Ahead of US President Joe Biden’s important visit to the Middle East, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also paid visits to a number of Arab countries and Turkey in a bid to strengthen his position. It was the latter visit that was the most important and significant in the history of the two countries. At least the Saudi media raved about the trip, with Arab News stating the general consensus: “The visit to Turkey on June 21 marked the beginning of a new phase in Turkish-Saudi relations.” In their joint statement, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Saudi guest emphatically declared “their intention to usher in a new era of cooperation” in political, economic, military, security and cultural matters.

It should be noted that efforts to normalize relations are ending a period of near rupture over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi embassy in Turkey and a series of disagreements over regional policy issues. The thaw began in April, when a Turkish court, which had tried 26 Saudi suspects in absentia for the murder of the journalist, abruptly suspended the trial and transferred the case to Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, for its part, has lifted an unofficial ban on imports from Turkey. On the eve of the Crown Prince’s visit, the Turkish President stressed the importance of promoting bilateral trade and exploring investment opportunities, turning closer bilateral contacts into real partnerships. Mohammed bin Salman also declared “the importance of closer cooperation with Ankara, especially in defense and energy.”

The Crown Prince’s visit was timed to benefit the President, whose country is currently suffering the effects of a deteriorating economic situation that has become increasingly serious since 2018. Inflation is over 70%, the lira has...
reached a new record low against the dollar, and dwindling financial reserves are making it difficult to service the country's unsustainable foreign debt. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, trying to turn the tide, has looked to wealthy Gulf states and, more recently, Riyadh for financial assistance to boost the troubled economy.

Mohammed bin Salman, for his part, is keen to strengthen Saudi Arabia's regional standing and partnership with other countries in every way possible, primarily to fend off and if possible derail the regional ambitions of his adversary, Iran. The Crown Prince keeps getting spurred on by reports that the United States will eventually agree to Iranian terms and sign a new agreement with the mullahs on Iran's nuclear program.

It is also no coincidence that the Saudis' visit to Ankara preceded US President Joe Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in mid-July. The Crown Prince's tour, which also included visits to Egypt and Jordan, is a means of demonstrating Riyadh's regional leadership, its ability to rally other Arab countries around it and strengthen Saudi Arabia's position in future talks with Joe Biden.

Looking back in history, the meeting between Saudi ruler Ibn Saud and US President Roosevelt in 1945 defined relations between the two countries for decades. Saudi Arabia has pledged to supply oil to the US on an ongoing basis and at ridiculously low prices, and the Americans have pledged to protect the regime of Ibn Saud from internal and external enemies. Ibn Saud, aided by American support, has completely shed the intrusive tutelage of Britain and has oriented himself towards Washington, strictly following its political lead. After the death of the founder of the Saudi Kingdom in 1953, his sons have, until recently, strictly carried out their father's legacy. A new "historic" meeting in Jeddah between Ibn Saud's grandson and US President Joe Biden appears imminent, which should define the new contours of the Saudi-US relationship. Or maybe it will end in failure, and the overseas visitor will go away empty-handed. The results of the meeting, for which both sides are actively and intensively preparing, will clearly show the future not only of Saudi Arabia, but of the entire Arab world.

Saudi Arabia is also interested in developing military cooperation with Turkey, which has a large and growing defense sector. In March, Erdoğan said Riyadh had placed a significant order for Turkish-made drones. In 2020, Saudi Arabia signed a $200 billion agreement with Vestel Defence Industry to establish a joint manufacturing project in Saudi Arabia for Vestel Karayel unmanned aerial vehicles. The Saudis were highly impressed by Russia's successful use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) during the special military operation in Ukraine, where, the UAVs are reported to successfully destroy modern military equipment supplied by the West to continue the war against Russia.

Incidentally, shortly before the Saudi Prince's visit, Erdoğan began building relations with another Persian Gulf ruler. In February 2022, he met the then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, on his first visit to the UAE in nearly a decade, to revive bilateral relations. Before this, Turkey and Egypt began preliminary steps towards reconciliation. Ankara began probing Saudi Arabia's position for improved relations more than a year and a half ago. In November 2020, Erdoğan called Saudi monarch Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to stress the importance of resolving differences through dialogue. The Saudi foreign minister subsequently responded that the kingdom's relations with Turkey were "excellent" and that "there is no information indicating any unofficial boycott of Turkish goods." In November 2020, Saudi Arabia offered emergency aid to victims of the earthquake that hit Izmir. Turkey continued to make offers to Riyadh in line with the Turkish President's December 2021 statement that his country would work to "improve relations with Saudi Arabia."

But contrary to the Saudi foreign minister's statement above, Turkish-Saudi trade has plummeted amid the fallout from the "Khashoggi issue," acute disagreements over resolving the crises in Libya and Syria, and disputes over maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), total exports from Turkey to Saudi Arabia fell from $3.2 billion in 2019 to $2.5 billion in 2020, and then to just $235,000 in November 2021. During the same period, Saudi exports to Turkey peaked at nearly $3.5 billion in 2021. However, Ankara's military exports to Saudi Arabia have increased separately, but this is only due to the Bayraktar drones, which are considered the best in the region.

In addition to economic considerations, Turkey is considering increasing its presence in the Persian Gulf in anticipation of reconciliation between the Gulf states and Iran. Five rounds of negotiations have so far taken place in Baghdad between Tehran and Riyadh, which broke off diplomatic relations in 2016. Ankara's rapprochement with the Gulf states is part of a wider process of countering the domestic consequences of its interventionist policies in the Arab region and elsewhere, which have made Turkey more isolated than ever. At the same time, it is a way of compensating, in a way, for ongoing tensions with the US and the West in general. There is still a dispute between Washington and Ankara over the latter's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems, which has led to the
suspension of Turkey’s participation in the Pentagon’s F-35 program. Moreover, Biden has often criticized Erdoğan’s authoritarian methods of rule, though he has welcomed other more authoritarian regimes in the region. Similarly, the EU Parliament recently voted to suspend negotiations on Turkey’s accession to the EU on the grounds of “deteriorating human rights situation and the broken rule of law in Turkey.” However, Erdoğan has recently “hit back” by literally forcing Sweden and Finland to pass draconian laws against Kurds residing there.

Protracted tensions with Washington also feature prominently among the factors that influenced Riyadh’s decision to reshape its international relations, especially with other Middle Eastern countries. According to Western media reports, the situation with the US has reached a point that, for the first time ever, the Crown Prince has actually refused to take phone calls from Biden. These calls were very important to the US President as he wanted to persuade the Saudis to increase oil production to make up for the shortage of Russian oil in Europe amid futile Western sanctions over Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, which caused fuel and energy prices to soar in the US. The Biden administration also reportedly wants Riyadh to condemn the special military operation in Ukraine.

The turning point in Saudi-Turkish relations, marked by the Crown Prince’s visit to Ankara, encapsulates the finding of mutual interests in the positions of both sides. Saudi Arabia wants to get Turkey on its side, primarily in the fight against its adversary, Iran, and also to harmonize positions on a common policy in the region. Turkey desperately needs investment, currency and other financial measures to boost its economy ahead of general elections scheduled for the middle of next year. Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party, which he leads, are experiencing a steady decline in the polls, largely due to the country’s economic woes and the effects of a boomerang interventionist foreign policy.

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