

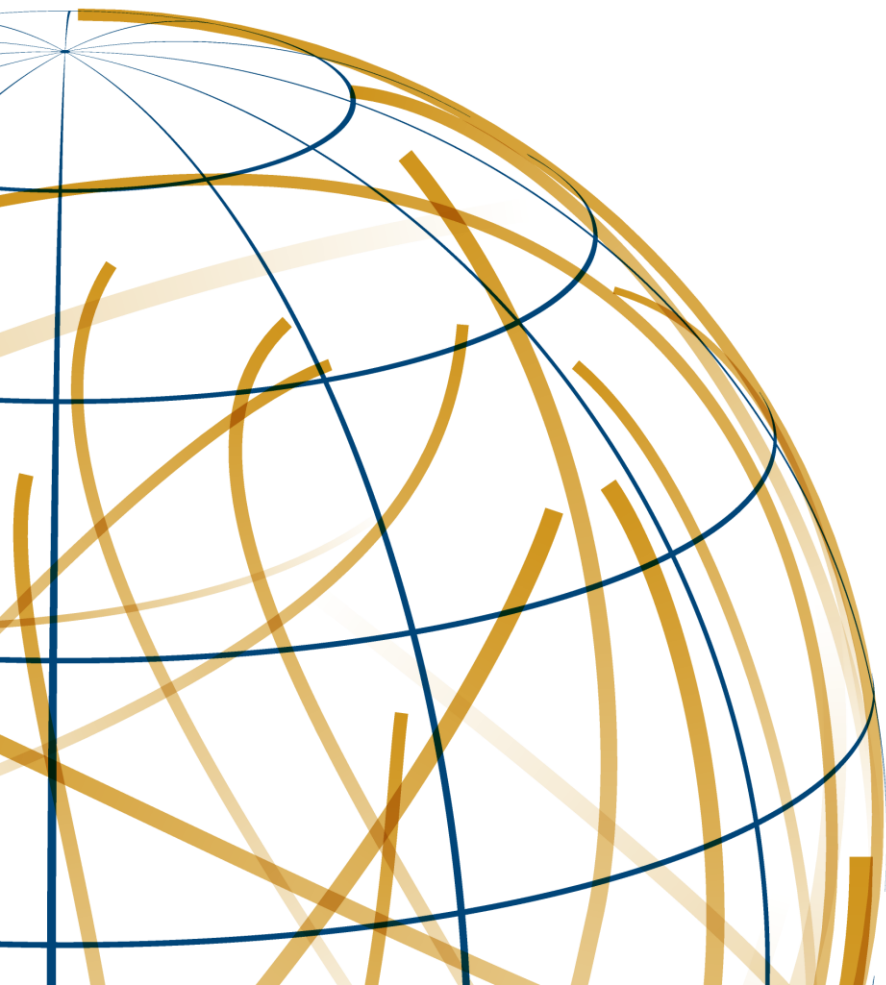
**SWP Research Paper**

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*Salim Çevik*

# Turkey's Reconciliation Efforts in the Middle East

Ambitions and Constraints in a Changing Regional Order



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 15  
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- Since 2021, Turkey embarked on a Middle East reconciliation initiative involving Syria, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This initiative responds partly to evolving regional dynamics and Turkey's specific challenges, such as its protracted economic crisis and regional isolation.
- These reconciliation initiatives are not a single package. Although they are part of a broader process of regional reconciliation and thus interrelated, Turkey's reconciliation with each individual country has its own unique dynamics. Each case has its own drivers, strengths, and obstacles, resulting in a wide range of outcomes at the conclusion of the reconciliation initiatives.
- With Syria, reconciliation has remained at the level of diminished hostilities (*détente*), while with Egypt it has reached the level of full diplomatic normalisation of relations. Reconciliation with the UAE has gone further, and it even has the potential for a realignment between the two countries. The state of reconciliation efforts with Israel and Saudi Arabia remains uncertain and subject to constant fluctuations, especially due to the war in Gaza.
- Given the direct consequences of the ongoing tensions in Europe's southern neighbourhood, Europe should support Turkey's reconciliation efforts, as it will lead to a reduction in tensions in some regions, notably in Libya.
- However, Europe should also recognise the limits of reconciliation processes. They are compromises between regimes that are highly personalised with no institutional basis or people-to-people dimension. They are therefore inevitably unstable. In the case of Turkey, Erdoğan's constant zigzagging, his use of foreign policy for domestic political gains, and the low level of trust among his interlocutors make the reconciliation processes particularly fragile.
- Regional reconciliation efforts can inadvertently strengthen authoritarian regimes by making it easier to suppress dissent at home. Europe can counterbalance this by closely monitoring political refugees and critical voices, and also by offering safe haven if and when necessary.

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## **Turkey's Reconciliation Efforts in the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints in a Changing Regional Order**

A month after securing re-election in 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embarked on a Gulf tour of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, signalling that the Gulf and the broader Middle East will remain key elements of Turkish foreign policy during his third (2023–2028) presidential term. This aligns with Turkey's diplomatic charm offensive and regional reset that began early in 2021.

However, significant obstacles are hindering reconciliation, particularly the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Erdoğan's fiery rhetoric against Israel. The 7 October Hamas attack was widely seen as an attempt to disrupt the Abraham Accords and block the normalisation of Saudi-Israeli relations. However, the first direct impact of the crisis was on Turkish-Israeli relations. Initially, Erdoğan showed unusual caution, calling for restraint from all sides, signalling his desire to continue the reconciliation efforts he began a year earlier. During the two weeks of clashes, it was generally expected that Erdoğan's renewal of Middle East foreign policy and reconciliation initiatives would weather the crisis. However, in a surprising shift, Erdoğan supported Hamas, stating that he did not see them as a terrorist organisation but as "freedom fighters". Two days later, on 28 October, he organised a large pro-Palestinian rally, effectively ending any chance at the normalisation of relations between Israel and Turkey. The next day, both countries recalled their ambassadors, collapsing their newly re-established diplomatic relations.

What does this episode tell us about Turkey's reconciliation efforts? What prompted Turkey to reconsider its regional policies, and how serious is Turkey about this? This research paper elaborates on the drivers, motivations, and limitations of Turkey's reconciliation efforts in the Middle East.

There is a general tendency to see Turkey's reconciliation efforts as a single package. This is misleading. Although all regional reconciliation processes begun over the past two years are interconnected, each should be assessed within its own bilateral context. In the case of Turkey, despite the overarching theme of reconciliation in the region, each of Tur-

key's five reconciliation processes — with Syria, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel — have unique circumstances and goals, leading to varying potentials and progress levels as well as different limitations.

The reconciliation with Syria can best be described as a *détente* that only involves a reduction in hostilities and the establishment of limited communication channels between the two adversarial governments. This process is unlikely to advance anytime soon, and the only thing that can bring Ankara and Damascus together is cooperation in working against Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Therefore, this *détente* may in fact create new problems for the West, especially for the United States, since cooperating together to work against Kurdish autonomy also means standing against the American presence in Syria, as the United States supports the Kurds in Syria.

The reconciliation between Turkey and Egypt has been more successful and can be described as a complete normalisation of relations. Both countries have ceased to be enemies and have established full diplomatic communication channels. However, they continue to disagree on a number of important issues, most notably their different positions on Libya.

The reconciliation between Turkey and the UAE has been the most successful process so far and shows the greatest potential, indicating a potential realignment. Both countries have not only ended hostilities but also begun cooperating in key areas. The economy is the most important factor, but defence and security cooperation is also growing, with geopolitical convergence likely. Even in areas of disagreement, such as on the topic of Libya, the extent of these differences has significantly decreased. Given the UAE's cash surplus and Turkey's financing needs — alongside their respective security ambitions — there is significant room for further bilateral development. Although it is too early to call them allies, the potential for rapprochement is evident.

Saudi Arabia shares a similar economic and security profile with the UAE and thus similarly complements Turkey's strengths and needs. However, reconciliation efforts have lagged behind those conducted with the UAE due to the animosity between the leaders as well as the size of Saudi Arabia, resulting in a competition between the two countries for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. Given the ongoing rivalry and personal tensions, it remains unclear at this stage whether the Turkish-Saudi reconciliation can move beyond the normalisation of relations.

Turkish-Israeli reconciliation remains even more uncertain. On the one hand, there are strong motivations for both countries, such as the desire to break their relative isolation in regional politics, their strong common position in supporting Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, and the potential for cooperation regarding energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, the Palestinian conflict continues to shape bilateral relations in unpredictable ways — relations that continue to oscillate from open hostility to fierce rivalry to friendly relations and geopolitical alliances. All things considered, especially after 7 October 2023, the Turkish-Israeli reconciliation remains uncertain for the foreseeable future.

Overall, there is not a single ongoing process, but rather multiple ones tied to different countries. Thus, it is important to examine how the recalibration of Turkish foreign policy affects each bilateral relationship, rather than viewing it as part of a single grand reconciliation plan.

Given the direct implications of ongoing tensions in Europe's southern neighbourhood, Europe should support Turkey's reconciliation process, as it could help reduce tensions, particularly in Libya. However, Europe must also recognise that these reconciliation efforts are inherently unstable, as they involve personalised regimes with no institutional basis or people-to-people dimension. Turkey's reconciliation processes are particularly fragile due to Erdoğan's frequent policy shifts, his use of foreign policy for domestic gain, and a lack of trust among his interlocutors. The durability and effectiveness of these efforts will also depend on Turkey's economic and geostrategic gains.

The reconciliation of regional actors also risks fuelling authoritarian consolidation at home, as it would free the hands of autocratic leaders to suppress dissent and criticism. Although Europe cannot exercise significant political leverage over these regimes, it can compensate by carefully monitoring the fate of political opponents and critical voices and acting as a safe third-country for them.

Additionally, Europe could leverage its economic influence to align Turkey's political and strategic policies with its own, similar to the approaches of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have provided Turkey with much-needed economic aid, but in doing so have forced Turkey to adopt a foreign policy that is in line with their own. Similarly, by attaching political conditions to financial agreements with Turkey, Europe can help prevent further divergence from the West.



# Drivers of reconciliation

In its reconciliation attempts, Turkey has initiated the processes, with other countries cautiously responding. Turkey's shift from promoting a more confrontational foreign policy to one that seeks reconciliation with former rivals can be understood within the broader context of ongoing regional reconciliation efforts, such as the signing of the Abraham Accords, exploratory talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel, the softening of Saudi-Iranian tensions, diplomatic reconciliation efforts between the UAE and Iran, Qatar and Egypt, as well as Syria's return to the Arab League. Although Turkey's actions align with the regional and international drivers shaping reconciliation efforts, it also has distinct, Turkey-specific motivations.

## The global and regional drivers of reconciliation

Changes in American policies have been one of the important drivers of reconciliation in the Middle East and have influenced regional efforts in different ways. Firstly, there was significant downsizing by the United States in the region, or at least a perception of downsizing, in particular affecting Gulf countries reliant on US security guarantees. Although there has been an ongoing American desire ever since the era of President Barack Obama to scale back its security commitments to the Middle East in order to concentrate more on its emerging rivalry with China, the process was rapidly increased by the Trump and Biden administrations. The first clear manifestation of America's withdrawing was Washington's lack of response to the drone and missile attacks in September 2019 on the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq.<sup>1</sup> This tendency was accelerated by the Biden administration. America's rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan

in the summer of 2021 certainly did not go unnoticed in the Gulf.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the Biden administration's desire to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its emphasis on democracy and human rights marked a departure from the Trump era, prompting Middle Eastern states, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to recalibrate their regional foreign policies. The combination of America's withdrawing, the prospects for a revival of the JCPOA, and Biden's policy shift encouraged Middle Eastern states to reduce their reliance on the United States, triggering a region-wide realignment.

Although American policy towards the Middle East was the main external driver of reconciliation efforts in the region, there were regional developments that also pushed for the normalisation of relations.

The Arab Spring fallout led to a regional power struggle, with Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia vying for dominance. Turkey's attempts at regime change and to install allies in Syria and Egypt failed, Iran faced limitations in its efforts to expand beyond the "Shiite ghetto",<sup>3</sup> and Saudi Arabia's assertiveness reached its limits, notably in Yemen and Qatar. The three powers could not establish regional dominance, thereby creating a stalemate in which none could stabilise a political system, yet all were capable of disrupting each other's designs.

In the same line, military conflicts either produced a significant victor, as seen with Iran's success in Syria, or resulted in a stalemate, as with the situation in Libya, where Turkey, Egypt, and the UAE were unable to push forward their interests. The diminishing returns of military actions prompted a shift towards diplomatic solutions. The economic burdens of con-

<sup>1</sup> Julian Barnes Decay and Hugh Lovatt, *Principled Pragmatism: Europe's Place in a Multipolar Middle East* (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2022), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/principled-pragmatism-europes-place-in-a-multipolar-middle-east/>.

<sup>2</sup> Thanassis Cambanis, "The Middle East Is Watching Events in Afghanistan Very Closely", *World Politics Review*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trendlines/29891/for-the-middle-east-afghanistan-is-a-worrying-sign>.

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 184.

licts, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, also exhausted major actors and led to the prioritisation of diplomacy.

Another dimension of the exhaustion was on the ideological front. As the counter-revolutionary forces supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE managed to stop and/or expel the Islamists from power in every country, the ideological struggles started to take a back seat. Islamists not only lost the power struggles, but their general appeal had significantly diminished due to a decade of consistent failures and widespread discretisation.<sup>4</sup> As Islamists lost their momentum, the conservative and counter-revolutionary forces in the region, led by the Saudi-UAE bloc, took a less alarmist approach and opened new diplomatic channels with Turkey and Qatar.

Against this background, the countries in the region began to act with more pragmatism and prioritised economics, trade, and diplomatic relations over foreign policy rivalries, ideological competition, and military activism.

### Turkey-specific drivers

With regard to Turkey-specific drivers of reconciliation, the economy ranks first. Since 2018, Turkey has faced severe economic difficulties marked by a soaring exchange rate and high inflation. The economic downturn led to political consequences, with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) losing key cities in the 2019 local elections and having to face declining polling numbers ahead of the 2023 general elections. To boost his domestic popularity, President Erdoğan shifted economic policy towards growth, relying on low-interest rates and cheap credit. While this stimulated short-term growth and prevented a spike in unemployment, it required Central Bank reserves to stabilise the currency – an unsustainable strategy. Combined with Turkey’s chronic current account deficit, this approach risks creating a cash crisis without there being significant international borrowing.<sup>5</sup> Turkey aimed to strengthen ties with

<sup>4</sup> Hussein Ibish, *Erdogan Visit Underscores UAE-Turkey Rapprochement Is at the Heart of Regional De-escalation* (Washington, D.C.: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington [AGSIW], February 2022), <https://agsiw.org/erdogan-visit-underscores-uae-turkey-rapprochement-is-at-the-heart-of-regional-de-escalation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Brad W. Setser, “Turkey’s Increasing Balance Sheet Risks” (online) (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 6 June

Gulf countries in anticipation of them providing sources of credit and investment in addition to serving as markets for Turkish products.

Moreover, it became clear that a confrontational, militaristic foreign policy diminished Turkey’s appeal as a stable investment destination. Military operations in the Middle East strained the state budget, while hostile relations with countries in the region hurt Turkey’s tourism and trade prospects.<sup>6</sup>

### Turkey’s reconciliation efforts are driven by economic difficulties and regional isolation.

Reconciliation efforts also have an important geopolitical dimension. Turkey’s assertive foreign policy has resulted in growing *international isolation*, particularly within the Arab world, with Qatar standing as its sole state-level ally. This isolation has extended to countries in the eastern Mediterranean as well and fostered an anti-Turkish alliance comprised of Greece and Cyprus – long-standing rivals – while including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. Turkey’s isolation in the eastern Mediterranean is best observed in the attempts to manage the large natural gas resources discovered in the region. In 2020, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) was established by the littoral states and France and Italy, which have major companies in the natural gas sector (Total and ENI, respectively). Despite having the longest coastline, Turkey was excluded from the EMGF, leading Turkey to view the organisation as a particularly anti-Turkey alliance. The Al-Ula agreement, which was intended to ease tensions with the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain), incentivised Turkey to improve relations with Middle Eastern countries in order to strategically weaken the alliances between these nations and Greece and Cyprus.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey’s aggressive foreign policy – including military interventions in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and the

2023), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/turkeys-increasing-balance-sheet-risks>.

<sup>6</sup> The unofficial Saudi ban on Turkish goods in 2021 was the most concrete example of this. While in other cases trade and tourism have not significantly declined, post-reconciliation figures have made it clear that bilateral tensions have prevented full realisation. Further details are provided in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Salim Çevik, “Erdoğan’s Endgame with Egypt”, *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.thecairoreview.com/global-forum/erdogans-endgame-with-egypt/>.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – reached its limits. Although successful militarily, there are reports of overextension, which has impacted Turkey’s ability to respond to crises, such as the 2023 earthquakes.<sup>8</sup>

Growing tensions with Iran – exacerbated by regional conflicts and divergent interests – has made Turkey an appealing ally for anti-Iranian countries.<sup>9</sup> Perceptions about America’s withdrawing from the region has increased Turkey’s value as a potential counterbalance to Iran’s ambitions.

The isolation resulting from Turkey’s foreign policy extended beyond its region, straining relations with Western allies. Regional reconciliation was part of the effort to mend ties with the West.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, reconciliation with regional actors could signal more pragmatism and less conflict to Western actors. Erdoğan also sought interlocutors in Washington, and Israel and the UAE emerged as potential partners. Ironically, the rise of anti-Western Eurasianists<sup>11</sup> in Turkey’s ruling coalition, especially after the failed coup of 2016, also fuelled reconciliation efforts. These Eurasianists – advocates of the “Blue Homeland Doctrine” – were key figures in Turkey’s expansionist maritime policies and prioritised mending ties with Israel and Egypt to weaken their alliances with Greece and Cyprus.

**8** Hürcan Ash Aksoy and Salim Çevik, *Political and Economic Implications of the Turkish Earthquakes*, SWP Comment 19/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/political-and-economic-implications-of-the-turkish-earthquakes>.

**9** Hamidreza Azizi and Salim Çevik, *Turkish and Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Syria*, SWP Comment 58/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C58.

**10** Salim Çevik, “Erdoğan Seeks Better Relations with the West after His Reelection” (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 7 August 2023), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/erdogan-seeks-better-relations-with-the-west-after-his-reelection/>.

**11** Suat Kimkloğlu, *Eurasianism in Turkey*, SWP Research Paper 7/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022RP07.

# Reconciliation with the region: Five different initiatives

Although Turkey's economic and geopolitical challenges have led it to recalibrate its foreign policy and seek reconciliation with regional actors, it would be wrong to consider these reconciliation initiatives as a single package. Each case has its own drivers, strengths, and obstacles, resulting in a wide range of outcomes at the conclusion of the reconciliation initiatives.

## **Each reconciliation effort follows a unique path and faces distinct challenges.**

With Syria, reconciliation has remained at the level of diminished hostilities (*détente*), while with Egypt it has reached the level of a full diplomatic normalisation. Reconciliation with the UAE has gone further, and it even has the potential to offer a realignment between the two countries. Reconciliation efforts with Israel and Saudi Arabia remain uncertain and are subject to constant fluctuations, especially due to the war in Gaza.

## **Détente with Syria**

Of all the Middle Eastern countries, Turkey has the worst and most conflictual relationship with Syria. With the onset of the Arab uprisings in Syria, Turkey, after a brief hesitation, strongly sided with the opposition and engaged in a proxy war ostensibly aimed at toppling the Assad regime. Moreover, Turkey has conducted four military operations in Syria since 2016 and occupies a significant part of northern Syrian territory.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the first three operations

targeted forces of the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), thereby avoiding direct conflict with Syrian forces, the fourth aimed at stopping Syria's advance into Idlib, leading to a direct clash.<sup>13</sup> A Syrian air-strike, backed by Russia, killed 33 Turkish soldiers, prompting Turkish retaliation. Given this backdrop, reconciliation with Syria started the latest and has progressed the slowest.

This whole process was made possible mainly thanks to a radical change in Turkey's Syria policy dating back to 2016. Turkey's priorities in Syria changed after Aleppo fell to the regime forces. Despite its rhetorical insistence that Bashar al-Assad must step down, Turkey has de facto abandoned its policy of regime change in Syria since then. Instead, Turkey has prioritised preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish political region adjacent to its territory, stopping new waves of migration into Turkey, and possibly returning some Syrian refugees in Turkey. In fact, all four of Turkey's military operations since 2016 have pursued one of these two objectives rather than regime change or weakening the Assad regime.

As Turkey began to restructure its relations with other regional rivals, reconciliation with Syria emerged as a possibility, as it would formalise Turkey's new policy paradigm, which does not prioritise the question concerning the future of the Syrian regime. For the Syrian regime, it would be an important step in breaking its international isolation and seal its victory in the Syrian civil war, as Turkey is the main supporter of the Syrian opposition.

After contact was made at the intelligence level, the Turkish and Syrian defence ministers met in

<sup>12</sup> Sinem Adar et al., "Visualizing Turkey's Foreign Policy Activism" (CATS Network, 20 August 2021), <https://www.cats-network.eu/topics/visualizing-turkeys-foreign-policy-activism#c5847>.

<sup>13</sup> Salim Çevik, *Short- and Long-Term Impacts of the Escalation in Idlib*, SWP Point of View (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 12 February 2020), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/short-and-long-term-impacts-of-the-escalation-in-idlib>.

Moscow on 28 December 2022.<sup>14</sup> This was the first ministerial-level meeting between the two countries since the severing of relations in 2011. Following this meeting, Erdoğan expressed his desire to eventually meet Syrian President Assad.

In fact, Erdoğan had been pushing for a quick normalisation of relations with the Assad regime ahead of the May 2023 elections, aiming to score a domestic political win by addressing Turkey's refugee crisis. By meeting with Assad before the elections, Erdoğan sought to preempt the opposition's long-standing proposal for reconciliation with the Syrian regime by claiming he had already fulfilled what they were promising.<sup>15</sup>

However, Assad, sensing Erdoğan's domestic political priorities, did not give Erdoğan what he wanted, despite pressure from Russia to mediate and organise a bilateral meeting at the presidential level. Instead, after several postponements and cancellations, a meeting of foreign ministers was held on 10 May with the participation of the Russian and Iranian foreign ministers.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Assad proved to be right in sensing that Erdoğan's insistence on bilateral talks was motivated by his electoral politics. The day after Erdoğan's election victory, Erdoğan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalın, announced that such a meeting was not expected any time soon.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Erdoğan did not raise this issue for more than a year. However, under pressure from growing public discontent over the refugees, Erdoğan once again expressed his desire to meet with Assad and achieve a full normalisation of relations with Syria in June and July 2024. However, his repeated appeals to Assad, including reminding him of their family holidays in the past, have so far failed to con-

vince Assad to meet with him.<sup>18</sup> Even if the two leaders come together at some point, Turkey's reconciliation with Syria is unlikely to reach the level of a full normalisation of relations in the foreseeable future.

### **The biggest obstacle to reconciliation with Syria is the irreconcilability of the priorities and demands of both countries.**

The main obstacle to the progress of reconciliation is the complexity – and even irreconcilability – of the priorities and demands of both countries. Syria has two preconditions for reconciliation: Turkey's termination of its military and political support for the Syrian opposition, and the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian territory. Meeting these demands would mean a complete capitulation for Turkey. Moreover, although much of the public discussion about reconciliation in Turkey has centred on solving the refugee problem, it is not clear how reconciliation would help Turkey to do so. First, the Assad regime's willingness to readmit Syrian refugees remains uncertain. Second, an important condition for reconciliation with Turkey is to stop harbouring jihadists in Idlib. If the Syrian regime regains control of Idlib, Turkey could face a new wave of migration. Reconciliation with Syria could therefore increase Turkey's refugee burden rather than alleviate it. Thus, repatriating Syrian refugees to Turkish-occupied territories – although a highly ambitious project – seems to be the only practical way to reduce the number of refugees in Turkey. Such an approach also allows Turkey to demographically penetrate Kurdish-majority areas, helping to undermine Kurdish political autonomy in northern Syria. However, this may further entrench Turkey's presence in Syria and weaken the possibility of reconciliation with the Syrian regime.

In fact, Turkey is not only attempting to keep certain areas under occupation to pursue its policy of demographic engineering, but also seeking to continuously expand its territorial control along the Turkish-Syrian border. Therefore, the fact that Turkey – as the initiator of the reconciliation process – is not

<sup>14</sup> “Turkish, Syrian Officials Meet in Moscow after Years-long Chill”, *Reuters*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-syrian-officials-meet-moscow-after-years-long-chill-2022-12-28/>.

<sup>15</sup> Salim Çevik, “Obstacles to a Turkey-Syria Reconciliation” (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 29 March 2023), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/obstacles-to-a-turkey-syria-reconciliation/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Russia, Syria, Turkey and Iran Hold High-level Talks in Moscow”, *Al Jazeera*, 10 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/10/russia-syria-turkey-and-iran-hold-high-level-talks-in-moscow>.

<sup>17</sup> “Turkish Presidency: No Date for Assad-Erdogan Meeting”, *The Syrian Observer*, 30 May 2023, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/83223/turkish-presidency-no-date-for-assad-erdogan-meeting.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Salim Çevik, “Erdoğan's Renewed Push for Syria Reconciliation” (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 25 July 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/erdogans-renewed-push-for-syria-reconciliation-domestic-priorities-and-regional-dynamics/>.

ruling out the possibility of a fifth military operation raises serious doubts about the sustainability of the reconciliation efforts.<sup>19</sup>

This long-term structural mismatch in both countries' approaches to reconciliation is exacerbated by the absence of short-term expectations. With the electoral period behind Erdoğan and Assad beginning to break his diplomatic isolation, both leaders have less incentive to push reconciliation forward.

However, the above-mentioned problems do not mean that the prospects for reconciliation have completely disappeared, as cooperation on the Kurdish issue may continue to drive reconciliation efforts forward. Turkey's position on the Kurdish issue is highly unlikely to change without a change in domestic power dynamics. In this context, the weakening and eventual elimination of Kurdish political autonomy in Syria remains a strategic priority for Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

Although Turkey has sought to achieve this goal unilaterally, Ankara may prefer coordinated action with the Syrian regime as a more effective approach. It is important to note that, for the Turkish government, the Syrian Kurds pose a political threat rather than a territorial or military threat.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Western recognition of Syrian Kurdish-Arab formations or any agreement between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian regime to formalise the AANES would be a serious setback for Turkey. In turn, Turkey can hope to weaken the AANES by normalising relations with the Assad regime and recognising the regime's sovereignty over territories controlled by Kurdish forces. Thus, the reconciliation between Turkey and Syria could turn into an anti-Kurdish alliance, even before the current tensions are resolved and relations between Ankara and Damascus are normalised.<sup>22</sup> In

fact, even the prospect of a normalisation of relations between the two countries has shifted the balance of power in favour of the regime against the AANES. Gradual improvements in Turkish-Syrian relations could empower Damascus to adopt a more assertive stance against the Kurds in Syria. While the credibility of the American protective umbrella is being questioned, the Kurdish position is becoming increasingly precarious as voices within the United States in favour of withdrawal are rising.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, in the short term, the reconciliation process will advance only along the lines of an anti-Kurdish alliance. However, this will create more challenges for the West, and in particular the United States. Further reconciliation would also lead Turkey and Syria to coordinate and cooperate against the American presence in Syria. It remains unknown as to how the United States and Europe will approach the Syria question.

## Normalisation of relations with Egypt

The first visible outcome of the reconciliation attempts was with Egypt, with which Turkey has not had official relations since the Egyptian military coup in 2013. At the outset, the conflict between Turkey and Egypt was an ideological one. The Egyptian military overthrew the elected Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government led by President Mohamed Morsi, with whom Erdoğan not only had very cordial relations but also shared a common ideology. Over the years, Erdoğan has never recognised the legitimacy of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the former Minister of Defence who later became president of Egypt. Erdoğan has repeatedly labelled Sisi a "putschist", "dictator", and "murderer" and said he would never meet with him<sup>24</sup> or sit at the same table.<sup>25</sup>

**19** In fact, since the summer of 2022, any new military operations have been halted due to objections from Russia, Iran, and the United States rather than being due to Turkey taking Syria's demands into consideration.

**20** Sinem Adar and Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, "Turkish Ambitions and Presence in Northern Syria in 2030", in *Looking Ahead: Geopolitical Dynamics and Scenarios for Syria in 2030*, ed. Muriel Asseburg and Salam Said (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022), 23–26.

**21** Güney Yıldız, "Türkiye's Swings in the Syrian Crisis: Paving the Way Forward", in *Turkey in the MENA Region*, ed. Valeria Talbot (Milan: Ledizioni Ledi Publishing, 2023), 93.

**22** Salim Çevik, "Prospects for Turkish Syrian Reconciliation" (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies [ISPI], 26 June 2023 [online]), <https://www.>

[ispionline.it/en/publication/prospects-for-turkish-syrian-reconciliation-133565](https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/prospects-for-turkish-syrian-reconciliation-133565).

**23** Amberin Zaman, "Pentagon Floats Plan for Its Syrian Kurd Allies to Partner with Assad against ISIS", *Al Monitor*, 22 January 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/pentagon-floats-plan-its-syrian-kurd-allies-partner-assad-against-isis>.

**24** "Erdogan Won't Meet Sisi, Even If He Pardons Morsi", *Middle East Monitor*, 8 February 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160208-erdogan-won-t-meet-sisi-even-if-he-pardons-morsi/>.

**25** "Turkey's Erdogan Refuses to Sit with Trump and 'Favourite Dictator' Sisi at UN Lunch", *The New Arab*, 25 Sep-

But the conflict has never been purely ideological. The overthrow of the MB government in Egypt — Turkey's most important regional ally — was the biggest blow to Turkey's bid for regional hegemony. Erdoğan has also used Turkish-Egyptian tensions to consolidate his domestic political base. Verbal attacks against Egypt's then-new president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, became one of his favourite talking points, drawing parallels between the Turkish opposition and the Egyptian president, implying that both were pawns in a global conspiracy against Muslim political movements.<sup>26</sup>

As bilateral relations completely collapsed, Turkey's support for members of the MB and its military presence in Libya became the main topics of discussion on the Egyptian side, while Turkey was concerned about its exclusion from the EMGF organised in Cairo.

Although none of these issues have been resolved, a process of reconciliation between the two states began in early 2021 in the context of the region-wide reconciliation discussed earlier. Following contact made behind-the-scenes between diplomatic and intelligence personnel, the first official bilateral meeting in years took place in Cairo in May 2021. Despite this early development, reconciliation efforts stalled for a while. In order to persuade the Egyptian leadership to continue the reconciliation process, Turkey pressured the Istanbul-based Egyptian media to soften their criticism of the Sisi regime and even stop their news coverage altogether. These gestures helped revive the process, culminating in April 2022 with Turkey appointing an ambassador to the charge d'affaires position in Cairo and, in June 2022, the first visit by a Turkish minister to Egypt in nine years.<sup>27</sup>

All these developments paved the way for the two leaders to meet on 20 November 2022 with the mediation of the Emir of Qatar, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Despite the leaders' meeting and the subsequent meetings and bilateral visits of the foreign ministers, the full normalisation of diplomatic relations took almost another year, up to July 2023.

tember 2019, <https://www.newarab.com/news/erdogan-refuses-sit-sisi-un-lunch>.

<sup>26</sup> “Erdoğan çitayı yükseltti: ‘Pazar günü Sisi mi diyeceğiz, Binali mi?’” [Erdoğan has raised the bar: “Will we say Sisi or Binali on Sunday?"], *Cumhuriyet*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdogan-citayi-yukseltti-pazar-gunu-sisi-mi-diyecegiz-binali-mi-1447149>.

<sup>27</sup> Ali Bakir, “The 2021 – 2022 ‘De-Escalation Moment’ in the Middle East”, *Insight Turkey* 24, no. 2 (2022): 56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48678906>.

It was clear that the Egyptian side was waiting for the outcome of the Turkish elections.<sup>28</sup>

### **Egypt and Turkey have achieved full diplomatic normalisation, but disagreements over Libya and eastern Mediterranean persist.**

The normalisation of diplomatic relations does not mean that all the problems in their bilateral relations have been resolved. In his support for the MB, Erdoğan has shown that his pragmatism outweighs his ideological convictions. Moreover, this pragmatism was necessary not only to reconcile with Egypt, but also to improve the much more strategically important relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it can be stated that different approaches towards the MB are no longer a major obstacle to Turkish-Egyptian reconciliation. However, different perspectives on issues concerning the eastern Mediterranean and Libya remain unresolved. In fact, the two-year-long reconciliation process has been full of pauses and reversals, mostly due to disagreements over Libyan policy.<sup>29</sup>

Even after the full normalisation of relations between Turkey and Egypt, Libya remains the main obstacle, and the future of bilateral relations will largely be shaped by developments in Libya. Turkey regards the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity as the legitimate government of Libya, whereas Egypt regards the Tobruk-based House of Representatives as the only legitimate legislative body in Libya and recognises the House-appointed government of Fathi Bashagha as the legitimate government. However, both countries have started to realise the limits of their policies in Libya. Turkey and its allies on the ground had to respect Egypt's red line and did not

<sup>28</sup> Meliha Benli Altunisik, “From Rivalry to Normalisation: Opportunities and Challenges to Egypt-Türkiye Relations”, in *Turkey in the MENA Region*, ed. Valeria Talbot (Milan: Ledizioni Ledi Publishing, 2023), 64.

<sup>29</sup> On 29 October 2022, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry declared that Egypt halted the reconciliation process with Turkey in response to an energy agreement signed between Turkey and the Dbeibah government that would allow Turkey to have energy exploration in areas that are contested by Greece and Egypt. See “Dialogue between Egypt, Turkey Halted over Turkish Practices in Libya, FM Shoukry Tells Al-Arabiya”, *Ahram Online*, 30 October 2022, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/478732.aspx>.

cross the Sirte—Jufra line.<sup>30</sup> Over time, Turkey started to reach out to the forces in the east. Similarly, Egypt, realising the balance of power on the ground, started to reach out to the Tripoli government. While maintaining their initial positions, both countries realised their common stake in the stabilisation of Libya and the end of the armed conflict. The easing of tensions in Libya has been an important factor contributing to the normalisation of relations.

Although Turkish-Egyptian tensions in Libya are currently frozen, a negotiated settlement seems unlikely anytime soon. First of all, Libyan domestic politics do not have the same importance for the two countries. Egypt sees Libya as the primary national security issue, while for Turkey Libya is more a derivative of its eastern Mediterranean policy. Moreover, even if Turkey were to meet some of Egypt's demands, such as the removal of Syrian fighters from Libya, it would do so in return for a change in Egypt's policy towards Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. This interconnectedness of different conflict areas makes a negotiated settlement even more unlikely and has led to the continuation of the status quo based on frozen conflicts.<sup>31</sup>

Another factor preventing relations from developing beyond normalisation is the economic aspect. Unlike the Gulf countries, Egypt cannot make a significant contribution towards Turkey's economy. Moreover, even when both countries severed diplomatic relations, they managed to compartmentalise their relations in economic terms.<sup>32</sup> Now they are

**30** "Egypt's Designation of Sirte, Jufra as Red Lines Helped in Preserving Libya's Political Path, Sisi Says", *Ahram Online*, 16 January 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/398938/Egypt/Politics-/Egypots-designation-of-Sirte,-Jufra-as-red-lines-he.aspx>.

**31** Unlike Egypt, Libya does not emerge as a national security issue for the UAE, Turkey's other rival on the Libyan scene. For this reason, the UAE has recently reduced its involvement in the Libyan scene and has preferred not to compromise its reconciliation with Turkey. For more details, see Emadeddin Badi, *The UAE Is Making a Precarious Shift in Its Libya Policy: Here's Why* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 27 October 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-uae-is-making-a-precarious-shift-in-its-libya-policy-heres-why/>.

**32** Bilateral trade with Egypt in 2012, the year before relations collapsed, amounted to US\$5.021 billion. During the following crisis-ridden decade, bilateral trade hit the lowest in 2016 with US\$4.277 billion and the highest in 2021 with US\$6.724 billion. Moreover, even in 2021, trade with Egypt merely constituted 1.3 per cent of Turkey's international

also compartmentalising political issues and trying to maintain a dialogue and diplomatic relations while continuing to disagree on critical issues.

## Potential realignment with the UAE

Differences with the UAE (and Saudi Arabia) started with their support for the military coup in Egypt and then continued due to other regional conflicts. Most notably in the Libyan civil war, Egypt and the UAE engaged in a proxy war against Turkey and supported rival factions. Turkey read the Arab uprisings as a seizure of power by the authentic peoples of the Middle East, while the counter-revolutionaries were characterised as inauthentic lackeys of the West. Qatar was Turkey's main ally in supporting the Arab uprisings and became the target of the blockade imposed by the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain) in 2017. Viewing this as an attempt to undermine its regional role, Turkey sided firmly with Qatar, dispatching troops and providing aid to counter the embargo, thereby deepening already existing tensions with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Having recognised Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ) as the mastermind behind the counter-revolutionary wave in the region, Turkey soon declared the UAE as the main enemy. Turkey's accusations against the UAE went as far as alleging that the UAE supported and financed the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016.<sup>33</sup>

Against this background, reconciliation efforts have so far been most successful and swift with the UAE. In fact, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia initially seemed very reluctant to reconcile with Turkey.<sup>34</sup> This situation changed very quickly towards the end of 2021, when the UAE, similar to Turkey, underwent a major transformation in its approach to regional policies and launched a diplomatic charm offensive on

trade (author's own calculations based on data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK)).

**33** Yunus Paksoy, "UAE Allegedly Funneled \$3B to Topple Erdoğan, Turkish Government", *Daily Sabah*, 13 June 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2017/06/13/uae-allegedly-funneled-3b-to-topple-erdogan-turkish-government>.

**34** Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey's Good Words Not Worth Much to Saudi Arabia", *Al-Monitor*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/turkeys-good-words-not-worth-much-saudi-arabia>.



many fronts.<sup>35</sup> MBZ visited Turkey in November 2021 — a move reciprocated by Erdoğan in February 2022.<sup>36</sup> Erdoğan was welcomed with a lavish ceremony in Abu Dhabi, and the outcome of these two state-level visits was the signing of several Memoranda of Understanding as well as a currency swap agreement totalling US\$5 billion. The UAE also pledged to invest a total of US\$10 billion in the Turkish economy.<sup>37</sup>

These initiatives gained momentum following Erdoğan's election on 28 May. Just three days later, the UAE ratified the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in March 2023. The agreement aims to increase bilateral trade to US\$40 billion. In addition, MBZ was the first leader to visit Turkey after Erdoğan's election victory.<sup>38</sup>

This rapid process of reconciliation was unexpected, given Turkey's past perception of the UAE as its arch enemy in the region. However, despite the heated rhetoric between the two countries, bilateral issues before the reconciliation were one-dimensional and did not involve other actors. Moreover, unlike in Syria and Egypt, where ideological differences often serve as a cover for deep-seated geopolitical and strategic differences, in Turkey-UAE relations it was essentially an ideological difference that pitted the two countries against each other. For example, during the attempts by the Saudis and UAE to roll back Iran, Turkey, and movements linked to the MB, it was clear that Saudi Arabia saw Iran as an existential threat, while the UAE focused on political Islamist groups linked to the MB.<sup>39</sup>

This ideological divide came to an end partly because the UAE no longer felt threatened by the forces unleashed by the Arab uprisings, especially Islamists. More importantly, Erdoğan has proved flexible in his support for the MB. As already mentioned, the UAE (along with Saudi Arabia) halted the normalisation of relations with Turkey in 2021, partly to see whether Turkey would meet the Egyptian regime's demands regarding the MB. Only later did positive reactions from Abu Dhabi begin to emerge.

### **Economic and security cooperation with the UAE holds the potential for realignment.**

In fact, among all of Turkey's reconciliation initiatives, the one with the UAE has the highest potential to turn into an important alliance, largely due to the overlapping needs and expectations of the two countries.

This is most evident in the economic sphere. With economic benefits being a key driver of Turkey's reconciliation efforts, the UAE, with its significant economic power, has emerged as an important ally. In the short term, this reconciliation has been crucial for addressing Turkey's growing financial challenges. Although the UAE's swap deals are smaller compared to those from Qatar and Russia, the UAE supports Turkey's economy in other ways. According to Bloomberg, two UAE banks, Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank and Emirates NBD, arranged 61 per cent of all syndicated loans in the first half of 2023.<sup>40</sup> Securing UAE financing is vital for Turkey, as Western lenders are growing increasingly cautious due to Erdoğan's unorthodox economic policies.

Turkey's expectations for bilateral economic relations extend beyond lending from the UAE and include trade and investment. Before relations soured during the Arab Spring, the UAE was Turkey's largest Gulf trading partner. Following the recent thaw, bilateral trade increased by 40 per cent between 2021 and 2022, and the CEPA agreement is set to boost trade further. Energy cooperation is also deepening, with Alparslan Bayraktar, Turkey's Minister of Energy, highlighting the UAE as a strategic partner in Tur-

35 Mohammad Barhouma, "The Reshaping of UAE Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Strategy" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 January 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86130>.

36 "Turkey, UAE Sign Agreements on Trade, Industry during Erdogan Visit", *Reuters*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-visits-uae-first-time-decade-2022-02-14/>.

37 Orhan Coskun, "Turkey, UAE Sign Investment Accords Worth Billions of Dollars", *Reuters*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-hopes-uae-investment-deals-during-ankara-talks-2021-11-24/>.

38 Ali Bakir, "Türkiye, UAE and Saudi Arabia: A New Era of Cooperation in a Changing Regional Landscape", in *Turkey in the MENA Region*, ed. Valeria Talbot (Milan: Ledizioni Ledi Publishing, 2023), 22–23.

39 Guido Steinberg, *Regional Power, United Arab Emirates*, SWP-Research Paper 10/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020RP10.

40 Ercan Ersoy, Asli Kandemir and Jacqueline Poh, "UAE Lenders Fill Turkey Financing Void Left by Global Banks", *Bloomberg* (online), 15 June 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-15/uae-lenders-fill-financing-void-left-by-global-banks-in-turkey>.

key's energy transition and carbon-neutrality efforts.<sup>41</sup> Overall, the UAE has shown a greater willingness than Saudi Arabia to leverage its economic influence and made significant investment and trade commitments.

Moreover, this is not a one-dimensional economic relationship. The poor state of the Turkish economy and the collapse of the Turkish lira make Turkish companies particularly attractive for mergers and acquisitions, while Turkey's substantial population guarantees a large market. All signs point to long-term UAE investment plans in Turkey – particularly in strategic sectors such as energy, logistics, technology, and defence – as part of the UAE's agenda to diversify its economy beyond the carbon sector.

Cooperation in the economic sphere has the potential to spill over into the geopolitical sphere and especially into security cooperation. Turkey clearly wants to play a more important role in the region's security architecture and has already demonstrated its commitment and credibility with the blockade of Qatar. Moreover, the Gulf region in general is an important market for Turkey's growing defence sector. Before the collapse of bilateral relations, the UAE and Saudi Arabia emerged as the second and third largest customers for Turkey's defence exports between 2011 and 2016, representing around 20 per cent of Ankara's defence exports.<sup>42</sup>

In turn, the UAE is seeking to increase the number of partners in the region, especially as it decouples from Saudi Arabia.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the UAE has approached Iran almost simultaneously with Turkey as part of its regional charm offensive.<sup>44</sup> As with Turkey, the UAE has made more progress than Saudi

Arabia in its rapprochement with Iran. In this context, good relations with Turkey are also important for the UAE, especially given Turkey's role as a rising security actor and arms supplier in the region.<sup>45</sup>

Reconciliation also means geopolitical rapprochement. Since, unlike Saudi Arabia (or Israel), neither country sees Iran as an existential enemy, both countries already had a common position towards Iran. The most important outcome of the reconciliation was the reduction in tensions between Turkey and the UAE in Libya.<sup>46</sup> Although neither country has significantly changed its positions, both are reaching out to rival factions in Libya. The UAE in particular has abandoned its hardline policy and is engaging with the Dbeibah government in the west without renouncing its support for the forces in eastern Libya. During the 2023 Champions League Final in Turkey, Erdoğan facilitated a brief meeting between MBZ and Libya's Dbeibah, similar to the Erdoğan-Sisi meeting brokered by Qatar's Emir at the World Cup.<sup>47</sup>

While bilateral relations between the UAE and Turkey have improved significantly, the extent and future of this reconciliation will also depend on the dynamics between the UAE and Qatar. With rapid growth in economic relations, the UAE could soon surpass Qatar as Turkey's primary economic partner in the region. Although Turkey's deepening ties with the UAE may not be welcomed by Qatar, in this new era of multiple alignments, Doha might lack the influence – or even the desire – to prevent Ankara from strengthening its relationship with Abu Dhabi. However, if tensions between Qatar and the UAE were to resurface, it would pose a significant obstacle to the further development of Turkey-UAE relations. Despite the progress made, the UAE's relationship with Turkey is unlikely to reach the level of the Turkish-Qatari alliance, which is built on deep personal ties and a history of shared stances in regional con-

41 Alparslan Bayraktar, "Turkey's Path to Carbon-neutrality Runs through the UAE", *The National News*, 25 August 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/2023/08/25/turkeys-path-to-carbon-neutrality-runs-through-the-uae/>.

42 Ali Bakir, "Turkey's Security Role in the Gulf Region: Exploring the Case of a Newcomer", *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 5 (2023): 809–31, doi: 10.1080/14683849.2023.2182686.

43 Stephan Roll, *Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE: The End of an Alliance*, SWP Comment 47/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C47v02; Steinberg, *Regional Power, United Arab Emirates* (see note 39).

44 On the day of MBZ's Turkey visit, Iran's deputy foreign minister tweeted that Iran and the UAE have agreed to open a new chapter in bilateral relations. See "Iran and UAE Agree to Open New Chapter in Relations", *Reuters*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-uae-agree-open-new-chapter-relations-2021-11-24/>.

45 Bakir, "Turkey's Security Role in the Gulf Region" (see note 42).

46 Galip Dalay, *Turkey's Middle East Reset Policy and How It Affects Regional Security Dialogue* (London: Chatham House, 22 December 2022), <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/turkeys-middle-east-reset-policy-and-how-it-affects-regional-security-dialogue>; Badi, *The UAE Is Making a Precarious Shift* (see note 31).

47 Sinem Cengiz, "Türkiye's New Modes of Diplomacy with Regional States", *Arab News*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2322936>.

flicts.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, if Turkey is forced to choose sides, as it was during the Qatari blockade, it is likely to stand by Qatar.

## The uncertainty of reconciliation with Saudi Arabia

Turkish-Saudi relations also collapsed due to both countries being on opposite sides of the Arab Spring. However, while singling out UAE as the counterrevolutionary force, Turkey tried to preserve its good relations with Saudi Arabia. For instance, Turkey worried about Iranian gains during the Arab Spring, initially supported Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, and accused Iran of trying to dominate the region by using sectarian policies.<sup>49</sup>

However, Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia received a severe blow with the Qatar blockade imposed by the Arab Quartet and Turkey's backing of Qatar. In reaction, Saudi Arabia immediately started to give diplomatic and military support to the YPG forces in Syria.<sup>50</sup> Tensions escalated when a prominent Saudi journalist and regime critic, Jamal Khashoggi, was murdered by Saudi operatives in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul Consulate. Turkey skilfully and slowly leaked evidence of a gruesome murder committed by the Saudi operatives, linking it to the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) and thereby undermining his international credibility. However, MBS weathered political pressures, particularly due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Turkey also began to take an increasingly critical tone on the Yemeni operation, which it had supported back in 2015.<sup>51</sup> In response, Saudi Arabia deepened its

military cooperation with Greece<sup>52</sup> and introduced an unofficial trade ban towards Turkey that reduced Turkish exports to almost zero.<sup>53</sup>

Once the reconciliation processes commenced, Saudi Arabia proved more intransigent than the UAE. Emboldened by the quick and successful rapprochement with the UAE, Erdoğan announced on 3 January 2022 that he would visit the Saudi kingdom on the following month. However, this visit never materialised, as the Saudis never offered the invitation. Erdoğan managed to visit Saudi Arabia only after the Turkish court processing the murder of Khashoggi announced that the case would be transferred to Saudi Arabia. On 28 April 2022, three weeks after this announcement, Erdoğan made his first trip to Saudi Arabia since the Qatar blockade in 2017. Aside from meeting with King Salman, Erdoğan also met with MBS, signalling that tensions due to the Khashoggi case had passed. MBS reciprocated the visit on June 2022. However, unlike with the UAE, no significant agreement was signed between Turkey and Saudi Arabia during these official visits. Only much later – two months before the Turkish elections – Saudi Arabia agreed to make a US\$5 billion deposit to the Turkish Central Bank.<sup>54</sup> This remained the most concrete outcome of the Turkish-Saudi reconciliation prior to Turkish elections, along with the removal of an unofficial trade ban imposed by Saudi Arabia on Turkish goods.

**The Saudis have been much more hesitant than the UAE to improve relations, despite sharing a similar economic and security profile.**

Since the elections, however, there have been more concrete developments in economic relations, such

48 Salim Çevik, "Turkish Gulf Relation in the Context of Regional Reconciliation" (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 14 February 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkish-gulf-relations-in-the-context-of-regional-reconciliation/>.

49 Alberto Gasparetto, "Iranian – Turkish Relations in a Changing Middle East", *International Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 93, <https://czasopisma.uni.lodz.pl/international/article/download/3829/3357>.

50 Birol Baskan, "Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations", *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 16, no. 62 (2019): 97.

51 Zuhail Demirci, "Turkey Criticizes Arab Coalition over Civilian Casualties in Yemen", *Anadolu Agency* (online), 30 October 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-criticizes-arab-coalition-over-civilian-casualties-in-yemen-/1631160>.

52 Paul Iddon, "How Significant Is Greece's Growing Military Cooperation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia?", *Forbes* (online), 31 March 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2021/03/31/how-significant-is-greeces-growing-military-cooperation-with-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia/?sh=2224624819ef>.

53 "Saudi Imports from Turkey Hit Fresh Record Low amid Informal Boycott", *Reuters*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/value-saudi-imports-turkey-drops-further-january-2021-03-25/>.

54 "Saudi Arabia Deposits \$5 billion in Turkey's Central Bank", *Deutsche Welle*, 6 March 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-deposits-5-billion-in-turkeys-central-bank/a-64896666>.

as the return of Turkish construction companies to Saudi Arabia<sup>55</sup> and the signing of the largest defence export deal in Turkish history between the Saudi Ministry of Defence and Baykar Technologies on the purchase of Turkish drones.<sup>56</sup> Overall, however, the Saudis have been much slower and more hesitant than the UAE to improve relations. This is despite sharing characteristics that could pave the way for further reconciliation, such as the complementarity of both economies, Saudi Arabia's cash surplus economy and need to invest in non-oil businesses, Turkey's urgent need for foreign exchange, Saudi Arabia's quest to find more security partners, and Turkey's desire to emerge as a security actor in the region.

In the economic realm, this is not a novelty. Turkey-UAE economic relations have been historically ahead of Turkey-Saudi relations,<sup>57</sup> and with the recent signing of the free trade agreement it will improve further. In contrast, even before relations broke down, Turkey and Saudi Arabia maintained hardly any economic relations.<sup>58</sup> While minimal economic relations can signal untapped potential, it requires additional political will to tap that potential – in that regard, Riyadh seems to be lagging behind Abu Dhabi.

One explanation of course is the size of the respective countries: As a small country, the UAE can be more agile in its foreign policy. This difference in the speed with which the two countries can act is also visible in their reconciliation with other countries,

55 Menekşe Tokyay, "Erdogan Aims to Deepen Economic Ties with Gulf Nations", *Arab News*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2339547/amp>.

56 "Saudi Drone Deal Entails Technology Transfer, Joint Production", *Reuters*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/saudi-drone-deal-entails-technology-transfer-joint-production-baykar-2023-07-18/>.

57 For example, in 2013, when relations first started to deteriorate, Turkey-UAE trade was \$10.7 billion and Turkey-Saudi Arabia trade was \$5.2 billion: Author's own calculations based on World Bank data, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUR/Year/2013/>.

58 As Ali Bakir and Eyup Ersoy point out, at its peak bilateral trade between Turkey and Saudi Arabia merely constituted 1.5 per cent of Turkey's international trade, while Saudi foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ankara from 2005 to 2020 accounted for merely 1 per cent of total FDI received by Turkey during that period. See *Mohammed bin Salman Visiting Turkey: A Litmus Test for Reconciliation* (Washington D.C.: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington [AGSIW], 22 June 2022), <https://agsiw.org/mohammed-bin-salman-visiting-turkey-a-litmus-test-for-reconciliation/>.

such as with Israel and Iran. It is highly likely that the very personal feud between Erdoğan and MBS over the Kashoggi case also lingers. Relatedly, despite its economic might, the UAE cannot make a claim of regional leadership due to its sheer lack of size, whereas Turkey and Saudi Arabia are rivalling for the role of leadership of Sunni Islam in particular, and the Muslim world in general.

Moreover, a deepening of ties between Ankara and Riyadh would significantly alter the balance of power in the region and would signal a threat to Tehran, in a way Turkey-UAE reconciliation does not.<sup>59</sup> Given that all parties are striving for de-escalation and regional stability, that is not a message any of the capitals would like to send. Hence, an additional layer of caution. Riyadh is being careful in co-ordinating its reconciliation efforts with Turkey, Israel, and Iran and not leaning too much in any direction. Overall, although both countries seem to be leaving the era of tensions behind, it is not clear as to what degree they will continue their reconciliation efforts.

## Collapsed reconciliation with Israel

Turkey's relations with Israel started to deteriorate much earlier than with other countries in the region. The first major crisis between Turkey and Israel erupted in 2010 after the infamous "Mavi Marmara incident", in which a Turkish faith-based NGO, İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH), tried to break Israel's naval blockade to the Gaza Strip by delivering aid from the sea. Israeli soldiers boarded the Mavi Marmara – the flagship of the aid convoy – and killed nine Turkish citizens.<sup>60</sup> Relations broke down until a reconciliation was reached in 2013. However, bilateral relations never fully recovered and remained tense due to Turkey's championing of the Palestinian cause and the Islamist movements in the region. A second collapse in bilateral relations came in 2018, following the killing of 60 Palestinians by Israeli security forces during protests against the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. Ankara reacted harshly and

59 Ali Bakir and Eyup Ersoy, "Mohammed bin Salman Visiting Turkey: A Litmus Test for Reconciliation", Washington, D.C.: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 22 June 2022, <https://agsiw.org/mohammed-bin-salman-visiting-turkey-a-litmus-test-for-reconciliation/>.

60 "Mavi Marmara: Why Did Israel Stop the Gaza Flotilla?", *BBC News*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10203726>.

expelled the Israeli ambassador, prompting Israel to retaliate.<sup>61</sup>

Similar to Syria and Egypt, relations with Israel also began to recover initially due to contact being initiated between intelligence services. Joint operations, such as those countering Iranian threats to Israeli tourists in Turkey, accelerated reconciliation.<sup>62</sup> Success in intelligence cooperation facilitated diplomatic reconciliation efforts. The departure of Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom Erdoğan had a long and hostile relationship, removed another impediment to diplomatic reconciliation. In March 2022, Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, visited Turkey, marking the first high-level visit since 2008, and he was welcomed by a full military procession in Erdoğan's palace. Later, the contact made between Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Erdoğan as well as between the respective foreign ministers gave more substance to Herzog's mostly ceremonial visit.

Reconciliation attempts were first put to the test during the spring seasons of 2022 and 2023, when violent clashes between Palestinians and Israelis typically increase during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This time, Turkey skilfully ignored these violent clashes and muted its criticism of Israel, demonstrating seriousness in improving its relations with Israel. Both countries announced a full restoration of diplomatic relations and an exchange of ambassadors in 17 August 2022.<sup>63</sup> Even the re-election of Netanyahu in November 2022 did not affect the reconciliation process between the two countries, and Erdoğan and Netanyahu met face to face in New York on September 2023.

Turkey showed eagerness for reconciliation with Israel as it serves as a strategic move for Turkey to alleviate its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean. Reconciliation with Israel is also important regarding the optics of Erdoğan's regime in the West. Ankara recognises the significance of Israel's support in miti-

gating the opposition that is prevalent in the US Congress due to long-standing anti-Turkish sentiments. Moreover, reconciliation with Israel is the most significant demonstration of Erdoğan's seriousness in initiating a new era of foreign policy that is based more on pragmatism and moderation.

Reconciliation is also linked, at least indirectly, to Turkey's deteriorating relations with Iran. While Turkish-Iranian relations traditionally swing between restrained rivalry and limited cooperation, the collapses of the Syrian and Iraqi nation states transformed this calculus and pitted the two regional heavyweights against each other in a spiral of conflict.<sup>64</sup> The fact that Turkey is entering a period of tense and conflictual relations with Iran makes Turkey a tempting ally for the anti-Iranian countries in the region, and particularly Israel. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the reconciliation process started with intelligence cooperation directed against Iran. Both countries' mutual support for Azerbaijan in the Azeri-Armenian conflict and potential cooperation in the South Caucasus is another dimension of their shared anti-Iranian position and has been a facilitator of their reconciliation. However, although Turkish-Iranian relations are deteriorating, Turkey does not share Israel's views on Iran either. For Israel, Iran is an existential threat, whereas for Turkey it is merely a rival.

Finally, Turkish-Israeli relations can gain a very strong economic dimension in the long term if both countries develop a cooperative relationship on the eastern Mediterranean gas fields. A gas pipeline that would deliver Israeli gas to Turkey and from Turkey to Europe would have a lasting impact on bilateral relations. The project is economically attractive as well, since transporting gas through pipelines is cheaper than the current mode of transport, which goes through liquefied natural gas facilities in Egypt. A pipeline from Israeli gas fields to Turkey would cost up to €1.5 billion and would be much more realistic than the now largely defunct €6 billion EastMed pipeline project designed to link Israel to Cyprus, Greece, and Italy.<sup>65</sup> However, even before 7 October, politics stood in the way of economic cooperation. Turkey is more enthusiastic for this project, as Erdoğan has

61 "Turkey, Israel to Restore Full Diplomatic Ties", *France 24*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220817-turkey-israel-to-restore-full-diplomatic-ties>.

62 Pro-government media also promoted this narrative of anti-Iranian cooperation. For instance, see "Iranian Cell Planning Attack on Israelis Nabbed in Turkey: Report", *Daily Sabah*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/investigations/iranian-cell-planning-attack-on-israelis-nabbed-in-turkey-report>.

63 "Turkey, Israel to Restore Full Diplomatic Ties", *France 24*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220817-turkey-israel-to-restore-full-diplomatic-ties>.

64 Azizi and Çevik, *Turkish and Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Syria* (see note 9).

65 Kadri Tastan, *Turkey and European Energy (In)Security*, SWP Comment 38/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C38.

repeatedly stated his readiness for energy cooperation between the two countries.<sup>66</sup> Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, however, has never reached a level that could commit Israel to a long-lasting economic cooperation that would “create an interdependency in favour of Turkey”.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, Israel, on several occasions, has postponed the planned visits of Turkey’s energy minister until political relations are more developed.<sup>68</sup> However, bilateral talks regarding energy cooperation are suspended for the time being due to tensions in Turkey-Israel relations as a result of Israel’s operations in Gaza.

## Future of reconciliation following 7 October

If it was not for Hamas’ attack on Israel on 7 October and the subsequent Israeli attacks in Gaza, Netanyahu was going to visit Turkey, demonstrating Israel’s willingness to continue the reconciliation process. Erdoğan’s initial reaction to the attacks and subsequent Israeli retaliations also demonstrated his seriousness about reconciliation efforts with Israel. In the face of the disregard for civilian life by both Israel and Hamas, Erdoğan underlined the sanctity of civilian life and called on both sides to exercise restraint.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, he reportedly asked the Hamas leadership in Istanbul to leave the country.<sup>70</sup> Although Turkish officials later denied this claim, it

was clear that initially Turkey did not come forward to defend Hamas, or even the rights of Palestinians. In that sense, Erdoğan’s early reaction was in line with his reactions during Ramadan in 2022 and 2023, and he refrained from confronting Israel. However, two weeks into the conflict, Erdoğan’s rhetoric changed sharply, mostly due to domestic political considerations. On 25 October, he announced that he did not consider Hamas to be a terrorist organisation, calling its fighters “mujahideen” (freedom fighters).<sup>71</sup> From that point on, Erdoğan reverted to his traditional stance against Israel, calling the country “a terror state” and accusing the international community of turning a blind eye to Israel’s atrocities. He even threatened Israel, claiming that Turkey could enter Israel as it did Libya and Karabakh.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, on 3 May, Turkey took the unprecedented step of severing all economic ties with Israel. In the past decade, trade has never been affected by the constant political crises between the two countries and has always been seen as the last bastion of bilateral relations.<sup>73</sup>

### Domestic political calculations forced Erdoğan to halt reconciliation with Israel.

Thus, in the period after 7 October, bilateral relations declined to a level never seen in previous crises. However, a more careful analysis of how Erdoğan reacted to this war and how and why his position has changed since 7 October reveals that he has tried very hard to avoid this outcome. In sum, Erdoğan has tried to preserve reconciliation efforts while avoiding the perception that he has entirely abandoned the Palestinians. The long duration and brutality of Israel’s war on Gaza has made it impossible for Erdoğan to walk this tightrope. For months, for example, Erdoğan

<sup>66</sup> Fulya Ozerkan, “Turkey Dreams of Far-fetched Gas Pipeline with Israel”, *Times of Israel*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkey-dreams-of-far-fetched-gas-pipeline-with-israel/>.

<sup>67</sup> Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, “Making Sense of Israel, Erdoğan, and Turkey”, *Mosaic*, 8 July 2022, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2022/07/making-sense-of-israel-erdogan-and-turkey/>.

<sup>68</sup> Hüseyin Hayatsever, “İsrail’le enerji diyalogu ertelendi: Fatih Dönmez’in ziyareti haziranda” [Energy dialog with Israel postponed: Fatih Dönmez’s visit in June], *Cumhuriyet*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/dunya/israille-enerji-diyalogu-ertelendi-fatih-donmez-in-ziyareti-haziranda-1939555>.

<sup>69</sup> Diyar Guldogan, “Türkiye Calls on Israelis, Palestinians to Act with Restraint”, *Anadolu Agency*, 7 October 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-calls-on-israelis-palestinians-to-act-with-restraint/3010374>.

<sup>70</sup> Fehim Tastekin, “Eying Gaza Mediator Role, Turkey Cools Hamas Ties, Erdogan Restrains Rhetoric”, *Al Monitor*, 22 October 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/eying-gaza-mediator-role-turkey-cools-hamas-ties-erdogan-restrains-rhetoric#ixzz8GxfEs2K1>.

<sup>71</sup> Tuvan Gumrukcu and Hüseyin Hayatsever, “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Hamas Is Not Terrorist Organisation, Cancels Trip to Israel”, *Reuters*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-hamas-is-not-terrorist-organisation-2023-10-25/>.

<sup>72</sup> For more on this statement of Erdoğan and the recent escalation in his rhetoric, see Salim Çevik, “Turkey Is Not an Actor in the Gaza Conflict” (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 2 August 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkey-is-not-an-actor-in-the-gaza-conflict/>.

<sup>73</sup> On the contrary, trade increased from around \$3.5 billion in 2010 to more than \$9 billion in 2022: Author’s own calculations based on TUIK data, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=Dis-Ticaret-104>.

ğan resisted growing public pressure to cut economic ties with Israel. It was only after he suffered the biggest defeat of his political life in the 31 March local elections that he took the steps to limit and eventually halt trade with Israel. This defeat is attributed, at least in part, to the rise of the New Welfare Party, which campaigned on the inconsistencies between Erdoğan's words and deeds, and demanded the cessation of trade with Israel. In a sense, therefore, Erdoğan was forced to take this step.

Moreover, unlike in previous conflicts, Turkey had been careful to not cut diplomatic ties. When Israel recalled its diplomatic staff in response to Erdoğan's statements, Turkey avoided retaliating and only called upon Israel's ambassador for consultations. Furthermore, Erdoğan made it clear that Turkey would continue to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, even though he is finished dealing with Netanyahu.<sup>74</sup> Thus, he tried to preserve relations with Israel by making a distinction between Netanyahu and Israel.

Erdoğan also has been careful to avoid criticising the Abraham Accords or other Arab leaders for not raising their voices against Israel. This stands in stark contrast to his reactions during previous conflict cycles, when he routinely attacked Arab leaders for their disregard of Palestinian rights and passivity against Israel.<sup>75</sup> This is particularly noteworthy considering statements such as Abu Dhabi's commitment to the Abraham Accords and Riyadh's ongoing interest in talks with Israel on the normalisation of relations. It also demonstrates the importance attributed by Erdoğan to regional reconciliation.

However, even though Erdoğan might be expecting to continue the reconciliation process with Israel once the fighting stops and Netanyahu is allegedly removed from power, he may be too optimistic in that expectation. Each cycle of reconciliation and confrontation towards Israel creates future problems concerning reliability. Even in 2021 – 2022, when Erdoğan approached Israel, there had been considerable suspicion on the Israeli side about his intentions,

and Israel dragged its feet for a while.<sup>76</sup> These suspicions about Erdoğan wanting to resume reconciliation efforts would be even deeper in a post-conflict, post-Netanyahu Israel.

Thus, while cooperation against Iran – especially in the South Caucasus – the economic imperatives of energy cooperation, and the positive attitudes of both countries towards regional reconciliation will push both countries towards advancing reconciliation, it remains to be seen whether these positive prospects will be sufficient to reinvigorate Turkish-Israeli reconciliation efforts. At present, however, these efforts seem to be dead for the foreseeable future.

<sup>74</sup> “Erdoğan Says Netanyahu ‘No Longer Someone We Can Talk To’”, *Hurriyet Daily News* (online), 5 November 2023, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-says-netanyahu-no-longer-someone-we-can-talk-to-187589>.

<sup>75</sup> “Erdogan: Turkey May Suspend Ties with UAE over Israel Deal”, *Al Jazeera* (online), 15 August 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/15/erdogan-turkey-may-suspend-ties-with-uae-over-israel-deal>.

<sup>76</sup> Cohen Yanarocak, “Making Sense of Israel, Erdoğan, and Turkey” (see note 67).

# Structural limits of reconciliation

In general, Turkey has been more willing than its peers to engage in reconciliation initiatives. However, as noted above, each attempts at reconciliation has had its own specific circumstances and led to different outcomes. But these processes are also constrained by a more structural set of problems underlying the reconciliation processes. This section aims to examine these issues.

## Personalisation of the regimes

Aside from political, economic, and structural factors, personal factors also play a large role in determining the future of these reconciliation efforts. This may not be surprising, given that political life and decision-making in all the countries mentioned are becoming increasingly personalised. Personalism can be defined as “the dominance of the political realm by a single individual. (In personalist politics) leaders themselves are disproportionately influential on policies and outcomes, often at the expense of rules and institutions.”<sup>77</sup> Several studies have shown that the rise of personalism is a global phenomenon that is common among democracies and autocracies alike.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Turkey has evolved from being an electoral democracy to a personalist autocracy. In this process, Turkey’s executive system has also shifted from a parliamentary system to a hyper-presidential system, in which all power is concentrated in the hands of the presi-

dent.<sup>79</sup> The personalisation of politics can also be observed in countries with which Turkey is aiming for reconciliation. In fact, personalism may be expected of monarchies, where the regime type dictates it. However, the personalisation of power exhibited by MBS and MBZ is exceptional, even when considering the standards of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Egypt has also evolved from a military autocracy into a personalistic autocracy. Even in Israel, Netanyahu’s stint as the longest-serving prime minister weakened institutions and led to the emergence of a personalistic government.<sup>81</sup>

The personalistic nature of these regimes has impacted reconciliation attempts differently. In the UAE, MBZ’s pragmatism has facilitated rapid reconciliation, whereas the personal grudges of Sisi and MBS have hindered progress with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. MBS delayed Erdoğan’s visit to Saudi Arabia to have Erdoğan concede publicly, and Sisi insisted on a personal meeting with Erdoğan before moving forward.<sup>82</sup> In Israel, reconciliation efforts progressed after Netanyahu’s departure, with both sides exchanging ambassadors before the 2022 elections to

<sup>77</sup> Erica Frantz et al., “Personalism in Democracies: A New Index Luminare Report” (2021), 1, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/b/13577/files/2021/06/Luminare1.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz and Joseph Wright, “The New Dictators”, *Foreign Affairs*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/new-dictators>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz and Joseph Wright, “The Global Rise of Personalized Politics: It’s Not Just Dictators Anymore”, *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2017): 7–19, doi: 10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302735.

<sup>79</sup> Sinem Adar and Gunter Seufert, *Turkey’s Presidential System after Two and a Half Years*, SWP Research Paper 2/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021RP02.

<sup>80</sup> Par Ahmed Fathi, “Portraits of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) — Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of the Executive Council of Abu Dhabi” (Paris: Institute Montaigne, 13 November 2018), <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/node/6266>.

<sup>81</sup> Gideon Rahat, “Personalization and Personalism in the 2019–2021 Elections”, in *The Elections in Israel, 2019–2021*, ed. Michal Shamir and Rahat Gideon (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>82</sup> Ragıp Soylu, “Erdogan-Sisi Handshake: Qatar Planned the Meeting for Months”, *Middle East Eye*, 21 November 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-erdogan-sisi-handshake-planned-months>.



avoid any stalling under a potential return of Netanyahu.<sup>83</sup> Overall, personalism points to a significant weakness of the reconciliation process: the weak institutional foundations.<sup>84</sup>

### Reconciliation processes are fragile due to highly personalised regimes and unpredictable leaders.

This raises another problem regarding the future and durability of attempts at reconciliation. Sudden changes in direction are common in personalised regimes. Autocrats tend to shift their policies quickly. Moreover, even if the leader remains committed to his policies, the future of these policies is intrinsically linked to the life span of the leader and his ability to remain in power. Hence, it does not allow for the emergence of a long-term regional political alliance or security architecture.

### Erdoğan's credibility

General problems associated with the personalism of these regimes have more acute implications for Turkey. This is due to Erdoğan's political style of constantly bickering, manoeuvring, and engaging in brinkmanship that he has demonstrated over his last two decades in power. Although acknowledged as a skilled tactician, his approach has led to frequent and abrupt shifts in Turkish foreign policy.

While Erdoğan's pragmatism made these reconciliation efforts possible in the first place, his demonstrated level of pragmatism also ensures that no agreement with him is final, as bilateral problems are never solved but merely put aside for the time being. Consequently, "with so many zigzags over the years, Erdoğan is not considered a reliable ally, partner or counterpart" by the regional states.<sup>85</sup>

A lack of trust in Erdoğan was also palpable when conducting bilateral relations and led to all parties cautiously anticipating the outcome of Turkey's pre-

sidential election in May 2023 before taking further steps towards reconciliation. Assad, for instance, insisted that he would not meet with Erdoğan before the elections. Egypt likewise waited to see the election results before formalising its normalisation of relations with Turkey, that is, appointing ambassadors. Netanyahu avoided participating in a bilateral meeting until after the elections. Bilateral meetings between Erdoğan and MBS did not yield any economic cooperation agreements until after the elections. The UAE ratified the free trade agreement three days after the second and final round of presidential elections.

One can say that most regional leaders would have preferred a Turkey that is not ruled by Erdoğan. As stated above, their measured approach reflected a reluctance to fully engage while there was a realistic chance of Erdoğan's departure from power.<sup>86</sup> It was only after the certainty of his continued leadership for at least another five years emerged that the pace of reconciliation accelerated, underscoring Erdoğan's diminished standing in terms of respect and confidence among regional counterparts.

### Elite-based processes

A fundamental weakness of all current reconciliation efforts in the Middle East is that they lack a people-to-people dimension. Despite a significant body of literature pointing to the importance of the people-to-people dimension as an effective and complementary form of diplomacy<sup>87</sup> as well as a "useful conflict resolution strategy"<sup>88</sup> for reducing hostile inter-state relations, reconciliation efforts in the region to date have been limited to interactions at the level of political elites without popular participation. Moreover, there are no mechanisms designed to increase people-to-people involvement, such as tourism and education to help people move between one country and another.

<sup>86</sup> In the UAE, the royal family's newspaper even stated two days before the election that they are ready to work with whoever wins. See here, <https://twitter.com/ragipsoylu/status/1657331023254900736>.

<sup>87</sup> Gregory J. Payne, "Reflections on Public Diplomacy: People-to-people Communication", *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 4 (2009): 579–606.

<sup>88</sup> "People to People Diplomacy", in *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace*, ed. Nigel Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195334685.001.0001/acref-9780195334685-e-564>.

<sup>83</sup> Selin Nasi, "Seçimlerin gölgesinde Türkiye-İsrail yakınlaşma süreci" [Turkey-Israel rapprochement in the shadow of elections], *Politikayol*, 30 October 2022, <https://www.politikayol.com/secimlerin-golgesinde-turkiye-israil-yakinlasma-sureci/>.

<sup>84</sup> Bakir, "The 2021–2022 'De-Escalation Moment' in the Middle East" (see note 27), 61.

<sup>85</sup> İlhan Uzgel, "Turkish Foreign Policy after Presidentialism" (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 25 October 2022), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkish-foreign-policy-after-presidentialism>.

Similarly, Turkey's reconciliation efforts are also taking place at a time when anti-Arab sentiments are running high in the Turkish public. Turkey is hosting the world's largest refugee population, as 3.6 million Syrians are currently residing in Turkey.<sup>89</sup> Although the Turkish public had generally been welcoming in the early years of the conflict, anti-refugee sentiments have risen to higher levels in recent years due to the deepening economic crisis, rising unemployment rates, and the realisation that most Syrians are no longer temporary guests but destined to stay. Anti-Syrian rhetoric soon translated into anti-Arabism.<sup>90</sup> Simultaneously, the visibility of rich Arabs, mostly from the Gulf region, and resentment towards them has also contributed to rampant anti-Arabism among the public.<sup>91</sup>

While Turkish public opinion always favored Palestinians in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the recent war and the associated brutality has only helped to increase anti-Israeli sentiments and even led to instances of anti-Semitism. Without a people-to-people dimension, it is almost impossible for the process to lead to a stable regional peace project.

### Domestic political constraints

Despite the elitist nature of the reconciliation processes, domestic political considerations also have a certain importance. This situation has so far been clearly seen in the efforts to normalise relations with Israel. While the Arab public's opposition to Israel's war on Gaza has kept these regimes from proceeding with the normalisation of relations with Israel, the issue is more acute in Turkey, not because the Palestinian cause carries more weight in Turkey than in the Arab countries, but because Erdoğan has to win elections and thus has to consider public sentiment more than Arab autocrats do.

<sup>89</sup> "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey", *UNHCR Türkiye* (online), <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>.

<sup>90</sup> Shona Bhattacharyya, "Anti-Arab Sentiment Sweeps Turkey, Home to World's Largest Refugee Population", *France 24*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/focus/20220117-anti-arab-sentiment-sweeps-turkey-home-to-world-s-largest-refugee-population>.

<sup>91</sup> "Kuwaiti Tourist 'Beaten Unconscious' in Turkey's Trabzon amid Rising anti-Arab Racism", *The New Arab*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/kuwaiti-tourist-assaulted-turkey-amid-anti-arab-racism>.

Despite the fact that Turkey is no longer classified as a democracy by any of the indices,<sup>92</sup> it is often considered to be a competitive authoritarian regime, which means that elections still play a big role in Turkish politics. Erdoğan has a remarkable track record of continuous electoral victories, but he relies on a slim majority. In the last presidential election, in May 2023, he could not secure victory in the first round, and in the second round he only won with 52 per cent of the vote. Moreover, in the 2024 local elections, the AKP came in second place for the first time since its founding in 2001, and alarm bells began ringing about Erdoğan's political future.<sup>93</sup>

Despite Erdoğan's desire not to forgo efforts to normalise relations with Israel by supporting the Palestinian cause, he is being forced to do so, in no small part due to his domestic competitor's quite public adoption of the Palestinian line. As said before, even though Erdoğan made calls for restraint in the early days of the conflict, he eventually changed track.

In order to understand how domestic politics is constraining Erdoğan's moves, one also has to acknowledge the radical transformation of the religious-conservative party landscape in Turkey. Unlike a few years ago, today there are a plethora of actors and parties competing for the votes of Turkey's large religious-conservative constituency. Throughout the last two decades, the AKP has been the main actor representing the religious-conservative vote. The only other party with some strength has been the Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party), which has either failed to enter the parliament or has been represented in the parliament by one or two MPs. However, other than the AKP, there are four other Islamist-conservative parties in the Turkish parliament today: Hürda-Par (Free Cause Party), Yeniden Refah (New Welfare Party), Gelecek (Future Party) and Saadet Partisi. In the most recent conflict, all four parties have raised the issue of Palestine, to the potential dislike of Erdoğan, thereby forcing him to take a clearer stance, which jeopardises the process of normalising relations with Israel. In the foreseeable future, they will continue to exert constraint over Erdoğan's policies towards Israel.

<sup>92</sup> For instance, Turkey has been classified as "not free" according to the Freedom House index since 2018, see <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey>.

<sup>93</sup> Salim Çevik, "Local Elections Show Turkey's Democratic Resilience" (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 2 May 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/local-elections-show-turkeys-democratic-resilience/>.

# Turkey's unrealistic expectations

## Limitations of economic relations

Economic expectations have been a key driver of Turkey's regional reconciliation efforts, partly explaining the faster progress with the UAE and Saudi Arabia as compared to the slower pace with Syria, Egypt, and Israel. This is not only because these countries lack economies of size, but also because Turkey's relations with Egypt and Israel have already been compartmentalised, to the extent that economic relations were not harmed throughout the decade of conflict. As stated above, trade with Egypt remained relatively stable,<sup>94</sup> and Turkey even experienced a boom with Israel.<sup>95</sup>

In contrast, economic relations with the two Gulf countries have great potential, both in the short and long terms. In the time leading up to the May 2023 elections in Turkey, both countries extended Erdoğan a helping hand, but not at a level that would ensure electoral victory. Moreover, the US\$5 billion provided by each country to the Turkish Central Bank, either in the form of swap agreements or loans, pales in comparison to similar agreements that Turkey made with Russia, Qatar, and China. Therefore, one could say that reconciliation efforts with the two Gulf countries have only partially met expectations in the short run.

Beyond cash injections, the UAE and Saudi Arabia present significant economic potential for trade and investment with Turkey. Notable developments include Saudi Arabia lifting its unofficial trade ban on Turkish goods and the UAE signing the CEPA

agreement with Turkey, which is also expecting significant investment from these two economies with cash surpluses. So far, Saudi Arabia has refrained from making commitments regarding investment, whereas the UAE has already made significant promises of investment in Turkey, having pledged at least US\$10 billion. However, it is not uncommon for the Gulf countries to throw around big numbers for PR purposes. Although the recent collapse of the Turkish lira makes Turkish companies and assets financially attractive, only a small fraction of these investments have materialised thus far.<sup>96</sup> This was also true with Qatar – Turkey's long-time ally – which never matched the high numbers it promised. Gulf countries remain cautious, partly due to doubts about Erdoğan's commitment to economic rationality.<sup>97</sup>

Based on the state of bilateral economic relations, one could conclude that Gulf countries' support for the Erdoğan regime is significant but cautious. Whether the reconciliation efforts can be sustained in the long run will be at least partially determined by the level of long-term economic cooperation.

## Exaggerated expectations in terms of foreign policy benefits

Turkey's reconciliation efforts have partly been driven by its desire to overcome isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, where it has longstanding

<sup>94</sup> Bilateral trade with Egypt in 2012 – the year before relations collapsed – amounted to US\$5.021 billion. During the following crisis-ridden decade, bilateral trade hit its lowest level in 2016 with US\$4.277 billion and its highest in 2021 with US\$6.724 billion (author's own calculations based on TUIK data).

<sup>95</sup> Bilateral trade increased from US\$3.440 billion in 2010 to US\$8.658 billion in 2022 (author's own calculations based on TUIK data).

<sup>96</sup> Asli Kandemir, Patrick Sykes and Anthony Di Paola, "Masdar M&A Talks in Turkey Collapse in Blow to Investment Drive", *Bloomberg* (online), 31 October 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-10-31/masdar-fiba-m-a-talks-collapse-in-blow-to-turkey-uae-investment-drive>.

<sup>97</sup> Nader Habibi, "Turkey's Economic Crisis and Erdoğan's Multiple Rapprochement Initiatives" (online) (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies, April 2023), <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb152.pdf>.

tensions with Greece and Cyprus. A key goal of Turkish foreign policy is to prevent external actors such as the United States and the European Union (EU) from getting involved in these disputes. However, in recent years, Greece and Cyprus have strengthened ties with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, forming alliances that include security and economic cooperation. These countries have conducted joint military drills, deepened security ties, and established the EMGF — excluding Turkey. They have also resolved maritime boundaries among themselves to manage potential natural gas resources. Turkey is now aiming to divide this alliance through its reconciliation efforts. In fact, Turkish officials have been quite outspoken about the link between Turkey's reconciliation efforts with these four countries and Greece's improving relations with them. For instance, Ibrahim Kalin, former presidential spokesperson and now head of the intelligence, framed the reconciliation processes as a response to Greek attempts to increase its influence in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>98</sup> Commenting on the reconciliation process with Egypt, Erdoğan clearly stated that all that Turkey is demanding from Egypt is to reconsider its eastern Mediterranean policy.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, both Israel and Egypt have repeatedly stated that their ongoing reconciliation attempts with Turkey will not undermine their alliance with Greece and Cyprus.<sup>100</sup> Even Saudi Arabia, which does not have a direct stake in the east Mediterranean conflict, has been careful to maintain strong relations with Greece. One month after visiting Turkey, MBS also paid a visit to Greece. Unlike the crown prince's visit to Turkey, 17 bilateral agreements were signed during this visit, including one on the installation of an electricity cable between the two countries that would, according to MBS, provide Europe with much cheaper energy.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, it is

clear that Turkey will have a hard time breaking up the newly established alliances of Greece and Cyprus in the region. Overall, how these four countries — and particularly Israel and Egypt — react to Turkish demands regarding the Mediterranean will largely shape the future and extent of their reconciliation efforts.

Even though currently lukewarm relations between Turkey and Greece have pushed this dimension to the backburner, potential Turkish-Greek tensions in the future will be a litmus test for Turkey's insistence on the reconciliation processes. At the moment, it seems that Turkey's expectations are too high.

**98** See CNN Türk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TS1hIFWtd0E>.

**99** Sami Hegazi, "Erdoğan's Handshake with Al-Sisi: Another Step towards Normalising Relations", *Daily News Egypt*, 21 November 2022, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2022/11/21/erdogans-handshake-with-al-sisi-another-step-towards-normalising-relations/>.

**100** "Israel's President Heads to Greece to Calm Ally ahead of Turkey Visit", *i24*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/1645686204-israel-s-president-heads-to-greece-to-calm-ally-ahead-of-turkey-visit>.

**101** Helena Smith, "Greece Rolls Out Red Carpet for Crown Prince, as Khashoggi Killing Falls off Agenda", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/>

[jul/27/greeces-welcome-to-mohammed-bin-salman-another-sign-of-western-forgiveness](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/27/greeces-welcome-to-mohammed-bin-salman-another-sign-of-western-forgiveness).

# Conclusions and recommendations

The previous era of conflicts between Turkey and its regional rivals has not only led these countries to political and economic exhaustion, it has also created acute problems for the EU in the form of geopolitical and military crises in its immediate neighbourhood (Syria, Libya, eastern Mediterranean). These multiple crises have undermined regional security and made the EU particularly vulnerable to security threats such as terrorism and organised crime as well as to waves of migration. A Middle East in turmoil further threatens the already fragile energy security of Europe. Therefore, reconciliation at the regional level as well as reconciliation between Turkey and its rivals are good news for Europe.

However, Europe should also be realistic in its expectations. These reconciliation efforts do not mean the emergence of a new regional security architecture with a more stable and peaceful region. Moreover, as the escalation of violence since 7 October has shown, ignoring or postponing the solution of fundamental problems – in this case the Palestine question – or frozen conflicts can trigger explosions of violence. Aside from the Palestine issue, deepening authoritarianism, economic collapse, state fragility, and the regionalised Kurdish issue are other potential pitfalls to a stable regional order.

In its current form, the reconciliation process consists of interrelated but distinct bilateral engagement processes, each with different potentials and possible degrees of success. Put in other words, this is a fragile peace and not a regional solution yet. Due to the delicate nature of the reconciliation processes and potential unresolved problems, there is an imminent risk of reverting back to political and military conflict (in the form of proxy wars) in the region.

The geopolitical expectations of the countries are not always easily reconcilable, as has been observed through the stalled reconciliation between Turkey and Egypt due to their divergent positions on Libya. Furthermore, the intersection of domestic politics and

foreign policy can always undermine the reconciliation process, as observed in Turkish-Israeli relations. And in certain cases, even if reconciliation efforts make some inroads, these could take the form of anti-Western cooperation, as observed in the Turkish-Syrian détente.

Moreover, there is a risk of reconciliation leading to different forms of conflict. If the current reconciliation processes continue to deepen, this will open channels of security cooperation between Turkey and some of its former rivals, namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and even Israel if reconciliation efforts continue once the war on Gaza is over. In fact, security cooperation is one of the main drivers for these countries to reconcile with Turkey. Given Turkey's deepening rivalry with Iran regarding Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus, such a cooperation has the potential to transform into an anti-Iranian axis and reignite the conflicts in the region between a pro-Iranian and an anti-Iranian camp. At the moment, the war on Gaza and Turkey's and Iran's common stance on this war are preventing the emergence of such blocs. In the long term, however, new conflicts between these blocs can only be avoided if Turkish-Iranian tensions are kept under control and Iran's reconciliation with the Gulf Arab states proceeds in parallel with the Abraham Accords regime.

Another area where Turkey's current reconciliation efforts may trigger further conflicts is the eastern Mediterranean, given that one of the drivers of the reconciliation process for Turkey has been the desire to break up the alliance between Greece and Cyprus and Turkey's Middle Eastern rivals. As Turkey's Middle Eastern reconciliation efforts progress, its stance on the eastern Mediterranean against Greece and Cyprus may become more confrontational. In the short term, such a danger seems to have been averted by the relatively improved relations between Greece and Turkey, and the ongoing thaw in bilateral relations should be

supported by the EU.<sup>102</sup> However, fundamental problems such as maritime border disputes, the length of territorial waters in the Aegean, and the Cyprus question remain, and given the potential usefulness of conflicts with Greece in Turkey's domestic politics (and vice versa in Greek domestic politics), tensions may rise at any time. In such a scenario, the EU would certainly be drawn into the conflict due to the involvement of two member states, and the EU's role as a mediator would be limited by Ankara's perception of prejudice due to Greece and Cyprus being EU members.

### Risk of authoritarian consolidation

Another potential problem that may arise from the ongoing rapprochement process is the risk of authoritarian consolidation. Reconciliation between rival actors in foreign policy is also driven by autocratic leaders' desire to focus on consolidating their rule at home.<sup>103</sup> With regard to the domestic politics of these countries, reconciliation efforts serve to mute domestic critics and increase autocratic consolidation. This can happen in three ways. First, the regimes that prioritise domestic stability will now be able to invest the large amounts of money they had spent on regional adventures towards strengthening their control over their populations, either through suppression or rent distribution. Second, by agreeing not to harm each other, they will silence the media organisations criticising rival regimes. And finally, through reconciliation efforts, these regimes may cooperate to suppress political dissent and increase their autocratic grip over their populations.

In order to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia, Turkey dropped the Khashoggi case, and in order to appease the Egyptian government, it silenced Egyptian media channels in Istanbul. Moreover, the MB diaspora currently residing in Turkey now faces the danger of extradition. There are already unverified accounts of Turkey deporting certain individuals

to Egypt, where they would not face fair trials.<sup>104</sup> Fearing such a scenario, these individuals might consider leaving Turkey and seek political asylum in Europe.<sup>105</sup>

On the reverse side, the UAE has silenced Sedat Peker, a mafia boss close to Erdoğan who turned into a whistleblower. Throughout the summer of 2021, Peker had broadcasted nine videos over YouTube in which he exposed several criminal acts and human rights violations by the Erdoğan regime.<sup>106</sup> As each video reached an audience of five to ten million viewers, these videos became the central topic of public debate for months and pushed Erdoğan regime into a corner. Peker also promised to broadcast new videos before the presidential elections that would have even more significant revelations about the criminal dossier of the Erdoğan regime. As part of the process of reconciliation with the UAE, Ankara has ensured that the UAE will prevent Peker from shooting new videos or releasing new political scandals. This underscores how reconciliation between authoritarian regimes can facilitate transnational repression, helping them control domestic narratives and deepen authoritarian practices.

Intelligence cooperation is another dimension of authoritarian consolidation. In fact, it was due to contact made behind the scenes between intelligence organisations that initiated several reconciliation efforts in the first place. Although intelligence cooperation may help countries better coordinate against criminal activities and security threats, a downside is that sometimes it can lead to better cooperation between these regimes in repressing political dissent. Through intelligence cooperation, these regimes will improve their surveillance capabilities and increase their autocratic grip. One well-known example is when Israel provided the Pegasus spyware programme to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Through this program, these regimes hacked the phones of several journalists and political

**102** Galip Dalay, "The EU Should Support the Thaw in Greece – Turkey Relations" (online) (London: Chatham House, 5 January 2024), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/eu-should-support-thaw-greece-turkey-relations>.

**103** Hamidreza Azizi, "The Rise of an Authoritarian Order in the Middle East", *National Interest* (online), 5 October 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/rise-authoritarian-order-middle-east-206693>.

**104** For these politically motivated trials in Egypt and the prison conditions afterwards, see Stephan Roll, *Political Prisoners in Sisi's Egypt*, SWP Comment 49/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021C49.

**105** Anchal Vohra, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Survival Is Now in Question", *Foreign Policy* (online), 7 August 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/07/muslim-brotherhood-turkey-survival/>.

**106** See Reis Sedat Peker, <https://www.youtube.com/c/sedatpekerreis/videos?app=desktop>.

dissidents and managed to keep their activities under surveillance.<sup>107</sup>

Overall, although the reconciliation process is unlikely to translate into a stabilised autocratic regional system — due to the personalised and unstable natures of the regimes — it will clearly help autocratic consolidation in each and every country.

## Recommendations

Although these challenges remain to be addressed, the war on Gaza has also demonstrated that the EU and Germany have limited political clout in the region. Moreover, the war has not only significantly damaged the credibility of Europe and Germany in the region, but also in Turkey, where people are accusing Germany and Europe of unconditionally supporting Israel's human rights abuses.<sup>108</sup>

Nevertheless, there are still options for handling the reconciliation process. Given the several potential pitfalls, the Middle East should not disappear from the political agenda of Europe. These reconciliation processes need to be monitored closely, and de-escalation mechanisms need to be built in order to prevent any potential challenges to diplomatic processes. Furthermore, multilateral frameworks similar to the Berlin Process<sup>109</sup> and the Baghdad Summit<sup>110</sup> need to

be developed in order to support the diplomatic efforts for a rapprochement. Such initiatives and venues can serve as mechanisms of de-escalation and conflict management while also serving as a platform to discuss and deepen regional cooperation. Regional ownership of the processes is particularly important. The EU should also strengthen central governance structures in fragile countries such as Lebanon and Iraq to prevent these countries from becoming battlegrounds for proxy wars. A more coherent EU policy is required for these processes to be effective.

The EU can also support the development of existing regional frameworks, above all, the EMGF. The integration of Turkey into a renewed EMGF is crucial for long-term stability. Turkey's exclusion from the Forum spurred more aggressive policies, and its inclusion could establish a multilateral framework for resolving issues with regional actors, particularly Greece. Such frameworks are vital, as they prevent unilateral solutions and reduce tensions. Collaboration in the energy sector, particularly in renewables such as offshore wind energy and green hydrogen, could mitigate divergences between Turkey and Greece. The EU could lead the creation of a new multilateral framework or expand the EMGF to facilitate the energy transition in the region.

Turkey's integration into this energy transition framework could also positively impact Libya by improving the prospects for a political solution. Energy deals — including the possibility of establishing an Israel-Turkey gas pipeline after the Gaza war — could further political reconciliation, contingent on the design of Turkey's role as either a transit country or a major market for Israeli gas. Such a design would create mutual dependency on energy resources and could represent a significant step towards a sustainable reconciliation.

Given the primacy of the economy as a driving force in reconciliation processes, Europe can learn from the examples of the UAE and Saudi Arabia using their economic powers to push Turkey towards political and geostrategic convergence. It has long become a cliché to argue that relations between Turkey and the EU fundamentally changed because the EU lost all its leverage vis-à-vis Turkey as its prospects for EU membership faded. However, just as the need to find economic support from the rich Gulf countries is currently forcing Turkey to re-evaluate some of its policies in the Middle East, Europe can also use its economic power to exert pressure on Turkey. This became particularly important in the post-election

**107** “Al Jazeera Journalists ‘Hacked via NSO Group Spyware’”, *BBC* (online), 21 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-55396843>.

**108** According to a survey conducted by the Arab Center, “75% of respondents saw Germany's position (on the conflict) as bad or very bad, compared to 9% who saw it positively”. See “Arab Public Opinion about Israel's War on Gaza” (online) (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center, 8 February 2024), <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-public-opinion-about-israels-war-on-gaza/>.

**109** The German government launched the Berlin Process to support diplomatic efforts to assist Libya's stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts. To this end, Germany hosted a series of high-level meetings and two conferences, primarily hosted in Berlin, with the participation of all stakeholders and regional actors, see <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/libyen-node/maas-unga-libya/2483870>.

**110** In August 2021, the Iraqi government managed to bring together the heads of state or foreign ministers of several regional countries, including Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The summit is considered an important milestone in regional reconciliation efforts, and in particular in the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

period in Turkey. Prior to the presidential elections in May 2023, Erdoğan's economic management had short-term goals that were aimed at sustaining the economy and increasing public spending until election time through cash inflows from his old and new allies. However, now Erdoğan has to address the structural problems in Turkey's economy such as a high current account deficit, low Central Bank reserves, and high inflation. Earthquakes in Turkey in February 2023 further worsened this situation.

Although Erdoğan's attempts to find foreign financing, mostly through swap deals, merely helped him to buy time, economic restructuring will require sustained credit inflows and FDI on a much larger scale. Although the inflated numbers coming from the Gulf countries may appear to be an important economic source, their actual realisation suggests that they are not sufficient. Turkey will have to knock on the door of Western countries or international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to receive the necessary amount of credit. Moreover, being aware that IMF credit comes with political conditionalities, Turkey has been pushing for credit from the World Bank instead.<sup>111</sup> Europe and its transatlantic partners should not waste this unique opportunity and use this leverage to re-create political and strategic convergence between Turkey and Europe/the West. Although it is unrealistic to bring Turkey back onto the list of democratic countries, by making economic aid and loans conditional on political circumstances, Turkey can to some extent be brought back towards the rule of law. At the very least, the EU could insist that Turkey must abide by the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, which it has recently started to ignore. Furthermore, this could prevent Turkey from becoming even more distant to the Western geopolitical sphere.

The EU can also counter some of the negative effects of reconciliation leading to authoritarian consolidation in the region by expanding protection programmes for opposition actors. Previous rivalries between regional autocrats provided safe havens and the necessary room to manoeuvre for opposition forces, political activists, journalists as well as the persecuted communities of each country. With rapprochement,

they all face the danger of being silenced and extradited. Although this is a cost to bear, European states can compensate by more carefully monitoring the fate of political refugees and critical voices and by acting as a safe third country for them.

This raises serious concerns in EU circles, in particular with regard to members of the MB residing in Turkey. Fearing that Turkey will no longer protect them from the wrath of the Sisi regime, these people may rush to obtain political asylum in Germany and other European countries. Given the hardening immigration policies in Germany and other EU countries, should this be a concern for German policy-makers? In light of the current state of reconciliation between Turkey and Egypt and considering the migration patterns, there is not much room for concern. First of all, most of the high-profile MB members have already received Turkish citizenship. Although there are reports of some of these citizenships being revoked,<sup>112</sup> it is unclear how widespread these revocations will be. Moreover, revocation does not automatically lead to extradition. At this stage, Erdoğan seems to be leveraging revocation or the threat of revocation to control the MB, while simultaneously using the movement as a bargaining chip in his foreign relations. It would also make more sense for Sisi to ensure that Erdoğan keeps them under control and pacifies them, rather than have them be extradited to Egypt. Finally, even when MB members do migrate to Europe, London appears to be the favourite destination due to earlier patterns of immigration and an already existing network of members. Thus, an MB exodus towards Germany and the EU seems highly unlikely. However, irrespective of this, the EU should take principled action regarding asylum applications from opposition actors in regional authoritarian countries and uphold asylum rights for those at risk as well as adhere to asylum laws and the Refugee Convention. It should grant these rights to individuals who would undoubtedly be deprived of a fair trial in their home countries. Finally, in addition to granting asylum, Europe could develop programmes to enable some members of the opposition, such as academics, journalists, and civil society activists, to pursue their professions and activities from Europe. In this context,

**111** Kerim Karakaya and Onur Ant, "World Bank in Talks to Double Turkey Exposure to \$35 Billion", *Bloomberg* (online), 5 September 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-05/world-bank-in-talks-to-double-turkey-exposure-to-35-billion-lm63my17>.

**112** Saeed Abdulrazek, "Türkiye Revokes Citizenship of Muslim Brotherhood Leader", *Asharq-al Awsat* (online), 20 February 2024, <https://english.aawsat.com/world/4865866-t%C3%BCrkiye-revokes-citizenship-muslim-brotherhood-leader>.



Germany's Philip Schwartz programme for exiled academics is a successful example that could be emulated by other European countries.

## Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AKP	Justice and Development Party/Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
EMGF	East Mediterranean Gas Forum
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MBS	Mohammed Bin Salman
MBZ	Mohammed Bin Zayed
TUIK	Turkish Statistical Institute
UAE	United Arab Emirates
YPG	People's Defense Units/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

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