



## **Erdogan's Gulf Tour: Reassurance without Substance?**

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Contemporaneous visits to the Gulf region by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani indicate urgent regional diplomacy in the face of mounting uncertainties with the Trump Administration. An additional layer of complexity is the fact that both leaders will soon face critical elections in their countries. For Turkey and Iran, it is hard to overstate the significance of domestic developments in the next few months. Turkey's referendum to increase the powers of the president, scheduled to be held on April 16, can be a turning point in modern Turkish history while the Iranian presidential elections on May 19 might change the trajectory of the 2015 nuclear deal, and thus, bring far-reaching implications for the Middle East.

Erdogan's Gulf tour to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain deserves particular attention as it followed US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Mike Pompeo's first overseas visit, which included a stop in Ankara. This is despite the fact that Turkey's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is generally unstable, the Syrian crisis being the main driver for close cooperation in recent years. Turkey's pivot to Russia at the expense of the Syrian opposition in Aleppo, however, raised doubts in the Arab street. Hoping for a reset in bilateral relations with the United States under the Trump Administration, Erdogan aims to reassure the GCC countries that Turkey did not abandon its promise to protect Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq. The message was even reflected in the selection of these countries in Erdogan's tour: among the six member GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain have been vocal supporters of the Syrian opposition.

### **Erdogan's Expectations from the Gulf**

In his [interview with](#) the al-Arabiyya channel, Erdogan called the Gulf countries to join Turkey's bid for the Raqqa operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). "If we succeed in liberating Raqqa from Daesh," he said, "we can hand over liberated areas to our Arab brothers, which would contribute to achieving stability there ... But we are in dire need of support from the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia."

Turkey has long expressed its concerns about the US strategy to arm the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are largely dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), for the Raqqa operation. By seeking Saudi support, therefore, Erdogan's goal is twofold. First, he aims to appeal to Arab voices to persuade the Trump Administration to align with Turkey against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate, the YPG. Second, Erdogan wants to form a Sunni Turkish-Arab coalition to shape the future of northern Syria, including the city of Raqqa.

Such a forceful coalition, in his view, would not only benefit Turkey but also the highly frustrated Syrian opposition, especially after the humiliating defeat in Aleppo. Without a strong military and financial commitment from the GCC, however, Erdoğan's vision will be difficult to attain.

Moreover, as political analyst Manuel Almeida rightly [notes](#), the magnitude of the Syrian crisis conceals what is arguably the most critical agenda item for Erdoğan in his Gulf tour: the Turkish economy. A sharp economic slowdown and deep [financial problems](#) may pose a real threat to Turkey's president at a time when he organizes public rallies for a victory in the April referendum. Pro-government media [began praising](#) the upcoming Arab Gulf investments in Turkey before Erdoğan's tour in order to alleviate public anxiety about the crumbling Turkish lira and the steady decline of western investments due to deteriorating relations with the European Union. Economic (in)stability will be a key factor in Turkey's referendum as rising Turkish nationalist politicians, such as [Meral Aksener](#), pose a challenge to Erdoğan. Although their campaigns cannot reach many Turks in the current state of emergency—as a result of [public threats](#) to opposition rallies and slim media coverage due to government pressure—Erdoğan places utmost importance on the public perception of the economy because of the referendum. In this sense, his Gulf tour was a reassuring public act for Turkish conservative voters.

However [exaggerated](#) “the Gulf money as savior” rhetoric may be, Erdoğan's tension with the West is often met with a counter-argument regarding finances by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is convincing especially among conservative Turks. The reality is that 80 percent of direct investment in Turkey [comes from](#) European countries compared to 7 percent from the GCC.

Nevertheless, the fact that Turkey gets only a small share of Gulf investment means that there is potential for Turkey-GCC economic relations to grow. Bilateral trade relations [skyrocketed](#) in the first two terms of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Erdoğan's leadership, surging from \$1.5 billion in 2002 to \$14.9 billion in 2011. In the past few years, however, there have been ups and downs that resulted in a current trade volume of [\\$16 billion](#)—not really satisfactory regarding Turkish hopes and aspirations. Erdoğan has sought a free trade agreement with the GCC, which may come true in 2017, while a representative from Bahrain serves as secretary general of the council.

### **Seeing with the Eyes of the Gulf**

The Trump Administration's [harsh criticism of Iran](#) certainly holds paramount implications for the GCC countries, especially for Saudi Arabia; they increasingly perceive Turkey as a partner in preserving Sunni interests in the region, notably in Iraq. Since 2008, with the inception of the Turkey-GCC High Level Strategic Dialogue, the joint declarations emphasized [support for](#) “full commitment to solidarity, independence, and territorial integrity of Iraq” in order to contain Iran's expanding influence over Baghdad.

The invasion of Mosul by ISIS and [increasing disenchantment](#) of Sunni tribes pose significant challenges to the Turkey-GCC commitment to Iraqi unity. Because the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG) strongly opposes a unified Iraq, in [their bid for independence](#), the future of Sunni Arabs in Iraq is gloomy. Kurdish independence would mean not only that the Sunni bloc of Arabs and Kurds would be weakened against a Shiite majority, but also that the achievement of a democratic federal structure that devolves Baghdad's power to local governorates will be less likely. Concerns about Kurdish independence, however, do not necessarily translate into Turkey-GCC hostility toward the KRG. In fact, as Iran [increases its intelligence activity and support](#) in favor of the KRG opposition and the PKK in Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia perceive their best interest as stability in Iraqi Kurdistan, whatever form it takes.

For Ankara and Riyadh, shaping the future of Mosul after ISIS is highly significant. Both powers support empowerment of local structures and decentralization in Iraq. Although Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman expansionist discourse [often disturbs](#) the GCC countries, Turkey's influence in Iraq is seen as a bulwark against Iranian antagonism.

### **Turkey-Gulf Cooperation in Syria: Still Plausible?**

After military gains in al-Bab, Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield aims to target Manbij and Raqqa with [an ambitious plan](#) by (1) establishing a safe "no-fly zone," (2) settling Arab and Turkmen populations in the safe zone, and (3) forming "a national army" of Syrian opposition through a "train and equip" program. In his speech in Bahrain, Erdoğan [expressed](#) his vision to turn an area of 1500 to 1900 square miles into a safe zone in order to build new housing for refugees.

The fundamental question for the Gulf countries, however, remains the same. Is it possible for Turkey to deliver on its promises in Syria while Erdoğan does not have real leverage over Putin? Erdoğan's Gulf visit [sparked](#) skepticism in Moscow, which was countered by [harsh criticism](#) in the Turkish media. Ankara is frustrated by Moscow's support of the Kurdish YPG in order to keep Turkey in check. When Ankara turns to the United States instead, it faces a similar pattern as the US dual engagement with Turkey and the YPG—a deliberate strategy to balance both players in Syria. Simply, the Turkish goal to contain Syrian Kurds will likely be harmed either by Russia or the United States.

Ankara came to realize that the only option to end this deadlock is a potential revision of US policy by President Trump. Perhaps that is why Erdoğan, who does not often miss an opportunity to criticize the West in the name of Islam, remains [quite shy](#) in responding to Trump's controversial refugee ban from seven Muslim majority countries. Thus far, however, the Trump Administration has not taken any concrete steps to change the course of US-YPG cooperation due to [strong skepticism](#) among American military officials over Turkey's operational plans on the ground.

The Turkish military [proposed](#) two plans to the Pentagon for joining the Raqqa operation. The first plan envisages a push toward Raqqa from the town of al-Bab, which Turkey-backed forces have been fighting to capture from ISIL since December 2016. The long distance between the two cities—110 miles—and rough terrain, however, make this plan almost impossible to implement.

Even if the Turkish military could achieve the same rate of progress it had in the Manbij and al-Bab operations, which was [roughly nine miles](#) per month, such a military campaign would take one full year—assuming that the Assad regime and its allies do not interfere in the meantime.

The alternative plan is Ankara's [preferred plan of action, which](#) requires strong US commitment. In this scenario, Turkish and American special forces, supported by Turkey-backed rebels, enter Syria through the town of Tell Abyad—currently held by the Kurdish YPG—and cut through Kurdish cantons and push toward Raqqa, which is located 60 miles south. Given the fact that the Tell Abyad area is mostly Arab, the Kurdish sway over the region has been precarious and Turkey may effectively divide united Kurdish cantons in the eastern Euphrates.

The skepticism in the Pentagon stems from [the possibility](#) that Ankara may have no intention to make a serious advance toward Raqqa; instead, it may plan on using the operation as a pretext to capture Tell Abyad and break up the Kurdish enclave. In this case, the United States would face losing Syrian Kurds as an ally against ISIL while the Turkish advance toward Raqqa would not be guaranteed. YPG commanders already [threatened](#) Turkey to fight back. The Pentagon's [consideration of proposing](#) the deployment of US combat troops in northern Syria indicates the level of anxiety about a potential Turkish-Kurdish fight.

An additional factor of American skepticism is due to Erdoğan's [promotion of anti-NATO generals](#) in the Turkish army after the coup attempt in July 2016. Known as “Eurasianists,” the generals share an ultranationalist world view, favoring an alliance with Russia instead of the United States. Among them is Lieutenant General Zekai Aksakalli, who currently leads Turkey's operations in Syria. Aksakalli's strong [anti-American views](#) are not private. Thus, Turkey's recent pivot to Russia appears to be more complicated and not a simple tactical maneuver.

### **Turkey and the Gulf: The Future Path**

While Erdoğan's tour may have provided reassurance to his Arab Gulf allies, Turkey's ability to deliver in Syria remains questionable. Whether Erdoğan succeeds in the upcoming referendum or not, Turkey's entanglement in Syria has been primarily focused on its own perception of threat rather than the interests of the Syrian opposition. Erdoğan's controversial Aleppo policy was a case in point. If Aleppo “will stain our conscience decades later,” in the [words](#) of former US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, it is destined to stain the Arab conscience forever.

Nevertheless, in an increasingly sectarian Iraq and Middle East, Turkey-GCC relations are in rapid transformation. Erdoğan's visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain are perceived as reciprocal to President Rouhani's visits to Oman and Kuwait. As Turkey's role in Syria and Iraq increases, Washington should expect to observe closer strategic cooperation between Turkey and the Arab Gulf.

Washington's strategic decision on the [Muslim Brotherhood Act](#), which would designate the group a terrorist organization, for example, may elicit a surprising joint response by Turkey and the GCC. Although Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates designated the group as "terrorist," the fact that the group has lost its influence, coupled with the Gulf's perception of an imminent threat by Iran, may encourage the Gulf countries to cooperate with Turkey in this matter. That this agenda is [largely supported](#) by anti-Muslim groups in the West will also play a factor in the Gulf perspective.