Erosion of strategic power – Saudi Arabia – Part II

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What is the issue?

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The assassination of a Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi has exposed the Turkish-Saudi rivalry that was largely hidden from public view.

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What is the role of U.S. in West Asian relations?

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- Turkey has had an uneasy relationship with Riyadh for several years.
- But the rise of its Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman has increased Turkey's anxiety that the Saudis intend to dominate the Arab world to the exclusion not only of Iran but of Turkey as well.
- The apprehension of turkey has been amplified by the clear signal sent by U.S. that Saudi Arabia had become the kingpin of America's policy toward West Asia.
- Turkey perceived the increasing Saudi importance to the U.S. as downgrading of Turkey's role in America's West Asian policy.
- It also coincided with a downturn in Turkish-U.S. relations.
- Turkey's relations with the U.S. came under strain because of major differences in their approach to the Syrian Kurds.
- Kurds make up between 15 and 25% of Turkey's population and many of them would like to secede and form an independent state of their own.
- However, Turkish nationalists insist everyone in their country is a Turk

whether they admit it or not and they are against Kurdish independence.
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- The civil war in Syria has allowed the Kurds there to carve out a space of their own between ISIS and the Assad regime, which has worried the Turks.
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- However, the U.S. militarily supported the Kurdish YPG militia in the fight against the Islamic State, while Turkey, which considers the YPG an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party(PKK) in turkey, vehemently opposed such a move.
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- Turkey's decision to buy the S-400 anti-missile defence systems from Russia has also added to the tensions.
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- Hence, the visible U.S. tilt toward Riyadh has further fuelled the existing differences between Saudi Arabia and Turkey.
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How do the regional relations shape the conflict?

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- The disagreements between Ankara and Riyadh were augmented by the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011.
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- Turkey enthusiastically welcomed the overthrow of authoritarian governments while the Saudi regime, feeling vulnerable itself, strongly opposed them.
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- **Egypt** - The conflict was visible during a military coup in Egypt in 2013 which led to the overthrow of Egypt's President Morsi, who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood.
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- Turkey had applauded Mr. Morsi coming to power as a vindication of the moderate and constitutionalist Islamist model and an indication that the Brotherhood was headed in the same direction.
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- On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is intensely apprehensive of constitutionalist and moderate Islamism since it directly challenges the Saudis' absolutist Islamism.
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- This is also the basis of the Saudi animosity towards the Brotherhood.
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- This was visible in the Saudis support to Egypt's General Abdel Fattah el-

Sisi, in 2013, and an immediate grant of $2 billion to the military regime to save Egypt's tottering economy.
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- **Qatar** - Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on Qatar in 2017, principally to punish it for its cordial relationship with Iran, with which it shares the world's largest natural gas field.
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- Qatar also has close relations with Turkey and hosts a Turkish military base.
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- The Emir of Qatar had sent a contingent of soldiers to provide security to turkey during the failed military coup in 2016.
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- Consequently, Iran and Turkey, has supported Qatar by flying in essential supplies to break the blockade and further reinforcing Turkish military presence in Qatar.
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- Turkey's pro-Qatar stance also reflects the difference in Riyadh's and Ankara's policies toward Iran.
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- Turkey and Iran were on opposite sides in the Syrian conflict, with Iran supporting the Assad regime politically and militarily and Turkey acting as the principal conduit for weapons supplies to the opposition.
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- However, it is interested in keeping its relations with Iran on an even keel because Iran is a major supplier of energy.
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- Also, Ankara and Tehran face a common threat from Kurdish separatism.
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- Therefore, while Saudi Arabia is locked in a series of proxy wars with Iran, Turkey has been careful not to take sides in this regional cold war.
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- Also, recent moves amounting to a rapprochement among Ankara, Moscow and Tehran indicate that an agreement has been worked out between Iran and Turkey on defining their spheres of influence in Syria.
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- This has upset the Saudis as it allows Iran to divert and concentrate its energies on contesting Saudi ambitions in the Persian Gulf and in Yemen.
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- **Yemen** - According to UN, the war on Yemen, waged by a Saudi-led coalition for over three years with American support, has pushed 14 million people, about half of the country's population, into "pre-famine" conditions.
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- Saudi Arabia started the attack in March 2015 after Shia Houthi rebels captured parts of Yemen, including the capital city Sana'a.

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- Riyadh saw the Houthis as Iranian proxies and was worried they would establish stable rule in its backyard.
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- And at least 22 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, of whom 14 million are extremely dependent on aid for survival.
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- None of this has deterred Saudi Arabia from continuing to pound Yemen.
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- Hence there are international concerns that Saudi must immediately cease the bombing campaign, lift the blockade and allow food and medicine supplies into Yemen.
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- Hence, despite the support from U.S., Saudi Arabia has been heavily criticised for its policies and actions in the international arena.
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- These episodes have provided the high moral ground for other regional powers in West Asia and an opportunity to discredit the Saudi regime for its actions in the regional sphere.
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Source: The Hindu

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