

TÜRKIYE IN THE MENA REGION

A FOREIGN POLICY RESET

edited by **Valeria Talbot**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

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Introduction

In recent years, geopolitical and economic imperatives have been a major driver of Türkiye's efforts to reset relations with regional competitors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Against a backdrop of disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as profound geopolitical transformations triggered by the redefinition of the United States' role in the region, a widespread sense of conflict fatigue and the redefinition of intra-regional equilibriums, Ankara's renewed diplomatic activism has been guided by two main considerations. First, the need to break its isolation, as Türkiye can no longer afford the cost of its assertive foreign policy and of fierce geopolitical competition in a region where détente now seems to be the new mantra. This appeared particularly clear after the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and some Arab countries as well as the 2021 al-Ula Agreement that put an end to the intra-Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) crisis. Second, the need to attract foreign investment and cash injections to relieve Türkiye's deteriorating economy.

In light of the evolving regional dynamics and pressing domestic needs, Türkiye has therefore progressively put aside the ideological approach adopted after the 2011 Arab uprisings and assumed a more pragmatic stance, trying to overcome the (geo) political and ideological fractures that have affected its regional relations over the past decade. Relying on geopolitical, economic and energy relations, Türkiye has been particularly proactive in its push for normalisation. In this regard, de-escalating tensions

and mending fences with regional countries, from Israel to the wealthy Gulf monarchies, have been at the top of Ankara's foreign policy agenda in the MENA region. Efforts to reopen channels of dialogue have also been made with Egypt, and even Syria, though with mixed results. These efforts intensified in the wake of the so-called "earthquake diplomacy" that began after the catastrophic seism that devastated Türkiye's southern provinces and Syria's northern areas in early February 2023. However, rapprochement processes with Middle Eastern countries have followed different, and often uneasy, paths. While in some cases it has been relatively straightforward to repair relations and find common ground for cooperation, other countries have been hesitant, or even reluctant, vis-à-vis Ankara's overtures. Against the backdrop of strained relations and deep-seated distrust (especially from Damascus), rapprochement with Syria remains the most complex and thorny dossier for Ankara, as many sticking points are still unsolved.

Since Erdoğan's re-election in May 2023, Türkiye's foreign policy activism has gained new momentum. This Report, which comes at a time of intense high-level diplomatic exchanges, aims to analyse Ankara's policy towards its MENA neighbours, highlighting opportunities for enhanced cooperation, obstacles to overcome on the way to full normalisation, and the reverberations of this new conciliatory policy on regional stability and beyond.

In the first chapter, starting from an analysis of the evolution of the rapprochement processes between key players in the Middle East, Ali Bakir focuses on Ankara's efforts to break its regional isolation and normalise relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. While the economic incentives behind these efforts cannot be understated, especially for the defence, technology, and tourism industries, this rapprochement also has an important geostrategic dimension. In contrast with the rapid rapprochement between Türkiye and the UAE, reconciliation between Ankara and Riyadh has been gradual and slow. Despite this, steps to end a decade of tensions

have been taken, breeding a new era of cooperation and shared interests between Türkiye, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in the face of evolving challenges in the MENA region. In conclusion, the author considers that finding the right balance between the interests and concerns of all players is crucial to push forward this positive momentum.

In the second chapter, Gallia Lindenstrauß tackles the uneasy relationship between Türkiye and Israel. The process of rapprochement between these two regional powers has not been without obstacles: after reaching a “cold peace” in 2016, the fragile attempt at détente collapsed under the weight of the two states’ divergent strategic interests only two years after the agreement was signed. However, in spite of Israel’s initial hesitancy, in the wake of 2020 regional and international changes, a new and more successful endeavour started. Despite frictions, in particular on the Palestinian issue, on several occasions Türkiye has proved its willingness to rebuild confidence with Israel, taking also into account the potential of economic and energy cooperation; as a result, at the end of 2022, both countries appointed ambassadors. While the process needs to be further consolidated, looking at the historic continuity in bilateral relationship, a break-up like the one that occurred in 2016 seems unlikely at this stage, given also the growing economic ties between the two actors.

The challenges of Türkiye’s slow and arduous rapprochement with Egypt are explored by Meliha Altunışık. While the two countries have been on opposite sides on several issues, from support for the Muslim Brotherhood to the Libyan crisis, the Eastern Mediterranean and influence over the Horn of Africa, they have been able to compartmentalise their political divergences for the sake of economic interests, permitting their free trade agreement to survive tumultuous times. Aware that closer and deeper ties would offer even greater opportunities in the fields of economy, energy and transport, the two countries have intensified their dialogue, finally resulting in the upgrading of diplomatic relations after Türkiye’s May presidential and

parliamentary elections. While Libya remains the main sticking point at the bilateral level, both Ankara and Cairo agree that the stability of the North African country is a common goal.

Ankara's interests in Libya and their interrelation to geopolitical, economic and energy dynamics at regional level are analysed by Evrim Görmuş. The maritime border dispute between Türkiye and its Eastern Mediterranean neighbours, the need to emerge from regional isolation as well as economic and energy interests led Ankara to engage in the North African country by supporting the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). The signature of two memoranda of understanding – one on the delimitation of maritime borders in the Mediterranean Sea and the other on security and military cooperation – with the GNA in November 2019 opened the way to Türkiye's intervention, which changed the trajectory of the Libyan civil war by June 2020, and established a permanent military presence in the country that has contributed to increasing Türkiye's bargaining power in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime borders dispute. While the stability of Libya is crucial, it is unclear how Ankara's Libya policy will proceed and how it will find the right balance between the different interests at stake.

In the last chapter, Güney Yıldız examines Ankara's Syria policy in light of the complex past and present bilateral ties. The Türkiye-Syria relationship is directly related to the security issue, due to the long border shared by the two regional actors, and the Kurdish question, which has its roots in the ashes of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, bilateral ties have undergone considerable changes over the past decades. The presence of an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and Ankara's desire to establish a regime in Damascus that favours Türkiye's strategic projection in the region led Erdoğan to break with Assad, sponsor opposition movements and deploy Turkish armed forces on Syrian territory in 2015 (initially against the Islamic State and later to contain the YPG). Today, Ankara

recognises that the Assad regime is likely to remain in power and could be a useful ally in containing Kurdish aspirations and repatriating Syrian refugees that live in Türkiye. However, the Syrian civil war has reshaped alliances and rivalries, adding further complexity to regional dynamics and the goals Ankara seeks to achieve with its Syrian agenda: to revoke Kurdish gains and support a kind of autonomy for pro-Turkish groups – two conflicting objectives between which Ankara must disentangle itself.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President

1. Türkiye, UAE and Saudi Arabia: A New Era of Cooperation in a Changing Regional Landscape

Ali Bakir

Since the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, the Middle East has been witnessing a rare moment of regional de-escalation, marked by a series of rapprochement and normalisation processes between key regional players. A combination of local, regional, and international factors brought these parties closer together, chief among them the defeat of Donald Trump in the United States presidential elections in November 2020, regional power fatigue, the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the al-Ula Agreement that put an end to the 2017- Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis and blockade against Qatar.¹

As a result, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reached out to Iran at the end of 2020 and Saudi Arabia reached out to Qatar at the beginning of 2021. Afterwards, intensive diplomatic engagements kicked off between Egypt and Qatar, Türkiye and Egypt, Türkiye and Israel, and Saudi Arabia and Iran. Among the most notable of these normalisation processes characterised by decreasing tensions and renewed diplomatic engagement are the UAE's normalisation with Türkiye and Türkiye's normalisation with Saudi Arabia.

¹ A. Bakir, "The 2021-2022 "De-Escalation Moment" in the Middle East: A Net Assessment", *Insight Turkey*, Spring 2022, vol. 24, no. 2, 2022, pp. 55-66.

The thaw in relations between these key players can be attributed to the recognition of the need for stability and cooperation in the face of shared challenges. The repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the intensification of great power competition in the Middle East further confirmed this trend. Economic and geopolitical factors have also played a crucial role in driving these normalisation processes, as Türkiye, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia seek to diversify their economies, and explore new avenues for collaboration in a rapidly evolving regional landscape.

In this chapter, we will delve into the factors that contributed to Türkiye's rapprochement with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and examine the dynamics of the normalisation process, the underlying motives, and implications on the bilateral and regional levels. By exploring the economic and geopolitical dimensions of Türkiye's engagements with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, we aim to shed light on the evolving nature of normalisation and the prospects of these relations.

From Discord to Partnership: The Reformation of UAE-Türkiye Relations

Evolution of the normalisation process

The rapid rapprochement between the UAE and Türkiye was particularly noteworthy, given the strained relations between the two countries over the past decade. The driving force behind this reconciliation was a transparent and focused agenda that centred on the mutual advantages of enhancing trade, investment, and business relations for the benefit of both nations as well as on geopolitical necessities and the need to diversify partners and allies in the age of the US decline and pivot to Asia.

In a surprising turn of events at the beginning of 2021, Abu Dhabi displayed conciliatory gestures towards Ankara, a

mere two months after the UAE's State Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, criticised Türkiye's military base in Doha.² On 7 January 2021, the same Emirati official informed Bloomberg that the UAE harboured no animosity towards Türkiye, emphasising that his country is Türkiye's primary trade partner in the Middle East.³ Subsequently, on 10 January 2021, Gargash conveyed to the Abu Dhabi-based Sky News Arabia channel that the UAE seeks to normalise relations with Türkiye, provided that mutual respect for sovereignty is maintained.⁴ The revised Emirati rhetoric highlighted the absence of any significant long-term issues with Türkiye, such as border disputes.

From the emerging Emirati perspective, the normalisation represents a favourable opportunity to forge connections between the UAE and Türkiye. Prior to these public statements, Abu Dhabi had discreetly implemented several positive measures towards Türkiye. These included the easing of restrictions on the mobility of Turkish businesspeople and the facilitation of commercial interactions between the two nations. Additionally, the Emiratis recommenced their daily flights to Istanbul on 21 December 2020.⁵

Irrespective of the underlying motivations for the UAE's decision to pursue de-escalation with Türkiye, Ankara responded positively to the Emirati overtures. In January 2021, Turkish officials welcomed the conciliatory statements from the UAE but called for tangible actions to accompany them.⁶ Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu asserted that Ankara

² "UAE official says Turkish base in Qatar destabilises region", *Reuters*, 10 October 2020.

³ A.A. Omar, L. Odeh, and M. Cranny, "Gulf States to Resume Trade, Air Links With Qatar in Days", *Bloomberg*, 7 January 2021.

⁴ Interview with UAE's State Minister Anwar Gargash, *Sky News Arabia*, 10 January 2021.

⁵ F. Kozok, Z. Fattah, and S. Westall "Gulf States Extend a Hand to Turkey in Wary Move to Ease Tensions", *BNN Bloomberg*, 3 February 2021.

⁶ R. Soylu, "Turkey welcomes UAE's positive statement on relations, but not yet fully convinced", *Middle East Eye*, 12 January 2021.

would reciprocate any sincere, concrete, and constructive steps taken by the Emirati side.⁷ In April 2021, Ankara appointed a new Turkish ambassador to the UAE, reflecting a commitment to improving political and diplomatic relations.⁸ The Emirati reaction was prompt, and for the first time in five years, the UAE's Foreign Minister, Abdullah bin Zayed, initiated a phone call with his Turkish counterpart on 22 April. The two officials exchanged congratulatory messages in honour of the holy month of Ramadan. The Turkish side regarded this interaction as both courteous and significant, particularly given the absence of such engagement over the previous five years.⁹

Following these positive developments, and a paradigm shift from the previous high tensions, the UAE and Türkiye embarked on a series of high-level engagements aimed at bridging the gap between them, normalising relations, and fostering bilateral ties on all levels. In August 2021, the UAE's National Security Adviser, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, made an unprecedented visit to Ankara, engaging in talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan concerning Emirati plans to bolster economic relations and invest in Türkiye.¹⁰ Subsequent to this visit, Erdoğan and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed partook in a significant phone conversation, where they deliberated on enhancing bilateral ties and regional matters.

A testament to the positive shift in relations was UAE presidential adviser Anwar Gargash's description of the call as being both friendly and positive, indicating a paradigm shift in UAE foreign policy towards constructive engagement.¹¹ Soon

⁷ O. Duru and N. Yuzbasioglu, "Turkey, Egypt in diplomatic-level contacts", *AA*, 12 March 2021.

⁸ "Turkey ambassador appointed to UAE as regional rivals ease tensions", *The New Arab*, 4 May 2021.

⁹ Z. Demirci, "Foreign ministers of Turkey, UAE speak over phone", *AA*, 22 April 2021.

¹⁰ "Turkish President receives Emirati delegation led by Tahnoun bin Zayed", *Emirates New Agency WAM*, 18 August 2021.

¹¹ "Erdoğan-MBZ phone call 'positive, friendly': UAE", *Daily Sabah*, 31 August 2021.

after, Abu Dhabi took several measures to cement the détente including the closure of the Istanbul office of UAE-based Sky News Arabia in November 2021.¹² During the same month, a meeting between Saif bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the UAE Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister, and Türkiye's Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, took place in Italy.¹³

A new era begins

A significant event occurred on 24 November 2021, when Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (MbZ), visited Türkiye, an unprecedented gesture since 2012. President Erdoğan received his Emirati guest with an official reception that included the rolling out of a unique turquoise carpet and a cavalry procession.¹⁴ This visit was met with substantial foreign attention considering the countries' erstwhile antagonism. It resulted in the signing of ten memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and agreements in various sectors including investment, finance, trade, energy, and environment.

This marked a shift towards more collaborative economic relations. A memorandum of understanding was also signed between Abu Dhabi Development Holding, chaired by Mohammed bin Zayed, the Turkish Wealth Fund, and the Turkish Presidency Investment Office, indicating a willingness for increased financial cooperation. Additionally, the Turkish and Emirati central banks also signed a cooperation agreement, laying the groundwork for a currency swap deal.¹⁵

¹² "UAE-based Sky News Arabia closes Turkey office after controversial report on S-400 missiles", *The New Arab*, 5 November 2021.

¹³ "Turkey's interior minister meets UAE counterpart in Rome", *Abval*, 19 November 2021.

¹⁴ A. Bakir, "Is the UAE moving to replace Qatar as Turkey's top Gulf partner?", *Ammaj Media*, 26 November 2021.

¹⁵ "Erdoğan hosts MBZ as Turkey, UAE seek to repair bilateral ties", *Daily Sabah*, 24 November 2021.

On the following day, Emirati officials engaged with Türkiye's ambassador to Abu Dhabi, Tugay Tüncer, a move that was reciprocated when Türkiye's Foreign Minister announced a planned visit to the UAE in December 2021, which in turn paved the way for President Erdoğan's official visit to the UAE in February 2022, the first of its kind since 2013. Erdoğan's significant visit was marked by a lavish reception, a cavalry procession, a 21-gun salute, and an aerial show. Additionally, the Burj Khalifa was lit up in the colours of the Turkish flag, demonstrating the UAE's intent to solidify better relations.¹⁶

On that occasion, thirteen bilateral agreements were signed, accompanied by discussions of a free-trade agreement and a letter of intent on defence industry cooperation, signalling a new epoch in Türkiye-UAE relations. Both countries emphasised the importance of bilateral relations for regional stability and prosperity. Mohammed bin Zayed assured that his country is "keen to strengthen its emerging partnership with Türkiye amid the rising regional challenges and is looking forward to jointly tackle these challenges through dialogue, understanding, and consultation".¹⁷ Similarly, Erdoğan stressed, "cooperation between Türkiye and the UAE is the key to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region". To further emphasise his point, Erdoğan said that "the security, stability, and prosperity of Türkiye is interlinked with the Gulf".¹⁸

This mutual interest was reflected in the UAE's substantial investment in Türkiye, including plans to establish a US\$10 billion fund for strategic investments and a nearly US\$5 billion currency swap agreement,¹⁹ showing a significant financial commitment to improve ties and signalling an interest in bolstering economic relations. As part of the economic

¹⁶ A. Bakir, "Cementing the Emerging UAE-Turkey Relationship: The Iran Factor", *AGSIW*, 25 February 2022.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ J. Malsin and C. Ostroff, "Turkey Takes \$5 Billion Lifeline From Old Rival U.A.E.", *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 January 2022.

cooperation, the UAE demonstrated an interest in Türkiye's burgeoning defence sector too, becoming the fourth-largest importer of Turkish defence equipment in 2021.²⁰ The two nations agreed on regular meetings to ensure the development and progression of their collaborative efforts.

These developments are pivotal in the process of normalising relations between Türkiye and the UAE, as they are focused on strengthening political and diplomatic interaction, economic ties, defence cooperation, and regional stability. They carry several important indications for various reasons. Firstly, the diplomatic thaw marks the end of a period of tension and ushers in a new era of cooperation. This is not only beneficial for the bilateral ties but also contributes to regional stability. The signing of MoUs and agreements in various sectors such as investment, finance, trade, energy and the environment is an important step towards realising the shared objectives of this normalisation between the UAE and Türkiye. Secondly, the high-level official visits and engagements underscore the seriousness of the intent to foster stronger ties. They have allowed officials from both sides to discuss and address common challenges and opportunities in a more open, frank, and constructive manner. The fast pace of the positive developments in the bilateral relations closed the gap between their previous positions and cemented the normalisation process.

Lastly, these events have sent a clear message to other regional players and the international community at large that both actors are committed to dialogue and cooperation as a means to resolve differences and promote shared interests.

²⁰ A. Bakir, "Cementing the Emerging UAE-Turkey Relationship: The Iran Factor", cit.

The underlying motives and prospects of normalisation

Regardless of the Emirati motives, Türkiye's reasons behind the normalisation with the UAE are multifaceted. Primarily, the geopolitical and economic benefits are undeniable. The UAE is one of the strongest economies in the Middle East and an influential player in regional politics. Normalising ties with the UAE can enhance Türkiye's political leverage and economic outlook. In March 2023, the UAE and Türkiye signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that aims to raise the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries to US\$40 billion in the next five years.²¹

Moreover, the Emirati interest in Türkiye's burgeoning defence sector provides opportunities for the defence industry to expand and flourish at a much-needed time. In March 2021, Tawazun, the defence and security acquisitions authority of the UAE's armed forces, entered into discussions with Baykar Technology of Türkiye, a manufacturer renowned for the indigenous Bayraktar TB2 drone. These discussions were held over a period of several months and culminated in the UAE making an enticing US\$2 billion offer.²²

This proposal encompassed Abu Dhabi's demand for an assortment of 120 TB2 drones, ammunition, command and control units, and training. During a meeting with the Central Executive Committee of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in July 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan disclosed that the UAE proposed the construction of a factory for the TB2 drone in Abu Dhabi.²³

Finally, given the volatile nature of the regional landscape, maintaining good relations with all players is key to regional stability and security. The normalisation of relations with the

²¹ Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, "[Turkey, United Arab Emirates sign trade agreement](#)", Directorate of Communication, 3 March 2023.

²² A. Bakir, "[The UAE just received twenty drones from Turkey. What's the backstory?](#)", Atlantic Council, 16 November 2022.

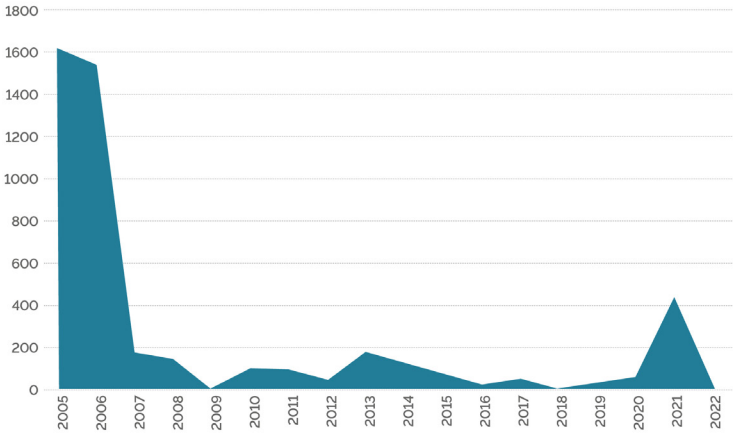
²³ Ibid.

UAE can play a critical role in fostering a stable environment conducive to economic growth and development, especially after a period of tension between the two regional players in several theatres including Syria, Iraq, Libya, Qatar, and the Eastern Mediterranean, among others.

The normalisation with UAE helps Türkiye consolidate its gains in several regional theatres, halts the zero-sum power struggle in the Middle East, and allows the country to cash in its gains in these regions. It will also provide an opportunity to attract much needed foreign direct investments to the country, helping, in conjunction with other measures taken to address the economic challenges, to stabilise the economic situation and attract investments that will allow the defence industry to continue to grow.

On the bilateral level, the normalisation process has already led to substantial economic commitments and potential growth in trade and investment. The renewed relationship also opens the door for deeper cooperation in areas such as defence, technology, and tourism. On the regional level, the normalisation could lead to a reshaping of alliances and balances of power. This could also influence other countries in the region to follow suit, creating a more harmonious and cooperative regional environment. It could potentially contribute to resolving regional conflicts and promoting peace and stability.

FIG. 1.1 – THE ANNUAL EMIRATI FDI TO TÜRKİYE



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Source: Compiled by the author from [Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası](#) (TCMB) data

The latest victory of President Erdoğan and the People's Alliance, led by the Justice and Development Party, in the general and presidential elections of May 2023 further deepened the Emirati-Turkish normalisation and upgraded the bilateral ties to a new level of strategic partnership. Only three days after Erdoğan's election victory, Abu Dhabi ratified the CEPA with Ankara,²⁴ a move that could potentially increase bilateral trade to US\$40 billion within a few years, meaning that Abu Dhabi will consolidate its position as the unchallenged economic partner of Türkiye in the Gulf.

²⁴ "UAE and Turkey ratify comprehensive partnership agreement", *Reuters*, 31 May 2023.

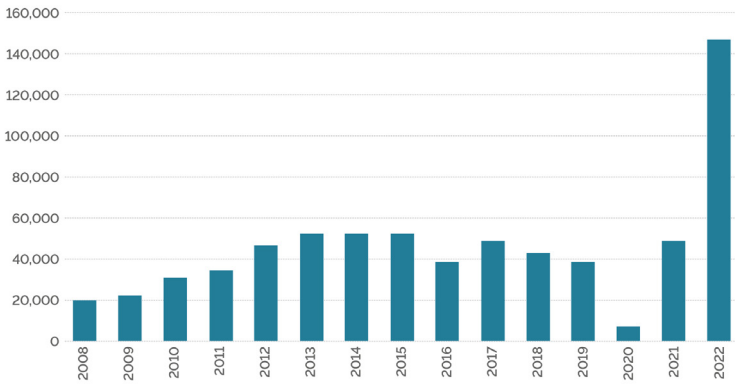
Furthermore, UAE's President, MbZ, became the first Gulf leader to visit Türkiye and meet Erdoğan following his election victory and 3 June inauguration. The visit saw the two leaders "discussing bilateral ties, watching a soccer game together and walking hand-in-hand after dining at an Istanbul restaurant".²⁵ According to the Emirati President, the discussions included ways to further strengthen economic cooperation and the strategic partnership between the two nations, and promote regional stability.²⁶ Erdoğan's A-team, consisting of Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz and Treasury and Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, paid its first foreign visit to the UAE on 22 June to explore further opportunities for economic cooperation.²⁷ The future prospects of normalisation with the UAE are promising if the current trend continues. However, several regional and international dynamics might affect the prospects of these relations and adjust the course or even alter it completely, including the US presidential elections in 2024. Having said this, the two actors are currently committed to building on the progress made so far and expanding their cooperation in various sectors. Regular meetings between officials from both countries will ensure the continuity and progression of these collaborative efforts.

²⁵ "Turkey's Erdogan runs soccer diplomacy with UAE, Libya at Champions League final", *Al-Monitor*, 12 June 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Turkish vice president, finance minister in UAE ahead of President Erdogan's visit", *Anadolu Agency*, 22 June 2023.

FIG. 1.2 – ANNUAL NUMBER OF EMIRATI TOURISTS IN TÜRKIYE



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Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism Türkiye

From Rift to Reconciliation: An Insight into the Saudi-Turkish Normalisation Process

The relationship between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia has been marked by tension and mistrust in recent years. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade against the small gas-rich country and Ankara's primary ally in the Gulf, Qatar. Although the crisis put Riyadh and Ankara on a collision course, Türkiye tried to maintain good ties with Saudi Arabia and resolve the crisis quietly through backdoor diplomacy. Accordingly, President Erdoğan sent a secret delegation to Riyadh spearheaded by his chief adviser Ibrahim Kalin.²⁸ However, the Saudis did not change their

²⁸ A. Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey - Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf

course, prompting Türkiye to expedite its military deployment in Doha, thus spoiling the plans of the Saudi-led bloc to subdue Qatar.

The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by a Saudi hit team at his own country's consulate in Istanbul, in October 2018, worsened Turkish-Saudi relations significantly and in an unprecedented way. Saudi officials tried to pin the disappearance of Khashoggi on Türkiye in the beginning,²⁹ however, soon after the Turkish intelligence (MIT) determined precisely how Khashoggi was assassinated by a Saudi hit team, Ankara pressed the Saudi authorities hard on the global stage and went after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) without actually naming him.³⁰ Yet, the fact that the Saudi Crown Prince was not punished for this by the international community put Türkiye in a critical position.

The normalisation course

Soon after, regional and international dynamics changed, forcing the two countries to come closer to each other. In late 2020, the two nations started taking steps towards rapprochement and normalisation. Unlike the normalisation between the UAE and Türkiye, that between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia was long, hard, and cold. Efforts to mend the diplomatic relationship between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia commenced on 30 October 2020, when the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, expressed condolences for the tragic earthquake in Türkiye's Izmir,³¹ a statement that went largely unnoticed given the informal boycott of Turkish goods in Saudi Arabia.

Divide”, in A. Krieg (ed.), *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 209.

²⁹ Saudi Press Agency, 4 October 2018,

³⁰ B. Aliriza, “Erdogan, Trump, and the Khashoggi Murder”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 12 December 2018.

³¹ M. Semiz, “Arab nations condole with Turkey after deadly quake”, *AA*, 31 October 2020.

Following this statement, King Salman directed the Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Action to provide support to the Turkish population affected by the Izmir earthquake, underscoring a sense of brotherhood.³² On 21 November 2020, King Salman initiated a phone call to Türkiye's President Erdoğan. The leaders agreed to maintain open lines of communication to augment bilateral relations and resolve lingering issues.³³ Concurrently, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Farhan affirmed the positive and friendly status of the Saudi-Turkish relationship.

Notably, at the conclusion of the G20 summit hosted virtually by Saudi Arabia on 22 November 2022, Erdoğan congratulated Riyadh on its successful hosting of the event.³⁴ During a meeting at the end of that month between the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Saudi counterpart, on the sidelines of the 47th session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Çavuşoğlu emphasised the criticality of the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia, indicating the sincerity of their dialogue and the potential regional benefits of robust Turkish-Saudi ties.³⁵

These developments, though not amounting to complete reconciliation at the time, signified a positive shift in Saudi-Turkish relations, arguably in anticipation of potential policy shifts under the new Biden administration in the US. During his campaign for presidency in 2020, Joe Biden labelled Saudi Arabia as a “pariah”, vowed to institute an arms embargo on Riyadh, and insisted that Saudi leaders would “pay the price” for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, which the US intelligence

³² “King Salman orders urgent aid to earthquake-hit Izmir”, *Arab News*, 6 November 2020.

³³ “Turkey’s Erdogan, Saudi king agree to solve issues through dialogue - Turkish presidency”, *Reuters*, 20 November 2020.

³⁴ “G20 summit can be critical in curbing pandemic’s fallout”, *AA*, 22 November 2020.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, “Participation of Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in the 47th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 26-28 November 2020”,

agencies concluded was approved by Saudi Crown Prince MbS.³⁶

Biden's position was one of the main reasons to bring Saudi Arabia and Türkiye closer to each other on the regional level. Yet, at a certain point, progress in the rapprochement process led primarily by King Salman was stalled by MbS at the beginning of 2021. The US President Joe Biden's unwillingness to punish MbS for the Khashoggi affair reduced Riyadh's urgency to improve relations with Ankara at the time. Knowing that there would be no more repercussions, the Saudi Crown Prince felt much more comfortable to put the normalisation process with Türkiye on hold while trying to extract concessions from Ankara and chart a normalisation course that would not allow Ankara to bypass him personally.

MbS maintained some personal reservations when it came to the prospect of embracing Türkiye following Ankara's efforts to punish those responsible for Khashoggi murder. For MbS, the Khashoggi case was still an issue, and he did not want to just jump over it. Parallel to this development, Saudi Arabia imposed an informal economic boycott on Türkiye's exports to the kingdom³⁷ and took pro-Greece measures³⁸ that were seen as provocative from the Turkish perspective.

Despite Ankara's challenges in decoding the mixed signals emanating from Riyadh, it remained steadfast in its commitment to enhance bilateral relations. In 2021, Turkish presidential spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, suggested that all avenues to achieve justice had been exhausted by Ankara, and there were no further steps to be taken.³⁹ The turning point arrived in

³⁶ D.E. Sanger, "Candidate Biden Called Saudi Arabia a 'Pariah.' He Now Has to Deal With It.", *New York Times*, 24 February 2021.

³⁷ "Boycott-hit Turkish exports to Saudi Arabia drop 92% in January", *Daily Sabah*, 4 February 2021.

³⁸ "Saudi Air Force Group Arrives in Greece for Military Drill", *Asbarq Al Ansat*, 13 March 2021.

³⁹ "Türkiye welcomes Saudi Arabia's trial for Khashoggi's murder: Erdogan's adviser", *Al-Arabiya News*, 27 April 2021.

March 2022 when, upon Saudi request, Türkiye transferred the murder investigation to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ This was a decisive step towards the normalisation of relations between the two nations. Even though Türkiye was deeply disturbed by the murder, it realised that it was pursuing a case that other global actors, already engaged with MbS, had chosen to disregard.

Transferring the case removed a significant obstacle from the path towards Saudi-Turkish normalisation. Consequently, the normalisation process regained momentum. Turkish President Erdoğan visited Saudi Arabia in April 2022, his first visit since 2017, and MbS visited Türkiye in June 2022, his first visit since becoming Crown Prince in 2017, succeeding Prince Mohammad bin Nayef. During his visit to Riyadh, President Erdoğan met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and the Crown Prince, marking over a year of diplomatic efforts to restore relations between the two countries.

The Turkish President's visit coincided with the holy month of Ramadan, leading him to assert that it was a fitting time to mend relations between the two fraternal nations. However, the absence of a joint concluding statement or any declaration of agreements following the visit led to speculation about the depth of the reconciliation and indicated unresolved issues requiring attention before full reengagement could take place.

The breakthrough

During MbS's visit to Ankara, the normalisation process gained further clarity. MbS and Erdoğan had a one-on-one meeting to discuss bilateral relations, areas of cooperation, and strategies for development across various sectors. Following the formal meeting, the Turkish side hosted a banquet in honour of the Crown Prince and his delegation, with two notable gestures. At the dinner, a Saudi national anthem praising the Saudis, King Salman, and his son was played, and in an unusual move,

⁴⁰ “Khashoggi case transfer does not rule out Turkish court's say: Minister”, *Daily Sabah*, 21 April 2022.

President Erdoğan personally escorted MbS to the airport for his departure. Upon the conclusion of the visit, a joint statement was released, emphasising the mutual resolve to initiate a new era of cooperation across political, economic, military, security, and cultural domains.⁴¹

The sudden shift in Saudi Arabia's stance towards Türkiye seems to be largely driven by changes in US politics, a desire to counterbalance Iran, rehabilitate MbS's global image, and prepare for the anticipated power transition within the kingdom. Saudi Arabia's effort to diversify its foreign relations and economy, establish a robust domestic defence industry, and address mounting security threats, particularly from Iran, also played a part in Riyadh's inclination to reconcile with Türkiye.

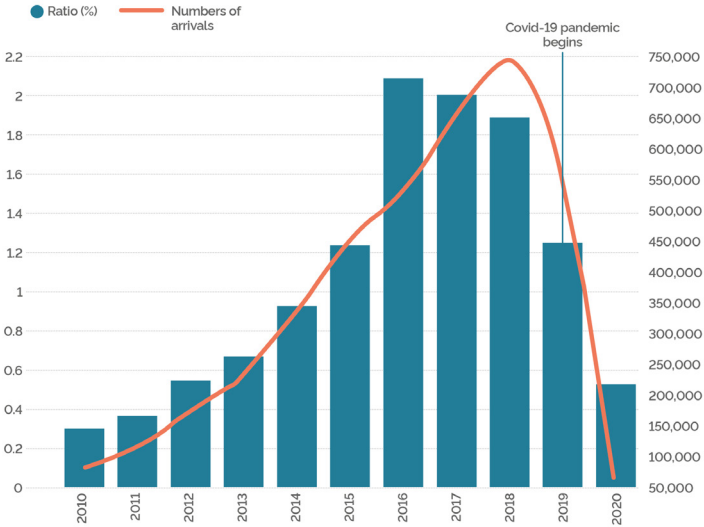
However, from the Turkish perspective, normalising relations with Saudi Arabia at this particular juncture was the prudent thing to do for several reasons. First, it is compatible with both the wider regional dynamics at play and the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy to accommodate these changes. Second, the normalisation would serve the interests of both sides and equip them with the right tools to counter any looming challenges. Third, considering the difficult elections in 2023 and huge economic challenges such as rampant inflation and the severe depreciation of the Turkish lira, Erdoğan must have considered normalisation with Saudi Arabia as part of his broader efforts to stabilise Türkiye's foreign policy and resolve outstanding problems in order to focus his undivided attention on the domestic front.

In this sense, Ankara sought to boost economic interactions with the kingdom, increase the volume of bilateral trade, attract Saudi foreign direct investment, and increase the number of Saudi tourists. Accordingly, the Turkish side expressed interest in strengthening relations with the kingdom in energy, food security, health, investment, and business, as well as defence,

⁴¹ Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, "[Joint statement after President Erdoğan's meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#)", Directorate of Communications, 23 June 2022.

security and other sectors. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with Türkiye to deposit US\$5 billion in the country's central bank through the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD).⁴²

FIG. 1.3 – ANNUAL NUMBER OF SAUDI TOURISTS IN TÜRKİYE



ISPI

Source: Compiled by the author from [Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası \(TCMB\)](#) data

⁴² “Saudi Arabia deposits \$5 bln in Turkey’s central bank – statement”, *Reuters*, 6 March 2023.

Pitfalls of over-emphasising the economy

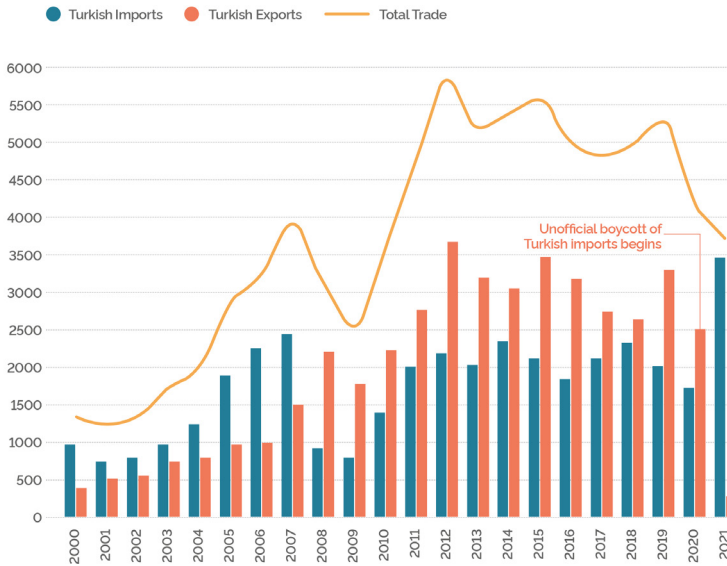
Türkiye's ongoing economic hardships certainly provided an incentive to seek Saudi investment and commercial engagement. Many observers even hold the belief that the normalisation with Saudi Arabia was almost exclusively driven by Türkiye's economic hardships and Riyadh's unofficial boycott of Turkish exports.

However, the interpretation of the normalisation process between Ankara and Riyadh as unidirectional and overemphasising the role of economic factors as the main driving force may represent a skewed understanding of the prevailing dynamics. In fact, existing data indicates that Türkiye's trade with Saudi Arabia has remained relatively modest, even negligible, in relation to the overall size of the Turkish economy. This holds true not only for the present situation but also for the period of 2015-16, when the relations between the two regional powerhouses were at their zenith.

The truth is that the volume of annual bilateral trade between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia has never exceeded US\$5.7 billion, which accounts for a scant 1.5% of Türkiye's total international trade. The unofficial Saudi boycott of Turkish exports that commenced in 2020 resulted in trade figures of slightly over US\$3.5 billion the following year. Regarding foreign direct investment, inflows from Saudi Arabia – having peaked as far back as 2008 – amounted to a mere 1% of the total Türkiye received from 2005 through 2021. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has not significantly contributed to tourism – a crucial component of the Turkish economy. Even at their highest in 2018, Saudi arrivals, close to 750,000, made up less than 2% of foreign tourists visiting Türkiye that year. While the economic dimension is undeniably a constant element in Türkiye's foreign relations and domestic considerations, it was not the primary catalyst in the Saudi-Turkish normalisation, contrary to dominant narratives. Instead, geopolitical and geostrategic factors exert more influence over the bilateral relationship between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. These dynamics have been

visible over the past decade, with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye becoming closer or more distant based primarily on political rather than economic considerations. Specifically, their ties have been profoundly influenced by the regional policies of the United States and Iran, as well as the security implications of these policies. The equation became more complex after 2017, with the rise of MbS's influence over Saudi foreign policy adding another significant variable.

FIG. 1.4 – TÜRKİYE AND SAUDI ARABIA BILATERAL TRADE

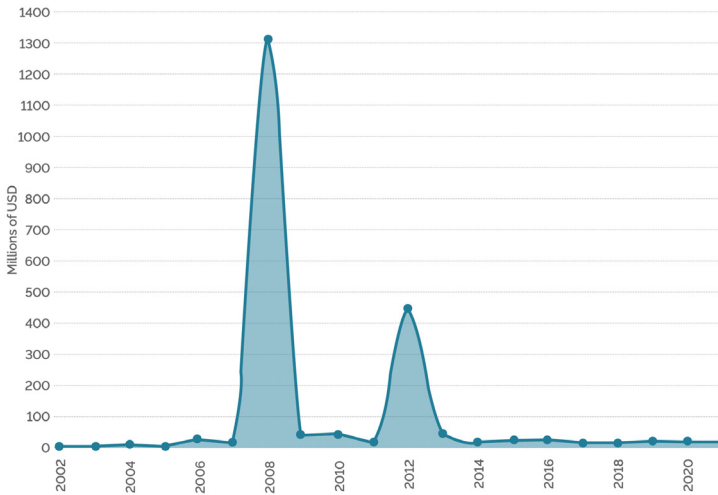


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Source: Compiled by the author from [Turkish Statistical Institute \(TUIK\)](#) and [Turkish Exporters Assembly \(TİM\)](#) data

The normalisation of relations between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia is important for several reasons. It helps to promote stability and security in the region by creating a more balanced power dynamic. Additionally, it opens up new opportunities for trade and investment between the two countries. Finally, it allows Türkiye and Saudi Arabia to work together on regional issues. The prospects for the normalisation of relations between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia are positive. Both countries have shown a willingness to work together on various issues, and there is a strong economic incentive for both sides to deepen their ties. However, there might still be some challenges that need to be addressed in the future. Regional and international dynamics, especially in relation to Iran and the US, might affect the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. Furthermore, on the bilateral level, other factors need to be taken into consideration. For example, there is not much positive chemistry between the Saudi Crown Prince MbS and Türkiye's President Erdoğan at the current moment. This means that while officials of the two countries will continue to meet, there may be fewer official meetings and less coordination on the highest level than anticipated. Moreover, the ambiguity of MbS's political and regional agenda, to say nothing of his sudden direction changes, would make it hard for Türkiye to synchronise on the regional level or work on issues of common interest, at least in the short-term.

FIG. 1.5 – SAUDI FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENTS TO TÜRKİYE



ISPI

Source: Compiled by the author from [Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası \(TCMB\)](#) data

Conclusion

The normalisation between Türkiye, the UAE and Saudi Arabia represents a significant shift in the regional dynamics of the Middle East. Overcoming past tensions and mistrust, these countries have recognised the need for stability, cooperation and shared interests in the face of evolving regional challenges. Regional and international factors as well as economic and geopolitical considerations have played crucial roles in driving the normalisation processes, as all parties seek to diversify their economies and partnerships and explore new avenues for collaboration.

The UAE-Türkiye normalisation process has progressed rapidly, driven by a transparent agenda focused on enhancing trade, investment, and business relations. Initial conciliatory gestures and subsequent high-level engagements have paved the way for a strategic partnership. The UAE's substantial investments in Türkiye, including the CEPA and defence industry cooperation, signify Abu Dhabi's seriousness and long-term commitment to deepening economic and political ties. These developments not only benefit bilateral relations but also contribute to regional stability.

On the other hand, the Saudi-Turkish normalisation process has been more complex and gradual, with multiple challenges along the way. Overcoming the fallout from the Qatar blockade and the Khashoggi murder, the two countries have gradually rebuilt their relations despite challenges such as personal reservations and fluctuating regional dynamics, which played a role in stalling the normalisation before the two parties came closer to each other.

The changing dynamics of US politics, the need to counterbalance Iran, and economic diversification efforts have driven Saudi Arabia's inclination to reconcile with Türkiye. Likewise, Türkiye's need to cash in its geopolitical gains and expand its economic and business horizon as well as its regional influence necessitated normalisation with Saudi Arabia. The process gained further clarity during Erdoğan's visit to Riyadh in April 2022 and Crown Prince MbS's visit to Ankara the following June, marking a renewed commitment to cooperation across various domains.

The future prospects of normalisation between Türkiye, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia hold promise, but also require careful consideration. Deepening economic ties, increased trade, foreign direct investment, and tourism are expected to contribute positively to the economic development of all parties involved. Normalisation also creates opportunities for collaboration on regional issues, fostering stability and security in the region.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that future prospects could be influenced by regional and international dynamics, including the US presidential elections in 2024, as well as the personal chemistry and political agendas of key leaders. Balancing the interests and concerns of all parties will be crucial in sustaining the positive momentum of normalisation.

In conclusion, the process of Türkiye's normalisation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia represents a new era of cooperation in a changing regional landscape. The economic and geopolitical factors that have driven these normalisation processes reflect a recognition of shared interests and the need for stability. While challenges remain, the willingness of all parties to deepen ties and address common challenges provides a foundation for future collaboration and the potential for positive regional outcomes. Future prospects depend on effective management of regional dynamics, continued dialogue, and efforts to strengthen economic, political, and security cooperation. By building upon the progress made so far and addressing the remaining challenges, Türkiye, the UAE and Saudi Arabia can contribute to regional stability, resolve conflicts, and promote prosperity in the Middle East.

2. Türkiye and Israel: A Second Chance to Restart the Relationship

Gallia Lindenstrauss

As part of Türkiye's outreach towards different Middle Eastern countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even Syria, in late 2020 Ankara also signalled to Israel that it wanted to repair relations. This was first met with suspicion on the Israeli side, but after a few confidence building measures, as well as the success of Ankara in convincing other actors in the region to repair ties, Israel agreed to normalise relations in August 2022. This chapter will look first at why the previous 2016 normalisation attempt between Israel and Türkiye was fragile and broke down less than two years after an agreement was signed. It will then move on to identify the reasons behind Türkiye's decision to attempt to repair relations with Israel at the end of 2020, why there were Israeli hesitations to play along, and what made Israel change its mind. It will discuss the points of tension still existing between Israel and Türkiye, as well as the areas in which collaboration is more easily achieved. Lastly, it will address some of the facilitating elements that have helped the current normalisation path hold till now and assess the chances of its continuation in the near future.

The 2016 Normalisation and Its Aftermath

The normalisation agreement signed between Israel and Türkiye in June 2016 was meant first and foremost to solve the crisis that was created in relations between the two countries following the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010. In that incident, Israeli navy commando forces killed 9 Turkish citizens on one of the ships that were part of the *Gaza Freedom* flotilla, in an attempt to stop the ship from breaking the naval siege Israel had imposed on Gaza. After an apology to Türkiye issued in 2013, the 2016 normalisation had three main components: US\$20 million of compensation to the families of the victims, to be transferred through a Turkish state-directed fund, Türkiye dropping all legal charges against Israeli soldiers and commanders, and Israel facilitating the transfer of Turkish humanitarian aid to Gaza.¹ Following the agreement there was a return to full diplomatic relations. It should be stressed that expectations for a true improvement in the relations between the states after the signing of the agreement were low – some described it only as “cold peace”.² There were even two separate press conferences to announce the agreement instead of a joint signing event. Still, as an indication of improved relations there were three ministerial visits after the agreement was signed – two visits by Israel’s Energy Minister (October 2016 and July 2017) and another by Türkiye’s Tourism Minister in January 2017.³

Despite the improved relations between the sides, already in May 2017, Türkiye’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, returned

¹ “President Erdoğan Approves Turkey-Israel Normalization Deal”, *Daily Sabah* 31 August 2016.

² O. Almog and A. Sever, “The Mavi Marmara: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences”, in A. Sever and O. Almog (eds.), *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 62.

³ “Israeli Energy Minister to Visit Turkey in First Such Trip for Six Years”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2016; “Israeli Tourists Flock to Turkey as Relations Normalize, Number of Tourists Rise 80 Percent”, *Daily Sabah*, 5 February 2017.

to his harsh rhetoric against Israel after legislation was brought to the Israeli parliament (that later did not pass), regarding restrictions on the use of public address systems for the Muslim call to prayer. In July 2017, during protests on Temple mount, Erdoğan commented that Israel was undermining the Islamic character of Jerusalem.⁴ Moreover, in December 2017, after US President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Erdoğan responded that the US decision was invalid and that Israel was a “terrorist state”.⁵ A bigger crisis between the countries erupted when there were Palestinian casualties in the *Great March of Return* demonstration on the border with Gaza and after the US moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In the May 2018 crisis, Türkiye not only recalled its ambassador to Tel Aviv for consultations, but also told Israel’s ambassador in Ankara to do likewise, which led Israel to ask Türkiye’s consul general in Jerusalem (who was seen by Türkiye as its representative to Palestine) to leave, and to a reciprocal move by Türkiye with regard to Israel’s consul general in Istanbul. Despite these steps, diplomatic relations between the states were not formally downgraded. Following Erdoğan’s return to his harsh stance against Israel, there were also several rhetorical battles between him and Netanyahu, adding a personal dimension to the differences between the countries.⁶

The fact that the normalisation agreement held less than two years after it was signed can be explained by several factors: firstly, soon after its signature in June 2016, the 15 July failed coup attempt occurred in Türkiye. This had major ramifications for Ankara’s domestic and foreign affairs and created an atmosphere less conducive to promoting bilateral relations. Secondly and in connection to this was the fact that Türkiye and Israel were part

⁴ P. Beaumont, “Erdoğan: Israel is harming Jerusalem’s Islamic Character”, *The Guardian*, 26 July 2017.

⁵ “Erdoğan: Israel a ‘terrorist state’ that Kills Children”, *Times of Israel*, 10 December 2017.

⁶ S. Efron, *The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2018, p. 41.

of two opposite camps; Türkiye was cooperating with actors such as Hamas and Qatar in what was described at times as the *political Islam axis*,⁷ whereas Israel was cooperating with Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and the UAE in an informal axis that had an anti-Türkiye element to it.⁸ Thirdly, there was a correlation between developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and the level of relations between Israel and Türkiye. Hence, President's Trump dramatic move of recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the US embassy there despite the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not resolved, was negatively received in the Muslim world, and more specifically in Türkiye. Also, Türkiye was approaching elections in June 2018, which encouraged Erdoğan to be more vocal about Israel. Lastly, despite Türkiye's hope that a pipeline to export gas from Israel to Türkiye would be built, and the fact that there were two visits of Israel's Energy Minister to Türkiye at the time, no deal was reached. The price of Israeli gas was too high for Türkiye and there was the issue of the pipeline being built in Cypriot economic waters without the Cyprus issue being resolved.⁹ Israel moved to promote its gas energy exports mostly through Egyptian liquifying facilities, which despite initial hesitations, proved to work well.

After two years of frosty relations, there was a change in Türkiye's position towards Israel in 2020. In December 2020, Erdoğan commented that Türkiye would like better ties with Israel and that "if there were no issues at the top level (in Israel), our ties could have been very different".¹⁰ In addition, two international events gave impetus to the change in Erdoğan's

⁷ I. Brun and S. Feuer, "In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle Over the Shape of the Middle East", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, p. 12.

⁸ R. Daniel, *Turkey, Israel and the Tumultuous 2011-2021 Decade in the Arab World*, Istanbul, Global Relations Forum, 2022, p. 20.

⁹ P. Rivlin, "Economic Relations Between Israel and Turkey", in A. Sever and O. Almog (eds.), *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 189.

¹⁰ "Erdogan Says Turkey would like Better Ties with Israel, Palestinian Policy still 'Red Line'", *Reuters*, 25 December 2020.

position. The first was the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, which gave a boost to Israel's regional standing and also temporarily shelved Israeli plans for annexation of part of the West Bank. The second was the election of Joe Biden as US President, which seemed to encourage a rapprochement between Israel and Türkiye for two main reasons. Firstly, Ankara was worried that contrary to President Donald Trump, with whom Erdoğan seemed to have better personal relations, the Biden administration would be a more difficult partner for Türkiye. Secondly, as the majority of the Jewish population in the US supports the Democratic party, there was the perception in Ankara that Türkiye needed to improve relations with Israel. In general, Israel's improved relations with Greece and Cyprus also had a dimension of growing cooperation between the pro-Israel and the Hellenic lobbies in Washington.

Another issue that caused Türkiye to express a desire to repair relations with Israel was the deteriorating economic situation at home and the need to attract foreign investments. While Israel itself would not necessarily be the source of these investments, improving relations with Israel would both signal pragmatism and moderation on behalf of Ankara and would also signal to other states in the region, such as the Gulf states that have a greater ability to invest in Türkiye, that Ankara is serious in its attempts for a reset in its Middle East policy.

An additional matter that had improved Israel's image in Ankara in late 2020 was the decisive victory of Azerbaijan in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Israel had sold weapons to Azerbaijan over the years, and more specifically when the war started in late September 2020,¹¹ and this was seen in Baku as one of the reasons for its success. Baku and Ankara enjoy close relations and hence, after the war, Azerbaijani, Turkish and Israeli flags were displayed together in Baku in appreciation of the results this joint standing had produced.

¹¹ A. Scharf and O. Yaron, “92 Flights from Israeli Base Reveal Arms Exports to Azerbaijan”, *Haaretz*, 6 March 2023.

Though it would be an exaggeration to claim that the victory was a joint trilateral effort, it reminded people of the golden years in Turkish-Israeli relations in the 1990's and the benefits of having Israel and Türkiye on the same side. Following the war, because Azerbaijan has liberated parts of its territory that had been under Armenian control since the 1990's, Iran and Azerbaijan now have a longer shared border and this is causing growing tensions between the two, hence close relations with Israel and Türkiye remain important to Baku.

Two Views on Türkiye's Normalisation Attempts with Israel

As Türkiye made moves towards Israel in a desire to repair relations, two approaches emerged in Israel. The dominant one emphasised that it was unwise to move ahead with relations with Türkiye, because Israel had already tried this route, and that any escalation between Israel and the Palestinians will only cause a new crisis between Ankara and Jerusalem.¹² Moreover, it was claimed by those supporting this approach that the price of not having ambassadors in Ankara and Tel Aviv was not high, as trade and tourism were developing well and that overall, Türkiye had more to gain from a normalisation of ties with Israel than vice-versa and therefore there was no rush. The other less prominent approach was that agreeing to a new exchange of ambassadors was a “technical decision” that did not require any concessions by Israel to Türkiye (contrary to the case in 2016). Hence, there was no reason not to improve relations with Türkiye, even though there were no illusions that Turkish-Israeli relations would return to the closeness seen in the 1990s.¹³ What both views shared was scepticism regarding how

¹² H.E. Cohen Yanarocak, “Can a Renewed Alliance Between Israel and Turkey Stabilize the Middle East?”, *Mosaic*, 7 June 2022.

¹³ N. Goren, “Israel-Türkiye Relations: Time for Change Gov't to Fix Ties: Opinion”, *Jerusalem Post*, 28 July 2021.

much relations between Türkiye and Israel can really improve, at least as long as Erdoğan is ruling Türkiye. Moreover, in practice there was not much difference in how these differing views were translated into actions in the sense that despite the hesitancy, there was an exploration of the possibility of improving relations, and in retrospective it did not take Israel that long to agree to normalise them. Already in early 2022 it was clear that a rapprochement was achievable.

Major Bones of Contention Between Israel and Türkiye

While Türkiye had raised objections to Israel's policies *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians even prior to Erdoğan's rise to power,¹⁴ it was under his rule that Türkiye became a much more vocal actor in this regard, and in some periods the main champion of the Palestinian cause in the international arena.¹⁵ Recurring Israeli operations in Gaza, as well as the stand-still, and at times reversal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians adversely affected Turkish-Israeli relations. Türkiye's growing involvement in Eastern Jerusalem and among Israeli Palestinians also caused Israel to be more suspicious of Türkiye's intentions.¹⁶ From Ankara's point of view, which agreed with a larger narrative in the Muslim world, there was an attempt by Jewish extremists, backed to a certain degree by the Israeli authorities, to change the status quo in the al-Aqsa compound.

From Israel's perspective there was ongoing frustration at the fact that the Hamas movement, considered by Israel as a terrorist organisation, had an office in Türkiye and that

¹⁴ A. Nachmani, *Turkey: Facing a New Millennium: Coping with Intervind Conflicts*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 207-08.

¹⁵ A. Zaman, "Erdogan Dashes Hopes of Turkey-Israel Reconciliation", *Al-Monitor*, 27 May 2020.

¹⁶ N. Shragi, "Turkey's Intrusion into Jerusalem", Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 15 June 2020.

terror attacks in the West Bank were orchestrated from Turkish territory.¹⁷ This was an issue Israel had already raised with Türkiye during negotiations for the 2016 normalisation agreement. But the problem persisted and there were even reports of Türkiye's granting passports to Hamas operatives to ease their freedom of movement. There were several cases in which Israeli security forces arrested Israeli Palestinians who had at some point resided in Türkiye, on different charges including ones concerning involvement in cyber operations and spying for Iran.¹⁸ In addition, Türkiye announced that it had arrested a number of Palestinians operating for the Mossad who were spying on Palestinian students in Türkiye.¹⁹

Furthermore, Türkiye's assertive stance in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean over the past few years brought together various regional actors who had previously had poor relations, into a sort of an anti-Türkiye front. From Türkiye's perspective one of the concerning developments was the closer relations not just between Israel, Cyprus and Greece but also the closer alignment between these countries and the Gulf states.²⁰ Hence, it was speculated that Türkiye's attempts to repair relations with different countries in the region was only superficial and that the true motivation was to drive a wedge between these actors.²¹ It should also be emphasised that contrary to the conciliatory tone coming from Ankara

¹⁷ A. Harel, "Shin Bet: Hamas Funneling Terror Funds to West Bank, Gaza Through Turkey", *Haaretz*, 12 February 2018.

¹⁸ T. Jofre, "3 Israeli Citizens Indicated for Helping Hamas attack IDF Infrastructure", *Jerusalem Post*, 20 October 2022; Y. Ben Menachem, " Hamas Spies on Israel for Iran from Istanbul", Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 16 January 2023.

¹⁹ L. Berman, "Turkey Arrests 7 citizens Suspected of Spying for Mossad", *Times of Israel*, 14 December 2022.

²⁰ R. Daniel, G. Lindenstrauss, and Y. Guzansky, "Complementary Facets: Türkiye-Israel Relations and the Abraham Accords", *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2002, p. 98.

²¹ B. Ravid, "Israel to Assess Erdogan's Seriousness on Normalizing Relations", *Axios*, 31 December 2020.

towards Middle Eastern countries, at the same time Türkiye increased pressure and revisionist rhetoric towards Greece and Cyprus. Hence, inconsistencies were also appearing among countries that had previously united against Türkiye as to what their policy should be *vis-à-vis* Ankara. A serious question in this regard is whether Türkiye should be admitted to the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) that was established in 2019. Clearly Türkiye is an important country in this region, and the EMGF could also be expanded to cover other issues, including renewable energy and joint disaster preparedness, and Israel would welcome such a development. Still, it will be very difficult to convince Cyprus and Greece to agree to Türkiye joining the forum in light of the lingering Cyprus question, and the disputes over maritime borders delimitation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea.

The Biden administration's non-paper in January 2022, laying out objections to the East-Med pipeline, which was intended to export gas discovered off the shores of Israel through Cyprus and Crete and from there to the rest of Europe,²² and which had previously been endorsed by the Trump administration (also through the 3+1 platform connecting Israel, Cyprus, Greece and the US), was seen in Türkiye as a sign to move ahead with the normalisation with Israel. Türkiye objected vigorously to this pipeline and one of the ways it tried to obstruct its building was by signing the controversial maritime delimitation agreement with the Government of National Accord in Libya that transformed the route of the pipeline into something disputable. Still, despite the problems encountered by the East-Med pipeline, there are other ideas for building energy infrastructure to connect Israel, Cyprus and Greece. The most notable of these is the Euro-Asia interconnector, designed to connect the energy grids of Israel and Cyprus to European countries' grids for the first time.²³ Despite the fact that this is

²² L. Harkov, "US Informs Israel it no longer Supports EastMed Pipeline to Europe", *Jerusalem Post*, 18 January 2022.

²³ C. Ellinas, "EuroAsia Interconnector Becoming a Reality", *Cyprus Mail*, 15

also an ambitious project – it will be the longest and deepest interconnector ever built, and also in the route Ankara is contesting – it is still cheaper than the East-Med pipeline, and has the potential to carry electricity produced from renewables and not just gas. It is therefore more versatile and in line with the EU Green Deal.

Beyond issues of contention between Israel and Türkiye, it should be stressed that there is also the problem of a less positive agenda in shared interests between Israel and Türkiye. Diverging from previous patterns in the relationship, Türkiye no longer needs Israeli assistance in the realm of defence industries: on the contrary, it is becoming a competitor to certain Israeli defence exporters. Also, despite growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan as well as resentment about Iranian infiltration attempts in both countries, Türkiye holds a different position to Israel with regard to Iran. Whereas Israel sees Iran as an existential threat, Ankara's view is more relaxed: it sees Iran only as a regional competitor and not an enemy state, and knows how to manage the relationship so that it does not escalate.²⁴ With regard to Syria, while the two countries are both neighbouring states to a nation engulfed by and trying to recover from a civil war, the interests of Türkiye and those of Israel are not the same and focus on different parts of Syria.

Confidence Building and Areas for Collaboration

Over the course of 2021-22 there were three occasions when Türkiye proved to Israel that it was serious in its desire to repair relations. The first took place in November 2021 and involved the quick release of an Israeli couple vacationing in Türkiye and charged with espionage. The fact that the couple was returned without any preconditions, even though they were accused of

May 2023.

²⁴ A. Omid, "If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix it: Why Turkey and Iran's 376 Years of Peace Will Continue", *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2015.

photographing a residence of the Turkish President, was well received in Israel.²⁵

The second took place in June 2022, when concrete Iranian plans to kidnap and kill Israeli tourists and businesspeople were foiled by collaboration between the Israeli and Turkish security establishments.²⁶ The ability to cooperate closely again and the successful results of this collaboration were an important push for the government, which had replaced a previous Netanyahu-led government, to move ahead in normalising relations with Türkiye.

The third positive development was the signing in July 2022 of an updated aviation agreement that paved the way for the return of Israeli carriers to fly to Türkiye.²⁷ Israeli air carriers had been unable to operate in Türkiye since 2007 since there was disagreement between the countries over the necessary security measures for these flights. In many ways, already in 2007 this disagreement provided a preview of the sharp deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations that would occur only a few years later. Hence, the solving of this particular issue, which gave an unfair advantage to Türkiye's carriers, came as a significant development.

In addition to these confidence-building acts, another factor that helped the sides regain trust was the key role Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, played in pushing the relationship forward. Almost immediately after entering office, Herzog recognised this issue as something he could promote. Also, the fact that he was perceived as a moderate voice in Israeli politics made his role as a communication channel between the states vital after the return of Netanyahu to power in December 2022 and the formation of a government including the most

²⁵ "Bennet Thanks Erdogan for Releasing Israeli Couple in First-ever Call between Them", *Times of Israel*, 18 November 2021.

²⁶ "Official Says Mossad, Local Intel Foiled 3 Iran Plots to Attack Israelis in Istanbul", *Times of Israel*, 24 June 2022.

²⁷ L. Berman, "Israel, Türkiye Sign Updated Aviation Agreement as Bilateral Ties Continue to Improve", *Times of Israel*, 7 July 2022.

extreme-right factions. Herzog's successful official visit to Ankara, in March 2022, was the first visit of its sort to take place in 15 years. His joint press conference with Erdoğan was a sharp contrast to the two separate press conferences announcing the 2016 agreement.²⁸

Trade has been a main area of cooperation between Israel and Türkiye. Even in the years of crisis, economic relations between Türkiye and Israel remained one of the few areas that were relatively little affected by political disagreement. It is thought that, had relations not turned sour, Türkiye and Israel could have enjoyed even more significant trade relations. However, while Türkiye's exports to Israel grew in a significant manner, Israel's exports to Türkiye remained largely the same. The ramifications of the Covid-19 crisis have also assisted Israeli-Turkish trade relations over the past few years; Türkiye proved a reliable trade partner for Israel in light of the disruption of supply routes. In 2022, the level of reciprocal trade with Türkiye amounted to US\$8 billion (up from US\$6.7 billion in 2021),²⁹ making Türkiye one of Israel's five largest trading partners.³⁰

Another area in which relations are developing is the tourism sector. While the *Mavi Marmara* incident did temporarily cause a decrease in Israeli tourists going to Türkiye, numbers began to bounce back after the two countries began repairing relations in 2013. Later, the number of tourists was obviously also affected by the Covid-19 crisis. However, in 2022 tourist numbers have not just bounced back but reached a record high of 800,000 Israeli tourists going to Türkiye.³¹ The number of

²⁸ K. Kirişci and D. Arbell, "President Herzog's Visit to Ankara: A First Step in Normalizing Turkey-Israel Relations?", Brookings, 7 March 2022.

²⁹ Bank of Israel, "No Longer an Island Economy? Growing Trade and Tourism Relations Between Israel and Middle Eastern Countries", Press release, 28 March 2023.

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Israel, "Israel to Reopen Economic Office in Turkey", Press Release, 6 July 2022.

³¹ "No Longer an Island Economy? No Longer an Island Economy? Growing Trade and Tourism Relations Between Israel and Middle Eastern Countries", cit.

Turkish tourists to Israel is still low,³² but still high compared to the number of tourists coming from other Muslim-majority countries.

Earthquake Diplomacy

Following the tragic earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in February 2023, Israel responded quickly. It sent one of the largest foreign rescue and assistance missions to help Türkiye. Israeli and Jewish NGOs also sent various delegations to help in the affected areas. Israel's manufacturers' association also orchestrated an organised shipment of aid. There were also displays of public sympathy, such as municipal buildings flying the Turkish flag.³³ Three main reasons can be suggested as to why Israel sent such a large delegation to assist, beyond the basic human instinct to assist in such times of trouble. First is the fact that the normalisation occurred only a short while before the earthquake. Second, there were memories of how Israel's assistance in the 1999 earthquake left a positive mark on the relationship for years. Lastly, as it is expected that a major earthquake will also occur in Israel in the foreseeable future, there was likely also a motivation of training the Israeli emergency forces for such a task.

Israeli assistance to Türkiye was well received. It may also have assisted in alleviating some of the tensions that were beginning to result from the fact that Israel's most far right and religiously conservative government was sworn in December 2022, resulting in several problematic statements and actions regarding the Palestinian issue.

³² G. Lindenstrauß, "The Changing Tourism Patterns Between Turkey and Israel: Reflecting a Troubled Relationship", in A. Sever and O. Almog (eds.), *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 228.

³³ R. Bassist, "[Israel's Rescue Teams Arrive in Turkey, will Establish Field Hospital](#)", *Al-Monitor*, 7 February 2023.

Looking Forward

The re-election of Erdoğan in the second round of the presidential elections in Türkiye on 28 May was the more probable outcome. In this respect, the logic behind the decision to normalise relations between the two states remains very much the same. So much so, that a visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to Türkiye is being actively discussed and there is also a plan for Erdoğan to visit Israel.³⁴

Both Israel and Türkiye are highly polarised societies, as was exemplified in the May 2023 elections in Türkiye that required a second round, and in the emergence of a protest movement in Israel following the attempt to promote a controversial judicial reform by the Israeli government in January 2023. Polarisation in Türkiye, however, does not manifest itself in divergences in the Turkish public's perception of Israel, which remains generally negative. It should be stressed, however, that even though there is sharp criticism towards Israel also in the opposition camp in Türkiye,³⁵ there is no strong movement among Türkiye's elites against the normalisation of relations with Israel, as is the case for example in Egypt. Likewise in Israel, both the protest movement and the opposite side of the political divide hold negative views on Erdoğan. It should nevertheless be emphasised that the Israeli public tends to differentiate between its perception of Erdoğan, which is usually negative (among Israeli-Jews; Israeli-Palestinian perceptions of Erdoğan are mostly positive) because of his critical rhetoric concerning Israel, and its attitude towards Türkiye, which at least judging by the large number of Israeli tourists visiting the country, is generally positive.³⁶

³⁴ “Turkey’s Erdogan to Meet Israel’s Netanyahu Next Month: Report”, *The New Arab*, 23 June 2023.

³⁵ R. Bassist, “Turkey Elections: Israel Never Saw Erdogan as an Ally, Unsure about Kılıçdaroglu”, *Al-Monitor*, 10 May 2023.

³⁶ A. Nir, “What do Israelis Want More than All-Inclusive Turkish Holidays?”, *Al-Monitor*, 22 October 2015.

In addition, while it is tempting to characterise the 2016 normalisation agreement as a failure in the sense that it held for less than two years, and to argue that this is also a warning not to be overly optimistic about the chances of the 2022 normalisation holding, this might be a simplistic view. One should acknowledge that the normalisation of 2022 could not have been achieved had the countries not resolved the *Mavi Marmara* crisis, at least at government level, in 2016. Hence the 2022 normalisation is not only a second chance to bring back relations to the regular course but also a direct continuation of the 2016 agreement.

It should also be acknowledged that in essence, Türkiye was the first Muslim-majority country to “normalise” relations with Israel back in 1949. Since then, and despite ups and downs in relations, there has been continuity in the relationship. Hence, even if this second attempt at normalisation fails in the short run, looking at the patterns of past relations between Ankara and Jerusalem, there is reason to be hopeful that the two states will be able to maintain diplomatic ties.

3. From Rivalry to Normalisation: Opportunities and Challenges to Egypt-Türkiye Relations

Meliha Benli Altunışık

In the last three years, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has adopted a reset policy in its relations with all the countries in the Middle East with which it had highly conflictual relations in the post-Arab uprisings era. Egypt has been one of them. Compared to most others, the normalisation of Türkiye-Egypt relations had a slow start. Still, it recently gained momentum after a symbolic public handshake and meeting between the two presidents at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in November 2022. This chapter aims to understand the reasons and dynamics of the normalisation between Egypt and Türkiye. To that end, it will first set the context of the rivalry that emerged after 2013 and discuss its bilateral and regional dimensions. Then the stages of normalisation will be elaborated, and the reasons will be discussed. Finally, the opportunities and challenges for both countries in the normalisation process will be examined.

The Emergence of Türkiye-Egypt Rivalry

Policy towards Egypt constituted one of the most critical elements of AKP's foreign policy in the post-Arab uprisings era. For ideological and strategic reasons, the AKP government welcomed the post-Mubarak transition and the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi as Egypt's

new president. As a result, the AKP extended its political and financial support to the new regime in Egypt.¹ Therefore, the removal of Morsi from power in 2013 and his conviction later created immense frustration in then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government. Moreover, the occurrence of these developments in Egypt at a time when the AKP government was facing its most significant and longest protest movement, called the Gezi protests, made the toppling of Morsi a domestic issue for Erdoğan. In rallies in different cities, he began to link the Gezi protests to the overthrow of the Morsi government. He adopted the Rabaa sign² referencing the events in the Rabaa al-Adawiya square in Cairo, where supporters of Morsi were fiercely attacked. Overall, on every occasion, nationally and internationally, Erdoğan continued to be an ardent critique of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Such a fierce attack led to a reaction from Egypt, where the al-Sisi government accused Türkiye of intervening in its domestic affairs. The escalating war of words led to the downgrading of diplomatic relations in 2013.

To make matters worse for Egypt, after the toppling of Morsi, the AKP government welcomed the leadership and members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which was designated as a “terrorist organisation” by Egypt and later also by several Gulf states. The Muslim Brotherhood established the Egyptian Revolutionary Council as an anti-regime platform and operated TV channels to propagate discontent against the Egyptian regime from Istanbul.³ Türkiye’s active support for leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood led to a further deterioration of relations, and the escalation continued when Egypt detained 29 people

¹ M. B. Altunışık, “Türkiye as an ‘Emerging Donor’ and the Arab Uprisings”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, pp. 333-50.

² The four-finger Rabaa (Rabia in Turkish) sign was used as a salute in support of ousted President Morsi.

³ S. Magued, “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s transnational advocacy in Türkiye: a new means of political participation”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, pp. 480-97.

on suspicion of spying for Türkiye.⁴ Yet, President Erdoğan did not change his attitude for a long time: In March 2015, when asked whether he would meet with the Egyptian president during his visit to Riyadh, he said, “You must be joking... For such a thing to happen, very serious steps in a positive direction must be taken”.⁵

Soon, bilateral problems between the two countries led to rivalry on a regional scale, particularly in the Libyan conflict and the Eastern Mediterranean, which also became interlinked. In Libya, the two countries supported opposite sides in the civil war that broke out after the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi. While Türkiye supported the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) formed as an interim government and backed by the United Nations (UN), Egypt supported the opposing faction, the self-styled Libyan National Army, based in the eastern part of the country and led by Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. Both countries provided diplomatic, political and military support to the actors in Libya, together with several other regional and extra-regional countries.

A second regional issue where Türkiye and Egypt have been on opposite sides is the Eastern Mediterranean crisis. Since the mid-2000s, the exploration and discovery of natural gas in the offshore fields of several Eastern Mediterranean countries has added to the complexity of geopolitics in the region. The competition eventually created two poles: Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt at one end and Türkiye at the other. Türkiye was also excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which was formed in January 2019 on an Egyptian initiative, and included energy ministers from Italy, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Republic of Cyprus and the Palestinian Authority, with support from the US, with the aim of creating a regional gas market. One of Türkiye’s responses to these developments, which it perceived

⁴ “Egypt detains 29 people on suspicion of espionage for Türkiye”, *Reuters*, 22 November 2017.

⁵ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’dan Sisi sorusuna sert yanıt” (“Harsh response from President Erdoğan to Sisi question”), *Hürriyet*, 1 March 2015.

was limiting its rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, was to sign a maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli-based GNA in Libya on 27 November 2019.⁶ This agreement, which defined the western maritime delimitation of Türkiye, aimed to override Greek claims to full maritime rights for its islands, and thus increased not only Türkiye's but also Libya's continental shelf rights. It also gave more continental shelf rights to Egypt than the agreement Egypt signed in 2003 with the Republic of Cyprus. Following the signing of the maritime delimitation agreement, upon the request of the GNA, the Turkish parliament also approved a bill allowing the deployment of troops to Libya with 325 votes in favour and 184 against.⁷ Thus, with these regional developments, the Libyan conflict and geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Eastern Mediterranean became interlinked, and Türkiye-Egypt bilateral rivalry became interlocked with this complex web of competition.

In addition, Egypt and Türkiye stood on different sides of the Qatar crisis of 2017. When Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt imposed an economic blockade on Qatar, accusing Doha of ties with the Muslim Brotherhood parties, Iran and Türkiye's AKP government stood by Qatar during the crisis. Finally, Cairo watched with concern Ankara's growing ties with countries in the Horn of Africa. Of particular interest to Cairo were Türkiye's growing ties with Ethiopia, a country with which Egypt was locked in crisis over use of the waters of the Nile River. Türkiye not only developed its economic relations with Ethiopia,⁸ but in 2021, the two countries also signed a military cooperation agreement.⁹

⁶ Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Republic of Türkiye and the Government of National Accord-State of Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean

⁷ "Turkish parliament approves motion on sending troops to Libya", *davaR.english*, 2 January 2020.

⁸ Nearly 200 Turkish companies, with a total investment of over US\$2 billion, became the largest employer by employing more than 20,000 Ethiopians. See Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye "Relations between Türkiye and Ethiopia".

⁹ "Ethiopia: Why Ethiopia is strengthening ties with Türkiye", *AllAfrica*, 21 August 2021.

Despite the intensification of rivalry in bilateral and regional relations, however, during this period, Egypt and Türkiye were largely able to compartmentalise their relationship and continue developing their economic ties. The Free Trade Agreement, which was first signed in 2005 and came into force in 2007, survived the tumultuous political relations. The volume of trade did not experience a drop, except in 2017 (see Figure 3.1) when Egypt decided to end Ro-Ro services from Mersin to Alexandria for security reasons. More significantly, investments also continued. Recently, Rifat Hisarcıklıoğlu, the chair of The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye, said, “As investors from Türkiye, we have never stopped our investments in Egypt”.¹⁰ As a result, Turkish companies invested over two billion dollars in Egypt, employing around 75,000 Egyptian citizens, while Turkish contractors completed 26 projects in Egypt worth US\$900 million.¹¹

However, looking at the increase in trade and an upsurge of investments in the last two years after the beginning of normalisation,¹² it is safe to argue that the rise in the previous years might have been even greater if there had been no political rivalry. Today Egypt is Türkiye’s largest trading partner in Africa. The volume of trade increased from US\$5.4 billion in 2019 to US\$7.1 billion in 2022, an increase of about 31%. Even more significant, the increase was 35% in 2021 compared to 2020 (see table). Similarly, in 2021 alone, Turkish companies invested an additional US\$250 million in Egypt.¹³ Recently, a major electrical appliance company in Türkiye announced that it is planning to build a factory in Egypt with an annual production capacity of 1.5 million electronic appliances, for an investment of US\$100 million. According to Egyptian Minister

¹⁰ The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye, “Turkey, Egypt business worlds call for development of mutual investments”, 21 January 2022.

¹¹ Ibid.

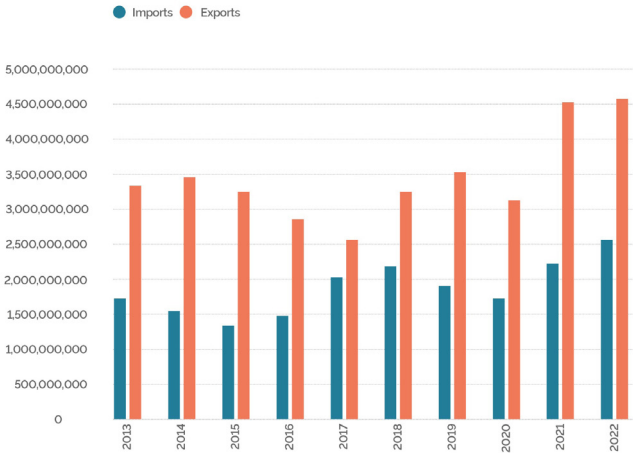
¹² “Mısır’a doğrudan yatırımlar hızlandı” (“Direct investments in Egypt accelerates”), *Ekonomist*, 21 April 2023.

¹³ The Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (2022).

of Trade and Industry, Ahmad Samir, this plant could employ approximately 2,000 Egyptians.¹⁴

Thus, though the two countries were able to compartmentalise their relations so that economic ties continued during the intense political rivalry, it is clear that earlier diplomatic normalisation would have created greater economic opportunities. Such a normalisation, however, required shifting domestic and regional contexts to push the two countries to reconsider their positions and relations.

FIG. 3.1 - TÜRKİYE'S TRADE WITH EGYPT 2013-2022 (BILLION US\$)



ISPI

Source: Compiled by the author from Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) data

¹⁴ “Türk firmasından Mısır’a 100 milyon dolarlık yatırım” (“Turkish company invests 100 million dollars in Egypt”), *Anadolu Agency*, 17 November 2022.

Normalisation of Relations

The recent sudden normalisation is puzzling, considering the extent of the tensions between the two countries. As with any major foreign policy shift, it has several reasons. From Türkiye's perspective, a reset in relations with Egypt is part of a larger normalisation effort Ankara has engaged in recently with other states in the region. Some general reasons must therefore exist to move away from assertive and conflictual relations from the AKP government's point of view. One of the main reasons is that such policies have become largely unsustainable economically and politically for Ankara as new challenges have emerged to AKP rule. The economic crisis in 2018 intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing global crisis. Inflation has been increasing and reached more than 80% in 2022,¹⁵ while the Turkish lira has lost value against the US dollar by 44 % in 2021 and a further 30% in 2022.¹⁶ In addition to the economic crisis, the presence of almost four million Syrian refugees in Türkiye and AKP's general liberal migration policy has increasingly become a point of criticism of the AKP. Overall, the opposition parties have increasingly made AKP's foreign policy choices in recent years a target of their criticisms, pointing to the AKP's support for Muslim Brotherhood parties throughout the Middle East and Türkiye's increasing isolation, and accusing the AKP of disregarding Türkiye's national interest through such policies. Faced with declining approval ratings, the AKP began to utilise foreign policy again. The economic crisis has made militaristic and confrontational foreign policy unsustainable and led the government to focus on foreign policy areas it determined as vital rather than expanding the fronts of struggle. The fact that Türkiye's policies led to the emergence of a balancing bloc that unified rivals in different issue areas, thus isolating Türkiye, led to a strategy to end that

¹⁵ Trading Economics, *Turkey Inflation Rate*, 2022.

¹⁶ "Turkish lira falls to record low near 19 to the dollar", *Reuters*, 9 March 2023.

isolation. Domestic political concerns therefore convinced the AKP to introduce changes to its confrontational foreign policy on all fronts before the crucial presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, from which it ultimately emerged as the winner.

In addition to Türkiye's domestic politics, general regional developments have led all countries in the region to shift from rivalrous regional politics to healthier levels of competition. The perception of declining US power in the region created a sense of empowerment among regional countries to increase their room for manoeuvre. Such perceptions have unleashed a series of normalisations, with a snowballing effect. All regional countries began to readjust their positions and exploit the possibilities of newly converging interests. Türkiye and Egypt could not have remained aloof to the dynamics of this "era of normalisation".

There were also specific reasons for normalisation between Türkiye and Egypt. The impetus for this shift came from the particular interests of Ankara and Cairo. For Türkiye, normalisation with Egypt could open up possibilities of finding mutually advantageous positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is seen as a territorial sovereignty issue in Ankara and is thus high on its security agenda. In fact, Türkiye has all along argued that the maritime delimitation agreement signed with the GNA in November 2019 was more advantageous for Egypt. Thus, when it became clear that Egypt considered Türkiye's maritime claims in its delimitation agreement with Greece signed in August 2020, Ankara perceived this as a goodwill gesture.¹⁷

On the other hand, there were several reasons for Egypt to seek better relations with Türkiye. For one, normalisation with Türkiye raised the possibility for Egypt to end Türkiye's support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation

¹⁷ "Bakan Çavuşoğlu'ndan Mısır ile normalleşme açıklaması" ("Minister Çavuşoğlu's statement on normalisation with Egypt"), *Habertürk*, 20 March 2023.

regarded as a regime security issue by the al-Sisi government. In addition, Cairo must have considered changing Arab dynamics and Türkiye's normalisation, especially with the UAE and Israel, in the context of its concerns about marginalisation after the Abraham Accords.

A critical reason has been the shifting context in Libya, with the failure of the forces of General Khalifa Haftar (supported by Egypt) to topple the UN-recognised government in Tripoli (supported by Türkiye). A changing balance of power on the ground, the GNA's success against Haftar's forces and the hastening of the process for a political solution with UN mediation and several rounds of talks, led Cairo to adjust its policy.¹⁸ The shift in Egyptian policy in Libya became apparent in 2020. Therefore, this new turn of events in Libya also allowed Türkiye and Egypt to normalise. Both Cairo and Ankara, focusing on their shared interest in unity and stability in Libya, began to support the UN-led process, re-launched in late 2020, to find a political solution and form a new unity government. Overall, the governments in both countries have moved away from ideological foreign policy to a more pragmatic approach,¹⁹ focusing on their short-term interests and responding to changing geopolitical context.

As a result, the two countries have embarked on a path to normalisation. There have been two rounds of "exploratory talks" between diplomats at deputy foreign minister level, first in Cairo in May, then in Ankara in September 2021. The two sides have agreed to continue the diplomatic process and that bilateral relations should be improved. It was reported that Cairo

¹⁸ K. Al-Anani, "Egypt's Changing Policy in Libya", Arab Center, Washington DC, 21 January 2021.

¹⁹ For the rise of pragmatism in Türkiye's recent foreign policy see M. B. Altunışık, "Domestic Sources of AKP Foreign Policy: Between Ideology and Pragmatism" in B. Özkececi-Taner and S. Açıkmüşe (eds.), *One Hundred Years of Turkish Foreign Policy (1923-2023): Historical and Theoretical Reflections*, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming on 23 September 2023. For the recent rise of pragmatism in Egypt see M. W. Hanna, "What Egypt wants in Sudan", Podcast: *The Horn*, 22 June 2023.

asked Ankara to stop granting Turkish nationality to Egyptians living in Türkiye and allowing Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members to continue freely broadcasting from Türkiye. These meetings resulted in Türkiye's first warning and the closing of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media outlets. Ankara's request for Egyptian media to tone down its criticism of Türkiye and President Erdoğan has also been accepted. Yet initially, Türkiye-Egypt normalisation developed slowly compared with other regional processes.²⁰

However, recently, normalisation has picked up pace. A significant step forward was the November 2022 meeting between Presidents Erdoğan and al-Sisi at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. It eliminated a significant hurdle as the rivalry from the beginning had a personal angle. This positive indication provided the sides with mutual legitimacy, which paved the way for additional meetings between officials. After personally trying to delegitimise the al-Sisi administration both domestically and internationally, President Erdoğan explained his handshake with him to journalists on his way from Qatar:

The past togetherness of the Turkish nation and the Egyptian people is very important to us. Why not again? In our meeting with Mr Sisi, I told him that our relations with the Egyptian people are different; the history is there. We had a problem in the last period, in a period of nine years. That evening, especially with the intervention of the Emir of Qatar, we took this step. After overcoming that problem, we had a narrow meeting with Mr Sisi for about half an hour and 45 minutes... Now the process has started, a process will continue with our ministers.²¹

According to the 2022 report identifying Türkiye's trends on different issues based on annual surveys, Erdoğan has been,

²⁰ M. B. Altunışık, "Türkiye and Egypt: the challenges of normalisation", ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 24 March 2022.

²¹ "Erdoğan'dan Mısır ve Suriye Mesajı: Siyasette küslük olmaz" ("Erdoğan's message on Syria and Egypt: No bad blood in politics"), *Cumhuriyet*, 27 November 2022.

to some extent, successful in convincing his constituency of the merit of the government's normalisation policies. It seems that the AKP voters' support for normalisation with Egypt increased from 19.2% in 2019 to 32.4% in 2022, the highest level for any country with which Türkiye began to normalise its relations. However, those who opposed normalisation were more numerous in the case of Egypt as well.²² Another result, on the other hand, showed that among all the political parties in Türkiye, the voters of the main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), are the most supportive of normalisation with Egypt.²³

Recently, earthquake diplomacy has created another positive momentum. Following the devastating earthquake in Türkiye in February 2023, President al-Sisi called President Erdoğan.²⁴ Egypt then became one of the countries that provided humanitarian aid to Türkiye, sending a ship and two helicopters.²⁵ Egypt's Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukri, paid a visit to Türkiye, where he had a tour of earthquake-stricken areas with Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu. After the meeting, both ministers spoke about the importance of progressing in bilateral ties and restarting exploratory talks. All these developments paved the way for reciprocal visits by the two foreign ministers in the following weeks. In March 2023, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu held talks with his Egyptian counterpart, Shoukry, in Cairo, and a reciprocal meeting was held in Ankara in April 2023.

²² M. Aydın et al., *Turkey Trends -2021 Quantitative Research Report*, İstanbul, Global Academy and Akademetre, 2023, p. 90.

²³ M. Aydın et al., *Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy – 2022 Quantitative Research Report*, İstanbul, Kadir Has University Turkish Studies Group, Global Academy, Akademetre, 8 September 2022, p. 149.

²⁴ “Mısır Cumhurbaşkanı Sisi'den Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'a telefon” (“Egyptian President Sisi calls President Erdoğan”), *NTV*, 7 February 2023.

²⁵ “Egypt sends additional humanitarian aid to quake victims in Türkiye”, *Anadolu Agency*, 23 February 2023.

Charting the Way Ahead: Opportunities and Challenges

Although Egypt-Türkiye normalisation had a slow start, it has picked up pace since the handshake between the two presidents in November 2022. The mutual appointment of ambassadors did not happen immediately, although both sides appointed an ambassador to the position of chargé d'affaires. Even then, the three meetings in the months following the earthquake between the two foreign ministers already attest to the eagerness on both sides to achieve progress. It was clear that the Egyptian side waited for the result of the elections in Türkiye. After that, the long-awaited upgrading of diplomatic relations occurred in July 2023.²⁶

Especially in the fields of economy, transport and energy, the two countries have already come up with an impressive list of areas of cooperation that would deepen existing ties. Overall, increasing trade and investment, including joint investments, are on the two countries' agenda.²⁷

In the field of energy cooperation, natural gas is an area that Türkiye is particularly interested in. For Ankara, trying to diversify its natural gas imports, especially after the war in Ukraine, Egypt has already become the number two provider, after the US, of spot LNG imports to Türkiye.²⁸ During his joint press conference with his Egyptian counterpart in their last meeting, the former Foreign Minister of Türkiye, Çavuşoğlu, stated that Türkiye now wants “to buy directly from our energy companies, BOTAŞ and the Egyptian company, not from the

²⁶ “Kahire ile yeni dönem: Mısır’a büyükelçi atanıyor” (“New Era with Cairo: Ambassador appointed to Egypt”), *TRTHaber*, 4 July 2023.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Türkiye, “Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu’nun Mısır Dışişleri Bakanı Sameh Shoukry ile yaptığı Ortak Basın Toplantısı in Ankara” (“Joint Press Conference by Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt Sameh Shoukry in Ankara”), 13 April 2023.

²⁸ Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK), *Turkish Gas Market Report 2021*, Ankara, 2022, p. 21.

spot market anymore”.²⁹ The issue of selling Egyptian LNG to European markets through LNG terminals in Türkiye also came to the agenda.³⁰ In addition, possibilities for diversifying energy cooperation, particularly in the field of nuclear and renewable energy, were discussed. Türkiye is also pushing for the restart of Mersin-Alexandria Ro-Ro services, which operated until 2017 and were then stopped by Egypt for security reasons, as they required Turkish trucks to travel within Egypt to Red Sea ports from where the cargo was transferred to the Gulf. However, this transport link is important for Türkiye to reach the Gulf, especially after the loss of the Syrian route.³¹

The two countries are also committed to encouraging tourism. Already the number of tourists from Egypt to Türkiye broke a record last year, with the number reaching 227,000.³² Çavuşoğlu explained that Turkish Airlines now has 50 flights a week to Egypt and has requested 12 additional flights.³³ In May 2023, Egypt restarted issuing visas at the border for visitors from Türkiye, a practice it abandoned after problems began in bilateral relations.³⁴ The AKP government has also asked to re-open some of its media outlets in Egypt, such as the state news agency (Anadolu Agency) and state TV (TRT), as well as Türkiye’s cultural centre, the Yunus Emre Institute, which has recently restarted its activities in Cairo but not yet in Alexandria.³⁵ Thus, bilateral relations picked up momentum in the last year, and the two countries expressed interest in developing them further in three meetings between their foreign ministers.

²⁹ “Bakan Çavuşoğlu’ndan Mısır ile normalleşme açıklaması” (“Minister Çavuşoğlu’s statement on normalisation with Egypt”), *Habertürk*, 20 March 2023.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Türkiye (2023).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Mısır’a seyahatlerde yeni dönem başladı” (“New era of travel to Egypt begins”), *Dünya*, 2 May 2023.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Türkiye (2023).

In recent years, Egypt-Türkiye relations have acquired an important regional political dimension. Thus, progress in normalisation is highly dependent on the two countries resolving their differences in regional issues or at least coming to the point of discussing them. There seems to be some effort to do so. Çavuşoğlu, for instance, stated that Türkiye could offer its good offices for Egypt's water conflict with Ethiopia: "Egypt has water issues with Ethiopia, we have water issues with neighbouring countries, such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria. We have experience in these issues. We said that we can provide the necessary support if they need help, especially in mediation".³⁶ Egypt also raised the issue of its concerns about the future of Syria and Türkiye's military presence there. This issue is one part of the current normalisation efforts between Syria and Türkiye that has not yet produced concrete results.

However, the most important regional issue, with a direct bearing on Egypt-Türkiye normalisation, is Libya. Opposing positions towards developments in this country have been a sticking point, and this issue was one of the main reasons preventing more rapid normalisation. Even once the normalisation process was advancing, at the end of 2022, Türkiye blamed Egypt for halting normalisation over Türkiye's new energy deal with Libya,³⁷ while Egypt blamed Türkiye for its continuing military presence.³⁸ Thus, the crisis in Libya constitutes the crux of bilateral relations as developments in this country are deemed strategically crucial by both sides. However, the shift in the two countries' positions in Libya have contributed to dampening their rivalry. Egypt has realised the limitations of its policy of supporting Haftar and his forces due to a changing military and diplomatic context. Cairo has therefore started to reach out to the GNA. Türkiye, on the other

³⁶ "Bakan Çavuşoğlu'ndan Mısır ile normalleşme açıklaması", cit.

³⁷ "Türkiye blames Egypt for halting normalisation over Libya energy deal", *Middle East Eye*, 2 November 2022.

³⁸ "Egypt halts dialogue with Türkiye over Libya policies, says foreign minister", *The Libya Update*, 29 October 2022.

hand, has realised the importance of reaching out to actors in the east in order to transition to a more stable Libya.

Therefore, the two countries recently intensified their dialogue on Libya and at least agreed on a common goal of stability in that country. Cavuşoğlu stated, “We agree that we are not rivals in Libya and should work together for the stability of Libya. We will increase our consultations on this issue”.³⁹ Yet there are still serious divergences. Egypt is not happy with Türkiye’s military presence in its neighbour.⁴⁰ For Türkiye, its engagement in Libya is for the long-term as it has already invested militarily, politically and economically in the future of that country, and its presence there is linked with its vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, although Libya is a big challenge for both countries, it also offers opportunities. Both countries share a general interest in ensuring Libya’s unity and stability – although there are differences in the specific actions each country is taking – and they need to find more areas of common interest to achieve this goal. Egypt and Türkiye have already reached out to the other side in the Libyan domestic competition. While Egypt has been trying to normalise its relations with the Tripoli government, Türkiye has reached out to Aguila Saleh, the head of the House of Representatives in eastern Libya. This development makes it easier for the two countries to work together to resolve the problems in the political process in Libya. Türkiye, for its part, expects Egypt to be more cooperative on Eastern Mediterranean issues related to energy and maritime delimitation, including Türkiye’s interests there. The fading possibility of realising the EastMed pipeline project, mainly due to feasibility concerns, has helped to relax tensions in the region somewhat. Yet, the issue also has other complex dimensions due to Egypt’s relations with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, which have linked Egypt-Türkiye relations to Türkiye’s long-term disputes with

³⁹ “Bakan Cavuşoğlu’ndan Mısır ile normalleşme açıklaması”..., cit.

⁴⁰ “Will there be a new dawn in Türkiye-Egypt relations?”, *The New Arab*, 30 March 2023.

Greece over the Aegean Sea and the Cyprus issue. However, the recent normalisation between Greece and Türkiye as part of earthquake diplomacy also raises possibilities of relaxing the zero-sum nature of the relationship.

Conclusion

Egypt and Türkiye have come a long way in their bilateral relations. Due to changes in the regional context and domestic considerations, the two sides began shifting their policies from zero-sum to normalisation. Normalisation already represents a significant foreign policy change for the two countries. However, diverging perspectives and conflicts remain in certain areas. Increasingly, these areas are more related to regional issues rather than bilateral ones. This makes the situation more complex as these regional issues and their trajectories are not just dependent on the policies of Egypt and Türkiye per se, but represent complex multi-actor regional and global dynamics. Yet, over the years, the two countries have demonstrated their ability to compartmentalise especially political and economic relations. More importantly, in the last two years, they have also shown their ability and willingness to start a dialogue even on topics of significant interest. The challenge now is to continue the dialogue and maybe to further compartmentalise their relations, even in cases like Libya, where significant security interests are involved, by focusing on the things they agree on. It remains to be seen whether they are up to this challenge.

4. Türkiye's Libya Policy on Shifting Sands

Evrım Görmuş

Disputes over maritime borders have created a tense situation between Türkiye and its Mediterranean neighbours due to shifting power dynamics between coastal states over the last few years. As a non-signatory to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Türkiye does not recognise the jurisdiction of coastal states over twelve nautical miles of territorial waters, or their rights to establish Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of 200 nautical miles from their coastlines. Türkiye also denies that the Greek islands are entitled to an exclusive economic zone outside their territorial waters, and that the Republic of Cyprus has the right to exploit energy resources without the consent of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

While the conflict has long been a regional affair, stemming mainly from the impasse over Cyprus, a number of developments in recent years have transformed it into a multifaceted confrontation involving the EU and other external powers. Most notably, in November 2019, the European Council agreed on a set of sanctions to be imposed on Turkish natural and legal persons involved in illegal exploration activities undertaken by Turkish research ships in the Republic of Cyprus' internationally recognised EEZ. Then, in June 2020, the foreign ministers of the MED7 countries (Cyprus, Greece, France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) issued a joint declaration expressing their unreserved support for Greece and the Republic of Cyprus against Türkiye, and calling on "all countries of the region to

respect international law, including the law of the sea, and in particular the sovereignty and sovereign rights of EU member states”.¹ A few months later, in September 2020, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority formally established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) to ensure the efficient production and marketing of offshore gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye viewed the forum as an anti-Ankara bloc, calling it an “alliance of malice”. It was within this context that Türkiye’s involvement in the Libyan conflict began to take on a clear shape.

Türkiye’s Increasing Engagement in Libya

Legal disputes over maritime borders and the subsequent increasing isolation of Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean led the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to overtly engage in the Libyan conflict, aligning itself with Libya’s UN-recognised, Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Libya has been in turmoil since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi more than a decade ago, wracked by civil war between rival factions competing for power. Given Libya’s historical ties with Türkiye dating back to the Ottoman Empire as well as the country’s strategic importance in Ankara’s foreign policy calculations regarding Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye joined the international intervention that toppled Gaddafi in 2011 and sought to shape the outcome in Libya. After the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, Türkiye continued to have a certain degree of stake in Libyan domestic affairs, in which Ankara developed a “friendly but largely passive” relationship with the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party, the Justice and Construction Party.²

¹ “Med7 Calls on Turkey to Respect Law of the Sea”, *Ekatimerini.com*, 4 June 2022.

² A. Lund, *Turkey’s Intervention in Libya*, The Swedish Defence Research Agency,

Following the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement and the formation a government of national unity, the GNA in 2015, Türkiye supported the UN-led political process in Libya. However, the agreement did not bring a halt to the fighting, and the country was divided into areas controlled by the UN-recognised GNA in Tripoli, and the Libyan National Army (LNA) with a House of Representatives in Tobruk.

With substantial financial and military support coming from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Russia, the LNA managed to take control of oil-rich central Libya, especially the critical Jufra-Sirte line, and advance on the capital, Tripoli.³ When Haftar's forces marched on Tripoli in April 2019, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan quickly expressed his support for the GNA against what he called a "conspiracy".⁴ Afterwards, Türkiye covertly started supplying armoured personnel carriers and drones to the GNA.⁵ It was not until November 2019 that Türkiye became overtly involved in the Libyan conflict, signing two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Tripoli on security and maritime affairs. Ankara signed a defence cooperation memorandum with the GNA in its fight against General Khalifa Haftar's LNA, pledging the delivery of armoured vehicles and drones as well as the deployment of mercenaries to Libya.⁶ Ankara further signed a maritime agreement with the GNA to open a maritime corridor between southwestern Türkiye and northeastern Libya in response to the creation of the "anti-Türkiye bloc" and the

FOI, April 2022.

³ S. Kardaş, "Turkey's Libya Policy: Militarization of Regional Policies and Escalation Dominance", *China Int Strategy Review*, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 325-36.

⁴ Lund (2022).

⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), "[Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters](#)", Report no. 257, Europe & Central Asia, 30 April 2020, p. 3.

⁶ MoU Security and Military Cooperation, "The Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord - State of Libya on Security and Military Cooperation", Istanbul, 27 November 2019.

country's increasing isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷

The Türkiye-Libya Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement, which delineated an 18.6 nautical mile (35km) maritime boundary between Türkiye and Libya, allowed for the bilateral creation of an EEZ by excluding major Greek islands such as Crete.⁸ The maritime demarcation agreement, while adding another layer of complexity to the Libyan conflict and directly linking Libya to the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, represents a major strategic success for Türkiye.⁹ Through the maritime deal, Türkiye's legal arguments have been recognised by one of the coastal states for the first time since Türkiye raised its position on the delimitation of maritime borders in the Mediterranean in 2003.¹⁰ The maritime boundary deal has therefore been conducive to breaking Türkiye's isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Türkiye-Libya Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement has been a source of great concern to the LNA and its regional supporters. Along with interfering with the Cypriot, Egyptian and Greek EEZs, the Turkish-Libyan maritime agreement has also blocked the route of the Eastern

⁷ Türkiye had already been in contact with Gaddafi about a maritime demarcation deal in 2010, but negotiations were suspended due to the unrest in Libya. See ICG (2020).

⁸ MoU Maritime Delimitation "The Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of National Accord - State of Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean", cit.

⁹ M. Eljarh, "Escalating Complexity in Libya's Ongoing Conflict", in M. Tanchum (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), 2021, p. 44.

¹⁰ Article 4 of the Türkiye-Libya Maritime Boundary Delimitation Agreement states that "if either of the two parties is engaged in negotiations aimed at the delimitation of its Exclusive Economic Zone with another state, that party, before reaching a final agreement with the other state, shall notify and consult the other party". See M. Özşahin, and C. Çakmak, "Between Defeating 'the Warlord' and Defending 'the Blue Homeland': A discourse of Legitimacy and Security in Turkey's Libya Policy", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 13, 2022, pp. 1-24.

Mediterranean Gas Pipeline intended to export Israeli, Egyptian and Cypriot gas to European markets. The deal has further caused unease in the EU and triggered a new wave of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly between Türkiye and Greece. Josep Borrell, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, reaffirmed the EU's strong stance of "solidarity" with Cyprus and Greece in the wake of Türkiye's activism in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹¹ France has positioned itself as the most vocal European power in support of the Greek-Cypriot position, deploying the nuclear aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹² In an immediate reaction to the MoU, Greece expelled the Libyan Ambassador to Athens, Mohamed al-Menfi, on 6 December 2019. Greece has further strengthened its ties with Italy and Egypt in its quest to demarcate its own EEZ, seeking to circumvent the boundaries agreed between Ankara and the government in Tripoli.¹³ Following the signing of the Greek-Egyptian EEZ Agreement, Türkiye issued a series of NAVTEX orders for natural gas exploration activities in the disputed waters around the island of Kastellorizo, named Meis in Turkish. In return, Greece also issued a NAVTEX and claimed that the Turkish NAVTEX remained invalid, escalating the tension to a climax in the summer of 2020.¹⁴

Since then, each rival bloc has hardened its geopolitical calculations, turning Libya into a major battlefield between competing powers in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, there is an important caveat to be considered here: Melcangi and Mezran caution that analysing the Libyan conflict

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² G. Dalay, "Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way out of the Current Deadlock", Brookings, 28 January 2021.

¹³ M. Mourad, "Egypt and Greece Sign Agreement on Exclusive Economic Zone", *Reuters*, 6 August 2020.

¹⁴ I.N. Grigoriadis, "The Eastern Mediterranean as an Emerging Crisis Zone: Greece and Cyprus in a Volatile Regional Environment", in M. Tanchum (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters...cit.*, pp. 25-30.

through the lens of a classic proxy war does not provide a true understanding of the dynamics on the ground, as it downplays the importance of the domestic agency. The authors add that “the ‘rentier nature’ of the Libyan state ensured that local actors could continue to extract what they wanted from central economic institutions, granting them the autonomy necessary to pursue their own objective”.¹⁵

Türkiye’s Reasons for Its Involvement in Libya

The AKP government has justified its close involvement with the GNA government in Libya and its wider confrontational stance in the Eastern Mediterranean with a strong emphasis on national security and the question of survival. The ruling party elites have attached great importance to claiming that confronting an alliance of hostile forces seeking to curb Türkiye’s clout in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East necessitates support of the Tripoli government. Although the official discourse of the Turkish government has explained its intervention in Libya as a balancing policy against the threat posed by its rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean, there are also a number of overlapping geopolitical, economic and ideological considerations at play in shaping the country’s policy towards Libya.

The long period of Ottoman rule in Libya allowed Türkiye to develop strong political and economic connections with the country. Türkiye’s shift towards an export-oriented economy turned Libya into an important country for Turkish businesses in their search for new markets abroad. Economic ties between the two countries grew considerably from the 1980s, with a large number of Turkish companies operating in the infrastructure and construction sectors in Libya under

¹⁵ A. Melcangi and K. Mezran, “Truly a Proxy War? Militias, Institutions and External Actors in Libya between Limited Statehood and Rentier State, *The International Spectator*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2022, pp.121-38.

the Gaddafi regime. Turkish companies are estimated to have signed US\$40 billion worth of construction contracts since 1972.¹⁶ When the 2011 uprising began, around 100 Turkish companies employing 25,000 workers were evacuated from the country.¹⁷ Construction contracts worth around US\$19 billion were left unfinished and unpaid, and the Turkish business lobby has put considerable pressure on the government to solve the problem of pre-2011 contracts with Libya.¹⁸ The Turkish Petroleum Corporation also invested over US\$180 million in Libya before the conflict, but its drilling investments have not been viable since 2011.¹⁹ The drive to compensate the losses of Turkish construction companies and to seize further economic opportunities offered by an oil-rich economy in the post-Gaddafi period have constituted major economic incentives driving Türkiye's involvement in Libya. With the announcement of Ankara's military deal to support the Tripoli government in 2019, the Independent Association of Industrialists and Businessmen (MÜSİAD) announced that it aimed to raise exports to Libya by over 500%, amounting to about US\$10 billion, against US\$1.49 billion in 2018.²⁰

In April 2020, a joint Turkish-Libyan working group was launched to settle the question of pre-2011 compensation for Turkish investors, and on 13 August 2020, Türkiye and the GNA finally signed an economic agreement to resolve remaining issues related to Turkish construction projects initiated during the Gaddafi era.²¹ The agreement, which is estimated to account for 20% of Libya's investment projects, also aimed to boost new Turkish investment and increase trade.²²

¹⁶ "Turkey's Strategic Play in Libya to Help Reap Economic Gains", *Deutsche Welle*, 3 July 2020.

¹⁷ Lund (2022), p. 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ ICG (2020), p. 23.

²⁰ "Turkey Seeks to Increase Exports to Libya", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2 January 2020.

²¹ Lund (2022), p. 48.

²² While many foreign countries had US\$100 billion worth of contracts in Libya during the Gaddafi era, only Türkiye has signed such a deal. ICG (2020), p. 13.

In 2019, Türkiye overtook the EU as the largest exporter to Libya after China, generating US\$1.53 billion in revenue for Türkiye.²³ By the end of 2021, Turkish companies operated in multiple strategic economic sectors in Libya, including cement factories, electricity generation and distribution, airports, trade and transport infrastructure.²⁴ According to Central Bank of Libya data, Türkiye became the top exporter to Libya with the amount of US\$2,8 billion in 2022.²⁵

Türkiye's involvement in Libya has been crucial to its broader ambitions to expand its spheres of influence not only in the Eastern Mediterranean but also in Africa, where Ankara has increasingly emerged as a significant player in recent years. Indeed, Libya has been seen as Türkiye's gateway to Africa. Africa policy gained momentum with the AKP's announcement of a "Year of Africa in Türkiye" in the early period of its rule in 2005. While Türkiye had only 12 embassies in Africa in 2002, the number of embassies increased to 44 by the year 2022.²⁶ A month after Türkiye's intervention in Libya, Erdoğan visited Algeria, Senegal and Gambia. During his visit, Erdoğan declared that "Algeria is one of Türkiye's most important gateways to the Maghreb and Africa"; Türkiye had already invested US\$3.5 billion in Algeria, ranking it among the country's largest foreign investors.²⁷

Türkiye's defence and aerospace exports to Africa also amounted to US\$460.6 million in 2021, in contrast to US\$82.981 million the previous year, according to the Turkish Exporters Assembly.²⁸ 30 African states have concluded

²³ M. Tanchum, "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente", *The Turkey Analyst*, 25 August 2020.

²⁴ Lund (2022), p. 48.

²⁵ Data from Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK).

²⁶ Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Türkiye-Africa relations".

²⁷ M. Tanchum, "Turkey Advances in Africa against Franco-Emirati-Egyptian Entente", cit.

²⁸ N.T. Yaşar, "Unpacking Turkey's Security Footprint in Africa: Trends and Implications for the European Union", SWP Comment 2022/C 42, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 30 June 2022.

various security agreements with Türkiye. The full range of state institutions involved in these agreements, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior (police, gendarmerie and coastguard) and the Presidency of the Defence Industry (SSB), has developed a wide scope for cooperation with their African counterparts.²⁹ Türkiye, backed by Qatar, its main regional partner over the past decade, has challenged the power of the Egyptian-Saudi-UAE alliance by building coastal military installations in Sudan on the Red Sea and in Somalia on the Arabian Sea.

Türkiye has justified its involvement in Libya through multiple discourses aimed at different audiences. In addressing international audiences, the AKP government has emphasised Türkiye's adherence to international norms and the legitimacy of the GNA government, referring to the UN Security Council resolution 2259. Domestically, however, the government has heavily relied on the "Blue Homeland" concept to garner support for its engagement in Libya in a highly polarised political environment.³⁰ Introduced by Cem Gürdeniz, a retired admiral, the Blue Homeland doctrine is based on the vision of a greater maritime prominence for Türkiye and the restoration of maritime hegemony in Türkiye's close neighbourhood in the Mediterranean, Aegean and Black Sea as well as in the wider area of the Red, Caspian and Arabian Seas and the Persian Gulf.³¹ In the Eastern Mediterranean, the Blue Homeland doctrine envisages the allocation to Türkiye of substantial areas of the maritime zones of Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, in stark contrast to UNCLOS. Though long marginal in policy circles, Türkiye's recent nationalist and anti-Western twist has made the Blue Homeland doctrine more mainstream, attracting more support among Ankara's governing

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Özşahin, and Çakmak (2022).

³¹ J. Mens, "Blue Homelands and Red Strongholds: The Libyan Civil War in Turkish and Russian Strategy", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2022, p. 376.

elites following the failed 2016 coup attempt.³² According to Gürdeniz, the Republic of Cyprus's claim to an EEZ amounts to an occupation of the Eastern Mediterranean, reminiscent of the Treaty of Sèvres that locked Türkiye into Anatolia. Echoing this, Erdoğan defined the Turkish-Libyan deal as a manoeuvre to reverse the effects of the same treaty. Ankara's involvement in Libya has therefore been lauded as a milestone in the creation of the Blue Homeland and expansion of Türkiye's hegemony over the seas beyond Anatolia.³³

However, the deployment of Turkish troops in Libya received little public support. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Istanbul Ekonomi Arastirma, 58% of Turkish people opposed sending soldiers to Libya.³⁴ Thus, Erdoğan sought to mobilise further nationalist sentiment to justify Türkiye's intervention in defence of the GNA through the exploitation of the Ottoman heritage in Libya.³⁵ Libya, ruled by the Ottomans from 1551 to 1912, is home to a population of Karaghila (Köroğlu or Kuloğlu in Turkish), descendants of XVI century Ottoman janissaries, who now live mostly in Misrata. In January 2020, in a speech to the AKP's parliamentary group meeting, Erdoğan was quoted as saying: "In Libya, there are Köroğlu Turks remaining from the Ottomans, whose number exceeds one million; they are descendants of Barbarossa and Dragut, and they are being subjected to ethnic cleansing. Haftar is bent on destroying them, too". Erdoğan has accordingly concluded that Türkiye's involvement in Libya is a moral obligation to "protect the grandchildren of our ancestors".³⁶

³² Dalay (2021).

³³ H. Taş, "The Formulation and Implementation of Populist Foreign Policy: Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 27, no. 5, 2022, pp. 563-87.

³⁴ E. Judd, "Erdoğan gains at home from Turkey involvement in Libya: Experts", *Al Arabiya News*, 25 June 2020.

³⁵ Taş (2022).

³⁶ ICG (2020), p. 3.

Changing Dynamics in the Aftermath of Türkiye's Intervention in Libya

Türkiye's intervention changed the trajectory of the Libyan civil war by June 2020 when Ankara-backed GNA units drove Haftar's forces back 450km eastwards to the city of Sirte. Türkiye transferred KORAL electronic warfare systems to Libya to neutralise the aircraft, drones and cruise missiles used by Haftar and his supporters.³⁷ As expected, Türkiye's incursions into Libya through its large military deployment, including the presence of its air force in al-Watayah and the construction of a naval base in Misrata, created a certain amount of unease in Cairo. Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi declared that "any military intervention in Libya would be a legitimate means of self-defence as Sirte is a red line for Egypt".³⁸ The imminent possibility of Egyptian military intervention, along with the presence of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor, halted the advance of the western Libyan forces. Despite supporting opposing sides, Russia and Türkiye have found a modus vivendi to deal with their ongoing rivalries in the wider region without upsetting bilateral relations. Both countries have further expressed their commitment to cooperate on the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

Through the united efforts of Germany, the United States and the United Nations, a ceasefire was reached on 21 August 2020, establishing a demilitarised buffer zone across the Sirte-Jufrah front line.³⁹ In November 2021, the United Nations Special Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) mediated the Libyan Political

³⁷ B. Daragahi, "Turkey Sends Troops and Electronic Warfare Tools to Libya", *The Independent*, 6 January 2020.

³⁸ A. Ghafar, "The Return of Egypt? Assessing Egyptian Foreign Policy under Sisi", The Middle East Council on Foreign Affairs Issue Brief, November 2022.

³⁹ M. Tanchum, "The Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: A Regional System Perspective on the Mediterranean's new Great Game", in Idem (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters...* cit., Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), 2021.

Dialogue Forum in Tunis, resulting in the election of the Abdelhamid Dbeibah Government of National Unity (GNU), which was tasked with holding simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections on 24 December 2021. Although the commitments to hold national elections on 24 December and to expel foreign military forces and mercenaries were renewed at the second Berlin Conference (June 2021), the elections scheduled for December 2021 were never held.

When the Saleh-led parliament appointed Fathi Bashagha as the new Prime Minister, Abdelhamid Dbeibah refused to relinquish power before elections, and the country was once again plagued by two governments. Bashagha, the GNA's former Interior Minister, was a figure associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Türkiye. In a surprise move, however, he reached a deal with General Haftar and Aguila Saleh, the speaker of the House of Representatives, to become Prime Minister of an interim government, claiming that Dbeibah's Tripoli-based government had ceased to exist since elections had not been held. Since neither figure was elected by Libyans, they can both be considered "the product of continuous deflection by corrupt politicians who do not wish to let go of their positions of power".⁴⁰

Dbeibah has had continual support from Türkiye and the Governor of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), Sadiq al-Kabir. The Central Bank's support has enabled Dbeibah to receive a substantial share of oil and gas revenues – amounting to around US\$36 billion in 2022.⁴¹ For Türkiye, maintaining the demarcation agreement has continued to remain a major concern in its Libya policy after the formation of the GNU in 2021. Dbeibah was immediately invited to Ankara where he publicly endorsed the boundary deal by saying that it is "based

⁴⁰ A. Khalifa "Why Elections Won't Happen in Libya", *Arab Reform Initiative*, 22 December 2022.

⁴¹ J. Harchaoui, "How Libya's Fault Lines were Redrawn", *War on the Rocks*, 24 February 2022.

on correct foundations and serves the interest of our country”.⁴² Dbeibah also acknowledged the Turkish companies’ crucial role in Libya’s reconstruction process.⁴³ The large-scale Turkish participation in the reconstruction of Libya is important to consolidate Türkiye’s presence in Libyan politics, “ensuring the continuation of Turkish leverage in Libya even after Turkish troops withdraw”.⁴⁴

When negotiations between the two governments for new elections failed to produce a viable outcome, the forces of Dbeibah and Bashagha launched an armed conflict in their struggle for ultimate power in 2022. Faced with Bashagha’s advance in the east and changing internal dynamics in Libya, Türkiye sought to open diplomatic relations with the Tobruk-based government, and Erdoğan hosted Salah in Ankara in August 2022. During the meeting, it was stressed that Türkiye sees Libya as an “inseparable whole”, and does not discriminate between regions.⁴⁵ However, Türkiye’s moves towards the Bashagha government do not involve a withdrawal of support for Dbeibah’s Tripoli-based government. Ankara’s support for the Tripoli government continues to remain an important leverage to secure economic concessions in eastern Libya.⁴⁶

In October 2022, Abdelhamid Dbeibah signed an energy agreement with Türkiye, allowing Turkish oil rigs and research ships to conduct joint exploratory activities for oil and natural gas in the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean that are contested with Greece and Egypt. This energy agreement immediately alarmed Greece and Egypt as well as the Libyan Parliament and its appointed Prime Minister Bashagha, who denounced the agreement by declaring that the signing of such a deal was only

⁴² Lund (2022), p. 44.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁴ Mens (2022), p. 380.

⁴⁵ F. Tastekin, “After Years of Hostility, Turkey Forges Ties With Eastern Libya”, *Al-Monitor*, 4 August 2022.

⁴⁶ M. Gurbuz, “Turkey Faces a Dilemma in its Foreign Policy Toward Libya”, Washington DC, Arab Center, 24 January 2023.

“the inherent right of an elected authority”.⁴⁷ In the same vein, the Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, after a meeting with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, strongly condemned the deal as illegal, saying that “Türkiye seeks once again to take advantage of the turbulent situation in Libya in order to further destabilise the Mediterranean region and establish regional hegemony. No one can ignore geography. No one can create a virtual world”.⁴⁸ The former Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanju Bilgiç responded to such criticisms by asserting that “any objection to an accord signed by two sovereign states is a violation of international law and the basic principles of the UN”.⁴⁹ A few months later, on 9 January 2023, a Libyan court suspended the controversial memorandum of understanding for the exploration of hydrocarbons signed between Türkiye and Libya’s Tripoli-based GNU in October 2022. While the court’s decision is not final, it has certainly added to the growing complexities of Türkiye’s Libya policy.

Conclusion

Türkiye’s military presence in Libya has contributed to enhancing its bargaining power in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundary dispute and has paved the way for its wider aspirations to create trans-Mediterranean commercial connectivity through central Maghreb.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Türkiye’s Libya policy seems to be in danger of reaching an impasse. As Gurbuz asserts, Ankara is caught in a foreign policy dilemma in Libya and has yet

⁴⁷ V. Nedos, “Ankara Ratchets Up Tension via Libya”, *Ekatimerini.com*, 4 October 2022.

⁴⁸ H. Hemdawi, “Egypt and Greece Condemn Deals Between Turkey and Libya’s Tripoli-based Government”, *The National News*, 9 October 2022.

⁴⁹ N. Ertan, “Turkey-Libya Energy Deal Clouds Waters in East Mediterranean”, *Al-Monitor*, 4 October 2022.

⁵⁰ M. Tanchum, “The Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis: A Regional System Perspective on the Mediterranean’s new Great Game”..., cit., p. 13.

to make a clear policy choice on how to proceed. While the creation of a unified Libyan government would be to Türkiye's advantage to protect its economic interests and secure its gains in the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye's exclusive dealings with the Tripoli government are at odds with its own calls for a diplomatic solution that unites Libya's two rival governments.⁵¹ Türkiye's recent diplomatic initiatives to resolve long-standing conflicts with Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also further limited its room for manoeuvre in Libya. Since the withdrawal of the Turkish military and pro-Turkish Syrian fighters from Libya is the precondition for Egypt to normalise its relations with Türkiye, finding a *modus vivendi* with Egypt continues to require Türkiye to limit its escalatory capabilities in Libya.

The continued use of foreign fighters and mercenaries by outside powers in Libya is a source of concern that remains unresolved. Even though the Second Berlin Conference on Libya, held in 2021, called for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya,⁵² the AKP government persists in claiming that Türkiye does not need to abide by the decisions of the Second Berlin Conference as Türkiye's military presence in Libya is based on a bilateral agreement with the legitimate government of Libya, and therefore does not represent an outlawed foreign intervention.⁵³

The results of the recent Turkish elections have secured President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan another term in office, raising concerns about the future direction of Turkish foreign policy towards Libya and beyond. Strengthened by his resounding election victory, Erdoğan is likely to reorient his regional policy towards Egypt and the UAE at an intensified pace to meet Türkiye's economic imperatives and geopolitical

⁵¹ Gurbuz (2023).

⁵² "The Second Berlin Conference on Libya", 23 June 2021, UNSMIL.

⁵³ B. Süsler, "Turkey's Involvement in the Libyan Conflict, the Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and Drone Warfare", LSE IDEAS Strategic Update, 24 August 2022.

stakes. To this end, Türkiye must certainly refrain from any intransigence in Libya that could be an obstacle to the progress of the reconciliation process. Hakan Fidan, who has been at the “backstage” of the rapprochement process with Türkiye’s old foes in the region, has been appointed Foreign Minister in the new government. Owing to his diplomatic savvy, Fidan is earmarked to maximise the potential of Türkiye’s diplomatic muscle in which Libya constitutes one of the cornerstones. At this early stage, it is reasonable to suggest that Türkiye’s Libya policy under Erdoğan’s new term is likely to be devoted to finding a delicate balance between maintaining continuity to secure previous gains and possible shifts to avoid serious confrontations with regional powers. It remains to be seen to what extent Türkiye will succeed in this daunting quest.

5. Türkiye's Swings in the Syrian Crisis: Paving the Way Forward

Güney Yıldız

Ankara's Syria policy is a game of high costs and higher risks, and on a track that Ankara is eager to change. After years of trying to topple Assad whatever the cost, the re-elected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is now striding forward with a firm goal in mind: a meeting with Syria's Bashar al-Assad as swiftly as possible. Yet, such a change is not as straightforward as it seems, for the price to pay carries weight in three distinct dimensions: domestic, regional, and international.

Deep-seated distrust, particularly from Assad towards Erdoğan, has the potential to obstruct any possible advancements. In his restructured cabinet, Erdoğan has enlisted Hakan Fidan as Foreign Minister. Fidan, previously head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), will now be instrumental in concluding potential agreements resulting from processes he initiated, including reconciliation with Syria. This move bridges the gap between intelligence-level negotiations and finalising agreements. Even during his tenure as the head of MIT, Fidan played a significant role in steering Türkiye's actions in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, among other foreign policy matters.

The contradiction in Türkiye's aspirations in Syria throws yet another spanner in the works. Ankara's desires swing like a pendulum: on one side seeking to revoke Kurdish gains and deny them collective political rights; on the other, wishing for some sort of autonomy for pro-Turkish groups, specifically the

Turkmens. It's a vision of two different, contradictory Syrias, both sought after by Türkiye.

The implications of Türkiye's policy on Syria are far-reaching and have a significant impact on regional stability, international relations, and the contentious refugee issue. Furthermore, the Syrian conflict has left an indelible mark on Türkiye's foreign policy, leaving it more militarised than before.

What unfolds in the coming months will shape the future of the region and beyond. This chapter aims to untangle the intricate web of this geopolitical scenario and to shed light on the past and present complexities of the Türkiye-Syria relationship and their potential future trajectories.

The Historical Dynamics of Türkiye-Syria Ties as Related to Current Events

The past is not a distant memory in the Middle East; it lives in the present, shaping the future. The historical dynamics between Türkiye and Syria, the role of the Kurds, the wider implications of the Syrian conflict, and the evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy all intertwine to shape today's complex regional fabric. Since before 1998, the two countries have experienced tectonic shifts in their relationship, from erstwhile rivals, to allies, then back to bitter rivals again and now potentially back to uneasy allies. To understand Türkiye and Syria's convoluted relationship, the contours of their shared past have to be traced back to when Ottoman sultans ruled the roost. Türkiye, once the epicentre of the Ottoman Empire, with Syria as one of its vassal states, became a modern nation-state following the empire's disintegration after World War I.

Hatay province debacle

Hatay province emerged as a historical bone of contention between Syria and Türkiye during the Ottoman Empire's final stages. The disagreement was seemingly resolved prior to

the 2011 Syrian conflict when Damascus implicitly accepted Hatay as part of Türkiye. However, amid current normalisation efforts, the issue's future remains uncertain. Historically, Hatay (or Alexandretta) was a Syrian district during the Ottoman Empire. Post-World War I, it became a point of contention.¹ The 1921 Treaty of Ankara between France (mandate holder over Syria and Lebanon) and Türkiye declared Hatay part of Syria but hinted at a future democratic resolution due to its significant Turkish population. By the late 1930s, with World War II looming, France advocated Hatay's autonomy to secure Türkiye's neutrality. Thus, in 1938, Hatay became an autonomous republic under French supervision, and Turkish was declared the official language. In 1939, a contentious referendum resulted in Hatay's union with Türkiye. Despite protests by Syria and other Arab states, Hatay was officially incorporated into Türkiye. This did not end Syria's claims. The province remained as part of Syria in official maps of the Syrian government. The Syrian government tacitly dropped its inclusion only during the first period of rapprochement with Türkiye prior to the Syrian conflict. It is imaginable that Syria might revive its claims to Hatay, even if just rhetorically. The issue is also contested within the opposition. Today the province is shown as part of Syria in the flag of the Kurdish-led, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Kurdish issue and the first Syrian-Turkish rapprochement

The Kurdish question is central to critical Turkish-Syrian relations. A people without a state of their own, the Kurds remain a politically volatile factor, capable of reshaping regional dynamics. Türkiye's dominant Kurdish movement, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has had a strong foothold in Syria, operating training camps in the formerly Syria-controlled

¹ M. Khadduri, "The Alexandretta Dispute", *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1945, pp. 406-25.

Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. As such, the PKK crisis between Türkiye and Syria dates back to the late 1970s and is one of the major factors that have shaped bilateral relations between the two countries. The PKK was established in 1978 in Türkiye's Diyarbakır, but later some members of the PKK leadership, including its leader Abdullah Öcalan, are known to have crossed the border to Syria before the September 1980 Military coup d'état in Türkiye. The group started an armed insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984, operating training camps inside Türkiye, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Although Damascus and the PKK never cooperated in training and the PKK never received sophisticated material support from Damascus, the Hafez al-Assad government allowed the PKK to operate in Syria, as leverage against Türkiye.

Two decades later, the crisis came to a head in 1998 when Türkiye, with potential military support from the US, threatened military action if Syria continued to shelter Ocalan and the PKK. On 16 September 1998, following a National Security Council (MGK) meeting in Türkiye, in which the Turkish establishment, with the encouragement of the US, decided to escalate tensions against Syria, the then Turkish Land Forces Commander, General Atilla Ateş, delivered a speech near the Syrian border in Hatay's Reyhanlı district, delivering an ultimatum to Syria to stop sheltering Ocalan.² In the face of Türkiye's ultimatum, Assad capitulated. In the Adana Agreement signed within weeks after Ocalan was forced to leave the country on 9 October 1998,³ Syria agreed to cooperate with Türkiye against the PKK. His eventual capture in Kenya in 1999, reportedly with CIA assistance, marked a

² General Atilla Ateş ended his speech by saying that “our [Türkiye’s] patience has run out” implicitly warning Syria of an imminent military attack in case Türkiye’s demands are not met. See “[Suriye’ye tankla girecektik](#)” (“We were going to enter Syria with a tank”), *Türkiye Gazetesi*, 26 June 2012.

³ F. Aksu, “1998 Suriye (Öcalan) Krizi” (“1998 Syria (Öcalan) Crisis”), *Türk Dış Politikası Kriz İncelemeleri (Crisis Analysis in Turkish Foreign Policy)*, 4 December 2015. Accessed 8 June 2023.

significant blow to the PKK and a turning point in Turkish-Syrian relations.

Prelude to the Syrian conflict

Syria-Türkiye relations saw an era of relative tranquillity following the Adana Agreement. Marked by increased cooperation and collaboration, the relationship between the two countries peaked in the period between 2009 and 2011. In a move aimed at encouraging bilateral growth, the two nations embarked on measures including visa liberalisation and free trade agreements. This bolstered travel frequency and trade volume between the two countries, creating a more robust interaction. In the aftermath, the two countries' friendship developed so deeply that the leaders of both holidayed together and gathered joint cabinet meetings.

However, the Syrian civil war that ensued in 2011 as an offshoot of the Arab Spring marked the beginning of a period of turbulent relations. In the earliest stages of the civil conflict, Türkiye, under the leadership of Erdoğan (Prime Minister at that time), attempted to play a mediating role between the Assad regime and the protestors.⁴ Ankara's approach contrasted sharply with that of Western powers such as France and United Kingdom, who sought to exert maximum pressure to topple President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

A shift in policy and growing involvement

By 2012, Türkiye had abandoned its offer to mediate between Assad and the opposition and obediently fell in line with the West. Ankara's intentions were directed towards establishing a congenial regime in Damascus to expand its sphere of influence southwards, potentially aligning Syria with the then pro-Türkiye regime in Egypt. The Turkish administration then played a pragmatic role in backing nearly anyone opposing the

⁴ "Syria Unrest: Turkey Presses Assad to End Crackdown", *BBC News*, 9 August 2011.

Assad regime. The Turkish security services took up the practical leadership of the broader Western strategy that envisioned toppling Assad's government.

However, this stance was not received without domestic and international criticism.⁵ As the opposition forces increasingly radicalised and the refugee crisis intensified, the West gradually abandoned the agenda of military intervention. This strategy, however, left Türkiye somewhat adrift as it had committed itself to either openly supporting or passively tolerating those who could assist in deposing Assad. As a result, Ankara chose to postpone addressing the complications resulting from rebel actions, turning a blind eye to the emergent radical threat within the country. The international voices once supportive of intervention turned silent, leaving Ankara alone to deal with the fallout of its Syria policy. During this phase, Türkiye's tolerance for extremist actors in the Syrian opposition became a focal point of criticism among EU and US policy circles,⁶ bringing further complexity to Türkiye's regional position.

The period also marked an exponential growth in the number of Syrian refugees crossing into Türkiye, exceeding 3.6 million by the end of 2021.⁷ The West, however, gradually curtailed its involvement. By 2014, they had all but stopped providing lethal support to non-moderate factions of the Syrian opposition, resulting in a divergence between the West's approach and that of Türkiye towards the Syrian conflict. The West then shifted

⁵ S. Starr, "A Deeper Look at Syria-Related Jihadist Activity in Turkey", Terrorism Center at West Point, 27 August 2014; K. Sengupta, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria", *The Independent*, 13 May 2015; A. Wilks, "Who are the Turkish proxies accused of war crimes in Syria?", *The National*, 28 October 2019.

⁶ B.S.J. Frantzman, "US targets Turkey-backed extremists in Syria with sanctions – analysis", *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 July 2021; "US expresses concern over Turkey-backed fighters in Syria", *Middle East Eye*, 6 August 2020; T. O'Connor, "U.S. Military Battles Syrian Rebels Once Supported by CIA, Now Backed by Turkey", *Newsweek*, 29 August 2017.

⁷ "Years On, Turkey Continues Its Support for an Ever-Growing Number of Syrian Refugees", World Bank Group, 22 June 2021.

its focus to economic leverage and potential incentives to be offered to Assad at international diplomatic platforms such as the UN-backed Geneva Process, with the goal of motivating him to implement reforms.

Türkiye's Drastic Pivot: From Downing Russian Jets to Collaboration in Aleppo and Astana

One pivotal event that stands out in this phase was the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by Türkiye on 24 November 2015. This incident, which occurred near the Türkiye-Syria border, marked a significant escalation between Ankara and Moscow.

The consequences of the incident were manifold. In the initial phase, Türkiye, a NATO member, exhibited a bold stance against Russia. Relations between Ankara and Moscow plummeted, with the Kremlin retaliating through economic measures and embarking on an intensified military campaign in Syria.⁸

However, as we fast-forward to 2016, the geopolitical chessboard presented an opportunity for a strategic realignment between Russia and Türkiye. Moscow skilfully leveraged its potential to sway the balance of power between Türkiye and the PKK⁹ and the broader Kurdish movement,¹⁰ pushing Erdoğan to publicly apologise to Putin on 27 June 2016.

That apology opened a window of opportunity for a newfound cooperation. Shifting its position significantly, Türkiye helped Russia to clear out Islamist rebels from Syria's Aleppo,¹¹ inflicting the heaviest-to-date blow against the Syrian opposition in December 2016.

⁸ G. Yildiz, "Turkish Foreign Policy: Ankara Seeks to Take Advantage of Regional Rivalries", Newsbrief, Royal United Services Institute, 1 January 2016.

⁹ D. Jones, "Turkey, Russia: Ties Worsen Over Downed Turkish Helicopter", *Eurasianet*, 19 May 2016.

¹⁰ D. Sabah, "HDP's Demirtaş meets Russian FM Lavrov despite harsh criticism", *Daily Sabah*, 23 December 2015.

¹¹ K. Shaheen, "Aleppo: Russia-Turkey Ceasefire Deal Offers Hope of Survival for Residents", *The Guardian*, 14 December 2016.

This convergence of interests laid the groundwork for Türkiye's subsequent participation in the Astana process. Named after the Kazakh capital where the talks were initially held, the Astana process sought to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, with Türkiye, Russia, and Iran taking the lead as guarantors. Türkiye's involvement in this process represented a continued evolution of its foreign policy from an anti-Assad position to an anti-Kurdish stance mixing a military-focused approach with diplomatic negotiations by external stakeholders.

In conclusion, the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by Türkiye served as a catalyst for a series of events that shaped the trajectory of the Syrian conflict. From the ashes of strained relations, Türkiye and Russia forged an increasingly resilient partnership, collaborating to clear Islamist rebels from Aleppo.¹²

Military Interventions and Changing Strategic Objectives

Contrary to common belief, Türkiye's initial incursion into Syria did not target the Kurds; instead, it was carried out in collaboration with them. In 2015, following extensive negotiations with Salih Muslim, the leader of the Syrian Kurdish group known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Turkish military entered Syria. The Turkish units operating in coordination with the YPG¹³ successfully relocated an Ottoman patriarch's historical mausoleum that was under imminent threat from the Islamic State. The mausoleum had originally been protected by Turkish soldiers but was moved to a safer location secured by the YPG.

¹² G. Yıldız, "Turkish-Russian Adversarial Collaboration in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh", SWP Comment 2021/C 22, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 24 March 2021. Accessed 12 June 2023.

¹³ "Report: Syrian Kurdish force provided corridor for Turkish evacuation of tomb", *Rudam.Net*, 23 February 2015.

Nevertheless, the path of Türkiye's engagement in Syria had begun to see a significant transformation as early as 2014, with the change becoming more apparent by 2015. Two factors determined this change: the ascension of the Syrian Kurdish-led rebels as allies of the US in its fight against the Islamic State and a changing domestic political situation in which Türkiye's Kurdish movement pushed back strongly against Erdoğan's executive presidency attempts in the general election of the 7 June 2015. The military partnership between the US and the YPG caused alarm in Ankara, which viewed the YPG as having direct operational ties with the PKK. The PKK had been engaged in a long-standing armed conflict with Türkiye since 1984. The YPG and the PKK share the ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan, who is serving a prison sentence on Türkiye's İmralı Prison island.

President Erdoğan harboured deep concerns over the emergence of a Kurdish self-governing entity, particularly one strengthened by US support. He feared it might incite political unity among Türkiye's Kurdish population. It is important to note that for the Turkish government, Syrian Kurds represent a political threat, not a territorial or military one. Consequently, any Western recognition of Syrian Kurdish-Arab entities is perceived as a severe setback for Türkiye. To prevent such recognition, Türkiye actively exerted pressure on the West from the beginning. This strategy proved largely successful, leading to the exclusion of the dominant Kurdish movement from international meetings open to most other opposition groups. However, the West's seeming duplicity in shutting out the Kurds did not garner Türkiye's favour. Ankara remained more responsive to potential actions by Russia or Iran, neither of whom shut their doors to the Kurds or denied them cultural and political rights.

Operation Euphrates Shield

The second threat was the YPG's ambition to establish a contiguous Kurdish entity along Türkiye's southern border, potentially stabilising the Kurdish-Arab administration and

forcing Türkiye into a negotiation. Operation Euphrates Shield was Türkiye's decisive action to impede the YPG's objectives. In launching Operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016, Türkiye's objective was two-fold: even though it was ostensibly designed to fight against the Islamic State and reclaim the Islamic State-controlled towns of Jarablus, Azaz, and al-Bab, more importantly, it aimed to insert a military wedge between two Kurdish-controlled regions, spanning from the north-western enclave of Afrin to the eastern regions of Syria.

Operation Olive Branch

Operation Euphrates Shield was Türkiye's first large-scale military operation in Syria, but not its last. Two years later, Türkiye launched another major offensive, Operation Olive Branch, in January 2018. Unlike the previous operation, Olive Branch was openly aimed at a Kurdish target: the enclave of Afrin in northwestern Syria, then under the administration of the YPG.

Afrin, nestled in the northwest, represented a critical piece in the YPG's territorial puzzle. Controlling Afrin was vital for the YPG to connect all Kurdish-held areas into a continuous stretch of land across northern Syria, a prospect Türkiye was determined to prevent. By focusing its military might on Afrin, Ankara intended to directly dismantle the YPG's aspirations for territorial contiguity.

The operation, carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, successfully ousted the YPG from Afrin after two months of fierce fighting, during which Türkiye relied extensively on its aerial superiority. The fall of Afrin to Turkish forces marked a definitive end to the YPG's efforts to connect Kurdish-majority territories in northern Syria. The operation did not end there. Ankara initiated a controversial demographic engineering process, resettling Arab and Turkmen populations in Afrin, an action that has been criticised as an attempt to erase Afrin's Kurdish identity and

alter its demographic structure.¹⁴ As a result, Afrin's majority-Kurdish status was reversed.

Operation Peace Spring

Türkiye's last military intervention against the Kurds was named, in line with previous operations, the "Peace Spring". The aim of the operation was to clear the Kurdish organisations that Türkiye considers as terrorist groups from the border and create a 30 km deep buffer zone.¹⁵ Türkiye also announced the intention to relocate millions of Syrian refugees¹⁶ in Türkiye to these Kurdish dominated areas.

However, the operation fell short of its ultimate goal, which was to create a long stretch of buffer zone controlled by Türkiye across the border. The operation only gained control of Tal Abyad and Ras al Ayn (Serêkanîye in Kurdish). Erdoğan talked about a buffer zone from early on in conflict,¹⁷ but faced strong opposition from the US, Russia, and the Syrian regime, as well as international condemnation and sanctions.

The operation changed the dynamics between the Kurds, Russia and the regime. It forced the Kurds to agree to a Russian-brokered deal with the regime that saw regime troops stationed in areas formerly controlled by Kurdish-led units with US troops present. This deal effectively ended the Kurdish autonomy project in northern Syria and restored the regime's sovereignty over most of the border areas. The Kurds also lost their leverage in future negotiations with the regime and their allies.

¹⁴ A.A. Holmes, "The Turkish War on Afrin Jeopardizes Progress Made Since the Liberation of Raqqa", Viewpoints Series no. 125, Wilson Center, April 2018.

¹⁵ Operation Peace Spring starts in N Syria: Erdoğan, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 October 2019.

¹⁶ P. Wintour, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposes 'safe zone' for refugees in Syria", *The Guardian*, 24 September 2019.

¹⁷ S. Idiz, "Can Turkey set up buffer zone inside Syria?", *Al-Monitor*, 19 September 2014.

The operation also highlighted the dynamics of the US's relationship with their Kurdish allies, who had fought alongside them against the Islamic State. Led by James Jeffrey, the US's Syria envoy at the time, and his deputy Richard Outzen, who were known for their pro-Turkish and anti-Kurdish stance in Washington, US officials convinced the Kurds to dismantle their border defences in anticipation of the operation. They assured the Kurds that the US would negotiate with Türkiye to postpone the offensive.¹⁸ However, President Trump abruptly announced the withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria, effectively giving Türkiye the go-ahead for their attack.¹⁹ The US decision received widespread criticism²⁰ as both a strategic blunder and a moral failure.

However, Türkiye's moves against the Kurds have not been without challenges. The partnership between the YPG and the US-led anti-Islamic State coalition caused a strain in US-Türkiye relations. Further, though Türkiye seeks to erase the Kurdish status in Syria, other regional actors such as Iran, Syria, and Russia appear content with Türkiye addressing the issue, creating a discrepancy in the regional approach to the Kurdish issue.

In parallel with these military operations, Türkiye has also sought to consolidate its influence in the rebel-held territories in northern Syria. Ankara has cultivated relationships with various pro-Turkish Syrian armed factions, united mostly under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army. At the same time, Türkiye has sought to develop a civilian administration in these areas, integrating them into its economic and administrative structures.

Ankara's insistence on maintaining military bases in Syria, despite opposition from Assad's government and its allies, adds another layer of complexity to an already convoluted conflict.

¹⁸ J. Szuba, "It took almost a year, but a simple shift in US stance led to Turkey's assault against Syria's Kurds", *The Defense Post*, 1 November 2019.

¹⁹ G. Yildiz, "US withdrawal from Syria leaves Kurds backed into a corner", *BBC News*, 20 December 2018.

²⁰ B. Chappell and R. Gonzales, "'Shocking': Trump Is Criticized For Pulling Troops From Syrian Border", *NPR*, 7 October 2019.

Moreover, the tacit support for extremist groups within the Syrian opposition, particularly in the early years of the conflict, has strained Türkiye's relations with its Western allies.

Türkiye's interactions with the Kurdish issue have also highlighted the complicated and multi-layered nature of the conflict. Despite the rapprochement between Türkiye and the Assad regime, the latter remains concerned about the local power dynamics if the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) were to disappear.

In conclusion, the Kurdish factor continues to play a pivotal role in shaping Türkiye's engagement in Syria. As the situation evolves, the Kurdish question will undoubtedly remain a significant determinant of Türkiye's strategies and actions in the ongoing Syrian conflict.

Türkiye's Two Contradictory Goals in Syria

Türkiye's current stance on the Syrian crisis, while robust in its execution, can be characterised by two seemingly conflicting goals. Ankara pursues autonomy for certain Syrian ethnic groups while simultaneously opposing it for others. This duality, inherently complex and problematic, significantly impacts Türkiye's approach and conduct in the region. Firstly, Türkiye has exhibited determination to roll back Kurdish gains. This objective predominantly stems from Ankara's concerns over the potential empowerment of its own Kurds, estimated to be around 19% of the country's population,²¹ which it fears may be inspired or incited by the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. Arguing that there are operational and organisational links between the Syrian Kurds and the PKK, which it classifies as a terrorist group, Türkiye views the potential empowerment of the Kurds in Syria as a direct threat to national security.

²¹ "Turkey (Türkiye)", *The World Factbook*, CIA, 5 July 2023.

Ankara's efforts have extended to blocking participation of the dominant Kurdish bloc²² in international forums, such as the Geneva or Astana processes, where Syria's future is being deliberated. The absence of significant Kurdish representation at the Geneva platform impeded its goal of inclusivity and diminished the representation of areas not under Assad's control. This opposition underscores the depth of Türkiye's concern over the prospect of Kurdish self-rule in any form within Syria.

Conversely, Türkiye's second goal in Syria appears contradictory to its staunch resistance to Kurdish autonomy. Ankara desires to maintain some form of autonomy for the pro-Turkish groups within Syria, particularly the Turkmens. Türkiye's support for their autonomy or enhanced political role, notably in regions like Idlib, Afrin and the northwest, comes into stark contrast with its simultaneous opposition to Kurdish self-rule in the northeast. Essentially, Türkiye is advocating for a Syria that is divided along ethnic and regional lines, with areas of influence tailored to its strategic interests.

Second Reconciliation with the Assad Regime: What Prospects?

Ankara, believing it has maximised its military achievements, is now pivoting towards diplomatic efforts, including potential reconciliation with the Assad regime. This approach aims to solidify its gains while also extending its reach.

President Erdoğan's attempts, since late 2022,²³ to arrange a meeting with President Assad are indicative of this policy shift.

²² The FCO Response to Foreign Affairs Select Committee, House of Commons, "[Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report - Foreign Affairs Committee](#)", 10 April 2018; M. Gly, "Russia: Turkey threatens to stop Geneva talks if Kurds invited", *Rudam.Net*, 13 April 2016.

²³ "Erdogan Wanted to Meet Syria's Assad - Turkish Media", *Reuters*, 16 September 2022.

As mentioned above, this is the second time that Türkiye has moved towards reconciliation with Syria, after the two nations signed the 1998 Adana Agreement, which led to a period of rapprochement and cooperation.

However, this reconciliation process has its complexities. While the 1998 Adana Agreement largely focused on Syria's obligations to aid Türkiye in its fight against Kurdish armed groups, the present situation demands mutual concessions. Türkiye's support for the pro-Turkish groups, especially the Turkmens, and its insistence on maintaining military bases in Syria are likely to be contentious issues in negotiations with the Assad regime.

Ankara recognises that the Assad regime, which it once sought to topple, is likely to stay in power and could be a crucial player in rolling back the Kurdish gains that are central to Türkiye's perceived national security interests. However, Ankara's reconciliation with Damascus is occurring within a vastly different regional and international context compared to the 1998 rapprochement. The Syrian civil war has redrawn alliances and rivalries, adding further intricacies to the process. As such, the current reconciliation efforts with the Assad regime could have far-reaching implications for Türkiye's Syria policy and its broader regional strategy.

The thawing relations between Türkiye and Syria, publicly acknowledged by Türkiye's former foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu²⁴ following his meeting with his Syrian counterpart in October 2021, were pursued with further negotiations, overseen by Moscow. A new hurdle was introduced when tripartite meetings between Russia, Türkiye, and Syria expanded into quadripartite discussions including Iran.

Tehran, initially sidelined in the negotiations, implicitly protested, with the Iranian Foreign Minister stating they had only learned about the negotiations from the press. In these four-way talks, Syria potentially has three voices, including its own,

²⁴ R. Soyulu, "Turkey's Cavusoglu says he met Syrian foreign minister in October", *Middle East Eye*, 11 August 2022.

and its two foremost backers, Iran, and Russia, while Türkiye generally presents a solitary stance. Ankara continues to explore strategic opportunities to utilise this new arrangement to its benefit and is attempting to have Moscow and Teheran balance each other out in the negotiation process. Iran's involvement also contributed to the necessity to review past negotiations. As a result, the meetings, which were supposed to be raised to the level of Foreign Ministers by now, have been downgraded to between intelligence and defence minister level.

Comparatively, Moscow has shown more willingness to accommodate Turkish demands than Teheran. Russia's vested interest in the Assad regime and its support for the regime on key issues necessitate a careful balancing act for Ankara. Additionally, Russia's distraction with the war in Ukraine has allowed Iran to increase its influence in Syria, shifting the power balance and creating a new dynamic for Türkiye to navigate. Türkiye, conducting its Syria policy, must now also navigate new regional developments, including Assad's diplomatic rehabilitation and Saudi-Iran normalisation talks. The differing levels of flexibility between Iran and Russia present another layer of complexity for Türkiye, which must calibrate its strategy and stance accordingly.

The West and Türkiye on Syria

The influence of global powers in the Syrian conflict is an undeniable variable in Türkiye's strategic approach. Particularly, the United States' role adds complexity due to its often fragmented policy towards the region, with the Pentagon and the State Department sometimes adopting contrasting strategic approaches. While the Pentagon acknowledges the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as pivotal leverage in the region, the State Department tends to engage more with state actors than non-state actors. Uncertain US commitments further convolute the situation, with high-level military visits and mixed signals amplifying concerns for regional actors, including Türkiye. One example of the influence of the US' mixed signals

came in 2018, when Washington's declared goal²⁵ of creating a border force in Northeast Syria alarmed both Türkiye²⁶ and Russia, prompting both to cooperate against the Syrian Kurds in Afrin and greenlighting Türkiye's attack on the region. The US later backtracked on the goal, which was not fully discussed with the Kurdish-led administration, and shifted its position to withdrawing significant number of troops from the region.

From the European Union's perspective, all current governance structures in Syria are presided over by undesirable victors (i.e. HTS, AANES). The EU has opted out of involvement with the Assad regime or any opposition groups, effectively reducing its influence over governance practices and the country's political future. For a more effective Syria policy, the EU must establish strategic clarity on governance in Syria. Its focus should shift from controlling migration through Türkiye or leveraging reconstruction funds to addressing the root causes of migration and security challenges. The EU should make good governance a prerequisite for engaging with rebel actors, facilitating the disarmament or integration of non-state actors within a reformed political system. Such clarity will enable more definitive EU policies regarding the return of Syrian refugees and the provision of a reconstruction and stability fund for Syria.

A nuanced understanding of these issues will ultimately define the scope of a potential European-Turkish partnership in Syria. Europe must strive to defuse tensions between Ankara and AANES, Syria's largest rebel administration, aiming to convert them into allies rather than adversaries. While AANES is a major Syrian governance actor and Türkiye is an active external player on the ground, Europe is not.

As Europe lacks a seat at influential international forums managing the conflict, like Astana, local allies and partners become even more crucial. The EU's most recent policy towards

²⁵ A. Barnard, "U.S.-Backed Force Could Cement a Kurdish Enclave in Syria", *The New York Times*, 16 January 2018.

²⁶ P. Wintour, "Erdoğan accuses US of planning to form 'terror army' in Syria", *The Guardian*, 15 January 2018.

Syria, established in 2017, has not seen substantial updates, emphasising the need for a genuine political shift in Syria.

Türkiye's Evolving Foreign Policy Stance

Post-2011, Türkiye's foreign policy witnessed a gradual but notable shift towards a more assertive and militarised approach, departing from its traditional practices. The Syrian conflict has been the primary catalyst for this shift, compelling Türkiye to engage militarily to safeguard its perceived interests.

As part of this assertive stance, Türkiye established a military presence in Syria, leveraging its presence as a strong bargaining chip in negotiations. Turkish officials often assert that without a presence on the battleground, they would not have a seat at the negotiating table. This military footprint has become a defining characteristic of Türkiye's current foreign policy approach. As such, the necessity to maintain its leverage in any future political resolution of the Syrian conflict is one of the key drivers fuelling Türkiye's prolonged presence.

However, this enduring presence also brings challenges and criticisms. Ankara's role in Syria, particularly its military operations and policies towards the Kurds, has strained its relations with allies, particularly the US and EU member states. Furthermore, managing the territories it controls in Syria, including providing governance and services, poses a significant burden on Türkiye. There's also the risk of becoming mired in an indefinite military commitment with significant costs and uncertain benefits.

Even if it reaches agreement with the Assad regime, Türkiye plans to continue its links with pro-Turkish groups, particularly the Turkmens. This indicates Ankara's intent to maintain its influence in Syria beyond the immediate conflict, further highlighting the enduring nature of its presence in Syria. The consequences of this policy shift are still unfolding, affecting not only Türkiye-Syria relations but also Türkiye's broader regional and global engagements.

Conclusions

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In this early phase of President Erdoğan's third term in office, no seismic changes are expected in Türkiye's foreign policy. Ankara seems committed to continuing down the path of autonomy and partnership diversification that it has pursued in recent years, maintaining a strong pragmatic approach. Yet, though continuity will generally prevail in Türkiye's foreign relations, certain shifts have also begun to take shape. Against this backdrop, the economic factor will continue to be crucial in the country's foreign policy calculations. In particular, the need to recover Turkish economy has been a major driver of the diplomatic normalisation processes that Ankara has started with regional competitors since 2021.

The appointment of former head of intelligence Akan Fidan as Minister of Foreign Affairs can be seen as a sign of continuity, especially as far as the main Middle Eastern dossiers are concerned. From Tripoli to Erbil and from Damascus to Baghdad, indeed, over the years Fidan played a leading role in conducting diplomacy in parallel with the Foreign Ministry. At regional level, therefore, Türkiye remains strongly committed to the rapprochement with Middle Eastern countries though, as in the case of Syria, the path may be fraught with obstacles. Back in recent years, it was Fidan who initiated the first contacts with his Syrian counterpart Ali Mamlouk with a view to restarting dialogue with a Damascus regime strongly supported

by Russia.¹ Engaged on the Ukrainian front, Moscow is the main sponsor of normalisation between Ankara and Damascus with the aim to ease tensions on the Syrian front, where Russian forces have been deployed since 2015. However, recent talks between representatives of the two countries, along with Russia and Iran, held in Astana as part of the 20th round of negotiations in a process that has failed to get off the ground for years, did not make any significant progress.² Strengthened by his recent readmission into the Arab League, President Bashar al-Assad remains firm in demanding the withdrawal of Turkish troops from northern Syria as a precondition for talks with his Turkish counterpart. For his part, Erdoğan, who sees rapprochement with Damascus as a steppingstone to the repatriation of a large proportion of the estimated 3.7 million Syrian refugees currently in Türkiye, is unlikely to withdraw from the areas of Syria under Turkish control in the foreseeable future. From a Turkish perspective, indeed, rapprochement with the regime of Bashar al-Assad would also serve to contain the autonomy aspirations of the Syrian Kurds, which Ankara considers a threat to national security given the ties between Kurdish forces – particularly between the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is classed as a terrorist organisation by Türkiye, the European Union, and the United States.

Unlike the rapprochement with Syria, dialogue with Egypt is proceeding at a rapid pace. Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi congratulated Erdoğan immediately after his re-election and, in the following days, Fidan had various telephone conversations with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry. This dialogue resulted in the appointment of ambassadors in early July, an important step toward the complete normalisation

¹ O. Coskun and L. Bassam, “Exclusive: With a Russian nudge, Turkey and Syria step up contacts”, *Reuters*, 16 September 2022.

² A. Zaman, “Few signs of progress at Turkey-Syria normalization talks in Astana”, *Al-Monitor*, 20 June 2023.

of diplomatic relations³ and a prelude to a possible meeting between the two presidents. However, despite such major progress along the road to normalisation, supported by strong economic, energy and trade relations, issues still remain to be resolved between the two countries. Libya is the most critical of these.

On the heels of the resumption of bilateral diplomatic relations over the last two years, cooperation between Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia appears to be proceeding on solid footing. Against the backdrop of a deteriorating economy, it is no coincidence that Erdoğan's first regional tour after his re-election was to the wealthy Gulf monarchies. The tour achieved significant results that gave the Turkish economy a much-needed shot in the arm over the short-term while laying the foundation for economic cooperation in strategic sectors – from energy to defence – over the long-term. While the lion's share concerns an agreement worth US\$50.7 billion with the UAE, coming on top of the agreement signed in March worth US\$40 billion, the Abu Dhabi investment fund ADQ also made a major contribution by pledging to support post-earthquake reconstruction in Türkiye through the issuing of US\$8.5 billion worth of bonds. Equally important are the agreements signed with Saudi Arabia: of particular note is the agreement between Turkish company Baykar Technology and the Saudi defence ministry for the sale of the famous Turkish Bayraktar drones to Riyadh. As Ankara looks to the Gulf for its economic recovery, the geopolitical repercussions of its collaboration with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are no less important, as they put a stop to a decade of strong rivalries and tensions at the regional level.

The economic imperative has also pushed Türkiye to look once again to the West. This was particularly evident in its approach to partners in NATO and the European Union

³ “Turkey and Egypt appoint ambassadors to restore diplomatic ties”, *Al Jazeera*, 4 July 2023.

(EU). In fact, Türkiye has recently adopted a less assertive and more conciliatory tone in a sign of détente after years of tensions between Ankara and Western capitals. The removal of the Turkish veto on Sweden's entry into the Atlantic Alliance at the summit in Vilnius on 11 and 12 July, in exchange for Stockholm's support for Turkish accession to the EU and other sensitive issues for Ankara, such as visa liberalisation and modernisation of the Customs Union, is undoubtedly an important breakthrough.

Besides NATO, President Erdoğan expressed a renewed interest towards the EU. This, however, does not mean that Ankara is abandoning its foreign partnership diversification, or the balancing act it has played between Russia and the West since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. This renewed interest in fact reflects more of a tactical move than a strategic shift. Inevitably, economic considerations are driving Ankara to turn again towards the EU, which remains by far the country's largest trading partner (bilateral exchanges amounted to US\$196.3 billion in 2022)⁴ and the main source of foreign direct investment over the past 20 years, with the Netherlands alone accounting for over 15% of total FDI in the period 2003-2021.⁵ Given its economic clout, therefore, the EU still represents a force of attraction and appeal for Türkiye. Nevertheless, though Ankara is undoubtedly interested in revitalising bilateral cooperation in various sectors, there is good cause to doubt its eagerness to revive the actual EU accession process. This would require a U-turn in domestic politics that is difficultly going to happen in the near future. While the prospect of Brussels agreeing to resume accession negotiations also appears unrealistic, at the end of June the European Council mandated the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, to present a report on the state of relations between Türkiye and the EU "with a view to

⁴ Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK).

⁵ Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye – Investment office, *FDI in Türkiye*.

proceeding in a strategic and forward-looking manner”.⁶ This seems to suggest that the redefinition of bilateral relations may follow a different approach compared to the stalled accession process, an approach that reflects mutual interests in a changing geopolitical environment.

While Türkiye is closely linked to Europe from an economic and investment perspective, energy and economic relations with Russia have also been strengthened, so much so that in 2022, Russia became Ankara’s largest trading partner, with exchanges for US\$68.2 billion (including Turkish imports of around US\$59 billion, mostly in hydrocarbons).⁷ Energy-based relations between the two countries have also been reinforced in the nuclear sector with the inauguration by the Russian state company Rosatom, just before the recent elections, of Türkiye’s first nuclear power plant, in Akkuyu in southern Anatolia. Against this backdrop, Erdoğan is likely to continue this delicate and complex balancing act between his Western partners and Russia. In line with its president’s aspirations to play a leading role in an increasingly multipolar system, Türkiye will likewise continue with the challenging mediation between Moscow and Kiyv that has given it a new international prominence in the last year and a half as well as with normalisation processes and détente policy.

⁶ European Council, “European Council conclusions on external relations, Eastern Mediterranean and other items, 30 June 2023”, Press release, 30 June 2023.

⁷ Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK).

About the Authors

Meliha Benli Altunışık is a Professor at the Department of International Relations at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara. She is also a Non-Resident Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. She is the author of *Turkey: Challenges of Continuity and Change* (with Ö. Tür, 2005) and *The South Caucasus: Security, Energy and Europeanization* (co-edited with O. Tanrısever, 2018). She also published a number of academic articles in journals such as *Arab Studies Quarterly*; *International Spectator*; *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*; *Journal of Southeast and Black Sea Studies*; *Mediterranean Politics*; *Middle Eastern Studies*; *New Perspectives on Turkey*; *Security Dialogue*; *Turkish Studies*; *Uluslararası İlişkiler*. She has taught courses on International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East and Political Economy of International Oil, Regionalism in the Global South.

Ali Bakir is a Research Assistant Professor at Qatar University's Ibn Khaldon Center. He is a Senior Foreign Policy and Security Analyst with over 15 years of professional experience working with senior officials, decision-makers, and stakeholders for governmental, non-governmental, and private sector institutions. He is also a Non-resident Senior Fellow with the "Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative" at the Washington-based Atlantic Council's Middle East programs. Before joining Qatar University, Dr. Bakir worked as a senior

political advisor at Qatar's embassy in Ankara, Head of the Gulf Studies Unit at the Middle East Studies Center, Senior Research at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies of the International Strategic Research Organization, and a researcher and senior editor at Aiwa Group for economy and defense. He writes in English, Arabic, and Turkish platforms on topics related to geopolitics and security in the MENA region with a special focus on Turkey's foreign and defense policies, Turkey-Arab/Gulf relations, and Gulf security. His education, fieldwork, and work experience span several countries, including Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Qatar. His most recent scholarly work is "Turkey's security role in the Gulf region: exploring the case of a newcomer" in *Turkish Studies Journal*.

Evrin Görmüş is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at MEF University, Istanbul. She holds a master's degree from the University of Oxford and a doctoral degree in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Washington. After having finished her PhD studies, Dr. Gormus held a TUBITAK Repatriation Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship, and a visiting post-doctoral fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA). She previously taught courses at University of Washington, Seattle; Istanbul Bilgi University and Bogazici University. Her academic work has been published in various journals, including Journal of International Relations and Development, Mediterranean Politics and the Journal of Refugee Studies.

Gallia Lindenstrauss is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and editor of the institute's journal *Strategic Assessment*. She specialises in Turkish foreign policy. Her additional research interests are ethnic conflicts, Azerbaijan's foreign policy, the Cyprus issue, and the Kurds. She has written extensively on these topics

and her commentaries and op-eds have appeared in all of the Israeli major media outlets, as well as in international outlets such as *National Interest*, *Hurriyet Daily News*, *Turkey Analyst* and *Insight Turkey*. Dr. Lindenstrauss completed her Ph.D. in the Department of International Relations at Hebrew University. She formerly lectured at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University, and a visiting fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Valeria Talbot is a Senior Research Fellow and Head in charge of ISPI's Middle East and North Africa Centre. She also is a lecturer in the Masters in Middle Eastern Studies in ASERI, Catholic University of Milan. Her main research areas are Euro-Mediterranean relations, Turkey's domestic and foreign policies, the Gulf monarchies and Middle East geopolitics. She is active as a scholar, contributing to research projects and publishing a number of papers, articles and books.

Guney Yildiz is a seasoned researcher and journalist with a speciality in Middle Eastern affairs, focusing on Turkey, Syria, and Kurdish dynamics. He brings over 15 years of journalistic experience to the table, having served at the *BBC News* where he consistently broke significant UK and international stories, resulting in wide coverage by both domestic and international broadcasters. His background is enhanced by a diverse set of experiences across various research settings including academia, major think-tanks such as the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP-Berlin), the Middle East Institute (MEI), and the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Additionally, he has been actively involved in human rights research at Amnesty International and in political and economic risk consultancy. In the realm of political advisory, his contributions as a Specialist Adviser on Turkey to the members of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the UK Parliament

stand out prominently. His expertise, further honed by regular visits to Turkey and a comprehensive three-week field research stint in Syria, ensures an on-ground understanding of the socio-political landscape. Currently, Dr. Yildiz is pursuing a PhD in Cambridge on the topic of political mobilisation by armed non-state actors in the Middle East, thereby augmenting his considerable expertise in the region.