the existence of Qatari army personnel and aircrafts in Turkey. This deal came to the fore at a time when Turkey-Qatar relations reached their highest level of political, economic, and energy relations. Relations were then taken to another level of cooperation with a mutual commitment to security provisions. While Ankara emphasizes that the move is not against other GCC countries and has consistently shown a willingness to find a diplomatic, and in Erdoğan's words an "Islamic," solution to the crisis, this does not alter the fact that Turkey is ready to take the next step to protect the Al-Thani regime in Qatar against an Egypt-type coup de grace.<sup>8</sup>

The question of why Turkey established a base now can be analyzed at three different levels. The first is about the waning interest of the United States in the Middle East and the Iran nuclear deal. Although a complete U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East is not the case, there is increasing concern about the commitment as well as the consistency of U.S. policy in the region. The second level of analysis is on regional relations. Regional powers have started to undertake security provider roles at various levels, such as Egyptian involvement in Libya or the Saudi-led operation against Houthis in Yemen. The Turkish military base in Qatar brings Turkey into this emerging environment with minimum risk—that is, at least it did before the current Gulf crisis. The Turkish military base is not likely to change the



regional balance of power or security architecture. Even the ultimate goal of 3,000 Turkish troops at its Qatari base would provide Turkey minimal leverage in the Gulf due to the lack of direct land, air, and sea access to Qatar.<sup>9</sup>

The third level of analysis to make sense of the military base is Turkey's domestic politics. A large part of the Justice and Development Party's propaganda to consolidate its support base has relied on the success stories derived from this foreign policy. However, "success" stories in foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, have been grim since 2011. Turkey's famous zero-problems policy and regional activism have partly failed after the Arab Spring, mainly due to the Syria crisis. The military base in Qatar would paint a new picture of success to reinforce that Turkey's new foreign policy is alive and well.

The military base in Qatar has been accompanied by another plan to establish a military base in Somalia.<sup>10</sup> Turkey aims to harness a military stronghold from the Gulf of Aden to the Arabian Gulf and keep interested parties aware that Turkey has a firm role in the security of this critical geography. This kind of foreign policy role would help divert attention away from Turkey's troubles in its neighborhood towards Turkey's opening to Africa and develop strategic ties with the Gulf.

## New Politics, Old Habits

In examining the Qatar crisis, Turkey has been limited by its dilemma of being stuck between hard- and soft-power preferences. It is rather paradoxical that Turkey seeks to provide a security guarantee for Qatar by establishing a military base in the country and holding a strictly pro-Qatari position while also offering Turkish mediation to both parties. President Erdoğan has appealed to Saudi leadership to play up to its role as "the elder brother" of the Gulf monarchies and restore relations with Qatar. To that end, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu paid visits to Doha, Kuwait City, and Riyadh in mid-June to carry messages of reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> Erdoğan then accentuated these efforts one month later by paying follow-up visits to these countries.<sup>12</sup> Ankara seems to be seek-

ing inroads to mediate the conflict; however, the Saudi-led coalition is reluctant to let Turkey play that role. It swiftly turned down Turkey's offer for mediation.

The recent Qatar crisis has further demonstrated Turkey's declining ability to bring parties to the table in the region. The coalition rather prefers Kuwait as a mediator in the unfolding conflict. The following factors may be listed as reasons for the rejection of Turkey's role as a mediator in the conflict:

- Turkey's lean towards certain groups that are considered "terrorists" by the Saudi axis, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, may have damaged its image as a neutral mediator in the region. In contrast, as a small state with limited capabilities, Kuwait has tried to maintain good relations with various actors in the region during the Arab Spring, including both Iran and Saudi Arabia. As also argued by Cafiero, Kuwait's negative experience in the Iraq War has also led it towards a more peaceful and low-profile foreign policy,<sup>13</sup> which starkly contrasts Turkey's ambitious and over-confident foreign policy in recent years.
- Turkey's directive approach to mediation efforts in the Qatar crisis could produce backlash among coalition countries. The failure of Erdoğan's recent shuttle diplomacy in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar to yield any progress could be evaluated as a consequence of this direct attitude. His attempt was also denounced by UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Mohammad Qarqash, who argued, "The Turkish president's visit did not carry anything new, and the hasty stand his country had taken made neutrality as the best option for Ankara. A Qatari review will achieve more than repeated visits."<sup>14</sup>
- The Emir of Kuwait, Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah, who is leading Kuwait's mediation efforts has a positive and popular image among his peers in the region. His initiative has also received support from the United States, France, Oman, Morocco, and Sudan.<sup>15</sup> Turkey's efforts had been initially led by Çavuşoğlu, who lacks the necessary leverage and popularity in the

region, and was later on taken up by Erdoğan. While Erdoğan enjoyed significant popularity among international actors in the past, the strains in the relations with Saudi-UAE block ruled Turkey out as a potential mediator.

- Turkey's weakened relations with the United States and the complicated relations with Russia as the two great powers in the Middle East have further isolated it in the region. As evident in its past experiences, Turkey's close ties with great powers, particularly with the United States, had been an asset and important leverage as a mediator. Before the Arab Spring, Turkey had successfully utilized its Western and non-Western characteristics as well as its close ties with both camps to realize its mediator role.
- Turkey's all-inclusive approach and its ability to speak to all actors in the region was a major asset as a mediator in the past. This characteristic has been largely tarnished during the Arab Spring. Today, we are faced with a Turkey that has strained relations with Egypt, has no diplomatic relations with Syria, and weakened relations with Israel.
- By being militarily involved in Syria and over-relying on hard power, Turkey has projected itself as a party to the Syrian civil war. Similarly, Turkey's quick move to strengthen its military base in Qatar upon the eruption of the recent crisis has portrayed a significant shift in its policy towards more hard power, which has damaged its peaceful image as a mediator. This image has been further injured as a result of the domestic developments within the country, particularly since the July 15 coup attempt, pointing to a widening state crisis that is difficult to be solved in the short run. Moreover, Turkey's way of handling its own Kurdish issue has not been too promising for a potential problem-solving agent.

## Prospects for the future

If Qatar decides to leave the GCC, Turkey would support it, probably with new measures such as a privileged economic partnership and enhanced financial/economic cooperation. Turkey-GCC ties, with all their economic potential, make political and strategic sense according to Erdoğan's mindset. The current embargo and tough stance of GCC countries against Qatar is against Erdoğan's regional vision of stability and Turkey's prospective leadership role. He may altogether put aside the GCC and back Qatar, arguing that he supports the oppressed party against a regional hegemony backed by the United States and Israel.

Despite his pragmatism as a politician, Erdoğan may have fixed attitudes in some cases. His critical position against the Sisi administration in Egypt is an example of this characteristic. He may have a similar position in this crisis and support Qatar no matter how long the GCC boycott against the country endures. He would probably approach Kuwait and Oman as allies in the GCC, but there are not many prospects for such a diversion. What would be worse for Turkey is to lose Qatar to Iran, which would mean better Qatar-Iran relations and a more isolated Turkey.

Turkey's greatest dilemma is thus dealing simultaneously with the boycott against Qatar led by Saudi Arabia while keeping Qatar away from Iran in order to perpetuate its regional rivalry with the latter. The principle of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" does not apply in this case. King Salman's appointment of his son Mohammed as crown prince sounded the alarm in Ankara. Mohammed bin Salman's rule represents a hard line in regional policy, Saudi Arabia-Israel rapprochement, and the continuation of the Qatar boycott. Erdoğan will probably continue to back Qatar in the crisis, keep an air corridor for the provision of goods and materials against the boycott, and preserve military units in Qatar. However, it is also likely that he will refrain from provoking Saudi Arabia. The more convenient rivals in this crisis are the UAE and Egypt. Pro-Erdoğan circles have already started to blame these two for the crisis and for their secret agendas against Turkey, including their alleged support for the failed coup on July 15 in Turkey.

In retrospect, the Turkish-Qatari line that advocated change in the Middle East failed to ensure a sustainable and inclusive regional order. Today, with Donald Trump in the White House and King Salman leading an activist course, regional priorities have shifted towards isolating radical forces such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and pro-Iranian militias from the Arab core. Against the current backdrop of polarization and elevated threat perceptions, it could be wise for Turkey and Qatar as lesser players in terms of disposable military and economic resources to assume intermediary or even secondary roles rather than try to continue their self-assigned flag bearer positions for leading change in the Middle East.

The extent to which the Turkish-Qatari alliance survives will depend on Qatar's resistance to the imposed boycott. The situation may evolve into a long-standing feud, or it may end with Qatar's choice to fulfill the demands and ease tensions. In the meantime, Iran will surely be taking advantage of the situation to corner Saudi Arabia. It is still unclear whether the EU and the United States will take sides in the conflict since they have so far been shifting positions on the issue. It seems there is no way to change the fact that Turkey's bet is on Qatar, mainly due to the necessity of past policies in the region. However, Ankara will also take care to avoid antagonizing Saudi Arabia.

## Conclusion

The Saudis appear cool-headed and reluctant to be embroiled in conflict with Turkey, which would put Saudi regional interests further in jeopardy as such a conflict carries the potential to push Turkey toward further cooperation with Iran. Erdoğan has likewise been cautious not to agitate the Saudis and has left room for a way out of the crisis on amicable terms. Lately, the crisis has shown signs of settling down, especially after U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Doha to sign a joint defense agreement as well as his willingness to see through an end to the embargo against Qatar. In the meantime, the 13-point ultimatum for Qatar has been reduced to six points, which now excludes the closure of the Turkish military base and Al Jazeera news agency.

Given that Turkish interests in the Middle East necessitate Gulf support, especially in Syria and Iraq, Ankara is ready to assist both sides to get out of its self-imposed crisis with acceptable yields and returns, such as the relocation of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas leadership in Qatar and closer coordination on regional matters. However, despite Kuwait's welcomed and Turkey's refused mediation attempts, the crisis has yet to be resolved. The failure of regional efforts has led Qatar to now turn to the United Nations for mediation. As such, while the deadlock in the crisis could strengthen the Turkish-Qatari alliance, it could also weaken it given the negative image of Turkey among international actors. Against this background, it would be wise for Turkey to strike a balance between its hard power and soft power capabilities, adopt a more low-profile attitude, and invest more in resolving its domestic problems to re-establish its credibility in the region.

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