

TURKEY AND THE GULF STATES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By [Sean Foley](#) *

This article argues that Turkey's improved relations with the Gulf states in recent years reflect Ankara's refusal to allow Washington to use its territory to invade Iraq in 2003, Turkey's promotion of regional trade, and the decline of traditional Cold War security alliances in the Middle East. Ankara and Gulf states have increasingly seen each as viable alternatives to their traditional strategic partners--the European Union for Turkey and the United States for Gulf governments. Nonetheless, one should not overstate the importance of this alliance: Turkey and the Gulf disagree about Iran's nuclear program and other regional issues.

FROM FOES TO FRIENDSHIP

In October 1927 Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk delivered a historic speech in which he explained why Turks had to abandon the Ottoman Empire and embrace his new state. Ataturk pointed out the high cost and futility of seeking an empire extending beyond Turkish-populated lands:

“Do you know,” he asked, “how many sons of Anatolia have perished in the scorching sands of Yemen?” In future, Ataturk promised, Turks would no longer die in wars in Yemen or the Arabian Peninsula—a region of the world that had become synonymous with the plight of the Ottoman soldier in Turkish folklore and popular songs. Ataturk’s successors closely adhered to his warnings and put a priority on Turkey’s relations with the United States and Western Europe over its ties to Arab states during the Cold War.[1]

For their part, many Arabs emphasized their suffering under four centuries of Ottoman rule and their resistance to the Turks. During a banquet in Mecca in 1931, the King of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, pointed his finger at an Ottoman prince and described how his ancestors had fought those of the prince rather than call themselves servants of the Ottoman Caliphate.[2] Decades later, Saudi school textbooks hailed their kingdom as the great “torch” that had lit the “path of liberation” of the Arab world from the yoke of Ottoman rule and European imperialism.[3]

Few disagreed in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser declared Turkey *persona non grata* in the Arab world in 1954 after Ankara opposed Algerian independence.[4] As recently as 2002, Turkey and Saudi Arabia accused each other of committing “cultural” massacres after Ankara criticized Riyadh for razing a historic Ottoman-Turkish Fort in Mecca to make way for a new housing project.[5]

A year later, however, a series of events began a rapid improvement in relations between Turkey and the Arab world—especially the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Not only has bilateral trade and investment blossomed, but Ankara and GCC governments have also synthesized their approaches toward many (but by no means all) foreign policy challenges in the Middle East. When Saudi King Abdallah made his landmark visit to Turkey in 2006, his guards told their Turkish counterparts in Turkish that they had come to their “second homeland.”[6]

Other Gulf leaders have followed Abdallah to Turkey, and Turkish leaders expressed warm words when visiting the Gulf. During Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan’s trip to Riyadh in January 2010, he stated that Turkish cooperation with Saudi Arabia was just as important as Turkey’s desire to join the European Union.[7]

This article seeks to explain why Turkey’s relations have improved so rapidly with the GCC states over the last decade. It is argued that the new relationship represents the convergence of four policy factors.

The first factor is the Turkish Parliament’s refusal to allow Washington to use Turkish territory in 2003 to invade Iraq. This decision prompted Gulf Arabs to reconsider their views of Turkey for the first time in decades and allowed Turkish leaders to emphasize aspects of their nation’s foreign policy that had long been overshadowed by Ankara’s Western alliances.

The second factor is Ankara’s adoption of policies aimed at encouraging Turkey’s economy to grow rapidly, controlling the country’s southeast border, and resolving political problems in the Middle East—even if that meant opposing Turkey’s traditional strategic partner, the United States.[8]

The third factor is the twin economic and political shocks in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century that transformed the Gulf Arabs’ worldview: the oil market’s collapse and regional instability following the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The fourth factor is Ankara and the GCC’s recognition that a mutual alliance could address the fact that once-key determinants of their foreign policies—the European Union for Turkey; the United States for the GCC—may no longer be as valuable.

At the same time, one should be careful not to overstate the importance of recent improvements in Turkish relations with the Gulf states. Nor should one underestimate the significance of longstanding differences over Iran or alliances that Gulf monarchs maintain with the United States.

THE POWER OF “NO”

The blossoming of Turkish relations with the Gulf began in the context of a seemingly critical setback for U.S.-Turkish relations and for Erdogan personally. In 2003, Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (Adalat ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) had only recently taken office, and Washington asked it to authorize the U.S. military to use Turkish territory to invade Iraq. In response, Erdogan’s governing coalition presented a resolution in the Turkish parliament to let U.S. troops go through Turkey into northern Iraq. Government officials stressed the dangers of refusing an urgent request of the sole superpower in the world and of not having “a seat at the table” or any voice in the adjudication of future Iraqi affairs.[9]

Yet the proposal found scant support in Turkish society. During the 1990-1991 war over Kuwait, Ankara had strongly backed Washington but in exchange lost millions of dollars in trade and gained only unstable borders. The virtually independent Kurdish region in northern Iraq had greatly escalated tensions among Turkey’s own Kurdish community in the country’s southeast. The new U.S. invasion promised even more problems. Polls showed that 80 percent of Turks saw the invasion as a U.S. attempt to grab Iraq’s oil and to show U.S. power. When parliament voted on the government’s resolution, March 1, 2003, it was defeated.[10]

For Erdogan, however, the apparent defeat became the turning point in Turkey’s relationship with the Gulf states (and also the United States). Turks were moving toward a new view of their Islamic and regional role and would no longer blindly follow the West’s lead in international affairs.[11] Gulf governments, many of which had been similarly torn between their ties to Washington and opposition to the invasion of Iraq, saw Ankara for the first time as a potential ally. The chaos in Iraq after the invasion, al-Qaida terrorist attacks in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and the emergence of a Shi’a government in Iraq reinforced the new perception that Turkey was an potential friend facing many of the same challenges the Gulf states did.[12]

Iran’s decision to pursue nuclear power (and potentially nuclear weapons) along with the perception that Washington had “abandoned” Iraq to Iran only added to...

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