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The Mediterranean Linchpin: Saudi Arabia Boosts Ties with Cyprus

Cyprus is likely to become the strategic linchpin of Saudi Arabia towards the Mediterranean. On September 11, 2019, Ibrahim Abdulaziz Al Assaf, the Saudi minister of foreign affairs, did a first-ever Saudi top official visit to Cyprus: in the latest years, the divided island has acquired a strategic role in Gulf monarchies' Western projection. On September 5, 2019, the first resident Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Cyprus, Khaled bin Mohammed Al Sharif, presented his credentials to the Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades.

Gas, investments, tourism and maritime security drive Riyadh's rising interest for the island. Most of all, Cyprus represents for the Gulf monarchies the south-eastern gate to the European Union space and a viable channel of communication with the European institutions.

The Saudi minister of foreign affairs stressed Riyadh's willingness to develop relations with Nicosia "*on all fronts*", focussing initially on tourism and investments [*Arab News*, "Saudi foreign minister determined to bolster Cyprus ties", September 11, 2019]. A bilateral Business Forum has to be launched as part of an economic diplomacy program: preliminary measures, as the agreements on double taxation and air services, were implemented yet.

In Saudi Arabia's eyes, Cyprus has an invaluable geographical position: it stands in the Eastern Mediterranean, just in front of the most stable of the choke-points surrounding the Arabian Peninsula, the Suez Canal. Moreover, Cyprus has a history of encounter with the Arab and Muslim world and now it is the south-eastern cornerstone of the EU, thus being part of the European market and shared regulation.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies can provide Cyprus with investments, in the frame of the "Gulf visions" for economic diversification, and consolidated expertise in the energy sector, given the discovery of off shore gas fields in Cyprus' waters. In 2017, Qatar Petroleum and the American Exxon Mobil signed an exploration and production sharing contract for a Cypriot off shore gas field, the

Block 10. In 2018, at behalf of president Anastasiades historical visit to Saudi Arabia (the first Cypriot president to be invited since 1960), Saudi Aramco expressed interest in doing business in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) [*Kathimerini*, "Saudi Aramco shows interest in Cyprus EEZ", January 4, 2018], representing a stable energy hub if compared with the stormy Middle Eastern region.

In such a context, Saudi Arabia must find a good balance, on its route to Cyprus, between opportunities and risks. Riyadh and the Gulf monarchies have to be wary not to reproduce and export here the conflicting patterns of alignment and counter-alignment which are dividing the Middle East: for instance, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Israel already supports Cyprus' drillings in its EEZ, while natural gas still remains a matter of contention between Cypriots and with Turkey.

This is a potential 'geopolitical trap': but Nicosia can handle it, stressing its role of European neighbour of the kingdom and, moreover, of reliable interlocutor between the Gulf monarchies and Brussels; and Riyadh can commit to the same dealing with Cyprus, first of all, as a European partner to work with in order to strengthen prosperity and cross-regional security.

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