

From Tension to Normalisation:

The Changing Nature of the Turkish-Gulf Relations

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Introduction

The eruption of the Arab Spring in late 2010 marks a significant turning point for the relations between the Gulf countries and Türkiye in that it prevented the already-existing bilateral economic and political cooperation from going ahead in the direction of and eventually transforming into a strategic partnership. Despite sharing broad objectives, both camps diverged on regional matters (Kardaş, 2021). On the other hand, the Gulf countries, consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have also diverged in their foreign policy orientation after the onset of the Arab Spring. This situation was unexpected as smaller Gulf states usually aligned their positions with the major actors in the region, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran (Szalai, 2017). The Arab Spring events and the subsequent Syrian crisis affected the foreign-policy of the Gulf countries and Türkiye, where antagonism between Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia was accompanied by a close strategic alliance between Türkiye and Qatar (Kardaş, 2021). However, despite the differences, the recent developments to foster the diplomatic ties between Türkiye

and the Gulf countries, particularly those with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the last two years (Altunışık, 2021), have tilted towards forging a "multidimensional regional cooperation". The underlying rationale behind the initiative, as explained by President Erdoğan, is to reinforce the relations with the Gulf countries, whereby forging a peace, stability, and welfare belt, strengthening the "Türkiye axis" – having been highlighted in his 2023 election manifesto (Duran, 2023). In this regard, Türkiye's proactive and dynamic foreign policy-making engaging with the regional political systems as put forward by the AK Party government's moving away from the traditional "threat assessment approach" (Oktav, 2018), which has now been phrased as the "humanitarian and enterprising foreign policy"¹, the regional developments involving the global actors, the main one of which being the changing attitude of the United States towards the region, as well as the geopolitical and economic interests of the respective actors have all been influential in the rapprochement that is being observed today.

¹ Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Türkiye's Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy." Accessed July 28, 2023. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/synopsis-of-the-turkish-foreign-policy.en.mfa>

Türkiye's Proactive Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times

After the establishment of the new government in 2002, Türkiye's foreign policy in the first decade of the AK Party era moved towards de-securitising the foreign policy in an attempt to get rid of the Cold War mentality that had influenced the country's policies for half a century, with changing threat perceptions and more positive approach towards contributing peace and stability (Aras & Polat, 2008). Türkiye's new strategic vision stemmed from it, moving to achieve its potential as a Middle Power that has a say in global affairs. Assuming the role of a pivotal state, Türkiye's perception was based on playing an active role on diplomatic, political, and economic fronts in a region of which it is at the centre. During the first AK Party era between 2002 and 2007, the emphasis was on its status as a bridge between East and West as part of Türkiye's adaptation process to the European Union. After the membership bid came to a halt during the second term of the AK Party, the attention shifted towards the relations with Türkiye's southern and eastern neighbours as part of an ambition to consolidate a regional leadership role. This situation, in turn, contributed to active foreign policy-making attempts established through soft power instruments, providing Türkiye with 'strategic depth' extended to neighbouring regions using diplomacy, economic relations and cultural exchange on the way to becoming a leader, facilitator and broker in regional matters (Haugom, 2019). This stance was reflected in Türkiye's policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' in a context affected by the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which pushed the environment in the Middle East towards being more chaotic and unstable. Exposed to security challenges from the regime change in Iraq, the PKK's increasing ability to use Northern Iraq as a base and Iran's ever-increasing strategic influence through the region led Türkiye to adopt the active policy to minimise the spill-over impact of regional problems on Türkiye, where the region was seen as an area of 'opportunity and responsibility'. In this regard, this policy also played into preventing the negative influences of the instability in the region on Türkiye's democratic consolidation, economic development, and territorial integrity by promoting mutual relations with neighbours (Oğuzlu, 2012).

Türkiye's economic considerations heavily influenced its proactive engagement with its neighbours to attract regional investors and secure market access to Turkish products (Oğuzlu, 2012). At the same time, the 'demonstrative effect' of Türkiye coming along with economic growth and becoming a 'trading state' where the foreign policy had gotten increasingly driven by economic motives helped set a democracy model for the Arab world in terms of prospects for reform and democratic transformation. In this sense, the 'snowballing effect' of Türkiye's earlier transition and the liberalisation of the Turkish market towards an export-oriented economy with a huge increase in per capita income set an example on the regional scale, thereby allowing for greater interaction between business elites and state officials in the direction of adoption of the tenets of the Turkish economic system (Kirişçi, 2011). Therefore, the Turkish economy's liberalisation is a factor supporting its soft power and influence over the countries in the region. In line with the export-oriented approach, which could be counted as one of the significant reasons for regional orientations, Türkiye more and more shifted its focus toward the MENA region (Kuşku-Sönmez, 2019).

Given the AK Party's emphasis on becoming a problem solver and contributing to regional and global peace, Türkiye has built a reputation as a facilitator of cooperation and effectively mediated conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Syria and Israel, and Palestine and Israel (Baudner, 2014). Indeed, as global politics has been subject to various humanitarian crises, Türkiye's adoption of a humanitarian foreign policy to contribute to regional stability and prosperity alongside its security and economic status has, in turn, benefited Ankara's soft power. Humanitarian foreign policy can particularly be influential in developing a positive state reputation amongst Muslim countries, as is the case with the examples of Islamic-oriented humanitarian NGOs playing an important role in conflict-ridden areas, whereby signifying being the leader and defender of the Muslim world with references of religious symbolism and Muslim identity (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022). Identity and history, as İbrahim Kalin underlines, are important elements in Türkiye's foreign policy engagements, alongside 'Turkish leaders' objective to

strike a balance between *realpolitik* and *ideal-politik*. When the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East commenced, this activism in foreign policy was particularly salient in Ankara's embracing of the popular movements, championing of democratic legitimacy and respect for fundamental human rights as the building blocks of the new regional order in the Middle East. Türkiye has become an inalienable actor in the international coalitions to oust the authoritarian leaders at the expense of losing the friendly ties Ankara had established with leaders (Kardaş, 2011).

Turkish foreign policy is most influenced by geopolitics and ideational factors, consisting of liberal undertones – many of the values and instruments constituting the core of the Turkish foreign policy initiatives indicate the conceptual framework of liberal principles in action in terms of employing cooperative policies to advance a country's national interests while emphasising the role of international institutions in the mitigation of conflicts. However, with the start of the Arab Spring, Türkiye was put between a rock and a hard place, raising questions as to whether these principles remain relevant (Kardaş, 2011). Many critics claimed that the events in MENA ultimately dented Türkiye's ambition to become an influential regional power. Yet, Türkiye proved the continuation of the liberal principles in foreign policy with a reinterpretation of the principles. The steps undertaken range from dialogue with regional leaders to supporting the will of the people for the sake of democracy and countering the oppression by dictatorships – having the flexibility allowing for adaptation without compromising on the primary principles. Therefore, Türkiye's policy after the Arab Spring transformed from Türkiye's interests with a particular idealism to a flexible and realistic framework entailing cooperation with legitimate international actors and a universal idealism favouring direct advocacy for democracy and the rule of law (Aras & Akarçesme, 2012). Despite early successes, the Arab democratisation wave faced a setback with the 2013 regime change in Egypt and the deterioration of the democratisation process out of the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen (Kösebalaban, 2020). Since the beginning of the 2010s, especially with the exacerbation of the Syrian crisis and the military power grab in Egypt, Turkish proactive policy has become challenged by security risks, such as internal wars, failed states and human tragedies resulting in refugee and ISIL crises, it had to recalibrate its priorities per the new environment (Keyman, 2016). It is for this reason, in line with the new realistic frame-



(Muhammed Shekh Yusuf - Anadolu Agency)

work of foreign policy while balancing the *realpolitik* and *ideal-politik*, securitisation has begun to gain the upper hand in foreign policy considerations owing to that transformation would lead either to the re-imposition of authoritarian rule or civil wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen all the while causing the intensification of competition between regional powers. At the same time, Türkiye's foreign policy orientation towards MENA was affected by domestic factors such as the collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2014-2015 and increasing anxiety over stability after the failed coup attempt in July 2016, hence the new foreign policy with a redefined role concerning partners and adversaries. In this context, the government has stressed that regional realities presenting new threats require military means to resolve rivalries where soft power policies would indicate nothing more than being 'dependent and passive' (Altunışık, 2020). Along these lines, the Turkish foreign policy can be said to have kept on being proactive despite changing dynamics, and hence a new outlook in multidimensional policymaking with a more assertive approach, an emphasis on security and an intention to be a central player in the quest for regional leadership. Therefore, the relations between the Gulf countries and Turkey through the course of events and the recent rapprochement can be perceived in this light.

Shifting Engagement with the Gulf Countries

Economic factors constituted the cornerstone of the expansion of Türkiye's bilateral relations and further opening with the GCC countries, particularly with the newly emerging wealthy middle class at the beginning of the 2000s who wanted to engage with free and globally integrated markets without dismissing the Turkish cultural and religious values. Türkiye's thriving economy, which grew by nine per cent by 2010, prepared the environment for the win-win situation fostered by projects in trade, agriculture, transportation, environment, tourism, and culture alongside free trade agreements (Hürsoy, 2013). Besides the economic concerns of diversification of markets and securing energy sources, the AK Party-led governments provided a sense of political stability after consecutively being elected, and economic and political reforms that were adopted between 2000 and 2005 as part of the EU accession process contributed to improving the country's democratic status as well as modernisation and liberalisation of key economic sectors. Also, the religious character of the new Turkish leadership, with Sunni Islam being at the front of political discourse, provided a religious affinity to the Gulf leaders. Particularly concerning Iran, the Gulf monarchies worry about the changing sectarian dynamics after the US invasion of Iraq, which allowed the Iranian influence to dominate the Iraqi realm, and they considered Türkiye as a counterforce being a predominantly Sunni country against the 'Shia arc'. All these developments consequently rendered Türkiye a potential ally with a renewed regional role in the eyes of the Gulf states. There were also shared interests in the field of regional security and counterterrorism – as a result, Türkiye became the first country to have a strategic dialogue with the GCC thanks to the introduction of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2008 in which food security, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, and the fight against terrorism have been the issues of utmost importance (Talbot, 2013).

The relations started deteriorating in the 2010s, indicating a new period in Türkiye-GCC relations. Both sides showed diverging reactions to the Arab Spring, where the GCC countries did not employ a 'one size fits all' approach, being differentiated and inhomogeneous (Talbot, 2012). It also marked a weakening of the underlying collective self-interest conception of the GCC,

as the role of Islamist groups in political transitions in North Africa led to a dramatic divergence in threat perceptions that prompted policy responses in Qatar and the new UAE- Saudi Arabia-Bahrain axis. Qatar, unlike the other Middle Eastern countries, including its GCC neighbours such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain, confronted no threat perception from the upheavals occurring elsewhere, and Qatar-funded *Al Jazeera* spread the message of the protestors and shaped some of the narratives emerging within the Arab Spring, whereby marking Qatar as distinct from seemingly more authoritarian counterparts across the region in favour of universal norms such as political and human rights and freedom of expression without any significant cost (Ulrichsen, 2019).

On the other hand, despite threat perceptions, the UAE supported regime change in Libya when UAE and Qatar participated in the No-Fly Zone together with NATO, even though the motives significantly differed from those of Qatar, as it came to be realised that "the traditional Western support could no longer be taken for granted and that more efforts would have to be invested in managing their strategic alliances while at the same time taking care of their own security" (Ulrichsen, 2019). In this regard, the pro-change attitude reflects not ideological sympathy but rather the desire to enlarge their influence in the MENA region and effectively affect and control the political transformations (Talbot, 2013) in the power vacuum in the region created by the upheavals. To refrain from the negative spillovers of regional fluctuations and to make up for the reduced level of security provided by the US, Gulf countries have increasingly become involved in diversification strategies concerning weapon supplies, partnerships and alliances which paved the way for various actors involved in the field, the most notable among whom being Türkiye in the context of multi-polarisation of Gulf security (Bakir, 2023a).

Considering that Arab Gulf monarchies rarely agreed on foreign policy issues and had their own aspirations, it is fair to regard they would adopt contrasting positions related to Türkiye's objective to play an upgraded security role in the Gulf. Indeed, the only profound alliance Türkiye established was with Qatar, as their



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interests, positions, and regional challenges were identical to a great extent. The convergence between Türkiye and Qatar peaked in 2014 with the launch of the Qatar-Türkiye Supreme Strategic Committee and a defence cooperation agreement signalling a transition from a partnership to a full-scale alliance (Bakir, 2019). This agreement constituted military training, defence industry collaboration, joint drills and the deployment of military forces when needed while allowing Türkiye to establish a Turkish military base in Qatar which gave Türkiye a similar status to France's and the US in the context of Gulf security (Battaloglu, 2021). The adoption of an assertive policy of change that gave the limelight to the Muslim Brotherhood and the affiliated movements in different parts of the region, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria by both countries brought them even closer – while Türkiye adopted this strategy to push for the democratization agenda in the region, Qatar saw it as an exit point to get rid of the Saudi dominance with the support of Türkiye (Yeşilyurt, 2018), where it had long been balancing against Saudi Arabia with ties to Iran while it became difficult with diverging policies after the Arab Spring. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has typically seen Qatar not as a sovereign state but as a vassal state. Therefore, Riyadh did not come to terms with Qatar's pursuit of an independent policy in a clash with Saudi strategic interests.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood represented an anti-thesis to Riyadh's view of Islam, as the latter was far less amenable to democratic principles. At the same time, the Brotherhood could drive Egypt, which was the long-standing ally, away from Saudi Arabia, which was not realised as they were overthrown shortly after coming to power (Başkan, 2019). As a result, the Middle East in the context of civil wars in Libya and Syria, polarisation in the domestic politics of Tunisia, and the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia, through the policy of economic aid and political support in return for basing rights became the issues of confrontation of geopolitical interests between Qatar- Türkiye bloc on the one hand and the Saudi-UAE-Bahrain-Egypt on the other, creating a multi-layered Gulf rift (Altunışık, 2020; Cengiz, 2019). Although Ankara claimed the Turkish engagement in the Horn is part of its enterprising and humanitarian foreign policy, the Gulf rivals increasingly engaged in debates of the so-called quest for the 'neo-Ottoman' revival (Vertin, 2019).

Increasingly wary of the Turkish influence in the region, the Saudi-led coalition increasingly competed with Türkiye and Qatar, translating into the Gulf crises of 2014 and 2017. With the regime change in Egypt, Saudi-Qatar relations seriously deteriorated and finally collapsed in 2014 when the Kingdom withdrew its ambassador from Qatar, joined by UAE and Bahrain,

whereas relations with Ankara did not collapse but they certainly cooled down. Despite the diplomatic fallout, each party supported different opposition forces in the anti-Assad fight in Syria. Yet, the territorial advance of ISIS in Iraq made them on the same page about turning their attention to ISIS, the root cause of which they all thought was the Assad regime in Syria. Hence the mending of diplomatic ties ensued. However, the Second Gulf Crisis broke out when the preventing factors of the Syrian cause, the Obama administration and ISIS seemed to be gone, leaving the Kingdom with no reason not to revive the crisis alongside the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, forming the so-called 'Arab Quartet' as a reaction for fabricated allegations that Qatar's Emir praised Iran as "a big power in the stabilisation of the region" while criticising other Gulf countries for going against it. Türkiye, during the Second Gulf Crisis, advocated for dialogue, while helping Qatar by sending food supplies against the blockade, establishing a Turkish military base in Doha, deploying more troops as well, and engaging in military exercises as a demonstration of force (Başkan, 2019; Yeşilyurt, 2018), alongside Iran who sent supplies and opened its airspace to Qatari flights, bringing together Türkiye and Iran as an unintended consequence. As this relationship troubled the other camp of Gulf countries, the blockading countries issued thirteen demands from Doha, among which the removal of the Turkish military base in Doha, cutting ties with Iran, ending Al Jazeera's broadcasting, and expelling leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, as a reaction, Saudi Arabia supported the PKK-affiliated PYD by various means, be it visiting PYD-controlled military bases or contributing financially to the PYD-controlled territories under stabilisation programmes. Therefore, it reverted the rapprochement between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia in 2015 started with the new King Salman creating a 'Sunni bloc' in the Middle East on multiple fronts, such as with the harmonisation in Yemen and Syria (Yeşilyurt, 2018).

These developments proved that Türkiye's support for Qatar was quintessential in resisting the Quartet. The UAE and Saudi decision makers tried to frame Türkiye's stance as a so-called 'grand strategy' of neo-imperialism (Kardaş, 2021), all the while the anti-Iran bloc sought the redesigning the Middle East by creating a new status-quo with the efforts to contain Iran (Ulutaş & Duran, 2018). This particularly arose from Türkiye's increasing resort to military means as well as its assertion of a leadership role in the Islamic world through humanitarian and development aid and raising its voice

to defend the rights of Rohingya Muslims and Palestinians, which contradicted Saudi Arabia's consideration of itself being the natural leader of the (Sunni) Islamic world (Kardaş, 2021). Indeed, Türkiye's persistent contentions with Iran became a major determining factor in the relations, where in Iraq, Ankara considered itself as the protector of Sunnis. Meanwhile, Türkiye tried to enter the Lebanese political equation through Sunni players, in an arena where Saudi Arabia has long been an important actor (Taştekin, 2023). However, if there were to be a 'grand strategy' of Türkiye if considered as a pattern of behaviour in terms of the consistency in behaviour over time, that should stem primarily from balancing off of the major powers in international affairs based on peaceful coexistence, multi-dimensionality linking Türkiye with various neighbours and the region-based foreign policy forcing it to actively participate in regional matters while re-evaluating its geography with multiple identities and realities (Aydın, 2020). Indeed, it has been argued that a possible adoption of a 'neighbourly core doctrine' that keeps great powers' military forces out of its immediate neighbours through integration with its immediate neighbours could prevent the potentially existential threats and interstate and intrastate wars in the neighbourhood through proxies have led Turkey to play a more active role based on relative power calculations (Aktürk, 2021).

Moreover, ideational factors governed Türkiye's foreign policy, as with the decision to align with Qatar. As per Holsti's typology of national role conceptions, Türkiye's bilateral relations with Qatar were guided by the elements of 'regional leader', 'regional protector', 'defender of Islam', 'faithful ally' and 'resisting-rejecting-reconstituting actor' (Battaloglu, 2021), in line with its official 'humanitarian and enterprising foreign policy' against the isolation of Qatar. This stance is even more visible in the recent rapprochement between the two contradicting blocs, signalling a rupture from the zero-sum game of the preceding years, even though the changing regional dynamics constituted the core of the transition.

Why Normalisation?

Between 2017 and 2020, Türkiye's relations with some of the GCC countries went through difficulties and setbacks. However, the 2021 Al-Ula agreement between the Saudi-led coalition and Qatar ended the 2017 Gulf crisis and paved the way for the normalisation of the relations between Türkiye and the UAE as well as Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. In this sense, the improvement in relations proved that "the fault lines and rifts between Türkiye and some GCC countries held less importance than mutual interests and the regional strategic imperatives needing cooperation and coordination (Bakir, 2023a). The first official sign of rapprochement with Saudi Arabia was in 2022, with the bilateral exchange of visits between the two countries. Apart from the Gulf crisis, the relations between the countries particularly deteriorated after Khashoggi's assassination in 2018, for which Saudi Arabia blamed Türkiye for damaging their image by leaking harmful information, including video and audio footage of the murder, hence sent mixed messages while continuing an unofficial boycott (Baycar, n.d.). However, reconciliation gained momentum after Ankara decided to transfer the murder case of Khashoggi to Riyadh. In this regard, the tensions between Riyadh and Ankara were more personal than those between UAE and Türkiye, which were more ideological in nature. The UAE and Türkiye diverged in their perspectives on political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, and it took a military dimension in 2019-20 when the two parties supported rival groups in Libya (Ulrichsen, 2019). Yet, the divergences were seemingly mitigated through Ankara's efforts to cooperate in mutually beneficial strategic projects in many areas, including the defence industry.²

Many analysts have suggested that Türkiye's reconciliation efforts with both countries have been motivated by economic reasons. However, it would be underestimating the pacification atmosphere in the region and with Türkiye in particular, considering, for example, the recent normalisation with Armenia, which is economically insignificant. Also, such claims overlook that bilateral trade relations have never constituted an important share of the overall trade with other countries. Of the international capital investments of the Gulf countries in Western economies, the Gulf money flowing into Türkiye constituted only a small amount,

and likewise, for Türkiye, the trade increase with the Gulf stayed modest compared to Türkiye's expansion of trade with other countries (Kardaş, 2021). So, the real drivers appear most likely to be geopolitical and geo-strategic factors rather than economic ones reviving the bilateral relationship.

The main reason for laying the ground for the normalisation was the partial US retreat from the region, which was started under the tenure of Trump and continued under the Biden administration, thanks to a decrease in the direct importance of the Middle East to the US with increased domestic production of oil and gas, and renewed concerns for great power rivalry focused on containing Russia and China while shifting the attention towards Asia (Haass, 2019). Still, the US did not completely relegate its influence – rather than involving in high-cost interventions in the Middle East, it designed a delegation of responsibility, whereby projecting its power through its allies in the region, including Israel, the Gulf, Jordan and Egypt and maintaining a military presence in the areas it considers low-cost (Duran, 2022). The 'ruthless pragmatism' focused on the US interests instead of democracy promotion, however, can indicate a lesser interest on the part of the US to reorder the region and can make room for revisionist actors as long as they do not contradict the vital US interests in the region (Tekines, 2022). In the emerging power vacuum, Russia and China have found a playing field together with the middle powers, such as Türkiye and the UAE, who played a pioneering role in the design of the new diplomacy. Also, the regional powers have realised the restraints of their alliance with the great powers and the limitations to their own power capabilities. For the Gulf Arab states, the *raison d'être* of the strategic alignment with the United States relied on the main American commitment to their defence, and the suspicions as to the US security guarantee had already been reinforced with the Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015, which continued to take hold during the Trump's with his reluctance to respond plausibly to the conventional Iran aggression in 2019 (Feierstein et al., 2022). With the Biden administration's continued downsizing of its presence in the Middle East and policy of equidistance from regional actors contrary to Trump have further led to states' geo-

² Daily Sabah. "Turkey, UAE Ink 2 MoUs for Defense Industry Cooperation," 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkey-uae-ink-2-mous-for-defense-industry-cooperation>

political balancing against the US, Russia and China, where Russia held significance in regional security and China in the regional economy, rendering the region effectively multipolar. In addition to making regional powers consider de-escalation, these policies have also brought former rivals such as Türkiye, the Gulf countries and Israel together to perceive each other through new lenses, which was instrumental in the Arab-Israeli as well as Turkish-Gulf normalisation. Apart from the geopolitical vacuum left by the US, another factor has been related to the post-Arab Spring era, where the role of political Islam advocates has lessened, decreasing the impact of the political and ideological tension between Türkiye and the Gulf countries. Also, the geopolitical stalemate in the conflict areas such as Libya has contributed to the regional de-escalation. The change the US administration and the emerging common ground on regional conflicts between the US and the EU have come to mean that the escalation cost would be significantly higher than it would have

been in the Trump era. These factors turn out to have prompted actors to revise their rivalries (Dalay, 2022).

Regarding Türkiye, in this context, these dynamics have led Ankara to recalibrate and resume its assertiveness and autonomous foreign policy, which could make the Gulf states see Ankara as a security guarantor. These countries have traditionally counted on foreign security guarantors and put a serious percentage of the GDP into defence, security, and military expenditures, as indicated by their classification among the top ten arms importers. This could indeed cause Türkiye to play a security guarantor role in the Gulf with its rapid pace in developing its local defence industry (Bakir, 2023a). Türkiye's attempts for normalisation have since been focusing on mending the bilateral ties rather than acting as part of a collective entity (Duran, 2022), which could bear fruit as it targets country-specific differences in a rather short time at a high level.

Whither the Status-Quo in the MENA?

It is plausible to say that both Türkiye and Saudi Arabia realised they needed each other for the stabilisation of the region and to create a new order. While Türkiye feels the need to establish a safe zone for the refugees in northern Syria and fight against the YPG, Saudi Arabia is more concerned with the Yemen war and the Houthis attacks. Yet, the normalisation between both countries can trigger and create a spill-over effect for the rest of the Gulf countries to promote stability, improve trade relations and facilitate security-centred rapprochement. Eventually, it could also potentially counterbalance Iran (Duran, 2022). However, the shared interests and the rapprochement rely on a delicate balance. Some difficulties emerged about Iran's influence in Syria and Iraq, and it could continue to exert its power. In Syria, the UAE and Saudi Arabia look to engage with the Assad regime to decrease Iran's leverage. However, the Caesar Act by the US lifted some sanctions to exempt investors and private companies with relations in north-eastern and western Syria targeted to aid the SDF while sanctioning the territories of the Assad regime, which could make the cooperation with Türkiye in the case of possible involvement with the SDF by Riyadh endangered. In Iraq, Baghdad is uncomfortable with the growing military influence of Türkiye in its fight in northern Iraq against the PKK, where Iran is going against the Turkish interests, all the while Israel

is aiming to reinforce its presence. Overlapping interests may not guarantee the establishment and stability of the Saudi-Turkish pact with the involvement of many parties (Gurbuz, 2022). Indeed, the recent normalisation between Iran and Saudi Arabia attests to the argument of many factors involved. Yet, if they capitalise on the reconciliation with Iran, it could provide a safe environment to promote economic relations in the region and prepare an environment for plans such as bridging Gulf and Türkiye through Iran. Also, Iran could facilitate a probable Ankara-Damascus normalisation. So, there is a potential for some issues to move from tense competition to a soft contest with the caveat that some issues will likely be immune to changing political dynamics (Taştekin, 2023).

As for the UAE, Turkish-Emirati normalisation in economic terms has extended to geopolitics, so much so that it triggered a new reshuffling of the regional equilibriums, and it seems to have provided greater stability in the Middle East than previously. Particularly in Libya, while previously strived for influence, both sides have taken stances that, although not completely aligned, can open new possibilities for stability and convergence. The interim PM Bashagha represents the common ground for the endorsement by both parties, and it can shape the future stability of Libya. And the spill-



over effect for the other players of this convergence seems to be with Egypt, who denied Dbeibeh's request for support. Yet, the Libyan case seems to be overly fluid and can be subject to the failure of a possible central government and a possible outbreak of a new civil war. In the Horn of Africa, the rapprochement is more consolidated as it appears especially regarding Somalia. They are headed towards supporting a common name despite having supported different parties and candidates in the previous years, with an increasing leaning towards PM Roble as the UAE had intense problems with President Farmaajo after the confiscation of UAE's funds in 2018 and Türkiye was not satisfied with the extreme personalisation of power (Donelli, 2022). Therefore, both countries employed a flexible and pragmatic approach post-Arab Spring to avoid confrontation, even though they might maintain diverging takes on regional problems.

On the other hand, with the case of newcomers into the region, Türkiye's elevated security role may face challenges. The actors beyond the region, such as China, Russia, and India, who are seen as effective hedging partners against the retreating US as well as two of

them, Russia and China, being UNSC members with vetoing power, might be looked upon more favourably vis-à-vis Türkiye. Also, these countries aspire to build more profound political and economic relations with the Gulf countries (Bakir, 2023b). India sees the region as a crucial element to its extended neighbourhood policy due to geographical proximity, and its influence there will bring more leverage towards the west. It has huge bilateral trade relations, and its nationals constitute the biggest ethnic minority group in the GCC states. On the part of Russia, projecting a growing interest in the Gulf, it came up with a security concept for the Gulf in 2019 which morphed into a collective security concept in 2021 (Bakir, 2023a), which aims to reconciliation between different parties and demonstrate Moscow has something to say on the regional status-quo, and therefore expecting to play a significant role in the new architecture of regional security (Kozhanov, 2021). Also, there is increasing cooperation between the Gulf states and Russia on the energy front in setting the oil and gas prices, as well as on the defence front with increasing arms imports from Russia by the GCC countries. Regarding China, it is the GCC's top trading partner, the largest energy importer from

the region, and the largest FDI investor. Besides, it has overarching technology and military capabilities to offer to the Gulf states, which makes China tied to providing security on many fronts ranging from economy and energy to defence. However, Türkiye proved itself to be a reliable partner over the years who is willing to share military technologies, and she is advantageous in terms of geographical proximity, which could make her gain upper-hand vis-à-vis the newcomers in the region to play an elevated role (Bakir, 2023a), as validated by the recent rapprochement. And concerning Iran, it might make its concerns come into reality - it may augment the collective influence of Ankara and Riyadh in

Iraqi politics if they can find common ground for their respective interests. This option might lure more countries into an agenda of unification, including Israel, where there is an implicit convergence of interests between Israel and Türkiye regarding Iran's increasing influence in Syria. Also, eliminating a funding source for the Kurdish militias, namely the YPG and PKK in Iraq and Syria, would strengthen Ankara's position and deprive Iran of a proxy in the region (Bakir & Ersoy, 2022). These developments could pave the way for a shifting regional balance towards stability and a decreasing Iranian dominance.

Conclusion

Türkiye and the Gulf states have gone through ups and downs throughout their relationship since the beginning of the AK Party era. The developments since the start of the Arab uprisings have transformed the regional dynamics to the extent that every country in the region needed to reassess their foreign policy, so much so that the self-security and extending regional influence considerations have become the dominating factors. In fact, when geopolitical interests are involved and the balance of power is affected, states have less considerations for economic interests. The power vacuum left by the US' partial retreat from the region required rebalancing of the regional alliances in favour of normalisation between the previously conflicting parties. Although it can be suggested that rebalancing was directed towards containing Iran, which is a motivating factor on the part of the Gulf states, there is also an element of liberalisation in the foreign policy similar to that of the pre-Arab Spring period with increasing bilateral economic cooperation on various fronts moving away from the sanctions mentality out of grievances despite the prevailing differences on geopolitical issues. However, even the previously unthinkable scenarios as to the geopolitical alliances emerged, although some continue to remain, and it can be indicative of both the relatively more positive environment regarding threat perceptions and Ankara's active foreign policy with the element of multi-dimensionality in consideration of ideals alongside realities. This foreign policy element based on a mixture of liberalism and realism can provide, in the long run, a stable atmosphere in a peculiar region where the interest and security dynamics of

each actor differ from each other, so finding the core convergence points is key to achieving that. However, it is for this reason that it relies on a delicate balance between the actors, their intentions and regional realities, and therefore, Türkiye's need to capitalise on the normalisation and sustain the pro-activism to assume a central role in the region is more necessary than ever for its own security, the security of the Gulf states and that of the wider region torn by conflicts.

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