

The Gulf Countries and Turkey: (Re-)Drawing the Map of Alliances in the Middle East

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Following a decade of tension, relations between Turkey and leading Arab countries have seen significant positive developments over the past year, led by the détente with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. While Turkey's reversal regarding Abu Dhabi and Riyadh stemmed mainly from economic considerations, it also has geostrategic implications. The thaw between Ankara, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh bolsters the chance that the recent rapprochement between Israel and Turkey will last, because it encourages Ankara to assume a more moderate position on regional issues that are important to Israel.

In November 2021, Ankara hosted United Arab Emirates de facto ruler Mohammed bin Zayed, and in February 2022 Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a reciprocal visit to the UAE. The rapprochement between Abu Dhabi and Ankara represents an especially sharp turn because Erdogan had accused the United Arab Emirates of being behind the attempted coup against him in 2016. During his visit to Turkey, bin Zayed made a commitment to invest \$10 billion in Turkey, and in January 2022 the countries agreed on a \$5 billion swap. In Erdogan's reciprocal visit to Abu Dhabi, a series of agreements between the countries were signed, including on preparations for coping with mass disasters, climate change, and initial defense industry cooperation.

Furthermore, in an unusual decision, in April 2022 the Turkish judicial authorities decided to suspend the legal proceedings regarding the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and to transfer them to Saudi Arabia. This decision came after a year-long dialogue between Ankara and Riyadh that was a preparatory measure before Erdogan's first visit since 2017 to Saudi Arabia on April 28, 2022, which included a meeting with King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Crown prince and de-facto leader.

It was Turkey that started putting out feelers to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as part of an effort to improve its relations with Israel and Egypt as well. It

seems that the main motivation for Ankara's attempts at rapprochement with countries in the region is related to its need to improve its economic situation, and these efforts evolved against the backdrop of the change of administration in the United States and the compromise agreement in the Gulf between Qatar and its neighbors, which in practice enables more diplomatic flexibility between the sides. From Turkey's perspective, the fact that Abu Dhabi placed restrictions on Turkish mafia boss Sedat Peker, who hid in its territory and broadcast videos that embarrassed the government in Ankara, was also critical for the policy change. Further evidence of a change in relations between the sides was the coordination of positions regarding events in Yemen: The Houthi attacks against the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in January 2022 led the Foreign Ministry in Ankara to condemn them and, for the first time, to call them "acts of terrorism."

The Background to the Tensions

Qatar aside, the Gulf countries see Turkey under Erdogan as a destabilizing actor with neo-Ottoman aspirations that supports political Islam movements in the region. Following the consequences of the regional upheaval, concerns about Turkey arose in light of its support for parties connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, and specifically in Egypt and toward Hamas. This Turkish policy is a threat to the Gulf countries, not only on the regional level, but first and foremost in their domestic arenas.

Early in the previous decade there was an attempt to warm relations between Turkey and the Gulf countries in light of Saudi Arabia's desire to include Ankara in the anti-Iranian camp. Turkey even declared support, albeit reserved, for Saudi Arabia in the initial stages of the war in Yemen. Furthermore, Turkey joined the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, initiated by bin Salman in 2015. The leaders of the countries held well-publicized official visits, and they established a council for strategic cooperation between them.

This rapprochement was temporary. Turkey's regional aspirations posed a problem for most of the main Sunni actors – each of which still sees itself

as worthy of regional leadership. As a result, Ankara, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh competed with one another over shaping the regional order and supported opposing sides in various conflicts, including the civil war in Libya. Ankara's assertive policy and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for Qatar were a source of ongoing tension between the three countries. Alongside with the establishment of military bases, ports, and support for proxies, the countries tried to form associations, albeit at times loose, in order to fulfill their interests. In this context was the warming of relations in recent years between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and between Greece and Cyprus on the other.

The Challenges Ahead

The current dialogue appears focused on economic cooperation, with central political aspects left open, alongside basic mutual suspicion regarding the long-term ambitions and motivations of the sides. To the United Arab Emirates, it is evident that improving relations with Ankara matches its plans to expand its economic influence and to this end, to take advantage of Turkey's geographical location. Ankara, given Turkey's worsening economic crisis, is in need of external investment. Regarding Saudi Arabia, Turkey wants to re-enter the domestic market of the largest economy in the Middle East, alongside with bolstering tourism and perhaps even selling Turkish arms.

In addition, in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the prevailing assumption is that Sunni Ankara could at least partially counterbalance the power of Shiite Iran. The concern in the Gulf is that even if a new nuclear agreement is achieved, but also as revenge if not, Tehran might expand its aggressive activities. While Ankara's self-perception as a regional power with aspirations to expand its influence was one of the reasons for the hostility between Turkey and the Gulf states in the past decade, a change of perspective is evident in the Gulf in this context, reflected in the attempt at rapprochement with Turkey – this time as a counterweight to Iran. It is doubtful that Ankara shares this strategic perspective, and despite periodic tension with Tehran, Turkish policy toward Iran is different. Therefore, this

divide will presumably constitute a source of disagreement between the sides in the future.

In addition, the expectations in the Gulf of a strategic change in Turkey's regional approach are unlikely to be met. Turkey's military presence in the Gulf and its involvement in Libya and in the Red Sea arena continue to constitute a threat. In effect, the détente between Ankara and Abu Dhabi is fueled in part by the delicate balance created following the discussions between the rival forces in Libya, which temporarily enable the external actors to moderate their policy. For Saudi Arabia, it will be necessary to see whether Ankara remains consistent in its support for Riyadh's regional policies.

For its part, Riyadh is advancing more cautiously and gradually than Abu Dhabi vis-à-vis Turkey, while it continues its dialogue with Ankara. In May 2021 Turkey's foreign minister visited Saudi Arabia, following a phone call between King Salman and Erdogan, and in March 2022 the foreign ministers of the countries met and agreed on "improving relations." It seems that the dialogue has succeeded in lowering the level of tension somewhat, but the personal rivalry between Erdogan and Prince Mohammed will continue to dictate hesitancy in developing the relations even after Erdogan's visit to the kingdom. Also, it is not clear whether, as Abu Dhabi and Riyadh expect, Ankara will succeed in restoring its relations with Egypt in light of its difficulty recognizing the legitimacy of the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. However, here too there is progress. There have been reports from the Turkish side about the appointment of an ambassador to Cairo, nine years after the previous ambassador was expelled from the country, and about a visit planned by the Egyptian foreign minister to Turkey.

In addition, Abu Dhabi's willingness to work toward the political rehabilitation of the Assad regime in Syria is a development that Ankara is forced to accept reluctantly, but the freeze in the Syrian civil war enables the sides to refrain from conflict over the issue. From Turkey's perspective, the Gulf countries have significant leverage over it in the form of their

tightening ties with Greece, Cyprus, and especially with Israel. Because in the context of the eastern Mediterranean Turkey continues to present uncompromising positions vis-à-vis Cyprus and Greece, developments in this arena could also exacerbate the tensions between Ankara and Abu Dhabi.

Qatar does not look favorably on the apparent rapprochement between Turkey and Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Cairo, as disagreements remain between it and its neighbors, and the regional competition over influence still exists. It seems that Qatar is concerned about losing its unique role for Turkey in the Gulf – the emirate hosts a Turkish military base – to its neighbors.

The sides have also assumed different stances regarding the way to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, especially following the signing of the Abraham Accords. Turkey was among those that condemned the normalization between Israel and the Gulf countries and even threatened to recall the Turkish ambassador from Abu Dhabi after the accords were signed. The threat was not carried out, and it seems that the normalization process has actually pushed Ankara to recognize the limitations of its hostile position and to join the trend. However, significant escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena could also create pressure from Ankara on the UAE to cool its relations with Israel. Aside from this, success in the détente between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates could lead to a certain cooling of relations between Israel and the UAE, which has set a goal of engaging in dialogue with all the actors in the region and cannot demonstrate positions supportive of Israel to the same extent as during the initial period after the signing of the Abraham Accords.

The ability of the Sunni countries to hedge risks and to display pragmatism in relations between them is an important basis for their ability to influence regional developments and to redraw the map of alliances. The fact that the United Arab Emirates was a pioneer in improving relations with Turkey forges a path for Riyadh and Cairo. However, the challenges to a real improvement in relations with Ankara are a warning sign for Arab countries

to take Turkey's courtship with a grain of salt. This skepticism toward Ankara's level of willingness to persist in the new course it has charted exists in Jerusalem as well. However, this is a region-wide change in direction, and in effect helps the various measures strengthen one another.