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Mapping Changes in Turkish-UAE Relations: A Matter of Diplomacy

by [Gokhan Demirtas](#), [Hasim Tekines](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Gokhan Demirtas](#)

A.Gökhan Demirtas served as a Turkish diplomat at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2009-2017. He worked at the Turkish Embassy to the Islamic Republic of Iran between 2011-2013, and at the Turkish Embassy to the United Arab Emirates between 2013-2017. He is an independent researcher on the MENA with the focus on Gulf Countries. Demirtas is a contributor to Fikra Forum.

[Hasim Tekines](#)

Hasim Tekines previously worked in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Ministry. He is currently an MA student at Leiden University focusing on Middle East Studies. Tekines is a contributor to Fikra Forum.

Understanding ideological shifts, regional geopolitics and the origins of the Turkey-UAE rift is critical to assessing the likely outcomes of recent diplomatic engagements between the two countries.

The regional rivalry between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates has been a dominant theme in Middle Eastern politics, looming in the background of regional crises from Syria to Tunisia. Yet recently, both sides have sent each other conciliatory messages, and have taken cautious steps to deescalate tensions. Most recently, the UAE's national security advisor Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on August 18 and discussed the UAE's investment plans in Turkey, as well as other regional issues. This visit suggests the potential for a new period of diplomatic relations, in which Ankara and Abu Dhabi will be able to manage their differences to promote mutually beneficial trade and investments. Nevertheless, in order to understand the likelihood of such a shift, it is important to characterize what has changed—and what has not—in Turkish-Emirati relations.

Ups and Downs Since the Arab Spring

The roots of the current Turkey-UAE rivalry [can be traced](#) to the Arab Spring, when popular movements—Islamist groups among them—overthrew a number of Arab regimes. Since that period, which Turkey generally supported but

the Emirates viewed as a major threat, Ankara and Abu Dhabi have promoted conflicting political and ideological prospects for the region. Relations reached a low point—and were almost broken off—when the Muslim Brotherhood lost power in 2013. Later, the 2017 Gulf crisis, war in Libya, East Mediterranean rivalry, and a series of diplomatic spats further soured relations. Although diplomatic relations were never entirely broken, Abu Dhabi did quietly recall Ambassador Khalifa Shaheen al-Marar back in 2018, and has still not replaced him with a new emissary.

However, it would be misleading to interpret Turkish-Emirati relations in the last decade as an uninterrupted and continuous escalation. In 2016, for example, Ankara and Abu Dhabi initiated a dialogue process to resolve their issues and improve cooperation. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visited the UAE in April 2016 and met with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, and Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed. That May, Abu Dhabi announced that Ambassador Shaheen would be the new Emirati ambassador to Ankara, a post that had remained empty since 2013.

Even Ankara's [accusations](#) of financing coup plotters against Abu Dhabi did not put a stop to this dialogue process. In fact, as Turkey sought to extradite officers believed to be a part of the 2016 attempted coup, the UAE [detained](#) two Turkish generals working in Afghanistan at the Dubai airport and extradited them to Turkey. In October 2016, the GCC was likewise the first international organization that declared the Gulen Movement—Erdogan's arch-enemy—a [terrorist organization](#), a clear gesture of goodwill towards the Turkish government.

Ankara welcomed these efforts, with Cavusoglu [subsequently stating](#) that Turkey and the UAE had the same regional interests and policies. Even so, given Turkish officials' reckless accusations against the UAE, it can be argued that Ankara's interest in reconciliation is not particularly strong. And while UAE FM Abdullah bin Zayed's October 2016 visit to Ankara was a significant turning point, Turkey rejected Zayed's offers of financial investments in return for extradition of Muslim Brotherhood members and cooperation on other regional issues. Since then, regional and bilateral crises alongside reciprocal media assaults have made the Turkey-UAE rivalry one of the most dangerous and contagious problems of the region.

Reasons behind the Turkish-Emirati Rift

Any attempt to mend this rift must acknowledge the ideological disagreement between the two governments, which has exacerbated problems in bilateral relations and incompatible geopolitical projections, and has led to the two countries' support of rival factions in almost every regional crisis. Additionally, the diminishing role of the U.S. in the Middle East has created a vacuum and has encouraged these regional powers to fill the void, fueling their clashing visions for the region.

Ankara and Abu Dhabi have both pursued expansionist foreign policies which aim to increase their economic, political, and military existence in the region—policies which are putting the two sides on a collision course. Turkey's military presence in Qatar and the Horn of Africa have alerted the UAE as well as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Libya, on the other hand, has turned into a proxy war in the Turkish-Emirati rivalry.

Further complicating this issue has been the Turkish foreign ministry's approach to the Emirates. Although the UAE is one of the top investors in Turkey, Ankara has treated its relations with the UAE as an expendable foreign policy item. For years after the Arab Spring, the Turkish government remained unaware of Abu Dhabi's concerns and frustrations regarding bilateral matters. Even in 2016, Turkey viewed the UAE as a small if ambitious Gulf sheikhdom rather than a regional actor with a growing influence.

Miscommunication has worsened the situation. Although Ankara has never recalled its ambassador to Abu Dhabi, diplomatic relations have always been weak. The number of high-level contacts between the countries is very low, particularly when compared with Qatar. In one of his rare diplomatic contacts with the UAE, Erdogan visited the

Emirate of Sharjah rather than Abu Dhabi in 2013—a decision that displeased Emirati leadership. If both sides had more frequent diplomatic contacts, it is likely that ideological and geopolitical differences could be navigated more smoothly.

Is Normalization Possible?

In his meeting with Sheikh Tahnoun last week, Erdogan welcomed the UAE's offer of investments in Turkey. Given the previous rejection of a similar offer in 2016, it is possible that Abu Dhabi expects some concessions and cooperation on regional issues in return. If this is true, then Ankara may have accepted the deal which it rejected in 2016.

The best way to assess the possibility of normalization is assessing how the factors influencing the conflict have changed. In terms of ideology, the Turkish foreign policy today has weaker Islamist contours than existed previously. A few months ago, the Turkish government asked the Muslim Brotherhood to “[tone down criticism of the Egyptian government](#).” Moreover, Ankara has proved how it can act pragmatically in Syria over the last few years. Thus, it is possible to conclude that ideological conflict between Turkey and the UAE is not currently a major obstacle in the path of normalization.

More importantly, Turkish and UAE leaderships now have better knowledge of the other's capacities and intentions after a few years of intense rivalry. Emirati Ambassador Shaheen became an assistant foreign minister and later Minister of State after he was called back from Ankara. Turkish Ambassador Can Dizdar became the Director General of the MENA region in the Turkish MFA.

Ankara and Abu Dhabi have also had a chance to measure each other's strengths. Particularly in Libya, both countries have been unable to score against each other, which may have encouraged parties to give more weight to diplomatic channels.

The changing role of the United States is also a factor. President Biden's election initially raised an expectation of increased U.S. involvement in the region compared to the Trump era. Yet the withdrawal from Afghanistan has lowered such expectations. Biden's policies over the past year indicate that the United States will continue to pull away from the region, and therefore, regional instabilities and power vacuums remain.

But perhaps the most important change is Turkey's decreasing power capacity because of its economic and other domestic policy problems. The Emirati leadership, like the Saudis and the Egyptians, “[all sensed Erdogan's weakness](#)” which make him more prone to give concessions. In contrast, the UAE made waves when it gave sanctuary to an important Turkish mafia leader, Sedat Peker, who has strong connections to the Turkish deep state, and has since made scandalous revelations about Erdogan's party, the AKP. Meanwhile, after Erdogan met with Sheikh Tahnoun, Erdogan [showed](#) how eager he is for a deal in a TV interview, while the UAE side has stayed quiet.

None of these factors guarantee a shift in relations, yet higher level diplomatic contact, particularly a meeting between Erdogan and Mohamed bin Zayed, is likely to be useful to ease tensions and manage future conflicts that will likely arise. After all, as both sides stated several times, Turkey and the UAE do not [have](#) deep-rooted problems with the other. But much is dependent on the state of Turkish internal politics; if the Turkish economy recuperates and Erdogan suppresses the growing waves of dissent against his domestic policy, the geopolitical and ideological rivalries between Turkey and UAE could once again become more dominant. ❖



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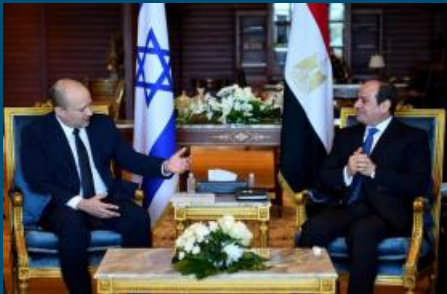


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