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Dr. Said Elhaj



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

OIC Jerusalem summit .. Indications of a Turkish-Saudi tension

Dr. Said Elhaj

Despite the long history of turbulent relations between the two parties – for different reasons beyond the scope of this article – Turkey and Saudi Arabia have converged during the last few years, especially after King Salman’s accession to the throne. This rapprochement was due to the common threats facing the two countries, first and foremost the Iranian expansion in the region, leading many observers to talk about a likely Turkish-Saudi – or a Turkish-Saudi-Qatari – ‘axis’ or ‘alliance’. In fact, if such rapprochement had been activated in the most appropriate way, it would have balanced Tehran's influence in the region.

However, there were many obstacles in the way of forming such an alliance, especially in light of:

- The different approaches of governance,
- The nature of relationship between religion and the state,
- The two countries’ visions on regional developments, and
- Riyadh's apparent reluctance to deepen cooperation with Ankara.

Despite the many negative signals that came from the Kingdom or the pro-regime public figures and media outlets, Turkey has shown great concern for maintaining good relations with Saudi Arabia, even after the Gulf crisis, when Ankara adopted a clear and explicit position backing Qatar, but not on the basis of antagonizing Riyadh.

The pro-Saudi regime media outlets called for the “establishment of a Kurdish state in southern Turkey” and urged the government to support the Kurdish armed factions in Syria. Moreover, there were loud voices in Saudi Arabia calling for providing support to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) –that was classified as a terrorist organization

by Turkey, the United States and the European Union, and has been leading a separatist war against the state of Turkey since 1984. The kingdom actually hosted some commanders of the Syrian Kurdish militias, and reportedly played a covert role (difficult to verify) in encouraging Masoud Barzani on holding the referendum (September 25, 2017) on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan region from Baghdad. It was expected that Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of "Israel" would bring all the Islamic countries together at the OIC extraordinary summit in Istanbul, under the chairmanship of Turkey, to confront it. So, focus was on the level of representation of the OIC member states at the summit to monitor their concern, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

While King Salman attended the OIC Istanbul Summit -2016 (April 14-15, 2016) in person and received special welcome and hospitality from President Erdogan, including allowing him to deliver an address to the conferees at the opening session of the summit against the protocol, however, Saudi Arabia sent its Minister of State for Islamic Affairs to attend the extraordinary summit-2017 (Dec. 13, 2017) amid indications of an escalating tension between the two countries:

First: Saudi Arabia's low-level representation at the OIC summit (Saudi Arabia was represented by Minister of State for Islamic Affairs, Da'wah, and Guidance Saleh bin Abdulaziz bin Mohamed Al Sheikh), compared to the 2016-ordinary summit, does not amount to the importance of the event (Trump's decision on Jerusalem). In fact, this low representation is linked to Riyadh's desire not to escalate with the United States. This was later manifested through a statement by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir on the United States role in the peace process between the Arabs and Israel. "We believe the Trump administration is serious about bringing peace between Israelis and Arabs," Saudi Foreign Minister told France 24 television late on December 13, 2017. But the most prominent reason behind this low-level representation, in my opinion, is

the chill in the Turkish-Saudi bilateral relations, and Riyadh's dissatisfaction with the recent Turkish positions, especially in the Gulf crisis, as well as the Saudi fears of Turkey's pioneering role in the official joint Islamic action within the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Second: Two days before the OIC extraordinary summit in Istanbul, Saudi daily Okaz published an interview with the so-called "foreign minister" of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a title used only with states rather than with a terrorist organization like the PKK. (On Dec. 11, Saudi newspaper Okaz published an interview with a senior PKK commander, Rıza Altun, who was portrayed by the newspaper as a "foreign minister" of the terrorist PKK, in a bid by Riyadh to sabotage the OIC summit.) The interview was conducted in Iraq's Qandil mountains (last October), where the "guest" clearly stated – which was highlighted by the newspaper – that "Our priority is Turkey." It is certain that Riyadh is aware of the sensitivity of this file for Ankara; and it is unlikely that such an interview would have been conducted and published by the Saudi newspaper without having a green light from Riyadh.

Third: Despite the continued Turkish policy of avoiding tension with Riyadh, including remarks made by Erdogan's senior foreign policy adviser Yassin Aktay that his country "does not compete with Saudi Arabia, but wants the Kingdom to play a leading role"- however, the Turkish media and political analysts did not hide their discontent at the recent negative Saudi signals. In this context, a well-known Turkish media figure said, "As the world is more than five, the Muslim world is bigger than Saudi Arabia."

Fourth: Some circles say that referring to the Jordanian monarch as the "Protector of Holy Sites and Jerusalem" by the Turkish president was an implicit message to Saudi Arabia, where King Salman is referred to as the 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques'. Regardless of whether this meaning was intended by Erdogan or not (which I think it

was not intended at all in this sense), it seems to be a natural expression of the tense relations between the two countries.

Finally, Riyadh seems to be in dire need of a deep review of the course of its relations in the Arab world and the region. While Saudi Arabia raises the banner of confronting Tehran, its policies push many parties, most notably Turkey and Qatar, towards rapprochement and cooperation with the Islamic Republic, which raises question marks on the kingdom's ability to do this and the chances of success. Perhaps it would be useful for Saudi Arabia to think carefully about Saladin's wisdom that was repeated by Erdogan at the opening of the OIC summit, that: "Those who are preoccupied with their friends will never be able to defeat their opponents."