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Turkey's Middle East Reset: A Precursor for Re-Escalation?

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COVER IMAGE: Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates—15 Feb 2022 | Fighter jets of the Air Forces of the United Arab Emirates fly over the sky with Turkish national flag colours to greet visiting Turkey president Recep Tayyip Erdogan | EyePress News/Shutterstock

Mirroring region-wide trends, Turkey has adopted a policy of bridge-building across the Middle East in recent years. The main drivers behind Turkey's new orientation are economic imperatives, a reduction of the United States' footprint in the region, the arrival of the Biden administration, the idea of the region entering a post-Arab Spring phase, and a stalemate in regional conflicts. These drivers are coupled with several Turkey-specific factors, motivating a larger regional reset.

Geopolitically, breaking the anti-Turkey alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean and counterbalancing Iran are the two principal trajectories of present-day Turkish foreign policy.

Domestically, with an economy in tatters, Turkey is a year away from an election. Addressing the economic slump requires a foreign policy reset. Plus, while de-escalation is the order of the day in Turkey-Arab Middle East and Israel relations, escalation is on the horizon in Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Greek relations.

To sustain this ongoing regional reset, it is vital to bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, strengthen regional platforms for dialogue and dispute management, and avoid a new Cold War between Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Iran.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To prop up the fragile regional rapprochement between Turkey and its erstwhile regional antagonists while preventing a prospective escalation in regional tensions between Turkey and Greece and Turkey, Arab states and Iran, this paper underscores:

Bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas/Energy Forum:

Including Turkey in the Forum would allow Ankara and Athens to deal with some of their disputes through multilateral frameworks, reducing the potential for escalation between Turkey and Greece/Cyprus.

Strengthen Regional Platforms for Dialogue and Dispute Management

Multi-stakeholder platforms on regional security and cooperation in the region should be encouraged, including the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership and other forums for dialogue and engagement.

Avoid a New 'Cold War' with Iran:

Opposition to Iran, within Turkey and Arab Gulf States, needs to be policy-based and should not morph into a wholesale containment strategy, which risks creating a new form of camp politics with its attendant escalation dynamics across the Middle East.

Reset Should Not Normalize or Legitimize Authoritarian Consolidation

Pro-change and pro-democracy people and civil society groups across the Middle East need to be vigilant in the face of the possibility that de-escalation of regional tensions might allow states to increase authoritarian tendencies at home.

KEYWORDS

#Turkey's_Foreign_Policy_Reset

#Middle_East_Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Turkey has recalibrated its Middle Eastern policy. It is mending ties with its regional antagonists and adopting a more economy-centric and cooperation-focused language towards them. However, in spite of the conciliatory tone and gestures, many major sources of tension between Turkey and its erstwhile adversaries remain unresolved. Bearing this in mind, how then does one account for Ankara's regional reset? The factors that have driven the broader regional de-escalation also inform Turkey's reset policy. Economic imperatives, reduction of the United States' clout in the region, the dawn of the Biden administration in the White House, the idea that the region has entered a post-Arab Spring phase, and the stalemate in regional conflicts all influence this process. However, there is also a set of Turkey-specific reasons that shape Ankara's policy.

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Geopolitically, breaking the anti-Turkey alignment in the Eastern Mediterranean and offsetting Iran's influence are the chief concerns of present-day Turkish foreign policy. Domestically, Turkey is heading for an election in 2023 in the midst of an economic maelstrom. To win the election, the government needs to address this predicament, which necessitates a recalibration on the foreign policy front. Nevertheless, in spite of these imperatives, a reset in Turkey's relations with its regional antagonists is still in the making, and hence fragile. Moreover—while reset is on the horizon between Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel—signs of escalation are looming in Turkey's troubled relations with Iran and Greece.

BACKGROUND

The Arab Spring has produced the deepest rupture and systemic change in regional politics since the end of colonialism in the Middle East. The same process has also redefined the nature of contentious politics and the fault lines in the region. New alignments have emerged, while some old partnerships have crumbled. The uprisings have also dramatically changed Turkey's policy towards the Middle East and its place therein. Turkey's pre-Arab Spring soft-power mediation facilitation, bridge-building and economy-focused policy was replaced by a new policy premised on the idea that Ankara should champion, if not lead, this epochal change in and long overdue transformation of the region.¹

However, over the last decade, the Arab Spring and the role of political Islamic actors in this process have also been major bones of contention between Turkey and the anti-Arab Spring countries which have included Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt (after the military coup of 2013). The contrasting stance of both sides on the Egyptian coup of 2013 and the Muslim Brotherhood's role in regional politics have been clear indicators of the political and ideological cleavage between them. In fact, the Arab Spring has represented a multilayered contestation over the domestic political order of the state, regional order, and the region's place in the international system. On all these counts, Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt were on opposing sides of the table.

These political and ideological rifts between the sides were aggravated also by geopolitical contentions—the most obvious case in point being the Gulf Crisis or the blockade of Qatar in 2017. Turkey did not regard this blockade as a bilateral crisis between Qatar and its Gulf-Arab neighbors. Rather Ankara saw it as a product of the Arab Spring and another sign of the contest for a new regional order.² Had the blockading countries been successful, Turkey's regional role would have been circumscribed. One of their key demands was the closure of the Turkish military base in Doha.³ In many other regional conflict theatres such

as those in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, the three opposing countries either competed in a fierce rivalry with Turkey or supported the anti-Turkey camp. For instance, these three states took part in the Philia Forum,⁴ which was launched on February 11, 2021, spearheaded by Greece, and driven by anti-Turkey considerations. Needless to say, the same countries supported Greece in its dispute with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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Beside the common ideological, political, and geopolitical contestations between this bloc and Turkey, there have also been specific incidents that have marred their relations. The most obvious case in point was the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. This murder has caused a deep rift between Riyadh and Ankara. Turkey's launch of a legal case against the perpetrators, exposing details of the murder and indirectly accusing Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of ordering it,⁵ brought Turkish-Saudi relations to the brink of collapse. In response, Saudi Arabia has effectively imposed an undeclared economic embargo on Turkey.⁶ The trade between both countries has nosedived and relations have soured.

As far as Ankara-Cairo relations are concerned, Turkey was the most vocal opponent of the Egyptian coup in 2013. In the aftermath of the coup, many Egyptian opposition figures, mainly but not exclusively Islamists, fled to Turkey.⁷ This coup and Turkey's policy towards it made bilateral relations highly confrontational. However, in recent years, three topics have dominated diplomatic talks between the two states: the Libyan conflict, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, and the presence of the Egyptian opposition, most importantly its media, in

Turkey. As Ankara has engaged in talks with Cairo, it has muzzled the Egyptian opposition media based in Istanbul, some of whom are leaving the country.⁸ For instance, on April 29, 2022, the Mekameleen Satellite Channel announced its departure from Turkey, citing “circumstances that are not hidden from anyone” as the reason.⁹ Yet, on Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, no tangible progress appears to have been made in the relations.

Since the onset of the Arab Spring, Turkey has undergone a profound and far-reaching schism with the UAE: specifically, on ideological, geopolitical and personal grounds. As indicated above, their conflicting approaches to political Islam and the Arab Uprisings have represented the ideological/political rift.¹⁰ Their adversarial stance on crises from the Gulf blockade to Sudan and Libya, and to Syria, has caused the geopolitical split. Information warfare between both sides, including the UAE's alleged role in the coup attempt in Turkey, has exemplified the personal rift in the relations.¹¹ To make a comparison, up until the murder of Khashoggi, while Turkey was more muted and measured in its criticism of Saudi Arabia, it was more vocal, frequent, and direct in its criticism of the UAE.¹²

TURKEY'S RESET POLICY

In recent years, particularly since late 2020 and early 2021, Turkey has changed the course of its foreign policy. Mirroring the process of wider de-escalation across the region, Ankara has reached out to mend ties with its former antagonists, which include the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Armenia.

To that effect, on November 24, 2021, the UAE's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (MBZ) arrived in Turkey to repair the fraying relations.¹³ President Erdogan reciprocated on February 14, 2022 by making a flamboyant trip to the UAE with a large delegation—a visit full of symbolism.¹⁴ As articulated above, in spite of the fact that in the aftermath of the Arab Spring Turkey had experienced its deepest rift with the UAE, in this new phase, the UAE has moved faster to mend ties with Ankara.¹⁵

In the same vein, the Israeli President visited Ankara on March 9, 2022. This was the first visit by an Israeli head of state since 2008.¹⁶

Moreover, on the Turkish-Egyptian front, the first official diplomatic talks between the sides took place in May 2021 in Cairo.¹⁷ Similar talks were also held in Ankara. In spite of the ongoing diplomacy, no breakthrough has thus far occurred, but the improvement in Turkey's relations with other regional rivals might encourage Cairo to be more forthcoming. The sticking point in the talks appears to be Libya.

Regarding Turkey's diplomatic outreach, Saudi Arabia has proved to be the most intransigent in fixing its relations with Ankara, putting forward certain preconditions. One of its key demands of Turkey was that Ankara should drop the Khashoggi lawsuit that was launched in Istanbul against the perpetrators of his murder. In response, Turkey halted this judicial case and transferred it to Saudi Arabia in April 2022.¹⁸ This decision proved to be a breakthrough and cleared the way for

President Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia, which took place on April 28–29, 2022,¹⁹ during which he met with the King and Crown Prince. The Crown Prince paid a reciprocal visit to Turkey on June 22, 2022.²⁰

Given the deep-seated sources of tension between Turkey and these actors, how can one account for the current reset in their relations?

1. REGIONAL AND SYSTEMIC DRIVERS OF RESET IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ankara's reset policy is the outcome of regional and systemic drivers as well as Turkey-specific factors. The wider drivers of the regional de-escalation, which also inform Turkey's normalization policy, are set out below.

First, the commencement of the Biden administration in Washington, and the United States' continued down-

sizing of its regional footprint in the Middle East, have led many nations in the region to rethink their policies towards their foes and friends. In addition, for many regional states, the U.S. reduction of its regional security commitments is not the only problem; the perception that the United States is unpredictable is arguably an even bigger issue for many.²¹ The complete withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, its partial withdrawal from Syria, and the cutting back of its security commitments in Iraq aggravate this perception. These factors have led many states to hedge their options and engage in a geopolitical balancing policy between the United States/West and Russia and China. Indeed, China has increasingly become a major player in the regional economy and Russia in regional security.²² In fact, in terms of the Middle East's relations with inter-

“...the prospect of an Iran nuclear deal, which could potentially make Tehran even more ambitious in its regional policy, has led former rivals such as Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel to look at each other through new lenses.”

national powers, the region has become multipolar.²³ It should also be mentioned that, during the Trump presidency, the United States picked sides in regional feuds. It unreservedly supported the anti-Iran bloc and appeared to go along with the blockade of Qatar. This policy was a major consideration in the escalation of regional tensions. In contrast, the Biden administration has thus far adopted a policy of equidistance from different regional actors and avoided supporting any country against its rivals in regional politics. The U.S. policy of equidistance, if not actual aloofness, has led regional powers to reconsider their previous policies and de-escalate.

Second, the prospect of an Iran nuclear deal, which could potentially make Tehran even more ambitious in its regional policy, has led former rivals such as Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel to look at each other through new lenses.²⁴ At a time when the United States is reducing its regional security com-

mitments, an Iran unfettered by sanctions could pose an even larger security challenge to its rivals. In fact, be it overt or covert, opposition to Iran is a point of convergence in Arab-Israeli normalization.²⁵ This is also a factor in the thaw of Turkish-Gulf and Turkish-Israeli relations.

Third, the notion that the region has entered a post-Arab Spring era, in which the role of political Islam protagonists has significantly decreased, is lessening the impact of the fierce political and ideological conflict between Turkey and the Arab Gulf states and Egypt.²⁶ This was the overarching struggle between the pro- and anti-Arab Spring camps in the region. But a nuance is needed here. The Middle East is suffering from ideological fatigue, but it has not yet entered a post-ideological phase. All the questions that pertain to organization of state-society relations, the triangle of people/politics/power, and the social contract remain unaddressed. It is unlikely, therefore, that the region will enter a post-ideological phase in the immediate future.

Fourth, the geopolitical stalemate in conflict zones such as Libya is another factor in the regional de-escalation.²⁷ The change of administration in the United States, and the growing convergence between the United States and Europe regarding regional conflicts, most notably in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, means that the cost of escalation is going to be considerably higher than it would have been under the Trump administration. Thus, the geopolitical stalemate coupled with the prospect of much higher costs, in the event of an escalation, have motivated many actors to dial down their rivalries and enmities.²⁸

2. TURKEY-SPECIFIC DRIVERS: DOMESTIC POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS

In addition to these region-wide drivers, there are two Turkey-specific domestic and geopolitical factors that have informed Turkey's reset policy. Domestically, the country is a year away from an election and is in the grip of an acute economic crisis, which worsens each day. Among other considerations, Turkey's economic downturn is partially an

outcome of its foreign policy and geopolitical activism. Ankara's disputes with both the Middle East and Western states have come at a heavy economic cost. As mentioned before, the most conspicuous case was Saudi Arabia's undeclared economic boycott of Turkey in the aftermath of the Khashoggi murder. Turkey is also under the United States' Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for its purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems²⁹ and faced the prospect of EU sanctions during the height of the Eastern Mediterranean conflict. There is a long list of economic consequences from Turkey's foreign policy choices. However, to have any chance of winning the next election, President Erdogan needs to fix the economy and to do so he needs to de-escalate his foreign policy strategy.³⁰ This economic logic is fully on display in Turkey's regional policy reset. In fact, Turkey's regional reset has thus far been more genuine and serious than its reset with the West.

2.1. Economics of Turkey's foreign policy reset

The UAE is Turkey's biggest trading partner among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members.³¹ Indeed, the official narrative of the recent rapprochement has been very economy-centric. To confront a deepening economic crisis, Ankara badly needs investment and a cash injection. To this effect, the UAE has adopted an economic stratagem for improving its relations with Turkey,³² most notably it aspires to have a share in Turkey's defense industry. But this has not yet materialized.³³

In terms of concrete steps, thus far, apart from signing a \$5 billion currency SWAP deal with the Turkish Central Bank,³⁴ the UAE has not been forthcoming in terms of turning its promise of economic investment into reality. Though the UAE's promise of economic investment is welcome news, for Ankara, the timing of these foreshadowed investments is the most crucial factor. With an election on the horizon, the Turkish government needs a fast cash injection. However, the image portrayed by the UAE is that it is investing in Turkey long-term, not in a short-term

propping up of Erdogan's bid to win the next election.³⁵ But this is contrary to President Erdogan's needs.³⁶ The upshot will be that Turkey will push for the realization of the free-trade agreement with the UAE, to which Abu Dhabi has expressed its readiness. If this materializes, the importance of the UAE in Turkey's Gulf policy would increase significantly.

On another front, Saudi Arabia is already lifting its undeclared economic embargo. Economic relations are set to pick up. However, the volume of Turkish-Saudi trade was modest, even during its heyday. In spite of Saudi Arabia terminating this embargo, the picture is unlikely to change in any significant way.³⁷ However, if Turkish and Saudi Central Banks sign a SWAP deal, this would be noteworthy. In the Gulf, the Turkish Central Bank has SWAP deals with Qatar and the UAE. It would be keen to have a similar deal with Saudi Arabia. If this came to pass, it would signal the seriousness of both parties regarding their commitment to the normalization process. Yet, Mohammad bin Salman's visit to Turkey has not yet borne out such an outcome.

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A third factor in Erdogan's economic narrative in normalizing relations with Israel centers on energy cooperation between the two states, bringing Israeli gas via Turkey to Europe and hence capitalizing on Europe's pursuit of reducing its reliance on Russian energy. Yet, even if this prospective energy cooperation proves to be feasible, it is likely to take years to materialize in earnest. At this stage, geopolitical and political factors loom large in this normalization, not least for Ankara, reducing Israeli appetite to be part of the anti-Turkey bloc in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is probable that Turkey sees normalization with Israel as a way of reaching out to the United States as well. In the coming months, it is highly likely that Turkey and Israel will exchange ambassadors.³⁸

Likewise, geopolitical factors are key motivations for Turkish-Egyptian diplomacy, too. For Ankara, the Eastern Mediterranean has predominance; for Cairo, Libya does. Both countries' economic ties were not particularly affected by their diplomatic rift.

Lastly, Turkey also hopes that its foreign policy reset will help reduce the damaging economic consequences of the war in Ukraine on the state. Russians accounted for 19 per cent of tourists visiting Turkey in 2021 and Ukrainians around 8.3 per cent.³⁹ Combined that is almost one-third of the tourists that visited Turkey that year. Given the Russian invasion is likely to have a deleterious effect on tourism, Turkey needs to attract visitors from elsewhere. The high-spending Gulf tourists are an attractive alternative. For instance, the increase in Turkish Airlines' flights to and from Saudi Arabia⁴⁰ and the resumption of Saudi airlines' flights to and from Turkey⁴¹ could be indicative of a new era in which more Saudis are likely to visit Turkey.

2.2. Geopolitical direction of Turkey's regional policy

Turkey's desire to overcome its isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean and hence break the anti-Turkey alignments between countries such as Greece, Egypt, Israel, and the UAE informs Ankara's normalization policy. Turkey's outreach to Egypt, Israel, and the UAE is a manifestation of this policy. Instead of an Eastern Mediterranean crisis between Turkey and a bloc of countries, Ankara wants this estrangement to acquire the character of the bilateral dispute between Turkey and Greece/Cyprus.

In addition, the prospect of an Iran nuclear deal and the deepening rift in Ankara-Tehran relations also motivates Turkey to seek better relations with the Arab Gulf countries and Israel, which are also concerned about Iran's regional ambitions. The nuclear deal of 2015 emboldened Iran to pursue an ambitious regional policy, particularly in Iraq and Syria. A new deal could have a similar effect on Iran's regional policy, including in Yemen, Lebanon, and the Gulf. On this point, Ankara wants to capitalize on the Arab Gulf states' fear of Iran⁴² and Israel's rivalry with Tehran.

Moreover, the geographic space of Turkish-Iranian rivalry is enlarging. It covers areas as far-flung as South Caucasus,⁴³ Iraq, Syria, Central Asia and potentially Afghanistan. Of these places, Iraq has proved to be the most contentious. Turkey and Iran support rival groups at the national level in Iraq, and also at the level of regional Kurdish politics. Turkey's military operation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates in Iraq has received criticism from Iran and pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia groups. For instance, in response to the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Unit's (PMU) attack on Turkey's Bashika military camp in Iraq, Ankara

“...Iraq could emerge on common ground for Gulf-Arab and Turkish cooperation.”

directly attacked PMU targets with drones in April 2022.⁴⁴ Likewise, the ongoing process of government formation in Iraq also pits Turkey and Iran against each

other. Ankara supported the now defunct Sadr-Kurdish-Sunni coalition, which Iran opposed. The UAE and Saudi Arabia also backed this coalition. Therefore, Iraq could emerge on common ground for Gulf-Arab and Turkish cooperation.

Finally, the Russians being bogged down in Ukraine may well have a negative effect on Moscow's place in the region's conflict spots, not least in Syria. Iran might try to fill any void this would leave, which in return would create more friction between Ankara and Tehran.

3. OUTLOOK

Given this background, its dynamics and context, how is Turkey's regional reset likely to unfold in the coming period? In particular, how can this process of de-escalation across the region be sustained and prevented from being a precursor for re-escalation in regional politics?

Firstly, Turkey is likely to adopt a pro-Saudi narrative on the conflict in Yemen and might potentially sell drones and other military equipment to the Kingdom. However, for this scenario to materialize, the

progress in Turkish-Saudi relations needs to go beyond symbolically important visits. The thaw in relations is still fragile.⁴⁵

Second, the narrative of Turkey's regional reset has been heavily economy-centric. But this does not devalue the significance of the geopolitical contentions. The Libyan conflict and the Eastern Mediterranean crisis would reveal how genuine the process of the regional reset is. These two issues have been major points of rivalry and enmity between Turkey and its regional antagonists, not least between Ankara, Abu Dhabi and Cairo.

On the Turkey-Egypt front, while Cairo prioritizes Libya, Ankara focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean. Cairo asks for the abrogation of Turkey's security cooperation and maritime delimitation deals with Libya, and withdrawal of Turkish forces and pro-Turkey Syrian mercenaries. Ankara can be flexible on Libya. For instance, unlike with Syria, Turkey has no land border with Libya, nor does it face direct security challenges from that country. Despite this, Turkey is unlikely to meet Egyptian demands in their entirety—it will strive to keep its agreements with Tripoli intact and maintain a level of Turkish military presence there, unless Cairo accommodates Ankara on the Eastern Mediterranean by signing a bilateral maritime delimitation deal with it, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Under normal circumstances, Ankara would be concerned for its interests and the possible implications of a government change in Tripoli that could result from Libya's long-delayed election, if it is held. At the moment, Turkey has well-developed relations with the current Interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah and his principal rival, Fathi Bashagha, which reduces Ankara's perception of risk stemming from a possible government change.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara would observe whether these actors would still be committed to the creation of an anti-Turkey regional

security and energy order in the region. As a corollary to this, whether Egypt and the UAE, for that matter Israel as well, would visibly side with Greece in its dispute with Turkey is another factor that would have ramifications on the process of reset between Turkey and those countries. During the height of the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus held military exercises⁴⁶ and sent a clear message opposing Turkey's posturing and military drills in the area.⁴⁷ Similarly, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Egypt conducted joint military exercises.⁴⁸ Such close cooperation between Greece and Turkey's former Middle Eastern antagonists was driven by an anti-Turkey agenda. Through its normalization policy, Ankara aims to uncouple these regional countries from Greece and Cyprus. Ankara's scorecard in achieving its goal in the coming period will influence the future of Turkey's reset policy towards these countries.

“...if the current thaw in Riyadh-Ankara relations is sustained, it will be important to observe how relations in the Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia triangle develop.”

Thirdly, in addition to Yemen, which could prove to be a point of cooperation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as well as the UAE, in an anti-Iran and anti-Houthis fashion, Iraq is another context that could prove to have potential for cooperation between the erstwhile rivals Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, as their interests there are not irreconcilable. The anti-Iran agenda could be the glue for any potential cooperation. All three actors are disturbed by Iran's oversized influence in Iraq and would like to create a counterbalance to the pro-Iran groups there, not least to reduce the role of the pro-Iran Shia militias (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU). As a reflection of this latter goal, they were supportive of the alignment between Muqtada al Sadr, Sunni groups, and the Kurdistan Democratic

Party (KDP) to form the next Iraqi government. This alliance has not succeeded in delivering a new government and has crumbled now, but such a cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic coalition indirectly building a premise on the logic of countering Iran's influence in Iraq is appealing to all three parties. As an upshot to this, there have been attempts to bring Iraq into the so-called Arab fold, to curtail Iran's influence in the country. The latest move in that direction was the attempt to forge a partnership between Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt in 2021.⁴⁹ In the same vein, Sadr's visits to Saudi Arabia⁵⁰ and the UAE⁵¹ in 2017 were seen in the same light. Broadly speaking, Turkey is supportive of the Arab states pulling Iraq towards the Arab fold. Ankara sees the Iran-centric bloc that runs from the border of Afghanistan through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon all the way to the Mediterranean as more menacing to its interests, as it shares long borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Fourthly, Turkey's policy of building bridges with former antagonists mirrors the broader regional normalization. As such, how Ankara's reset policy interacts with this deserves close scrutiny. The most significant case in point is the Al Ula Summit which at least nominally resolved the Gulf crisis and terminated the blockade of Qatar.⁵² However, it seems that the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is stronger than that between the UAE and Qatar.⁵³ In this respect, if the current thaw in Riyadh-Ankara relations is sustained, it will be important to observe how relations in the Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia triangle develop.

Finally, even if there is a government change in Turkey in the aftermath of the 2023 election, the new government would also pursue the normalization policy, including towards the Assad regime in Syria.⁵⁴ However, normalisation with the Assad regime would prove to be more complicated than the Turkish opposition appears to realise now. In addition, an opposition-led government would avoid the regional cleavages and blocs that were born out of the Arab Uprisings.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS


Bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas/Energy Forum: This recommendation is primarily geared towards the existing members of the forum. As indicated above, breaking its isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean is one of the main drivers behind Turkey's reset policy. Among other things, three factors have aggravated Turkey's fear of being sidelined from the emerging regional energy and security order: 1) the planned Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline project was premised on a tripartite cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, and was supposed to bring gas from this region to Europe in a way that circumvented Turkey.⁵⁵ However, this estimated €6.2 billion project is increasingly seen as unfeasible. Many actors, most importantly the United States,⁵⁶ have signaled the withdrawal of their support for it.⁵⁷ In contrast, Turkey is now offering Israel the opportunity to bring its gas to Europe via Turkey. 2) The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum was formalized by a charter in January 2020 and lists the following countries as its members: Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, France, and Italy.⁵⁸ Turkey is glaringly missing from the forum. 3) The military exercises between Greece and Turkey's Mediterranean and Middle Eastern antagonists have further aggravated Turkey's concerns about making an anti-Turkey regional security framework. The launching of the Greece-led Philia Forum in February 2021,⁵⁹ which included Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, and France would only have deepened such fears in Turkey. In line with the softening of relations between Turkey and its Middle Eastern rivals, it is plausible to anticipate that the frequency of military drills between Greece and Turkey's erstwhile foes would decrease.

However, while Turkey and its former Middle Eastern antagonists are mending ties, the prospect and potential for escalation between Turkey and Greece/Cyprus remains. To manage this, it is important to bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum—the remit of which is now

going beyond cooperation on gas. Hence it is now being increasingly called the Eastern Mediterranean Energy Forum, so that Ankara and Athens deal with some of their disputes through multilateral frameworks. For that matter, it is important to bring Lebanon, another Eastern Mediterranean country, into the Forum as well. The European Union can play a role in facilitating this. In the same vein, the EU should advance some imaginative policy or plan,⁶⁰ possibly in the nexus of climate change and energy transition, for this region so that regional parties and the EU can try to address their shared challenges in a collective manner through multilateral forums. Such steps could provide an incentive for Turkey and Greece to dial down their disputes.

Strengthen Regional Forums for Dialogue and Dispute Management:

The ongoing regional reset is still fragile and reversible. It is amenable to many internal and external factors. For instance, the Trump presidency was a major factor driving the escalation in regional politics. His unequivocal support for the anti-Iran camp and green-lighting of the blockade of Qatar in 2017 deepened regional fault-lines and rifts. As a consequence, a Trump-like president in the United States in 2024 could prove to be highly inimical to the ongoing process of de-escalation. In this respect, it is vital to strengthen regional platforms for dialogue and dispute management. Initiatives like the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership,⁶¹ held in August 2021 with the participation of a significant number of regional leaders, should not be a one-off event.⁶² Rather it should form the nucleus of a platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue on regional security and cooperation in the Middle East. For instance, Turkey's Antalya Diplomacy Forum, Qatar's Doha Forum, and similar regional platforms should create more space on their agenda to explore ways of encouraging regional dialogue, cooperation, and dispute management mechanisms. This year's Baghdad conference should focus more on shared challenges such as migration, climate change, water scarcity, or radicalism. More than creating a political profile, such



topics are better suited to kick-start region-wide dialogue. However, the ongoing government crisis in Baghdad is one of the major impediments to a successful conference. In spite of this, without regional ownership of Middle Eastern normalization, this process will remain fragile and vulnerable to external changes and upsets, not least to a change of leadership in the United States.

Avoid a Cold War with Iran: Opposition to Iran forms a common ground between Turkey and the Arab Gulf states as well as Israel. On this point, all actors, particularly Turkey and the Arab Gulf states, need to tread carefully. Iran's expansionist policy across the region has produced highly deleterious outcomes and needs to be opposed. However, this opposition needs to be policy-based and should not morph into a wholesale containment strategy towards Tehran. If the latter were the case, it would then risk creating a new form of camp politics in the region with its attendant dynamics of escalation across the Middle East, and with highly adverse outcomes for regional conflicts and fragile states such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. In other words, the ongoing process of de-escalation should not be a precursor for a future escalation between Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel on one side, and Iran and its regional network on the other. Such a scenario would only deepen regional fragmentation, increase the fragility of regional conflicts and contested states, and heighten tensions.

ENDNOTES

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