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By **George Meneshian**
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Armenia's effort to end its diplomatic isolation and find new partners in the Gulf and the role of Greece

By George Meneshian*



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Armen Sarkissian in Riyadh (Image source: [Al Arabiya](#))

On 23 January 2022, Armenian President Armen Sarkissian announced his resignation. Before his resignation, he tried to open a door of opportunity for Armenia in the Gulf; on October 25, 2021, he made a historic trip to Riyadh¹ in an effort to establish ties. Two months later, he gave the first ever interview between a senior Armenian official and a Saudi media outlet when he sat for an interview with Arab News and its editor-in-chief Faisal J. Abbas².

¹ Reem Krimly, "Sarkissian first Armenian official to visit Saudi Arabia, meets with Crown Prince," *Al Arabiya News*, 28 October 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/10/28/Armenian-president-first-official-to-visit-Saudi-Arabia-meets-with-Crown-Prince>.

² Faisal J. Abbas, "Exclusive: Armenian president hails 'new page' in ties with Saudi Arabia, thanks Arab world for providing refuge after genocide," *Arab News*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1991456/world>. A year ago, during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Armenian President was invited to deliver a speech on the Emirati–Saudi Arabian TV channel 'Al Arabiya'.

In the interview, Sarkissian stressed that, after becoming the president, one of his “first goals” had been to establish diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia which he described as “*very important, very influential and very prominent state, the guardian of the faith of Islam.*” Sarkissian’s interview also shared information about his October visit to Riyadh during which he met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman at the Future Investment Initiative Conference increasingly a sort of “Davos in the Desert”³.

“*We agreed that in reality our diplomatic relations started with that visit, and I’ve made invitations for the Minister of State and foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, and of course His Royal Highness, to visit Armenia,*” he said.

One aspect of the effort is to end Armenia’s diplomatic isolation and develop new partners. After the disastrous 2020 Nagorny Karabakh war and the following Armenian – Azerbaijani border crisis⁴, Armenia seeks new friends. Russia and Russian-led organisations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), did not help Armenia during her greatest time of need. The Saudi Kingdom, therefore, is a great potential ally given its role as a major geopolitical actor in the greater Middle East and the Islamic world. With the Arab states of the Gulf, Armenia shares a number of strategic interests; these include the following:

First, a concern about an expansionist Turkey led by President Erdoğan. Turkish so-called ‘*Neo-Ottomanism*’⁵ is an issue, not just for Armenia but, for the entire Middle East and Mediterranean world as well. In recent years, Turkey has supported the Muslim Brotherhood and allied factions, including Hamas, in a struggle to define the future of the Middle East⁶. Moreover, Turkey intervened on Azerbaijan’s behalf during that country’s invasion of the Armenian-controlled self-proclaimed ‘*Republic of Artsakh*’. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), share concerns with Armenia about Turkey’s foreign policy in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa. This has brought the Saudis and the Emiratis close to countries such as Greece, Cyprus, Sisi’s Egypt and Armenia.

Second, the common need to expand their diplomatic and economic footprint outside their respective regions; the Gulf States are taking initiatives to become major actors in regions⁷ such as the Horn of Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and, more

³ The Arab Weekly, “Saudi ‘Davos in the Desert’ draws hundreds of business leaders from West,” 29 October, 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/saudi-davos-desert-draws-hundreds-business-leaders-west>.

⁴ Joshua Kucera, “Armenia and Azerbaijan in new border crisis,” *Eurasianet*, 14 May, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-in-new-border-crisis?fbclid=IwAR2cnyQhU58toepiFkQSOS8JKMZHfz6sy3VoxOIWgKxkF2wBdal0mNNTIJQ>.

⁵ Ivaylo Hristov, “Neo-Ottomanism – Emergence, Ideology and Political Doctrine,” *Social Evolution & History*, 18, no. 1 (2019): 139-157.

⁶ Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 57-79; 95-107.

⁷ Guido Steinberg, “Regional Power - United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)*, Research Paper 10, July 2020,

recently, the Caucasus. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there has been a shift regarding the foreign policy of the Kingdom, which, from Islamic-oriented has become more pragmatic⁸. Armenia needs to think out of the box and expand her diplomatic presence in the Arab world, the Eastern Mediterranean and the European Union (EU). A potential partnership between the Saudi-Emirati axis and Armenia could benefit both parties to achieve their aforementioned goals.

Third, while Armenia has had a warm relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran is too strained by its conflict with the West and its attempt to establish a ‘Shi’ite Crescent’⁹ in the Middle East to provide the kind of robust and enduring support Armenia requires. During the aforementioned interview, Sarkissian seemed to leave open the possibility that Yerevan may correct its close relationship with Iran: “*I do understand and I see the tensions, I do understand and see Iran and the Gulf, Iran and Lebanon,*” he said in a carefully worded reply.

Indeed, from the perspective of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, moving Armenia away from Iran is an even more important geopolitical goal than building the country as a bulwark against Turkish adventurism. This would also contribute to the development of a US – Gulf States – Armenia ‘triangular nexus’; on the one hand, the Pashinyan government in Armenia is trying to approach the West because it needs a) Western funds and investments, b) Western support for its reform agenda and c) the involvement of the West in the process of the resolution of the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. The Gulf States, on their part, seek the return of the special relation these states had with the US during the Trump administration. Therefore, strengthening relation with the monarchies of the Gulf might be a promising ticket to a brighter future and a strong complement to Armenia’s warm relations with the West, while moving Iran away from Transcaucasia is a way for the Gulf States to reaffirm their pro-US foreign policy.

There are two additional reasons why cooperating with Saudi Arabia should be in the list of priorities of Armenia’s foreign minister:

First, there is an active Armenian community in the Arab world, including the Gulf States, and Armenia’s potential partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE could secure the safety and prosperity of these communities. The Armenian communities of the Middle East, although they traditionally support reactionary forces such as the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and the PLO, they could contribute to the rapprochement of

<file:///C:/Users/George/Desktop/Bibliography/Middle%20East%20&%20North%20Africa/Saudi%20Arabia,%20UAE%20&%20the%20Gulf/Regional%20Power%20United%20Arab%20Emirates%20Abu%20Dhabi%20Is%20No%20Longer%20Saudi%20Arabia%E2%80%99s%20Junior%20Partner.pdf>.

⁸ Mohammed Alrmizan, “Armenia and Saudi Arabia: Potential Diplomacy in Complex International Relations,” *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, Special report, December 2020, <https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/320>.

⁹ The Foreign Policy Centre, “Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East,” November 2018.

Armenia with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the rest Gulf monarchies, given their good social and economic performance in these countries.

Second, Yerevan may find important allies regarding the Genocide Issue. Armenia and Saudi Arabia share common historical narratives regarding the Ottoman Turkish atrocities during World War I. In Saudi Arabia, remembrance and coverage of the Armenian Genocide have a resemblance to the experiences of ‘Seferberlik’, the violent mobilisation by the Ottomans of young Arabs from Medina and other locations of the Middle East during the Second Balkan War (1913) and the Great War (1914 – 1918). In 2019, the Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon visited the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Antelias, a town that hosts the seat of the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia¹⁰. This development can be described as a first small step by Saudi Arabia towards the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Despite Sarkissian’s attempts to find new allies in MENA¹¹, premier Pashinyan seems to have other priorities; the Armenian government has decided to proceed with the necessary steps to start negotiations with the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan in order to normalise relations and open borders with these two countries, almost thirty years after the blockade imposed to the country by its Turkic neighbours. Turkey had ceased diplomatic ties with Yerevan due to the Armenian occupation of the seven Azeri-populated districts surrounding Nagorny Karabakh in 1992-3. Despite the attempts to normalise relations between the two countries in 2009 with the ‘Zurich Protocols’¹², Turkey did not want to dissatisfy her partner Azerbaijan. However, following the 2020 Karabakh war and the return of these seven districts to Azerbaijan, Turkey, has no serious reasons not to normalise relations with Armenia.

Pashinyan has agreed with Azerbaijani president Aliyev to resolve their bilateral issues following their meetings in Moscow (11 January 2021), Sochi (26 November 2021), and Brussels (14 December 2021). Furthermore, in mid-December, Armenia and Turkey announced their intention to normalise relations by appointing special envoys who met for the first time in Moscow, on 14 January 2022¹³. In addition, Armenia has agreed to participate in the South Caucasus "3+3" Cooperation Platform¹⁴ with Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Pashinyan’s government has decided to compromise in several issues in order to normalise relations with the Turks and the Azerbaijanis. This policy, however, has dissatisfied the Diaspora, the opposition parties, as well as the

¹⁰ Op cit. Alrmizan, 14-7.

¹¹ The Middle East and North Africa.

¹² Duygu Ozturk-Tuncel and Mitat Celikpala, “Turkey’s rapprochements with Greece and Armenia: Understanding path breaking steps,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19, no. 3, 431-449.

¹³ Al Monitor, “Turkish and Armenian envoys to meet in Moscow next week,” 5 January, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/turkish-and-armenian-envoys-meet-moscow-next-week>.

¹⁴ Gigi Gigiadze, Shota Ghvineria and Zaza Shengelia, “3+3: Georgia And The New Regional Architecture: A False Choice?,” *Economic Policy Research Center*, 2021, https://eprc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/33_eng.pdf.

country's president who seems to continue his campaign for finding new allies against Turkey (and Azerbaijan).

In the meantime, several Gulf States have eased tensions with Turkey. In example, the UAE's de facto leader Mohamed bin Zayed visited Ankara and signed a \$10bn-worth agreement with Erdoğan¹⁵. Moreover, the Turkish president will visit Saudi Arabia in February 2022 in an attempt to reapproach the Kingdom¹⁶, while the crisis between the GCC and Qatar, Turkey's strategic partner in the Gulf, has been resolved since January 2021¹⁷. Turkey's policy shift is apparent; Ankara is trying to ease tensions with the Gulf States, Israel¹⁸, Egypt¹⁹, Haftar's faction in Libya²⁰, even with Armenia. It is true that Turkey and the Gulf States share some common interest. For example, both Turkey and the UAE support the Ethiopian government in its war against the Tigrayan rebels²¹. Furthermore, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia support the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah party in Yemen in order to prevent the pro-Iranian Ansar Allah (Houthi) from dominating the country^{22 23}. In addition, the pro-US monarchies of the Gulf do not seek to have a long-term rivalry with Turkey, a NATO member-state.

With these considerations in mind, one could ask why Armenia and Saudi Arabia should work together.

First of all, analysts have little hope that talks between Turkey and Armenia will be fruitful. The Turkish envoy Serdar Kiliç, an experienced diplomat who is also a former Ambassador to Washington DC, is an Armenian Genocide denialist and has tried to stop the US Congress from acknowledging the Armenian massacres of 1915 as a

¹⁵ Hamdullah Baycar, "Rapprochement Spree: Abu Dhabi Recalibrates Relations with Ankara," 16 December 2021, <https://carnegeendowment.org/sada/86025>.

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, "Turkey's Erdogan says he will visit Saudi Arabia in February," 3 January, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/3/turkeys-erdogan-says-he-will-visit-saudi-arabia-in-february>.

¹⁷ Bel Trew and Borzou Daragahi, "Saudi ends blockade but Qatar gives up little," *Independent*, 5 January, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/qatar-saudi-arabia-gulf-arab-b1782751.html>.

¹⁸ Times of Israel, "Erdogan tells visiting rabbis ties with Israel are 'vital' for regional stability," 23 December, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-tells-visiting-rabbis-ties-with-israel-are-vital-for-regional-stability/>.

¹⁹ Mohamed Saied, "Qatar's presence in eastern Mediterranean benefits Egypt, Turkey," 15 December, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/qatars-presence-eastern-mediterranean-benefits-egypt-turkey>.

²⁰ The Libya Observer, "Cavusoglu: Haftar stipulated meeting Erdogan to visit Turkey," 28 December, 2021, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/cavusoglu-haftar-stipulated-meeting-erdogan-visit-turkey>.

²¹ Declan Walsh, "Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia's Civil War," *The New York Times*, 20 December, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/africa/drones-ethiopia-war-turkey-emirates.html>.

²² Mutahar Al-Sofari, "An Exceptional Case: Saudi Relations with Yemen's Islah Party," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 26 July, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exceptional-case-saudi-relations-yemens-islah-party>.

²³ Omar Munassar, "Turkey's Policy Shifts Toward Yemen's Civil War, a Local and Regional Perspective," *The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, 14 December, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15966>.

genocide²⁴. Furthermore, despite the statements of Turkey and Armenia on the potential normalisation of their relations, the former accuses the latter of conducting a ‘*terrorist campaign*’ against Azerbaijan due to the recent escalation of violence on the Armenian – Azerbaijani border²⁵. Turkey continues supporting Baku in its recent confrontation with Armenia which has led to the occupation of Armenian territory in the Eastern provinces of Syunik and Gegharkunik. Besides, even if Pashinyan and Erdoğan sign a peace treaty, Turkey could pose a threat to Armenia’s security in the case of a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey’s active role during the 2020 Karabakh war is enough to prove that Turkey can directly or indirectly attack Armenia if the latter is on war with Azerbaijan, Turkey’s strategic partner in Transcaucasia²⁶. The reveal of secret documents about Turkey’s plans to invade Greece and Armenia²⁷ strengthens the argument that Armenia, with a population of almost 3 million people, faces a security dilemma by Turkey, a regional power with a population of 85 million, that occupies parts of neighbouring Cyprus, Syria, and Iraq.

Secondly, the Turkish – Saudi/Emirati rapprochement may fail. This scenario is not impossible given the unstable situation in Libya²⁸, the ongoing rivalry between Turkey and Egypt, as well as the possible re-emergence of groups affiliated with the Muslim Brethren who continue to coordinate their actions from Istanbul. As already mentioned, Turkey and Saudi Arabia share some common interests. However, they both want to emerge as the regional hegemon in MENA and the Islamic (Sunni) world; on the one hand, the Saudi Kingdom is traditionally portrayed as the protector of Islam and its holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Turkey under Erdoğan, on her part, seeks to claim the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which was recognised as the legitimate representative of Muslims worldwide, given that the Sultan also inherited the title of the Caliph.

With these considerations in mind, Greece, an EU and NATO member-state, enjoying strategic relations with major powers like the United States and Russia, should recognise, welcome, and encourage Armenia’s soft power outreach to the Arab World and especially its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, given that the Armenian – Emirati rapprochement is already taking place²⁹. Greece herself has upgraded her ties with both

²⁴ Hürriyet Daily News, “Turkey appoints former US envoy for normalization with Armenia,” 16 December, 2021, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-appoints-envoy-to-armenia-to-normalise-ties-170103>.

²⁵ Russian News Agency TASS, “Turkey views Armenia’s actions in Syunik region as “terrorism” — foreign minister,” 17 November, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1362775>.

²⁶ Murad Ismayilov and Norman A. Graham, ed., *Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations: One nation – two states?*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).

²⁷ The Jerusalem Post, “Turkey drew up plans to invade Greece and Armenia - secret documents,” 16 June 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/turkish-plan-to-invade-greece-leaked-in-secret-reveal-report-631641>.

²⁸ Rebecca Anne Proctor, “Libya’s peace remains fragile as election disputes defy resolution,” *Arab News*, 10 January, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2001236/middle-east>

²⁹ George Meneshian, “The reasons behind the Armenia–UAE alliance,” *Middle East Online*, 11 September, 2020, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/reasons-behind-armenia%E2%80%93uae-alliance>.

the Saudis³⁰ and the Armenians³¹ during the past three years. Besides, it was the Greek embassy in Abu Dhabi that actively supported the establishment of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Armenia two decades ago³². Perhaps the Embassy of the Hellenic Republic in Riyadh could play a similar role by contributing to the Armenian – Saudi rapprochement as well.

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia is one of the most innovative and promising economies of the wider region. From its immense cultural output to its indisputable financial clout, the budding relationship between Armenia and Saudi Arabia offers huge potential for growth, not only for Yerevan and Riyadh, but with promising spillover effects across Southwest Asia and Southeastern Europe. That is something Greece will no doubt benefit from, too, given her ongoing cooperation with the Saudis in various fields.

The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is already implementing a proactive foreign policy in the neighbourhood, should support this rapprochement, encourage the development of Armenian soft power, and contribute to it, too: Yerevan and Athens enjoy massive diasporas with rich networks and connections, across Europe, the Americas and the Middle East. Greece's influence, expertise, and resources could accelerate Armenia's opening to the Middle East and, in turn, benefit Greece, as well as Athens' Western allies. Greece, as an EU member-state has the capability to push for the promotion of Brussels' agenda in South Caucasus. She can also play an active role with regard to the connection of Europe with the Caucasus and through it with Central Asia, due to her geography. Most importantly, Greece must react to Turkey's attempt to break the new Mediterranean axis by easing tensions with Middle Eastern states, including the Gulf monarchies and Israel³³.

To sum up, Sarkissian's visit to Riyadh, last October, is an indicator that Armenia and Saudi Arabia have agreed to establish ties, thirty years following Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union. The so-called '*Neo-Ottomanism*', has certainly played a major role in the decision of the Saudis to reach out the Armenians. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Yerevan and Riyadh share more common interests, apart from dealing with Turkey's behaviour. Global affairs and geopolitics have brought the Armenian – Saudi initiatives to the attention of the West. Greece, as the most credible Western power in the wider region should seize the opportunity to

³⁰ Vassilis Nedos, "Athens, Riyadh confirm strategic ties," *Kathimerini*, 27 October, 2021, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1170618/athens-riyadh-confirm-strategic-ties/>.

³¹ Kathimerini, "Greece, Cyprus expand alliance to include Armenia," 4 June, 2019, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/241230/greece-cyprus-expand-alliance-to-include-armenia/>.

³² Dimitrios Iliopoulos, former Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic to the United Arab Emirates (1997-2000), interview by author, Athens, 5 January, 2022.

³³ Mustafa Gurbuz, "Turkey and the Gulf States: A New Era of Détente," 8 December, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkey-and-the-gulf-states-a-new-era-of-detente/>.

upgrade her (trans-)regional role while simultaneously bringing benefits for her Western allies too.

There is little to lose and much to gain.

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