



Brief n. 47/July 2022

The Saudi – Turkish Normalization: Impact on ties with Iran?

Ali Bakir

*Research Assistant Professor at Qatar University's
Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences*

Con il sostegno di



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo

For the first time since he assumed the position of Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia following the 2017-Gulf crisis and blockade of Qatar, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) paid an official visit to Turkey on June 22. The Tension between the two States peaked in the last few years against the backdrop of murdering journalist Jamal Khashoggi in his own country's consulate in Istanbul in 2018. However, the visit inaugurated the normalization of relations between the two regional powers following more than a year of diplomatic rapprochement efforts.

According to the joint statement released at the conclusion of MBS visit to Ankara, the two sides stressed their determination and commitment to open a new page and launch a new era of cooperation in bilateral ties, including in the political, economic, military, security, and cultural spheres.

Iran's concern

The visit attracted a lot of attention and generated much debate in several regional capitals. In Iran, for example, the visit raised questions concerning the possible implications of the normalization process between Turkey and Saudi Arabia not only on Tehran's influence and interests in the region but also on the prospects of the relationship between Iran and Turkey.

Turkey is the main political, economic, and military power in the region. Its geopolitical significance came to the front again following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Likewise, Saudi Arabia is an energy powerhouse. Its relevance as a major global oil producer has skyrocketed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ankara and Saudi Arabia have the biggest two economies in the region. Once they join forces, the two regional heavyweights have a substantial strength that could influence the regional dynamics and alter the balance of power in the Middle East.

Considering these facts, Iran had expressed [concerns](#) about such realignment between Riyadh and Ankara on Tehran's regional influence in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon as greater cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on regional issues could leave Iran exposed. Tehran is particularly worried about the possibility of developing defense cooperation between the two countries and the potential transfer of the Bayraktar TB2 drones to Riyadh.

Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia: balance of powers in the Middle East

From historical perspective, Turkey and Iran are regional rivals. Despite this fact, they enjoyed a relatively stable relationship in modern times thanks to open communication, diplomacy skills, institutional relations, and some shared cultural and social aspects. The same cannot be said about the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh and Tehran see each other as an archenemy. The two countries share a little bit beyond geographical proximity and oil wealth. Both Riyadh and Tehran have been competing for influence and power in the Gulf and the Levant regions.

Given Turkey's regional position, status, and power, Ankara has been trying to strike an act of balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yet, since the eruption of the Arab revolutions in 2011, the behavior of Riyadh and Tehran toward Ankara has made it more difficult for Turkey to attain such a goal. During the last 10 years or so, one can observe that the closer Turkey to Riyadh, the most likely its ties with Tehran will deteriorate. Likewise, the closer Turkey to Tehran, the most likely its ties with Riyadh will deteriorate.

Accordingly, the relationship between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran is highly interactional. Moreover, this formula is a two-way road rather than one. In other words, the way Iran or Saudi Arabia behaves might also affect Turkey's position towards them.

Iranian anti-Turkey efforts in the last months

Since 2021, the Middle East has been witnessing a unique de-escalation moment. Primary players have been reaching out to each other, paying rapprochement efforts, reconciling, and even normalizing their relationships. Contrary to this trend, Iran has been increasingly engaged in hostile activities toward Turkey in Iraq, Syria, and [inside](#) the Turkish territories.

Last February, Asai'b Ahl al-Haq, an Iranian-backed Shiite armed militia in Iraq, [issued](#) a vigorous threat to target Turkey. The threat was followed by several attempts to target Turkish posts in Northern Iraq by several Iran-baked militias. Turkey [reportedly](#) responded by drone strikes. Moreover, Iran has been working on establishing an anti-Turkey alliance between the pro-IRGC Shiite armed groups in Iraq and the PKK – a designated terrorist group by Turkey, NATO, and the EU. This observation was also confirmed by a US military intelligence's [de-classified](#) report last May.

Likewise, Iran has been stepping up its anti-Turkey efforts in Syria. In May 2022, Iran signaled its official [opposition](#) to any Turkish military operation against the YPG- an offshoot of the PKK, a designated terrorist organization by Turkey, in Northern Syria. A former Iranian diplomat [warned](#) that any Turkish military operation in Northern Syria would result in a clash between Ankara and Tehran. In June, several reports [indicated](#) that Iran sponsored establishing a joint operations room between the Kurdish armed YPG militias and the IRGC-backed Shiite armed militias (Hezbollah, Fatemiyoun, and some Syrian Shiite groups from the towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa) to counter possible Turkish military operation.

Iran's pressure on Saudi Arabia

Concerning Saudi Arabia, Iran continued to pressure Riyadh from Yemen and Iraq. Last year, an official [report](#) documented 430 missile attacks as well as 851 drone attacks from Iran-baked Houthis at Saudi Arabia since 2015. Despite the limited engagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the temporary truce in Yemen, no significant breakthrough has yet been registered in the Iranian – Saudi talks. On the contrary, the unease regarding the increasing threat of Iran in the region escalated recently. During MBS's tour to [Egypt](#) and [Jordan](#) last June, joint statements of Saudi Arabia with Amman and Cairo cited concerns regarding Iran, its nuclear program, and regional policies.

Iran's first response to the Saudi – Turkish normalization

While the Turkey- Saudi joint statement did not mention Iran, Tehran understood there could be a logical realignment between the two countries based on countering Tehran. In other words, Iran's recent regional actions, especially against Turkey, could create a common cause for both Riyadh and Ankara to counter Tehran regionally. In this sense, a Turkish – Saudi realignment against Iran would empower Ankara in Syria, Riyadh in Yemen, and the two countries in Iraq, which will end up undermining Tehran's influence in the region.

Aware of this fact, Iran's Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, rushed to Turkey on June 27, following MBS visit to Ankara, to discuss several bilateral and regional issues. At the

conclusion of his visit, Abdollahian expressed a contradictory position to his country's previous one concerning the possible Turkish military operation in Northern Syria. In his statement, Abdollahian [highlighted](#) that "Turkey's security concerns must be tackled fully and permanently," adding, "We understand Turkey's security concerns very well... a special operation might be needed."

In parallel with this stance, Iran [expressed](#) a favorable position concerning the possible reopening of its embassy in Riyadh and the Saudi embassy in Tehran. This position contradicts Iran's previous stance on the matter announced on June 20, which [indicates](#), "It is too early to talk about the reopening of embassies by Tehran and Riyadh."

Iran's diplomatic maneuvers are obviously meant to address some concerns related to Turkey and Saudi Arabia and pre-empt the possible realignment of the two regional powers based on countering Iran. In this sense, how the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Turkey will develop in the near future and whether it will evolve into anti-Iran alliance will also depend on how Iran will behave towards the two regional powers.