

Kuwait-Turkey Military Cooperation Alarms Saudi Arabia

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Turkey has recently signed a military cooperation agreement with Kuwait, member of the six-state Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). According to the agreement, signed during the Turkey-Kuwait Military Cooperation Committee meeting, the two countries are planning to share their military experiences and coordinate their activities beginning in 2019.

The GCC alliance includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey already has a military base in Qatar, another GCC member state.

Editor of the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Rai al-Youm, Abdul Bari Atwan, wrote that the Kuwaiti-Turkish accord could lead to deployment of Turkish troops in Kuwait.

“The accord doesn’t rule out deployment of Turkish troops in Kuwait and purchase of Turkish weapons, including armored vehicles, along the lines of the Qatar-Turkey accord that defends Doha against Gulf countries.”

Turkey’s efforts to sell defense industry products to Kuwait are not a secret. Turkey participated in the 2017 Kuwaiti Defense and Aeronautics Fair with 23 companies.

Kuwait-Turkey agreement came in the backdrop of close Turkish ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkish moves to become a shield for Qatar against the Saudi-United Arab Emirates alliance, the decision by Riyadh to assist Kurds in Syria and the tensions that erupted with this month’s disappearance of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

Tellingly, Kuwait-Turkey agreement follows Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Ben Salman’s brief unsuccessful visit to Kuwait on September 30, 2018. This was his first formal visit as Saudi crown prince to a Gulf Cooperation Council country since becoming the heir apparent.

A source at Kuwait’s emiri court told Reuters that the visit took place in a highly tense atmosphere, and that no political or economic agreements were signed by the two sides. The Kuwaiti daily al-Rai al-Youm, quoted a high-level source as saying that the visiting Saudi prince and his delegation appeared visibly displeased and angry. He only exchanged a few inconsequential words with the Kuwaiti ruler, and headed for his private plane along with his delegation as soon as the dinner was over, and flew back to Riyadh.

According to Kristin Smith Diwan, a senior resident scholar at the Washington-based Arab Gulf States Institute, the visit had gone badly, and that key issues – the proposed reopening of production in the Neutral Zone oil fields or the Qatar crisis – had generated disputes.

A top priority of the visit was discussions to restart production in oilfields located in the Neutral Zone shared by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The need to increase oil capacity has intensified as Iranian oil output drops under the pressure of U.S. sanctions, and Venezuelan oil production continues to slide. The administration of U.S. President Donald J. Trump has been publicly hounding OPEC, and swing producer Saudi Arabia, to provide the additional production necessary to smooth oil markets, Diwan said adding:

“With questions mounting as to whether Saudi Arabia has the spare capacity needed to meet these demands, the untapped potential of the Neutral Zone oilfields of Wafra and Khafji loom large. The fields could contribute half a million barrels toward the 1.5 million barrels of additional output sought by Saudi Arabia. Production was halted in the Neutral Zone over the course of late 2014 and spring of 2015 due to disputes that have never been fully understood. The [complex situation](#) in which the two national oil companies jointly manage the fields alongside foreign oil groups with equity stakes seems to have raised difficult issues of sovereignty. It appears that the meetings in Kuwait have thus far failed to resolve the issue, with Bloomberg reporting that talks stalled over the role of Chevron.”

According to al-Rai al-Youm, the crisis over the oilfields began when Kuwait refused to issue visas to maintenance technicians from the Chevron corporation who had been sent to supervise work on the fields to increase their output and oversee further exploration in the area. Their company had positioned equipment on the Kuwaiti side without consulting the Kuwaiti government. The Saudi government responded by halting production from both fields on the pretext of undertaking maintenance. This maintenance has lasted for four years, shutting the fields down and costing Kuwait some \$18 billion in lost production.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have not been good for the past 15 months, Abdel Bari Atwan said, adding:

“They have been merely ‘proper’, due to Kuwait’s neutrality in the Gulf Crisis and its failure to send significant numbers of troops to fight in Yemen as part of Operation Decisive Storm. Its warplanes played a merely symbolic role in that war. Tensions increased as a result of Kuwait maintaining diplomatic relations with Iran. It also condemned the recent shooting in Ahvaz that caused the deaths of 85 people, unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which indirectly supported the attack. Their media outlets justified it and hosted guest commentators who backed it and deemed it to be a legitimate act of resistance and not terrorism.”

Lebanese researcher Ali Mourad said Kuwaitis are seriously worried about being invaded. He told Al-Monitor,

“Kuwaitis need a regional force like Turkey to deal with Saudi ill intentions. They are truly afraid of a Saudi invasion because of a hegemony crisis in the oil fields, Kuwait’s ties with Qatar and the blank check Trump has issued to MBS [Mohammed bin Salman].”

Mourad said,

“Because of his prevailing fears, Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Al-Sabah went to

Washington in September 2017 to beef up ties with Trump. For the past three years the Kuwaiti ambassador in Washington has been hosting the Kuwaiti National Day receptions at the Trump International DC hotel. They are of course trying to take steps to free themselves from Saudi hegemony.”

Mourad added,

“But the situation is not the same nowadays. Kuwaitis fear a critical threat from a rogue clique in Saudi Arabia. This is why they call MBS ‘little Saddam.’ Amir Sheikh Sabah is in a weak position. This is why he is looking for alliance with Turkish President Erdogan. This is not really what they want but they have no other choice. As a regional force they can’t ask for help from Iran. There is no regional power other than Turkey.”

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