



## Power Competition in the Middle East: Emerging Alliance of Turkey And Qatar, and Response of Saudi Arabia



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**Abstract:** *This study describes the domestic influences, ideational factors, and power dynamics in the wider Middle Eastern and Gulf region. The study has examined the burgeoning rapprochement of Qatar and Turkey particularly post-Arab Spring and its implications for Saudi Arabia. After the Arab Spring, the Middle East presented a tripolar structure where the Turkey-Qatar alliance and their sympathy with the Muslim world formed a third bloc which is called the moderate resistance bloc. This study is based on qualitative research methodology. The ramifications of the study explored that to avoid the dominance of politics and status quo blocs, the moderate resistance bloc strived to play a balanced role by adopting the pragmatic approach in its regional and global engagements. The study recommends that all three countries should promote sustained diplomatic dialogue.*

**Key Words:** Turkey-Saudi Arab-Qatar Relations, Arab Uprising, Events of Arab Spring, Formation of Blocs, Turkey-Qatar Alliance

### Introduction

The study has examined the burgeoning rapprochement of Qatar and Turkey particularly post-Arab Spring, and its implications for Saudi Arabia. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Middle East presented a tripolar structure where the Turkey-Qatar alliance and their sympathies with the Muslim world have formed a third bloc that is called the modest confrontation bloc. The formation of that alliance has disturbed the balance of power in the region. The two preexisting blocs of the region feel threatened by the new one. Although Turkey-Qatar foreign policy had to witness a setback in 2013-2014 they grasp the base in the Middle East in the presence of preexisting blocs. The Iran-led revisionist bloc became more

prominent after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Saudi Arabia emerged as the leader of the status quo bloc. Actually, Saudi Arabia has regime security concerns and always takes a strict stance against revolutionary and revisionist forces. Three blocs have differences in terms of approaches and weaken the rival blocs.

The under-observation study has explored the bilateral relations between Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Before the Arab Spring Turkey established cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, then after the Arab Spring what factors drew a line among them? How does the Syrian conflict affect their relations? At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkey built excellent relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

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But today Turkey has been strengthening relations with Qatar instead of Saudi Arabia (Beaujouan & Rasheed, [2019](#)).

### **Power Competition in the Middle East and its Impact on Turkey and Qatar relations**

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Regional power competition has continued between the regional powers after reshaping the Middle East in modernizing. This power competition divided the region into three different blocs.

- a) Revisionist bloc: This bloc consists of Lebanon, Hezbollah, Palestine (Islamic resistance movement), Iraqi Shia factions, Hamas, and Syria, and the leading state is Iran. The feature of this group is anti-American foreign policy. This group is against the existence of Israel and its increasing strength and influence in the region, its authoritarian political system, the collapse of central authority in Iraq, and Israel's violence in Palestine which has significantly increased the bloc of revisionists throughout the 2000s.
- b) Status quo bloc: This bloc consists of the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt, among these..... leading states is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This is a pro-American group, and working on the Zionist and US interests in the region.
- c) Moderate bloc: Since 2010 substantial shift of power structure in the Gulf and wider Middle East occurred. Destabilization in Yemen, Syria, and Egypt created a political power vacuum in the region, which is a huge challenge for revisionists and status quo blocs. To take advantage of this vacuum Turkey and Qatar have attempted to make a new bloc (Goldberg, 2019). Turkey and Qatar formed an alliance to make an autonomous sphere of influence for themselves in the Middle East. The under consideration study explored analytical aspects of Qatar and Turkey and their alliance and its impact on the regional direction, especially the response of Saudi Arabia.

In 2017, the status quo bloc under Saudi Arabia's leadership issued a list of demands for Qatar, thirteen demands were addressed in the list, one of them was a halt of military cooperation between Qatar and Turkey, and the closure of a Turkish military base that was under construction. Turkey's defense minister Fikri Isik immediately responded that Turkey is not going to review its armed base in Qatar, and any demand for its closure would be considered as interference between Qatar and Saudi Arabia relations. The list also contains the demand to end support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which come to power through a democratic ballot before the military coup of 2013, drastically scale back cooperation with Iran, close the broadcaster Al-Jazeera, and dismantle backing to Hamas governing Palestine's Gaza Strip. Turkey and Qatar both supported Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar was given ten days to complete the demands or face unspecified consequences. However, the dynamics of the present confrontation between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar can be well concluded from a historical perspective (Akbarzadeh & Baxter, 2018).

### **Turkey's Relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar Before Arab Spring**

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During the 2000s decade, Turkey worked a lot for robust relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. For instance, leaders of the two states cross-visited each other. Tayyip Erdogan Turkish Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia in 2004, 2005, 2007, twice in 2006, 2009, and again twice in 2010. Tayyip Erdogan visited Qatar thrice in 2005, 2008, and 2010. Saudi King Abdullah also paid visits to Turkey in 2006 and 2007, and Sheikh Hamad of Qatar visited Saudi Arabia in 2009 (Birol, 2019). In the first decade of the 21st century, things were quite different. Turkey and Saudi Arabia relations were on a historical high and a bright future seemed to lie ahead. Even Recep Tayyip Erdogan received the King Faisal International Prize for service to Islam from the hand of Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz.

During this golden period, Turkey was able to invest in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. For instance, in 2002 Turkey's exports increased from \$554

Million to \$2.2 billion, and imports from Saudi Arabia increased tenfold in 2002 from \$120 million to \$1.3 billion in 2010. On the other hand, Turkey's exports to Qatar increased elevenfold from 2002 \$15 million to \$162 million in 2010. And imports from Qatar increased seventeenfold in 2002 from \$10 million to \$177 million in 2010. Meanwhile from 2002 to 2010 Saudi Arabia and Qatar were in the top 20 countries that directly invested in Turkey.

Turkey has strived to establish robust relations with the Gulf states since the 1980s to expand its exports and grab capital from the Gulf region. So the JDP focused on existing relations. The other governments of JDP also endeavour to enhance bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, Gulf states and Qatar beyond the economic relations. For instance, in 2004 Turkey led the "Istanbul Initiative" launched under the NATO initiative to develop security cooperation relationships with the Middle Eastern states. Saudi Arabia and Qatar also joined the initiative, and Qatar gave a positive response (Long, [2011](#)).

A historical day came on September 2, 2008, when milestone relations were built with the Gulf states when the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) declared Turkey a strategic partner. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are also members of the GCC. It is also noteworthy that this was the first declaration of GCC about any country being a strategic partner. The Memorandum of Understanding was also signed with Turkey. Under this memorandum, annual meetings were instituted on high-level strategic dialogue to consult on security, defence, economic, cultural and political matters. Indeed Turkey and Qatar had more cordial mutual relations than they had with Saudi Arabia, because both shared friendly relations with Iran, supported the Muslim Brotherhood Movement in Egypt, nurtured outstanding relations with Assad in Syria, and recognized Hamas as the legitimate representative of Palestinians. Turkey and Qatar were standing on the same page (Schwedler & Gerner, [2008](#)). Saudi Arabia was on the other page for both of these issues. Saudi Arabia rejected the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology since the 1990s, the nuclear program of Iran and its increasing influence in Yemen,

Lebanon, and Iraq, backing of Hamas in Palestine, and having tense relations with the Assad regime.

The bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been fragile for the last ten years, while Turkey-Qatar relations are on a historical milestone, both are considered close and safe allies in the Middle East. After the imposition of sanctions on Qatar from Saudi Arabia, Turkey stood by Qatar, continued its food supply, and swiftly passed a law in parliament to deploy troops to Qatar. Turkey and Qatar heavily invested in each other's countries, while Saudi Arabia dislikes their economic, military, and strategic relations. Until 2010, there were not inevitably any negative relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. But with the Arab Spring, relations began to change, yet collusion in the Syrian crisis prevented a completely fragile Turkey-Saudi relations. The question is this: what thing brought the two countries into total opposition? (El-Labbad, [2014](#)).

## Arab Uprising

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The Arab Spring is a series of anti-government protests. This was an armed rebellion and uprising, which engulfed many Arab states in early 2010. This uprising spread in most states in the spring of 2011, That is why it was called the Arab Spring. The political and economic effects of the uprising left on the Arabs are still felt today. The Arab Spring brought changes in countries like Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia. Despite public support, the uprising could not succeed because of the demand for more democracy, and more freedom. The period after the uprising has increased oppression and instability in the region. Although the Arab Spring was divided into distinct aims and geography, its beginning was with a single act of defiance (Anderson, [2011](#)).

## Beginning of the Arab Spring

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A Tunisian street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in December 2010 to protest against police for arbitrary seizing of his vegetables. The police claimed that Muhammad couldn't get a permit letter. This act led to the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which led to

street protests in the capital of Tunisia and rapidly spread to the whole country. President Zine El Abidine who was ruling Tunisia for 20 years, and the scale of protest forced him to flee to Saudi Arabia.

The first parliamentary democratic elections held in Tunisia in October 2011 inspired the other nations also take cue from Tunisia's events. They also began protests of their own.

The objective of the protesters was to gain political rights and social freedom. It is also noteworthy that such protests also occurred in Bahrain, Egypt, and the Tahrir Square uprising in Cairo (Badran, [2016](#)).

### **The Arab Spring Events**

Although the Tunisia protest brought some improvement in human rights, other nations couldn't enjoy the same fruits from the Spring of 2011. Dictator Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown after a long time in October 2011. He faced the worst civil war in which a violent mob captured him and was violently executed by opposition fighters. But the death of Qaddafi did not help. Because two opposite factions ruling separate regions of the country are still at odds with each other. The civilians of Libya suffered a lot during the years of political upheavals. They have limited access to health care and food and bear violence on the ground. Many Libyese flee to Europe and other countries by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Likewise, the civil war in Syria continued for many years after the Arab Spring forced many people to move to Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and throughout Western Europe. The military group ISIS in Syria was declared caliphate, following the Islamic Laws. ISI has done a lot of atrocities and even damaged a lot of property and cultural heritage sites under their controlled areas. ISIS had been defeated in Syria. But a dictator Bashar al-Assad has been imposed on the country for a long time and has been president of Syria since July 17, 2000. Additionally, the current civil war in Yemen might be traced back to the Arab Spring. The conflict converted into tribal warfare, and the country's infrastructure was damaged (Schwedler & Gerner, [2008](#)).

### **Formation of Blocs Post Arab Uprising: Saudi Arabia's Response to Turkey and Qatar**

The Turkey-Qatar association from the time: when the Arab Uprising had shown the great influence on the Middle East for her supremacy. The under-observation study has analysed the establishment of the Qatar and Turkey bloc after the Arab Uprising and the response of Saudi Arabia. The newborn bloc faced many hurdles during 2013-2014. The study will analyze its strategy of consolidation under external pressure, and alternative strategy along with its regional implications.

### **Historical Perspective of Bloc (2002-2013)**

A cordial relationship was built between Turkey and Qatar meanwhile 2002. At the same time, successful trade relations began between the two states. Import and export increased manifold. The US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq created a political vacuum in the region, and Turkey and Qatar attempted to fill this power vacuum in the region. But they used the tool of soft power to fill the vacuum. However, their soft power policy had to face serious challenges due to the Arab Uprising early 2010s, and the most serious challenges were during 2011-2013. This was the time when they had to decide whether to support the governments or protestors. So they choose the second option. They began to support the popular uprising in Egypt.

Turkey used diplomatic tools in the Syrian crisis and encouraged the Assad regime to introduce new reforms in the country but all in vain (Azizyza, [2013](#)). Then Turkey strongly supported military and political opposition in Syria. Qatar became the first Arab state to close its embassy in Syria and demand foreign military intervention. Ankara and Doha adopted the stance of pro-revolution as unwavering and unconditional (Pearson, 2018). Doha and Ankara's silent and hesitant position toward the Bahrain regime's initiative of violent repression of Shia-led peaceful demonstrations during 2011, here both did refrain from unsettling the Saudi pro camp. This was the first phase of the

emergence of the Turkey-Qatar bloc (Robert, [2012](#)).

### **Growing Influence of The Moderate Resistance Bloc and Response of the Saudi Bloc**

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In Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military coup against Muhammad Morsi's government in 2013 led by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was a big challenge for the moderate resistance bloc. The status quo bloc under Saudi leadership led the Sisi coup, which shows their antagonism to the Iranian-led Shia Crescent (Tucker & Robert, [2019](#)). The status quo bloc is also in contradiction of the existence of Ikhwan Crescent in the Middle East. The status quo led the Sisi administration after the fall of Morsi, failure of the Ennahda government in Tunisia in 2014, utterly controlled the power and scope of modernization. The Arab Uprising entered into the second phase in the rest of the region, like Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Chaotic situations created in these countries nurtured the extremist armed forces including ISIL and other groups of Al-Qaeda the inspiration of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) (Hinnebusch, [2016](#)).

### **Qatar-Turkey Alliance Under Saudi Pressure**

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Following these setbacks, in March 2014 status quo bloc under Saudi Arabia's leadership pressured the new Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to revise foreign policy with Turkey. Qatar and Turkey signed a mutual defence cooperation agreement in December 2014 that made a Highly Strategic Collaboration Council by which Qatar acceptable to Turkey for building an army base. The indication of mutual trust was first shown by Qatari leader Sheikh Tamim when he called Tayyip Erdogan and offered his support on July 15, 2016, during the failed coup attempt. In June 2017, pressure from the Saudi-led status-quo bloc also intensified the Qatar-Turkey alliance. The Saudi-led status quo bloc imposed sanctions on Qatar, Ankara responded immediately and received Doha from humanitarian and economic costs of the Saudi-led status quo bloc. Additionally, Turkey launched its armed base in Qatar to defend

against any probable attack. The 2017 Qatar crisis showed Saudi Arabia's increasing tension about the growing Doha-Ankara alliance and their relations with Muslim alliances throughout the Middle East region. Although the status quo bloc remains to create challenges and restraints against the expansion and consolidation of the third bloc Qatar and Turkey hold their alternative regional strategy (Hedges & Cafero, [2017](#)).

### **Role of Moderate Resistance Bloc between the Two Existing Blocs**

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The exploration of the study indicates that the Turkey-Qatar bloc could be a great power in the Gulf States and broader Middle Eastern states. As its name moderate resistance bloc carries characteristics of both the status quo bloc and revisionist bloc. Like the status quo bloc which has pleasant relations with Israel and also maintains a security partnership with America, the moderate bloc seems to criticize Israel's atrocities in Palestine and Lebanon. It also criticizes the US's role in the civil war in Syria. Moreover, Turkey and Qatar always consider the important role of Iran in the region, and the moderate status quo never denies its strategic position in the region (Stivachtis, [2018](#)). Turkey and Qatar also have amicable relationships with developing global states including China, Russia, and India. They pursue flexible and pragmatic foreign policy contrary to their contesters (status quo bloc, and revisionist bloc). Turkey and Qatar had a confrontation on the Syria issue yet they concurrently supported Qatar in 2017, against a Saudi-led blockade. Turkey also collaborated with Russia and Iran on the peace process of Astana in the Syria conflict in 2017. Succinctly, it can be said that there is a balanced player between two extremist players to maintain the balance in the Middle East (Khalifa, 2018).

On April 28, 2022 Turkish President visited Saudi Arabia for two days. This was the first visit after five years. The visit was planned after Trump's failure in US presidential elections which led to many changes in the region. In spite of having clashes over many issues, leaders of the two states maintained coordination, cooperation, and formal communication. Mutual cooperation was at its peak during 2015-2016



when King Salman bin Abdulaziz established a strategic cooperation council. Although the blockade on Qatar has created gaps in bilateral relations, Turkey has been trying to normalize relations via backdoor diplomacy (Gurbuz, [2022](#)). Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018 in Istanbul damaged bilateral relations. The Turkish government claimed that this was an attempt to sabotage its credibility and image both externally and internally (Coskun, [2022](#)).

### **Turkey Endeavors to Reset Relations with Saudi Arabia**

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The improvement in bilateral relations began by exchanging positive messages from MBS and Erdogan in 2020. But due to the absence of an amicable formula to reset relations, they postponed it for a year (Wilks, [2022](#)).

### **Present Relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia**

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In the current scenario, there are three major international and regional development breakthroughs between Turkey and Saudi. The relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia were complex and marked by both cooperation and contention.

- Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia have strong economic ties. They engage in trade and investment, with Turkish businesses involved in various sectors in Saudi Arabia, such as construction and tourism. Saudi Arabia is also a significant source of remittances from the large Turkish expatriate community working in the kingdom.
- Saudi Arabia is a major oil producer, and Turkey has been importing Saudi oil. Energy cooperation has been a key aspect of their relations.
- Turkey and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing factions in various regional conflicts, such as in Syria and Libya. Their differing positions have contributed to regional instability.
- Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and other Arab states, imposed a blockade on Qatar in 2017. Turkey

supported Qatar during this crisis, providing assistance and increasing its military presence in the region.

- Turkey is led by a government with Islamist leanings, while Saudi Arabia follows a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. These ideological differences have sometimes caused tensions.
- Both countries have seen changes in leadership and policy since my last update. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have remained in power. However, their policies and approaches may have shifted
- The Saudi-led coalition has been involved in a military intervention in Yemen since 2015. Turkey has criticized the Saudi role in the conflict and expressed concerns about the humanitarian situation in Yemen
- There have been efforts to improve relations, with diplomatic channels open between the two countries. In 2021, Saudi Arabia and Turkey expressed their willingness to improve ties (Ataman, [2021](#)).

### **Conclusion**

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The study seems to illustrate the political power competition within the regional states. The study showed how Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon plan particular forms of ideational and political procedures beyond their national border in the method of alienation, rivalry, and engagement. The study also covered the role of international actors within the regional rivalries including the US, Russia, and China. The study focused on the period of Arab Spring with historical perspectives. This explored the domestic influences, ideational factors, and power dynamics in the region as stated in the introductory session. An endeavour has been made to suggest for political system throughout the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region. However, due to the rapid changes in regional events, it is difficult to evaluate all incidents in detail.

Turkey's inclination toward Central Asian States, Russia, and Iran shows its interest in gaining geostrategic and economic power in neighbouring regions because Turkey doesn't want to confine its movement to European as well as Western circles. There is no longer a bipolar regional system in the Middle East. Ever since the alliance between Turkey and Qatar to sponsor the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) came up, as result the Middle East and Gulf region converted at the time of spring into a tri-polar power. After the Arab Uprising Turkey and Qatar developed bilateral relations for regional strategy, which can be best described as moderate resistance. To avoid the dominance of revisionist and status quo blocs, the moderate resistance bloc strived to play a balanced role by adopting the pragmatic approach in its regional and global engagements. If the moderate resistance bloc couldn't stop international and domestic transformations yet it will continue its

consolidation and institutionalization with the passage of time.

### **Recommendations**

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Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are important regional players in the Middle East, and their relationships with one another have had a significant impact on regional dynamics. Improving and stabilizing their relations can contribute to regional stability and cooperation. For this purpose, all three countries should engage in sustained diplomatic dialogue, encourage people-to-people exchanges, cultural events, and educational programs, Identify areas of shared interest and focus on building cooperation in those areas, whether it's energy security, infrastructure development, or regional stability. This can help address differences, build trust, and find common ground on various issues.

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