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## **Turkey and Saudis in Syria: Aligned Interests, Clashing Revisionisms**

By: Dr. Zenonas Tziarras\*

In early May, 2015 it became known that Saudi Arabia and Turkey are supporting extremist Islamist groups in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. That Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others, have – mostly indirectly – been supporting Islamist groups is not news as similar reports have been emerging from time to time since 2011, if not earlier. But this policy with regard to the Syrian conflict became increasingly overt amidst growing instability and lack of Western commitment to Assad’s overthrow. According to *The Independent* and other media, Turkish and Saudi support focuses on the overarching jihadist group Jaish al-Fatah which includes al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra – a rival to both Assad and the self-styled “Islamic State,” also known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham).

### **Turkey’s Syria Policy**

A number of factors are driving this Turkish-Saudi policy. To begin with, Turkey has made it clear that it wants the overthrow of Assad; and it is, in fact, the first time in its history that Ankara adopts a regime-change strategy. When the United States decided to form an international “coalition of the willing” to counter ISIS, Turkey refused to get actively involved unless the coalition were to target both Assad and ISIS at the same time. It is clear that Ankara favors a war of all-against-all to the end of weakening all parts: Assad, ISIS, the Kurds and Iran. The ultimate goal, one that Turkey decided to pursue once it adopted a clear stance against Assad in the fall of 2011, is the replacement of Assad with a Sunni government most likely formed by

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Muslim Brotherhood's Syria branch. The expected outcomes would be a pro-Turkey government that would be easily manipulated by Ankara and the stabilization of Syria's domestic situation which would help restore security on the Turkey-Syria boarder.

Had Ankara's strategy been successful, Iran's regional influence and Shiite networks, one of Turkey's traditional concerns, would also be severed and Turkey would be able to rise as the most important regional power. Its support to jihadist groups is only one of the employed tactics towards the achievement of a broader Turkish geopolitical vision under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Importantly, despite its aims and rhetoric, Turkey is not willing to lead this change in Syria. In the past four years, Ankara was presented with numerous opportunities to engage the neighboring country. Yet it always preferred to rely on proxies and calls on NATO and the international community to intervene. It was because of this very tactic that Ankara allowed the Peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdish forces) to enter the Syrian town of Kobane through Turkey to help the Syrian Kurds in the battle against ISIS; and this is again the reason why it decided to support the jihadists in Syria. There is also the chance that this policy, with which Washington disagrees, is partly aimed at pressuring the US to adopt a harder stance against the Assad regime at a time when Washington seems to be silently reconsidering its regime-change strategy in Syria.

### **Saudi Security Concerns**

For its part, Saudi Arabia shares many of Turkey's interests and concerns. It, too, is disappointed by the US stance on Syria and would like to see Assad gone. The stakes are high for Riyadh and very much related to the very survival of the kingdom. Just like Turkey, Saudi Arabia sees Syria as a way to get to Shiite Iran which is its "eternal rival"; their antagonism has to do with economic, security and religious-ideological issues. Supporting Sunni jihadist groups is a way of countering Iran's



proxies in Syria such as the Quds Force and Hezbollah. At the same time, it is an effort of battling the spread of ISIS. Both the Shiite actors and ISIS could have domestic repercussions for the kingdom. On the one hand Riyadh wants to keep its Shiite minority in check while on the other it wants to prevent Sunni Salafist groups from rising against the regime on the grounds of its ideology and its affiliation to the West. The recent bombing attacks in Saudi Arabia, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, affirm the kingdom's fears.

It is important to note that this decisive Saudi approach to the Syria conflict came after the death of King Abdullah and its replacement by his brother Salman in late January, 2015. After this change of guard, Salman tried to improve his house's relations with the religious elites of the kingdom in order to strengthen his position. This led to a more religiously-tinged foreign policy that, in turn, softened the Saudi stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood and increased its sectarian tendencies. In this sense, the convergence of Turkish-Saudi interests over Syria cannot be seen independently from domestic and geopolitical transformations.

### **Clashing Revisionisms**

In light of the above, Turkey and Saudi Arabia seem to indeed share a number of interests vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict and thus their collaboration should not come as a surprise. However, despite the alignment of their aims at this juncture and on the particular case of Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are not the best of friends; they have been uneasy neighbors for some time while their rivalry over regional leadership has manifested in the past, notably in post-2003 Iraq. As Sunni Muslim countries they claim the leadership of the Arab world on the basis of their religious identity and power stature. Admittedly, Saudi Arabia is a more likely leader (along with Egypt) based on the simple fact that it is an Arab country, unlike Turkey.



Lastly, the revisionist foreign policies of both countries which aim at altering the regional *status quo* for their own benefit, along with their delusions of grandeur render their collaboration a temporary and ephemeral one. Though ups and downs are to be expected, it is even more certain that once – and if – they manage to change the regime in one way or the other and by extension stave off Iran and its Shiite network, it will only be a matter of time before their aligned interests transform into another power struggle over influence and control in Syria and the region. In the meanwhile the road ahead is going to be bumpy with other aspiring players such as Iran and Russia trying to mark their own territory thus finding themselves at odds with both Turkey and Saudi Arabia.