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# **After a Divorce, a Frosty Entente: Turkey's Rapprochement with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.**

## Strategic Necessity and Transactional Partnership in a Shifting World Order

Jana J. JABBOUR



Turkey and  
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# Abstract

After the Arab uprisings, Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) broke down along sharp ideological lines. While Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sought to preserve the regional status quo by adopting a counter-revolutionary approach, Turkey emerged as an anti status quo, pro-revolutionary power supporting political islam. During the period 2017-2021, the intense competition between Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi took the shape of a cold war that played out through a proxy confrontation on various fronts, particularly in **Libya** and Syria.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE conceive the normalization of their relations as a transactional partnership that allows them to achieve separate short-term economic and political objectives without committing to any genuine long-term alliance. While Ankara and Riyadh are engaging in a pragmatic, realpolitik-driven rapprochement, overall relations will probably remain poor and marked by strategic competitiveness and a zero-sum mentality, especially at time of rising regional uncertainties and insecurities.

# Résumé

Après les printemps arabes, les relations de la Turquie avec l'Arabie Saoudite et les Émirats Arabes Unis se sont rompues en raison de divergences idéologiques nettes. Alors que Riyadh et Abou Dhabi ont cherché à préserver le *statu quo* dans la région en adoptant une approche contre-révolutionnaire, la Turquie est apparue comme une puissance pro-révolutionnaire, en remettant en question l'ordre établi et en soutenant l'islam politique. Entre 2017 et 2021, l'intense compétition entre Ankara et Riyadh/Abou Dhabi s'est transformée en une guerre froide et a donné lieu à des confrontations par proxy sur plusieurs fronts, notamment en Libye et en Syrie.

La Turquie, l'Arabie Saoudite et les Émirats Arabes Unis conçoivent la normalisation de leurs relations comme un partenariat transactionnel leur permettant d'atteindre des objectifs économiques et politiques distincts de court-terme, sans s'engager dans une véritable alliance de long-terme. Alors qu'Ankara et Riyadh s'engagent sur un rapprochement pragmatique et axé sur la *Realpolitik*, les relations globales resteront probablement faibles et marquées par une compétitivité stratégique à somme nulle, notamment dans une période d'augmentation des incertitudes et des insécurités régionales.

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# Introduction

2021 was the year of diplomatic restoration for Turkish foreign policy, and 2022 is likely to be the year of normalization with regional counterparts. While in the past few years Ankara's relations with Arab states—particularly in the Gulf—were marked by intense competition and strategic rivalry, Turkey's overtures to Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in 2021 signaled a reset in Turkey's foreign policy and a shift from confrontation to appeasement. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's spectacular visit to Abu Dhabi in February 2022 and his trip to Riyadh on April 28th reflect the Turkish leadership's aspiration for reconciliation and increased cooperation with the two Gulf heavyweights, in a context of global and regional reconfigurations as well as mounting economic and political challenges on the Turkish domestic scene. Yet, the Turkish-Emirati-Saudi normalization is unlikely to lead to a long-term strategic alliance as Ankara and Abu Dhabi/Riyadh continue to vie for regional leadership; instead, their rapprochement is meant to be a context-specific marriage of convenience and a transactional partnership allowing each party to pursue its interests in an evolving regional and global environment.

# **Turkey vs the UAE/KSA: A Complicated Relationship**

## **2002-2010: The Strategic Depth Doctrine and its Positive Spillover Effects on Ankara's Relations with the Gulf**

Relations between Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi have always fluctuated between cooperation and confrontation, partnership and competition. The ascent to power of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 allowed for a rapprochement with the Gulf states. In contrast to the secular governments that had ruled Turkey since 1923, the AKP and its leader Erdoğan put a high priority on improving ties and building stronger relationships with the Arab and Muslim states. Seeking "strategic depth" in the region, Ankara engaged in a good neighborhood diplomacy, famously coined as "zero problems with the neighbors" policy. This approach paved the way for increased cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE throughout the decade. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing change in the balance of power in the region brought Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE closer together, as they all sought to contain Iran's increasing military and political influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In 2005, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, join the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), a partnership forum that was launched during North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s 2004 Istanbul summit aiming at promoting security cooperation on a bilateral basis between NATO and partner countries in the Middle East region. As a result of closer ties between Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in August 2006 the late King Abdullah became the first Saudi leader to visit Turkey since 1966; a year later, on his second visit to Ankara, the Saudi monarch was awarded the Turkish President's Medal of Honor for his role in building up cooperation between the two countries.

Improved diplomatic relations between Turkey and the GCC fostered growing business and investment. Following the signing of the 2005 "Framework Agreement for Economic Cooperation between Turkey and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf", trade between Turkey and the six GCC states increased ninefold, from a volume of \$1.49 billion in 2002 to \$19.6 billion in 2012. Also, in just over a decade, GCC investments in Turkey

have tripled, rising from a volume of \$2 billion in 2000 to \$6.5 billion in 2011, mainly in the real estate, banking and telecommunications sectors.<sup>1</sup>

Among the GCC states, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were Turkey's largest two economic partners. Turkish exports of textiles, metals and other products to Saudi Arabia soared from \$397 million in 2000 to \$3.6 billion in 2012, while the volume of Saudi exports (essentially of oil) to Turkey reached about \$3 billion.<sup>2</sup> The UAE was the GCC's top investor in Turkey, followed by Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> When it comes specifically to the real estate sector, by the end of the 2000s, Saudi investors dominated the market, as they had acquired the largest share of foreign ownership of real estate in Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to greater cooperation in the political and economic fields, strategic ties between Turkey and Saudi Arabia/the UAE emerged in the field of defense and military cooperation. In 2008, a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established, bringing together the foreign ministers of each of the six GCC countries and Turkey to cooperate on bilateral and regional security issues, as well as improve trade, cultural, and political ties. Ankara and Riyadh also signed three military cooperation agreements (in 2010, 2011, and 2013) providing for joint training for their military personnel, joint production of arms and the sharing of technologies. In 2012, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were among the top 10 clients of the Turkish defense industry, with arms imports estimated at \$100 million.<sup>5</sup> Turkey also showed keen interest in working closely with the Kingdom to develop its national defense industry.<sup>6</sup>

## 2010-2017: Antagonistic Threat Perceptions and Intense Geopolitical and Ideological Competition

Yet, with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011, Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE broke down along sharp ideological lines. Turkey perceived the "Arab Spring" as a historical opportunity to expand its influence through shaping a new regional order based on political Islam and that would gravitate in Ankara's orbit; therefore, the Turkish leadership acted as the patron of Islamist movements in the region by providing political and

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1. V. Talbot, "Turkey-GCC Relations in a Transforming Middle East", *ISPI Analysis*, No. 178, June 2013, available at: [www.ipsionline.it](http://www.ipsionline.it).

2. "Turkey Exports to Saudi Arabia", The United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, available at: [www.tradingeconomics.com](http://www.tradingeconomics.com).

3. "A Win-Win Relationship: Recent Years Have Seen a Jump in Trade with Gulf States", *Turkey Report*, Oxford Business Group, 2012.

4. Data of the General Directorate of Real Estate Records of the Ministry of Environment and Cities of Turkey, available at: [www.imtilak.net](http://www.imtilak.net).

5. V. Talbot, "Turkey-GCC Relations in a Transforming Middle East", *op. cit.*

6. G. Ali Khan, "Saudi Arabia, Turkey to Work Closely on Local Defense Industry", *Arab News*, February 25, 2018, available at: [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com).

material support for Muslim Brotherhood groups in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, and promoting a “Turkish/AKP model” of political governance based on a special mix of democracy, secularism and Islam, and a sophisticated blend of tradition and modernity. Hence, not only the AKP government provided financial support to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups,<sup>7</sup> but the party also held between 2011 and 2013 workshops in Istanbul where it offered training for Arab Islamists in such topics as running a political campaign, drafting a political party program, developing a communication strategy, engaging youth and women, and dealing with religious diversity.<sup>8</sup> For Turkey’s AKP, these workshops were conceived as an opportunity to transfer its know-how to already existing Arab groups, based on its own experience as an Islamist party who has succeeded in a democratic and secular setup.

While Turkey fully embraced the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for their part, saw the revolutions as a threat to political stability in the Gulf and viewed the Islamist movements, particularly those aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, as anathema to regional security. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi therefore sought to preserve the regional status quo ante by leading the counter-revolution and containing the rise of political Islam.

However, divergences in the Turkish and Saudi-Emirati approaches to the Arab revolutions did not initially lead to the deterioration of bilateral relations. All three being opposed to the Assad regime, Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi cooperated on Syria, where they funded various anti-Assad forces<sup>9</sup> and coordinated their counter-terrorism campaign against ISIS.<sup>10</sup> In Yemen, the Turkish government extended its support to the Saudi intervention a few days after the start of the operation, with the Turkish minister of foreign affairs announcing that Turkey “can give logistics support and intelligence support (to the Saudi-led operation), but we are for political solutions”.<sup>11</sup> “Split diplomacy” (diplomatie du grand écart) or “twin-track policy” could best characterize Turkish-Saudi, and Turkish-Emirati, interaction in the period 2010-2016: despite their divergent interests and competing views toward the Arab uprisings, Ankara and Riyadh, and Ankara and Abu Dhabi, managed to maintain cordial relations by compartmentalizing issues of disagreement.

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7. “Egypt Signs \$1 Billion Turkish Loan Deal”, *Reuters*, September 30, 2012, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

8. Field work and interviews by the author.

9. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and Turkey received criticism from Western media for backing Syrian rebel groups associated with Jaysh al-Fath (the Army of Conquest), which includes the al-Nusra front, an al-Qaeda affiliated group. See K. Sengupta, “Turkey and Saudi Arabia Alarm the West by Backing Islamist Extremists the Americans Had Bombed in Syria”, *The Independent*, May 12, 2015, available at: [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk).

10. In 2016, Riyadh sent warplanes to Turkey’s southern Incirlik airbase, in preparation of a joint offensive on ISIS. See “Military Moves: Turkey and Saudi Arabia Close Ranks on Syria”, *Al Arabiya*, February 17, 2016, available at: [www.english.alarabiya.net](http://www.english.alarabiya.net).

11. “Erdogan: Turkey Supports Saudi-Led Mission in Yemen”, *Anadolu Agency*, March 26, 2015, available at: [www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr); A. Sytas, “Turkey Wants Political Solution in Yemen, but Supports Saudi-Led Operation”, *Reuters*, April 3, 2015, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

## 2017-2021: Cold War and Proxy Confrontation

The outbreak of the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017 caused a major rift and ushered an era of open confrontation between Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi. As Saudi Arabia and the UAE led a regional alliance to cut off Qatar economically, accusing it of terror offenses and ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey backed Qatar, deploying troops and supplies to a base in the country. Intensifying relations between Turkey and Qatar have in return contributed to increased threat perceptions in Saudi Arabia and the UAE regarding Turkish regional ambitions. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) described Turkey as part of a “triangle of evil” along with Iran and hardline Islamist groups,<sup>12</sup> while the UAE’s foreign minister likened Turkey to Iran, accusing the two governments of colonial delusions.<sup>13</sup>

The murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul further deteriorated Turkish-Saudi bilateral relations. Erdoğan’s fiery rhetoric against Riyadh implying that Saudi Crown Prince was responsible for this assassination,<sup>14</sup> and the Turkish trial in absentia of 20 close MBS aides indicted over Khashoggi’s murder, dealt a serious blow to Ankara’s relations with Riyadh.

During the period 2017-2021, the intense competition between Ankara on the one hand, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the other hand, took the shape of a cold war that played out through a proxy confrontation on various fronts, particularly in Libya and Syria. When the Libyan conflict escalated, Turkey and Qatar supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), with Ankara deploying thousands of soldiers and mercenaries to assist the GNA according to a Pentagon report.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt backed the Libyan National Army, with the UAE sending arms to aid dissident marshal Khalifa Haftar.<sup>16</sup> In Syria, despite being both opposed to the Assad regime, Ankara and Riyadh nevertheless supported antagonistic anti-Assad groups on the ground, acting in a competitive way; while Saudi Arabia

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12. “Saudi Prince Says Turkey Part of ‘Triangle of Evil’”, *Reuters*, March 7, 2018, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

13. In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed of the UAE, blamed much of the chaos in the Middle East on states that “have historical delusions of restoring their domination and colonial rule over the Arab region”. See “Turkey is No Longer a Part of a Coalition Looking to Roll Back Iranian Influence”, *Ahval*, October 5, 2020, available at: [www.ahvalnews.com](http://www.ahvalnews.com).

14. E. Toksabay, “Turkey’s Erdoğan: Khashoggi Killing Ordered at Saudi ‘Highest Levels’”, *Reuters*, November 2, 2018, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

15. I. Debre, “Pentagon Report: Turkey Sent up to 3,800 Fighters to Libya”, *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2020, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com); On Qatar’s position, see “Qataris Sign Security Deal with GNA, Challenging UN Efforts in Libya”, *The Arab Weekly*, October 27, 2020, available at: [www.theArabweekly.com](http://www.theArabweekly.com).

16. J. Malsin, “U.A.E. Boosted Arms Transfers to Libya to Salvage Warlord’s Campaign, U.N. Panel Finds”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2020, available at: [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com).

supported Salafi-inspired groups, Turkey backed groups close to political Islam.<sup>17</sup> Negative and confrontational discourse dominated relations, as the Gulf countries' and Turkey's leaders engaged in the demonization of each other. Turkey's foreign minister accused Saudi Arabia and the UAE of destabilizing the region,<sup>18</sup> while the latter blamed Turkey for being a destructive force.

The intensification of the cold war between the Turkish-Qatar axis and the Saudi-UAE axis in the years 2016-2021 took place against the backdrop of a changing regional security context and major shifts in Turkey's and Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions. After the failed coup attempt of July 2016, the Turkish leadership showed increased concerns over regime stability and national security. This has translated into the securitization of regional issues, a preference for unilateral action, and a militarization of foreign policy with increased use of hard power. Growing regional polarization also pushed Ankara to redefine its relations with partners and adversaries alike, with the Turkish leadership viewing Ankara's interaction with other regional powers as a zero-sum competition. Domestic evolutions had spill-over effects over foreign policy: the alliance between the ruling AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in the wake of the coup attempt contributed to a militaristic and aggressive turn in foreign policy as challenges emanating from the region were elevated to national security threats. The nationalist narrative of an isolated Turkey surrounded by enemies and unreliable regional rivals emerged as the main pillar of Turkey's new foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the intensification of the conflict in Yemen, growing Houthi attacks against the Kingdom, and the international "naming and shaming" campaign against the Saudi leadership following Khashoggi's murder created a security obsession in Riyadh, which translated into more assertive, offensive, and competitive foreign policy.

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17. Several reports point to Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's support for Jaysh al-Islam, an Islamist rebel alliance based in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, led by Zahran Alloush, the son of Saudi-based religious scholar Abdullah Mohammed Alloush. The support for Jaysh al-Islam is interpreted as a reaction to the empowerment of Jabhat al-Nusra, supported by Turkey. See K. Yacoub Oweis, "Insight: Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist Rivals to al Qaeda in Syria", *Reuters*, October 1, 2013, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com); I. Black, "Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force", *The Guardian*, November 7, 2013, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com); D. Kenner, "Saudi Arabia's Shadow War", *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2013, available at: [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

18. "Turkey Accuses UAE of Sowing Chaos in the Middle East", *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2020, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

19. M. Akyol, "Again, a Country Surrounded by Enemies", *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 24, 2013, available at: [www.hurriyetnewsdaily.com](http://www.hurriyetnewsdaily.com); M. Hoffman, M. Werz and J. Halpin, *Turkey's 'New Nationalism' Amid Shifting Politics*, Center for American Progress, February 2018, available at: [www.stiftung-mercator.de](http://www.stiftung-mercator.de).

# From Open Conflict to Hopes of Reconciliation

While Turkey and Saudi Arabia/the UAE have been at loggerheads since 2016, changing global and regional realities, coupled with domestic challenges, have created the ground for normalization.

At the international level, the American disengagement from the region, reflected by the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, forces Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to adapt to this new reality by adjusting their foreign policy, diversifying their network of partners, redefining their alignments, and building stronger cooperation amidst rising security challenges (Kurdish fighters in Syria, Houthi militias in Yemen, a more assertive Iran). What's more, the Biden administration's hardened approach to Saudi Arabia following the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, its restrained response to missile strikes by Houthis in Yemen, and its cold relations with the Erdoğan government,<sup>20</sup> have created in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Ankara a perception of dilution of US security guarantees to allies, prompting them to repair their damaged relationship.

At the regional level, a new strategic picture forces Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi to keep tensions down and seek greater cooperation. Seen from these three capitals, the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reflects a softened US stance on Iran; facing the risk of Iran's comeback on the international and regional stage, they find common cause in collaborating with the view of containing a potentially rising Iranian influence.

For Ankara in particular, improving relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE also offers a way to break out of the spiral of regional isolation. Because of its adamant support for the defeated Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its frequent resort to hard power in Syria and Libya, Turkey's "zero problems with the neighbors" policy turned into a situation of "zero neighbors without problems". Instead of gaining "strategic depth" in the Middle East, Ankara found itself in strategic abyss. Taking stock of the limitations of its hawkish foreign policy, Turkey is pivoting away from its former aggressive posture toward a more pragmatic, realpolitik-based approach that focuses on rekindling ties with former foes.

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20. J. Spicer, "Turkey Slams Biden's Past Call for U.S. to Back Erdogan Opponents", *Reuters*, August 15, 2020, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

Lastly, for Ankara, the aspiration for normalization with Gulf states is driven by domestic considerations. Turkey is struggling with a severe financial and external debt crisis and is desperately in need of foreign capital. As the country prepares for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023, improving the national economic outlook appears a must for the ruling AKP. In fact, it is highly likely that the economy will decide the country's political future this time, as it did after the 2001 economic crisis which helped bring Erdoğan and his party to power. Therefore, by reaching out to Gulf states, the Turkish leadership seeks to attract the latter's capital in an attempt at boosting economic growth and securing a victory in the upcoming elections. It is worth mentioning that these elections, more than any other, have a highly symbolic significance for Turkey, and for Erdoğan: 2023 marks the centennial of the Turkish Republic; and, just like Mustafa Kemal founded the Turkish state in 1923 and entered the political imaginary as the "father of the Turks" (his popular nickname "Atatürk" literally means that), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan aspires—in 2023—to enter history as the new "father of the Turks" or the father of a "new Turkey" that he has molded and shaped.

Turkey's charm offensive vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia, but also vis-a-vis Israel, is also driven by energy incentives in the context of intensified struggle for hydrocarbon resources among regional powers in the Eastern Mediterranean. In recent years, Turkey's bellicose foreign policy has pushed Saudi Arabia and Israel to find common cause with Ankara's traditional enemies: Greece and Cyprus. Saudi Arabia's joint military exercises with Greece,<sup>21</sup> and Israel's military and energy cooperation with Athens and Nicosia,<sup>22</sup> acted as an alarm bell for Ankara, pushing it to review its calculations. The Turkish leadership's quest for appeasement with Riyadh—and Tel Aviv—is therefore an attempt at preserving Ankara's interests in the EastMed energy equation through undermining and deconstructing the informal web of alliances arrayed against it.

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21. The exercises, which took place at the Souda Air Force Base in Greece, focused on implementing several training sorties that included offensive and defensive counter operations and air support operations. See "Saudi and Greek Air Forces Begin Joint Exercise in Greece", *Arab News*, March 18, 2021, available at: [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com).

22. "Cyprus, Israel, Greece Agree to Boost Military Cooperation, Keep Army Forces Prepared", *Al Arabiya*, November 12, 2020, available at: [www.english.alarabiya.net](http://www.english.alarabiya.net); "Greece, Cyprus, Israel, US Discuss Energy Cooperation", *The National Herald*, August 7, 2019, available at: [www.thenationalherald.com](http://www.thenationalherald.com).

# An Interested Marriage of Convenience

It is against this backdrop that Turkey undertook in 2021 a reset of its foreign policy toward regional heavyweights, namely Egypt, Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Following the al-Ula Summit, which restored unity to the Gulf by ending the GCC blockade on Qatar,<sup>23</sup> the Turkey-Qatar axis lost its *raison d'être* against the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis. Having realized the futility of continuing its support for the Muslim Brotherhood at the expense of its diplomatic relations with Egypt, Ankara made overtures to Cairo which resulted in two sessions of exploratory talks to restore relations.

On the Turkey-UAE track, following an unprecedented visit of UAE Crown Prince to Ankara in late 2021, Abu Dhabi announced a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey. This initiative, which has the potential to rescue the Turkish economy, paved the way for reconciliation and prepared the ground for President Erdoğan's spectacular two-day visit to Abu Dhabi in February 2022, the first since 2013. The pomp and Turkish flag-waving cavalry that greeted Erdoğan in Abu Dhabi signaled the ushering of a new era in Turkey-UAE relations. Erdoğan's meeting with Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and de facto leader was very fruitful: it resulted in the signing of 13 memorandums of understanding aiming at improving relations and boosting cooperation in various sectors, including agriculture, trade, tourism, healthcare, transportation, and—most notably—defense. In fact, the UAE is said to be planning to acquire the latest Turkish innovations in the attack drones industry, notably the Bayraktar Akinci drone,<sup>24</sup> manufactured by the Turkish company Baykar Technology, owned by none other than the family of President Erdoğan's son-in-law.<sup>25</sup>

Turkey's return to a more pragmatic foreign policy line is not limited to reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. An appeasement is also underway with Israel, suggesting that a new regional security architecture might be emerging, with Gulf countries, Turkey, and Israel joining in a united bloc against a rising Iran. Ankara and Tel Aviv have had tense

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23. On the Summit, read: "Al-Ula GCC Summit Ends the Blockade of Qatar", *Doha Institute*, January 7, 2021, available at: [www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org).

24. See "UAE, Turkey and Bayraktar Akinci Drone", *Tactical Report*, February 2, 2022, available at: [www.tacticalreport.com](http://www.tacticalreport.com).

25. Baykar Technology is a business that belongs to two brothers of the Bayraktar family and was first founded in 1986. Over time it has grown to become a giant of Turkish arms manufacturing. The son-in-law of Turkish President Erdogan, Selcuk Bayraktar, is the company's chief technology officer. See E. Topcu, "How Useful are Turkish-Made Drones Fighting in Ukraine?", *DW*, March 6, 2022, available at: [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com).

relations since the arrival to power of the AKP in 2002, as Erdoğan championed the Palestinian cause and engaged in Israel-bashing. Relations seriously deteriorated following the Mavi Marmara Flotilla incident in May 2010, when Israeli forces stormed a Turkish Gaza-bound flotilla carrying humanitarian aid for Palestinians. Erdoğan then accused Israel of state terrorism, and the countries withdrew their respective ambassadors. Relations broke down again in 2018 when Turkey, angered by the US moving its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, once more recalled its ambassador, prompting Israel to respond in kind. Since then, the two countries have not exchanged ambassadors. Yet, amid Turkey's worsening economic crisis and in the context of a reshuffled Middle East following the Abraham Accords, Ankara has reviewed its calculations and sought to restore ties with Tel Aviv. Israel's President Isaac Herzog was hosted in Ankara in March 2022, becoming the first Israeli leader to make an official trip to Turkey in 14 years. The visit is likely to open a new page in Turkish-Israeli troubled relationship.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, on the Ankara-Riyadh front, after a phone call between Erdoğan and Saudi King Salman in November 2020, the sparring partners agreed to keep channels of dialogue open, signaling a possible improvement of relations. Following alleged mediation attempts by Qatar and the UAE, both competing for the role of "facilitator", Erdoğan visited Riyadh on April 28th and met with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

By repairing ties, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are engaging in a marriage of convenience that is likely to yield significant benefits for the three of them. As Gulf states look to expand their defense arsenals amid incessant attacks from Iran-linked groups in the region, Turkey's game-changing military technology is appealing. In particular, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are eyeing Turkish drones which proved highly effective on the battlefields of Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine.<sup>27</sup>

Turkey also hopes that a normalization with Riyadh would lead to the lifting of the informal Saudi boycott of Turkish goods as well as products "made in Turkey" imported from foreign companies.<sup>28</sup> Turkish exports to the kingdom effectively plunged to \$189 million in the first 11 months of 2021, down from \$2.5 billion in 2020 and \$3.2

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26. J. Lis and J. Khoury, "Historic Summit in Ankara: Alongside Israeli President Herzog, Turkey's Erdoğan Says Believes Visit Heralds a New Era in Ties", *Haaretz*, March 9, 2022, available at: [www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com).

27. "Intel: Saudi Arabia Seeks Turkey's Drones, Erdoğan Says", *Al Monitor*, March 16, 2021, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

28. "Saudi Imports from Turkey Tumble in December After Informal Boycott", *Reuters*, February 24, 2021, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

billion in 2019, causing the ire of Turkish business associations who appealed to Erdoğan to find a solution for the conflict with Riyadh.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to economic and military considerations, geostrategic calculations provide a rationale for the rapprochement. A Turkish-Saudi-Emirati coordination has the potential to break the status quo in various conflicts and crises where Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi have competed against each other through proxies, in particular in Syria and Libya. Change indicators have immediately begun to appear in some contexts where Turkey and Saudi Arabia-the UAE had struggled for influence, opening up previously unthinkable scenarios. Following Bashar al-Assad's visit to Abu Dhabi,<sup>30</sup> and alleged informal talks between Saudi Arabia and representatives of the Damascus government,<sup>31</sup> a reconciliation between the Syrian regime and Gulf countries seems underway; this has pushed Turkey to also seek rapprochement with Syria.<sup>32</sup> In Libya, Turkey and the UAE have taken positions that while not yet perfectly aligned are increasingly converging towards one another.<sup>33</sup> More generally, at the macro-regional level, Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi hope that their partnership would contain and counterbalance the expanding influence of Iran, especially given their mounting concerns about a potential rehabilitation of Iran at the regional and international levels following the revival of the JCPOA.

In short, the three powers conceive the normalization of their relations as a transactional partnership: a short-term, issue-focused cooperation, driven by pragmatism and allowing them to achieve specific economic and political objectives without committing to a genuine long-term alliance. Such kind of transactional partnership embedded in adversarial collaboration starkly contrasts with the solid partnership that Turkey has established with Qatar and that, in many aspects, takes the shape of a strategic alliance built on solid bases (convergence of political agendas, common threat perceptions, shared economic interests).

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29. F. Tastekin, "Erdoğan Hopes Fence-Mending Trip to Saudi Arabia Eases Financial Woes", *Al Monitor*, January 7, 2022, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

30. "Assad: Syria's Leader Makes Historic Visit to UAE", *BBC*, March 19, 2021, available at: [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

31. M. Ayton, "Times Have Changed: Saudi Arabia—Syria in Rapprochement Talks", *Al Jazeera*, June 8, 2021, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

32. J. M. Martín, "Turkey Considers Rapprochement with al-Assad in New Foreign Policy Shift", *Atalayar*, October 5, 2021, available at: [www.atalayar.com](http://www.atalayar.com).

33. For a detailed analysis of the evolving position of Ankara and Abu Dhabi toward Libya, see F. Donelli, "Turkey-UAE Reconciliation: Implications on Libya and the Horn of Africa", *ISPI*, March 30, 2022, available at: [www.ipsionline.it](http://www.ipsionline.it).

# An End to Rivalry or Just Another Truce?

While fence-mending between Ankara on the one hand, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the other hand, signals a truce in their complicated relationship, there is hardly any chance that such rapprochement would lead to a genuine and lasting partnership.

First, when it comes to Turkish-Saudi relations specifically, these are marked by deep-rooted historical prejudices and mutual distrust and resentment. The Saudis look at Turkey's regional ambitions with fear and suspicion as they are haunted by the memory of the destruction of the First Saudi State by the Ottoman Empire (1818). In the Turks' collective imaginary, on the other hand, the loss of Mecca to the Saudi Kingdom continues to be a significant blow to the Islamic prestige of the Ottoman Empire and its heir, Turkey. The past is not yet past, and it overshadows current bilateral relations.

What's more, the lack of personal affinity between the Turkish President and the Saudi Crown Prince is a major, yet overlooked, disruptive factor. Both Erdoğan and MBS have high ego and a subjective understanding of international relations: they both conceive foreign affairs as an arm wrestling opposing powerful leaders, and a *rapport de force* where the stronger will win. While both leaders have economic and strategic incentives to normalize ties, Erdoğan and MBS seem each to be waiting for the other to make the first concessions. This might explain the delay in Erdoğan's trip to Riyadh.

Lastly, while the Khashoggi affair is no longer a "hot topic", it has not yet been totally overcome. In April 2022, in what could be perceived as a positive gesture toward the Saudi leadership, a Turkish court ruled to suspend the trial in absentia of 26 Saudis accused in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and for the case to be transferred to Saudi Arabia.<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Turkey's abandoning of the affair is a necessary, yet insufficient, condition for the warming of bilateral relations. In fact, Ankara's political instrumentalization of this affair in the past few years remains an open wound for the Saudi leadership, and nurtures suspicion and mistrust vis-à-vis Ankara. The affair therefore continues to strain Turkish-Saudi relations and to loom over them.

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34. "Turkey Suspends Khashoggi Trial, Transfers it to Saudi Arabia", *Al Jazeera*, April 7, 2022, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

Second, when it comes to Turkish-Saudi-Emirati relations more generally, serious differences in interest and approach persist, particularly *vis-à-vis* Iran. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE view Tehran as an archenemy, Ankara sees it only as a frenemy. In fact, Turkey sustains subtle relations with Iran: despite supporting opposing sides in the Syrian conflict, Ankara and Tehran have avoided direct confrontation and managed to find a *modus vivendi* allowing them to pursue their interest while respecting and accommodating each other's "red lines". And despite their rivalry for regional leadership, Turkey and Iran are economically interdependent: Turkey purchases Iranian oil and has helped the regime circumvent US-imposed sanctions. Against this backdrop, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE expect Turkey to actively contain Iran, Ankara is more likely to engage in soft balancing toward Tehran.

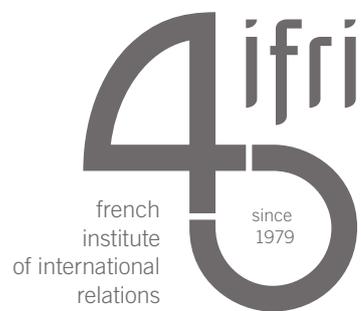
Third, both parties seem to have over-expectations on each other's readiness to offer concessions. Saudi Arabia and the UAE expect Turkey to curb its interventionist foreign policy in return for greater economic cooperation. But Ankara is unlikely to deliver on this demand given the Turkish leadership's growing assertiveness and quest for power and status at the regional and global levels. Turkey's expectations might not materialize either, particularly when it comes to the hope of eroding Saudi Arabia's collaboration with Greece and Cyprus in gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

# **Conclusion: Turkey and Saudi Arabia/the UAE, Frenemies Forever**

Despite changing global, regional, and domestic realities that pull Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi toward each other, the root causes of contention remain in place and prevent any genuine partnership, let alone alliance, between Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other hand.

While Ankara and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi are engaging in a pragmatic, realpolitik-driven rapprochement against the backdrop of a shaken regional and international order, overall relations are likely to remain poor and marked by strategic competitiveness and zero-sum mentality. As uncertainties rise and polarization intensifies in the Middle East, the three Sunni poles of the region are doomed to remain frenemies fluctuating between war and peace, open confrontation and transactional, interest-based partnership.





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