

Al Sharg Weekly

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President Erdoğan's Gulf Tour

Turkish President Erdoğan embarked on a new Gulf tour on Monday in an attempt to attract new investments to Türkiye. Following the ministerial-level meetings between the Turkish and Gulf officials a short while ago, President Erdoğan initiated a series of meetings at the presidential level with the oil-rich Gulf countries to attract giant investments that can bolster the Turkish economy, which has faced a downturn over the past years. During the 3-day-long tour, the Turkish President visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. Erdoğan was joined by dozens of Turkish businessmen and a high-level delegation during the trip. Moreover, several business forums were organized by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) in Jeddah, Doha, and Abu Dhabi throughout the visits.

Following the delegation meetings of the two sides led by the Saudi Crown Prince and President Erdoğan, both sides signed a number of deals ranging from industry and energy to defense and communications. Remarkably, Saudi Arabia has signed an agreement with the Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar, showing the Kingdom's desire to enhance its defense capabilities. Following Saudi Arabia, President Erdoğan visited Qatar and the UAE, respectively. Of note, Türkiye and the UAE have inked many agreements amounting to 50,7 billion USD.

Türkiye and Sweden's NATO Accession Process

After months of waiting, Sweden finally got Türkiye's approval to join NATO. Prior to getting the country's approval in its bid to join NATO, Sweden was forced to make some concessions in line with Ankara's demands. Ankara's terror-related concerns played a vital role in its negotiations with Sweden and Türkiye has gained the following from Sweden's NATO accession bid:

■ Türkiye forced Sweden to change some of its laws due to terror-related concerns and got promises from the Swedish authorities that Stockholm would take a tougher stance against the PKK and other groups that are on Ankara's terror list, such as the FETÖ, YPG/PYD.

■ NATO will appoint a special counter-terrorism coordinator in line with Ankara's request, meaning that Türkiye's concerns will be on the agenda when needed. The appointment of a counter-terrorism coordinator will create a reference point for the country in the upcoming period. NATO has accepted Türkiye's security concerns in its official documents during Sweden's NATO bid. This, in itself, is a success for Ankara.

■ Türkiye is very likely to obtain new F-16s from the USA after the deal. Moreover, the USA is expected to provide the necessary support for the modernization of Ankara's current air force fleet.

 Sweden's promise to Türkiye to support Ankara with regards to the Customs Union and visa liberalization.

■ Lifting the sanctions against Türkiye during Sweden's NATO membership process.

■ Sweden's NATO accession process partially eased Ankara's long-standing strained relations with the European countries and the USA. Eased relations with the West can attract possible new investments to Türkiye, positively affecting the Turkish economy. President Erdoğan currently seems to be very willing to normalize relations with the West in general and with the USA in particular. The diplomatic traffic between Ankara and Western countries is likely to speed up.

Russia's War on Ukraine and its Ramifications in MENA Black Sea Grain Initiative

In July 2022, the UN and Türkiye brokered the Black Sea Grain Initiative with Russia and Ukraine to help alleviate a global food crisis worsened by Moscow's invasion and blockade of Ukrainian ports. However, the deal, which allowed for safe exporting of Ukrainian grain for the past year, expired on Monday (July 17) after Russia pulled out. Last Thursday, an EU spokesperson revealed that the UN and Türkiye, assisted by the European Commission, had been leading talks to extend the Black Sea export of Ukrainian grain ahead of the deal's potential expiration. Now that Russia has officially quit, concerns are rising over the imminent effects of impeded food and fertilizer access. Food prices and food security in MENA were heavily impacted by grain shortages during the pandemic, so it remains to be seen whether a similar crisis will soon unfold.

Russia Vetoes UN's Humanitarian Aid Extension Mandate for Syria

As expected, Russia has vetoed the extension of the UN's cross-border humanitarian aid mandate for Syria. Since 2014, the UN has sent humanitarian aid to people in need in Northern Syria through four crossings from Türkiye. Nevertheless, three of those crossings were closed, and only one (Bab al-Hawa) was functional due to the constant Russian vetoes over the past years. The humanitarian aid tragedy for Syria comes to the fore every year as Russia uses its veto power in the United Nations Security Council. In an attempt to increase the legitimacy of the Assad regime, Moscow claims that all the aid must go to the needy people through full approval and coordination of the Syrian regime.

Nonetheless, the Syrian regime is known for its misuse of aid, as Damascus is directing the aid to its cronies rather than the millions of people in need. With the recent Russian veto, the lives of millions of people depending on humanitarian aid were put at risk. Following Russia's veto to extend the UN's mandate for the next nine months, Syria's ambassador to the UN, Bassam Sabbagh, sent a letter to the United Nations Security Council. In the letter, the Damascus government claimed that it allows the Bab-al Hawa border crossing to be used for humanitarian aid for the next six months with the condition that the aid must be made in "full cooperation and coordination" with Damascus.

Iraqi Premier Visits Syria

The Syrian regime's normalization attempts continue at full speed. Following the Gulf countries' rapprochement with the Syrian regime, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani visited Damascus. Sudani has become the first Iraqi premier to visit Syria since 2011. The Prime Minister discussed many issues with the Syrian regime leader Bashar al-Assad ranging from "terrorism" to combatting drug trafficking and drought. It should be noted that Iraq and Syria maintained bilateral ties throughout the Syrian conflict, although many Arab countries withdrew their ambassadors from Syria and closed their embassies following the regime's brutal crackdown on protesters. After the earthquake that hit Syria and Türkiye in February 2023, reconciliation attempts with the Syrian regime accelerated at a regional level for different reasons, notably due to stopping the drug inflow from Syria to different Arab countries and the increased burden of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. As a result, the Gulf countries reconciled with Syria, and the rapprochement process culminated in Syria's readmission to the Arab League in May 2023.



A Proxy-War in Sudan?

The fighting in Sudan, now in its third month, remains relentless as rival generals Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, vie for control and flout multiple cease-fires. The conflict began on April 15 and has led to significant humanitarian costs, with over 3,000 fatalities and approximately 2.1 million people internally displaced. The rivalry between the two generals was exacerbated when Hemeti became Burhan's deputy in 2021, leading to disagreements over power and the merger of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the Sudanese military. The conflict has taken on a regional dimension, however, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE supporting different factions due to Sudan's strategic location and natural resources. Tensions have been escalating between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their mission to diversify their economies away from oil, and they are now racing for control of Sudan's energy and logistics gateways. To add fuel to the fire, a recent leak (reported by the Wall Street Journal) has revealed that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman threatened to place sanctions on the UAE in a private conversation with journalists last year. If the UAE is embittered by these leaked comments, Sudan may become increasingly embroiled in this Gulf power struggle.

Diplomatic Crisis Between Iraq and Sweden

An official in the office of the Iraqi Prime Minister has reported that Baghdad has decided to expel the Swedish ambassador in Iraq, and the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires in Sweden will also be recalled. This comes as the latest development in the case involving the burning of a copy of the Quran in Sweden and the storming of the Swedish embassy building in Baghdad.

The Iraqi ministry, in its statement, affirmed that the government has instructed the relevant security authorities to conduct an urgent investigation and take the necessary security measures to uncover the circumstances of the incident and hold the perpetrators accountable.

In the context of these developments, the Swedish embassy in Iraq has announced the closure of its doors and the suspension of its services due to the ongoing protests until further notice. Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström described the storming of his country's embassy in Baghdad as completely unacceptable and issued a statement that the embassy's invasion is "wholly rejected."



Netanyahu's Sixth Government... Internal Crises and Challenges

Approximately 150,000 Israeli protesters demonstrated in Tel Aviv and other cities for the 28th consecutive week against the government's judicial reform plan. The plan, proposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government, aims to limit the powers of the Supreme Court and grant significant authority to the Parliament in appointing judges. The law is expected to be enacted by the end of the month. The opposition views this as a threat to democracy and has raised concerns among some of Israel's allies, notably the United States.

The project also seeks to increase the authority of elected officials over the judiciary. Critics argue that it jeopardizes the "democratic nature of Israel" and could potentially help Netanyahu evade corruption charges in several cases.

There is also concern within the Israeli military about the growing disobedience among pilots and paratroopers. Various security levels have warned about its impact on "deterrence power," and opinions have differed on whether this decision threatens Israel's national security. President Biden previously described the current Israeli government as the "most right-wing" ever and criticized its judicial reform plan and policies in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Despite tensions, the White House invited Netanyahu to visit the United States later this year.

Tunisia-EU Migration Deal

Tunisia and the EU have signed a deal to address "irregular" migration, with Tunisia becoming a major port to cross the Mediterranean. The deal, finalized earlier this week, disburses \$118 million to combat smuggling, strengthen borders, and facilitate the return of migrants. It also claims that migrants at the border will be treated with the "full respect of human rights" and that governments will establish more legal pathways for migration. This comes after last week's crisis which saw 150 Sub-Saharan African refugees stranded in a militarized border zone between Tunisia and Libya. Despite reports by Tunisian officials of safe evacuations, many remain missing. The deal – described as "strategic and comprehensive" by the EU – also outlines a plan to improve Tunisia's economic standing through "socio-economic reforms" and cooperation on a green energy transition, education, research, and innovation. It's worth noting that the EU previously offered Tunisia a \$1bn long-term loan to repair its battered economy; however, due to stalled discussions with the IMF, this has not materialized. As such, many see this week's deal as critical in managing migration. Still, it's uncertain how things will unfold, considering Tunisia's poor track-record on migrant mistreatment and governmental corruption.

Morocco-Israel Relations Deepening

The Moroccan Royal Court announced on Monday that the King has received a letter from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stating Israel's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara (though Israel has not publicly confirmed this). The move comes as both countries have been strengthening their ties since signing the contentious Abraham Accords, stipulating increased investment, tourism, and military cooperation. There is speculation that Morocco sought this concession to expand the two countries' positive rapport and to subsequently invite Israeli investors to the Western Sahara. Morocco may be asked to reciprocate by recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Palestine. Meanwhile, Algeria, which opposes Morocco's attempts to resolve the Western Sahara dispute unilaterally, has been deepening its ties with Iran, Russia, and China. This is certainly a diplomatic victory for Morocco, but some analysts predict that the legal and political impact of Israel's alleged recognition will be limited.



Algerian President Visits China

After a strategic trip to Russia, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune is currently on a week-long state visit to China, at the invitation of President Xi Jinping. Tebboune's visit to China aims to strengthen non-Western alliances and counterbalance Morocco's growing ties with the West and Israel. Algeria seeks Chinese investments in its mining sector and advanced technologies, while also deepening military ties. This visit follows the trend of countries in the region pivoting eastward in their alliances, exemplified by Saudi Arabia's strategic partnership with China in 2022 and the signing of a strategic deal between Palestine and China. Evidently, the shifting security landscape across North Africa and the Middle East and the involvement of various foreign actors are reshaping the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics of the region in unprecedented ways.

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