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The Struggle between Turkey & Saudi Arabia for the Leadership of Sunni Islam

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Summary

Today the geopolitical antagonism in the Middle East revolves around three powers: Shiite Iran, Sunni radical Saudi Arabia and Sunni moderate Turkey. Turkish-Saudi Arabian rivalry for the leadership of the Sunni Islamic world is ongoing and is expected to escalate further in close connection with the Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region. The two conflicts overlap with Turkey being more flexible between the arch-foes Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Σήμερα ο γεωπολιτικός ανταγωνισμός στον ισλαμικό κόσμο της Μέσης Ανατολής συνίσταται σε τρεις δυνάμεις: το Σηιτικό Ιράν, την σουνιτική παράδοση που εκπροσωπεί σήμερα η Σαουδική Αραβία και το μετριοπαθές Ισλάμ της Τουρκίας. Ο τουρκο-σαουδαραβικός ανταγωνισμός για την ηγεσία του σουνιτικού ισλαμικού κόσμου είναι σε εξέλιξη και αναμένεται να οξυνθεί περαιτέρω σε σχέση με τον παράλληλο ανταγωνισμό Σουνιτών και Σηϊτών μουσουλμάνων. Οι δύο αυτές συγκρούσεις είναι αλληλένδετες με την Τουρκία να έχει τον πιο ευέλικτο ρόλο ανάμεσα στο Ιράν και την Σαουδική Αραβία.

Keywords:

Sunnis, Shiites, Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Israel, (Islamic Republic), United States of America.

1. Introductory points

The geopolitical antagonism between Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Sunni Islamic world is an ongoing and unfolding process in various places where Muslims reside, mainly in Syria, Iraq and Egypt as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia. This antagonism is a consequence of the geopolitical weakening and fragmentation that the Islamic world suffered in the aftermath of the collapse of the Sunnite Ottoman Sultanate and the Shiite Qajar Iran after WW1 and the subsequent modernization of these societies under the secular scheme of the Kemalistic Republic of Turkey and Pahlavi Iran monarchy.¹

Almost fifteen centuries after the emergence of Islam in the world and a century after the marginalization of Islam from the political spectrum of the Sunnite and the Shiite spectrum of the Islamic world, today's Turkey and Saudi Arabia compete for the leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. This antagonism results basically from two facts: firstly, despite the modernization of the elites of the Muslim societies in the 20th century, the role of political Islam remained strong and endurable amongst the masses of Muslims in the same society; secondly, this strength and perseverance of political Islam hit back half a century later with the Islamic Revolution in Shiite Iran. Albeit Shiite in dogmatic orientation, the Iranian revolution has had a Pan-Islamic agenda, i.e. the return of political Islam to the forefront of the political reality in the Islamic world (Realm of Islam) at the expense of post-colonial imperialistic powers; Ayatollah Khomeini invited the Sunni Islamists in other countries to join their forces with Iran and do the same. The Iranian Shiite revolution sent shockwaves both to Sunni and Shiite in other countries and influenced their Islamic intelligentsia, setting the background for their ideological awakening. It is precisely under the aforementioned two factors that the Turkey-Saudi Arabia antagonism is being unfolded in the Sunnite Muslim world today.

However the current situation in the Muslim world is complex. Albeit the impact of the Shiite Iranian revolution has been strong amongst Sunni Islamists and public opinion, the role of ethnicity and nationalism, which had been introduced to the Muslim world along with secularization in the last half century, remains strong. It has been employed by secular Muslims as a bulwark against Islamic re-expansionism. Moreover Shiite Islamists in Iran are also struggling to reduce the impact of nationalism in their society in order to boost their efforts further. Yet this inner struggle between the concept of ethnicity and religion is time-consuming and is expected to last. As a result of this struggle, the Islamists's efforts to make political Islam the driving force of their political life are not unanimous.

The struggle between Islam and nationalism is also associated with the Sunni-Shiite discord. Secular nationalist Muslim politicians in the Arab and Turkic world associate nationalism with various aspects of Islamism as a pretext for diminishing the regional influence of political Islam. For instance, in nationalistic terms moderate Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and Turkey view Shiite Islamism as an "Iranian" geopolitical threat because Iran is the cradle of modern Shiite political Islam. Analogically in religious terms extreme Islamists in Saudi Arabia and Turkey reject Shiite Islam as a heresy because it does not agree with the Sunni

¹ H. Katouzian, "Riza Shah's Political Legitimacy and Social Base," στο *The Making of Modern Iran, State and Society Under Riza Shah, 1921-1941*, ed. S. Cronin (London, 2003), 15-37.

tradition and rituals. As shown below, this dual dimension of the regional conflict stems from the dogmatic form of Islam that each country represents in the Sunni world.

The geopolitical antagonism between Turkey and Saudi Arabia in a Sunnite context coincides with a formative period for the type of Islam both countries represent both in their societies and abroad. The formative character of this period is also the case regarding the Sunni-Shiite conflict regionally. Thus Islamist Arabs and Turks keep an eye on the keen efforts of the more experienced Iran to export Shiism in the Sunnite world while they are also trying to impose their own model of Sunni Islam, each one at the expense of the other in a Sunnite context.

Hence today the geopolitical antagonism in the Middle East revolves around three powers: Shiite Iran, Sunni radical Saudi Arabia and Sunni moderate Turkey. Egypt, the most important Arab country, both in terms of population and Islamic tradition, is not among the protagonists in the aforementioned struggle, simply because, as the *the coup d'état* against Morsi manifests,² the army remains the main pillar of politics there. In the Muslim triangle, Shiite Iran has a clear political system (Islamic Republic) and definitive nucleus in its foreign policy, i.e. approaching and empowering fellow moderate Sunni Muslims in order to get rid of non-Muslim imperial powers. Similarly in the case of Sunni Islam, the Arabian Peninsula's radical form of Wahhabi Islam approaches Shiites as infidels and views them in a black and white way. The Shiites also view the Sunnis as the illegitimate descendants of the Umayyad rulers who disobeyed to the Prophet Muhammad's order to appoint 'Ali as his successors. In contrast to the Wahhabis of the Arabian Peninsula, Islam in Turkey is more moderate because, according to the legacy of Ottoman Islam, Turks combine an adherence to Sunni Orthodox Islam and Sufi Islam (Mysticism).

2. The ideological background of the Saudi Arabian-Turkish antagonism

Efforts by Riyadh and Ankara to become the sole protagonist in the Sunni world are driven by both geopolitical interests and ideological reasons. Whilst their geopolitical interests are mainly economic in nature and they are often cited in the international media and academic analyses, their ideological differences are less obvious. This is mainly due to the fact that the foreign policy rhetoric is diplomatic in its expression and prevents each side from revealing their true worldview. The ideological differences between Saudi Arabia and Turkey are two: first, their ethnic diverse background and, second, the different from Islam each side adheres and promotes. Both reasons have their own significance and overlap.

2.1. Nationalism

With regard to the issue of ethnicity it is more than obvious that in the past Pan-Arabism and Pan-Turkism have been the main ideological frameworks that each country has promoted at the expense of the other.³ What is worth noting, however, is that nationalism influences the way each country views the other in religious, i.e. Islamic, terms. Even though both peoples are Sunni Muslims, the Saudis view Turks as the descendants of the

² Abigail Hauslohner. "Egypt protests: Protesters joyous as army removes Morsi, Morsi rejects 'coup'", *Toronto Star*. Retrieved 3 July 2013

³ J. Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation* (London, 1995), 186.

Ottomans who ruled the Arabian Peninsula for five centuries. Although the Ottoman rule was Islamic and was in accordance with the Islamic worldview of Muslim Arabs, the influence of Arab nationalism today prevents the Saudi Arab mind from thinking religiously in interstate affairs regarding Turkey. Similarly Islamist (Neo-Ottoman) Turks view Saudi Arabia as a former Ottoman province and this aspect is in accordance with their ethnic and religious worldview.

2.2. Islam

As far as the second difference, i.e. the form of Islam each country propagates, albeit both populations are Sunni Muslims and view Shiite Iran as their common ideological heretical rival, each country boasts to be the leading religious leader in the Islamic world for two reasons: the form of Islam they view as legitimate and their role in the past and present of Islam.

3. The Sunni ideological rivalry

3.1. Islam in Saudi Arabia

Islam in Saudi Arabia is identified with Wahhabism or Salafism, i.e. the literalist, strict and puritanical approach to Islam. Given that the term “Wahhabism” is considered derogatory by the Wahhabis themselves, they prefer to call their movement as Salafism, whilst they term their version simply as “true Islam.” The Wahhabis adhere to Hanbalism, one of the four schools of Islamic thought, which was introduced by Ibn Taymiyyah and later by Ahmad ibn Hanbal in the Arabian Peninsula in mid ninth c. AD.⁴ Ever since this form of Islam has dominated the religious preferences of the majority of Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula, including the five centuries of Ottoman rule.

Wahhabism terms Shiism as heresy and the Shiites as apostates of Islam, a sin that is punished by death, since in Islamic terms an apostate is an infidel and dangerous to the Islamic divine order that the Wahhabis are striving to re-shape on earth. In contrast Shiites view the Wahhabis as extremist and oppressive Sunni Muslims who have deviated from the right path, as their Sunni ancestors had done since the Battle of Karbala (AD. 680). That is how one can interpret the Saudi anti-Shiite policy in Iraq and Syria. According to the Wahhabi tradition the Shiites are termed as devious and dubious while they are symbolized as snakes.⁵ The dominant perception is that Shiites, wherever they are located, are the lethal enemy of the Wahhabis and the Saudis. In the same fashion the Wahhabis persecute Sufi Islamic groups which have a Shiite origin.

After the establishment of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi family invested on the preexisting Wahhabi tradition and decided to export it to other Muslim countries as a means of boosting their regional power and sustaining a religious form of foreign policy in a nationalistic Pan-Arab context.

⁴ Chiragh Ali, *The Proposed Political, Legal and Social Reforms. Taken from Modernist Islam 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York City:Oxford University Press, 2002), 281.

⁵ For instance see Zaraqawi’s anti-Shiite attitude in Iraq: *Le Monde*, September 17, 2005.

In the case of the other Sunni countries and schools of Islamic thought, the Saudis are tolerant but they are constantly striving to influence them with their own Islamic outlook, claiming that their puritanical Islam is closer to the initial form of Islam that the Prophet of Islam had preached. In this framework the Saudis compete with other countries which bear the long tradition of Sunni Islamic thought. Egypt is the number one ideological adversary of Wahhabi Islam and Turkey follows suit.

Regarding the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood, they do not adhere to the Wahhabi Islam, albeit they share the common Islamic outlook with the Saudis. Since the times of Gamal abd al-Nasser, the Saudis have created Islamic networks with the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood aiming to assist them at the expense of Egyptian nationalists and to draw them to the Wahhabi movement. These networks played a major role in the mobilization of Egyptian Islamists in the Arab spring. Yet Morsi's moderate and cautious attitude toward Riyadh suggests that the Brotherhood rejects Wahhabism and promotes a more moderate profile of Islam which is based on the other Schools of Islamic thought. As a result, Saudi Arabia's anti-Morsi role in the recent *coup d'état* in Egypt was considerable and reflects the nervousness of Saudi Arabia about Morsi's independent policy to Riyadh and pragmatic policy to Iran and Turkey.⁶

Yet Turkey poses the greatest challenge for the Saudi regional supremacy plans because of both Turkey's current geopolitical and economic strength as well as its glorious Ottoman past and rich Islamic tradition. The Saudis disagree with the moderate and global Islam of Turkey because of certain dogmatic parameters as well as the non-Arab origin of the Turks which makes them culturally alien and their contribution to Islam of secondary significance to the Arab eyes.

3.2. *Islam in Turkey*

Contrary to the absolute and puritanical Islam of Saudi Arabia, Turkey's Islam is moderate, more tolerant and flexible as well as cosmopolitan. These features are due to mainly two factors: the imperial Ottoman past of Turkey and the way that Islamism re-emerged by defeating Kemalism in the past century. The moderate spirit of Islamist Turks is depicted in the so-called "Soft Islam" which is supported by the US and the West as a model for coexistence between Islam and liberal democracy. At least this was the case prior to the Gezi Park riots.

The "soft Islam" of Turkey stems from the Islamic dogmatic mosaic of the country, a remnant of the Ottoman past too. In terms of doctrine, Islam in Turkey is divided into three main categories: the Sunni Orthodox Islam, Shiism and Sufi Islam or Mystical Islam. Both categories consist of subcategories regarding the doctrine-movements and the various religious groups representing these movements.

The Sunni Orthodox Islam forms the nucleus of the Sunni Islamic beliefs all over the world. It is the link between Islam of Turkey and the rest of the Sunni world, including Saudi Arabia. The Sunni Orthodox Islam of Turkey includes almost all of the four schools of Islamic thought but it is predominantly based on the Hanafi School.⁷ This type of Islam legitimized

⁶ Daniel Greenfield, "Did Morsi's Flirtation with Iran Lead to his Overthrow?" Frontpage Mag, July, 9, 2013.

⁷ Nurit Tsafir, *The History of an Islamic School of Law: The Early Spread of Hanafism* (Harvard, Harvard Law School, 2004) (Harvard Series in Islamic Law, 3).

the Ottoman Sultans to unite the Islamic world and represents it in the geopolitical struggle at the time.

The second category of Turkish Islam is Sufism or mystical Islam which is in direct controversy with the Orthodox Islam. The various Sufi groups (Mevlevis, Bektashis, Naqshibandis, Hurufis etc.) coexisted in Turkey with the Sunni Orthodox Islam and they are the result of the evolution of Islam amongst the Turkish tribes in the middle centuries. They represent a mystical path of Islamic the origins of which go back to Shiism and Iran.

The same is the case about the Alevites, the third category of Muslims in Turkey. Enjoying a great number (almost 15 million followers) in Turkey the Alevites (venerators of Ali) are a syncretistic Islamic movement that combines Islamic, Christian, Zoroastrian and Judaic dogmatic aspects. In Islamic terms they form a branch of Shiite Islam and this poses for the religious influence of Shiite Iran in modern Turkey.

3.3. *Their role in Islam*

The Saudis do not only consider themselves to preach the right form of Islam but they also view themselves as the custodians of the two most sacred places in Islam: the Mecca Kaaba Shrine and the Medina Mosque. They think that after the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate the banner of Islam has been given to them by the Almighty and as a result of that they have a special mission to accomplish, i.e. to spread Wahhabi Islam.

In nationalistic terms in their subconscious they frame their religious outlook with the ethnic concept that they are the exemplary representatives of the Arab race who was chosen by God to bring Islam on earth through Prophet of Islam Mohammad and the Arabic language through which Islam was spread around the globe. This ethnic dimension of their metaphysical outlook contradicts the religious-Islamic one, according to which religion and morality comes first whilst ethnicity is secondary. Nevertheless the Saudi government and the clergy in the country have merged the two concepts (religious and nationalistic) in a very harmonious and convincing way in which the two elements are interwoven indiscriminately. In this context the aforementioned concept that the Saudis are the legitimate dynasty and country who have been assigned with the divine task to carry the banner of Islam after the fall of the Ottomans has also an ethnic connotation, since they view this assignment as a result of their Arab origin too. In particular they justify it historically as the return of the banner of Islam to their hands after centuries of Ottoman Turkish rule.

On their past the Turks view their role as important since they are the descendants of the Ottomans who were the legitimate leaders of the Sunni Islamic world. Hence modern Islamist Turks consider as their legitimate right to return to the glorious Ottoman past and re-take the lead of the Islamic world. In this regard they view the House of Saud as an illegitimate family of Bedouin tribesmen who control and oversee Mecca and Medina without any religious credentials. They also reject Wahhabism as a local aspect of Islamic practice which cannot be applied to the rest of the Muslim world. According to the Neo-Ottoman foreign policy of Turkey the ultimate goal of Ankara is to re-assert the control of Mecca and Medina after they have spread the “soft Islam” of Turkey to the Arab world. It is at this point that both Turks and Saudi Arabs have started to struggle for the control of the majority of the Sunni Muslim world.

The Saudis are operationally more experienced and advanced than the Turks. The Saudis enjoy an experience of more than three decades contrary to the Turks who have just started forming their own *modus operandi* in the domestic scene of Turkey and they are in the process of exporting it abroad. Whilst the Saudis have established a wide, strong and effective networks of Muslim fighters (*mujaheddin*) in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Balkans and the Caucasus, and they seek the prevalence of Wahhabism basic by force, Turks prefer mostly the peaceful penetration through culture and education (Fethullah Gulen's network) in various Muslim societies, mainly Turkic-speaking in the Balkans, the Caucasus and C. Asia.⁸

Although the Turks and the Saudis have joined so far forces to diminish the influence of emerging Shiism in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, it was a matter of time to have the first indication of Turkish-Saudi antagonism in the same regions. The conflict between the two has just started and it is twofold: first, in the form of soft power, it takes place culturally in terms of establishing theological schools and seminaries in other countries and, second, in the form of army struggle which is at an initial stage and is focuses for now in Syria and Iraq.

4. The Future of the Saudi-Turkish antagonism

In the short term the emerging antagonistic spirit between Ankara and Riyadh is expected to turn to a conflict both in political and (para)military terms. The Saudis use both ways and they are good in doing that. Ankara is not as experienced as Riyadh is in the case of military-guerilla warfare networks operating in other countries. While Turkey has preferred so far to use mainly the soft power of diplomacy and economy, it is a matter of time to develop effectively its own paramilitary networks in the region in order to halt Saudi advances at the expense of Ankara.

Politically it is expected that Turkey, due to its moderate Islamic profile may have a multiple approach of the Shiite-Sunite conflict in the region. In some cases it will side itself with the Shiite forces and in some other cases with liberal moderate Islamic ones. Yet any permanent of substantial cooperation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (or Qatar) is not on the horizon. This antagonism is unfolding in mainly three fronts: in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. The same is the case, but in the mid or long term, in the other parts of the Muslim world such as the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo), as well as the Caucasus and C. Asia.

4.1. Syria

In Syria while Riyadh and Ankara have been cooperating in order to diminish Iranian influence in the country by attempting to depose President Assad, they apparently miscalculated the reality on the ground. Assad's successful defense and counterattack in Qusayr and other cities proved that the Syrian civil war is going to last for quite some time. As a result Saudi Arabia and Turkey feel nervous about who is going to support the Syrian opposition who seems helpless and with low moral after recent tactical failures.

⁸ Farangis Najibullah, "Turkish Schools Coming Under Increasing Scrutiny in Central Asia," *Radio*

On the eve of this unexpected shift in operations, Riyadh has decided to take control of the Syrian opposition forces by boosting the power of its Salafist fighters. This move has irked Ankara who views Saudi intentions with suspicion. Besides Syria is on the doorstep of Turkey and views seriously its legitimate and influential role in Syria. The time of collision between the two Sunni powers has come.

Already before the Qusayr battle (May 2013), the Saudis developed a large force of Wahhabi-Salafist Mujaheddin in Syria with al-Nusra being the spearhead of this force. Now al-Nusra acts in a hostile way against other factions of the Syrian opposition. The goal of Saudi Arabia is to monopolize power and control the Syrian opposition in order to establish a Salafist state in the north and centre of Syria. This is a threat to Turkish interests.

On its part Ankara is expected to act swiftly and establish its own militias at the heart of the Syrian opposition forces. The fact that for Turkey Syria is an Arab country and the cultural-linguistic (Arab) parameter may play a role is not a problem. The case of Iranian influence has proved that Syria is an Arab speaking country but with a multi-cultural background which enables multi-ethnic regional alliances.

Thus, in the next few weeks or months we must expect an all-out involvement of Ankara in Syria in two ways: Supporting the pro-Turkey political and paramilitary wing of the Syrian opposition, further boosting Turkish intelligence forces in Syria and forming secret paramilitary groups of Syrian and Turks in Syria. The first two choices are doable since Ankara has developed strong relations with the liberal leadership of the Syrian opposition, hosting conferences and its headquarters on Turkish soil. As for the third action, this is expected to take place in the mid-term but it will happen because the Saudi Salafist fighters will receive reinforcements from Riyadh in terms of manpower and equipment.

Politically, if things get out of control for Turkey in Syria, Ankara has the choice to alter its policy in Syria and re-approach Assad, with the mediation of Iran, against the dangerous Salafist fighting power of S. Arabia. It is not expected that any Turkey-Saudi Arabia rapprochement may take place anytime soon or ever because of the ideological gap between the two countries in Islamic terms.

4.2. Palestine

In this case the struggle is expected to be mainly political and economic. After the fall of the Morsi government, Hamas leadership has lost its most immediate regional supporter. Khalid Meshaal is concerned with Riyadh's (and Doha's) negative attitude to Morsi because it reveals the real intentions of S. Arabia to support Fatah in Palestine. That means that Meshaal is probably going to turn to Ankara for further support rather to Riyadh. This is good news for Turkey who is going to exploit this opportunity in order to boost its political and economic presence in Gaza [mainly] and the West Bank. This aspect is going to be one of the central ones in Erdogan's agenda in his forthcoming visit to Palestine. In this case cooperation between Turkey and Iran against Saudi Arabia is expected to unfold in the next few months.

4.3. Egypt

Turkey's role in Egypt is going to be multi-dimensional, combining political, economic and military elements. After the recent *coup d'etat* against Morsi, the Islamic Brotherhood already shows signs of inclination to Turkey for ideological and material support. The negative attitude of Riyadh to Morsi's rule, because of his rapprochement with Iran and Turkey, sets the Turkey-Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood alliance in the foreground of political developments. As in Palestine and Syria, the Turkey-Iran cooperation may be the case for Egypt too. The political involvement of Turkey in Egyptian political affairs has already taken place with Erdogan and Davutoglu's criticism against Egyptian army and their calls for reinstating Morsi. Turkish and Iranian officials, including Foreign Ministers, have held meetings about the crisis in Egypt and they have agreed to provide support to the Islamic Brotherhood.

5. Summing up

From the preceding discussion it is apparent that the Turkish-Saudi Arabian antagonism for the leadership of the Sunni Islamic world is ongoing and will escalate further. There is also a close connection with the Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region. The two conflicts overlap with Turkey being more flexible between the arch-foes Iran and Saudi Arabia. In fact, Ankara is closer to Iran than Saudi Arabia. Iran also views Ankara with more sympathy because of Turkey's moderate Islam and more flexible foreign policy. Hence a close Turkish-Iranian cooperation is expected to be initiated in less than a year in order to sideline Saudi Arabian Islam from political developments in the region.

This dual conflict in the Islamic world is seen with much concern by the West. Israel and the U.S. view Turkey's intentions with much suspicion and they seem to prefer an unorthodox and eventually meaningless alliance with Wahhabi Islam in spite of the terroristic profile of the latter. The key factor in this process is Turkey and for how long Turkish Islamists will be able to maintain their diplomatic approach between the West and their Islamic orientations and goals in the region.

Το ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ (ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ) ιδρύθηκε το 1988 και λειτουργεί ως ένα ανεξάρτητο, μη κερδοσκοπικού χαρακτήρα ερευνητικό και επιμορφωτικό ίδρυμα. Μέσω του πολυετούς έργου του έχει αναδειχθεί σε σημαντικό φορέα πληροφόρησης, μελέτης και σχεδιασμού θεμάτων εξωτερικής πολιτικής, και θεωρείται ένα από τα πιο έγκριτα σε διεθνές επίπεδο κέντρα μελετών της Ελλάδας στον τομέα των Ευρωπαϊκών υποθέσεων και των διεθνών σχέσεων.

Το ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ δεν εκφράζει, ούτε εκπροσωπεί συγκεκριμένες πολιτικές απόψεις. Επιχειρεί μόνο να λειτουργήσει ως θήμα ελεύθερου διαλόγου και ως κέντρο παραγωγής και ανταλλαγής ιδεών.

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