

# The United Arab Emirates: Turkey's New Rival

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Brief Analysis

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**With tensions between Turkey and the UAE on the rise, regional conflicts, from Libya to Syria, are now being influenced by the rivalry.**

In a symbolic move following a diplomatic dispute between Ankara and Abu Dhabi, Turkey announced at the beginning of January that it would officially change the name of the street where the United Arab Emirates (UAE) embassy is located to “Fahreddin Pasha Street.” This early 20th century Ottoman commander had recently been criticized by Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan on Twitter, who reposted a comment that accused Fahreddin Pasha of robbing and looting Medina rather than defending it and remarking on the history of the “ancestors” of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The retweet created an uproar in Turkey and provoked outrage against bin Zayed in Ankara, where officials summoned the Emirati embassy’s charge d’affaires. However, it seems that the real winner of this episode was Turkish President Erdogan, who is trying to revive the historic greatness of the Ottoman Empire. Erdogan gave a speech in which he criticized bin Zayed in very insulting terms. Thus, one retweet gave Erdogan an opportunity to bolster his domestic position and give a fiery speech in support of his efforts to unite the Islamic world under Turkey’s leadership.

Yet the real source of the recent tension between these two countries has nothing to do with the distant past, and is rather a purely political issue tied to the current moment. It is rooted in regional developments, growing political disputes, and clear ideological conflicts between Ankara and Abu Dhabi over the past ten years. The map of conflicts and crises in the Middle East and North Africa shows that the two parties stand on completely opposite sides. Turkish media will hardly allow an occasion to pass without attacking the UAE directly or indirectly. It was also no surprise that Erdogan omitted the Emirates during his Gulf tour in February 2017, which included Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain.

The failure of the coup d'état that took place in Turkey on July 15, 2016 represented a milestone in the history of UAE-Turkish relations. Some media outlets close to Erdogan accused the UAE of backing the coup, especially after

some UAE-based media such as Sky News and Al Arabiya openly declared their support for the coup. According to Turkish and Qatari media reports, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu was referring to the UAE when he said: “We know that a country gave three billion dollars of financial support to the coup attempt in Turkey.” On another occasion, the Turkish minister called on the Emirates to abandon its current position, saying: “We have recorded what they have done.” However, the initial sympathy of UAE media with the attempted coup, or Saudi and Egyptian media for that matter, does not mean that these countries were involved in backing that coup. Moreover, the UAE soon officially welcomed “the return of Turkey to its legitimate and constitutional track.”

A related problem concerns the relationship between the Justice and Development Party (AKP), headed by Erdogan, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Its relationship with the AKP’s precursor parties dates back to former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, Erdogan’s political “godfather,” since the 1970s. Erbakan was also considered the father of political Islam in Turkey. The UAE government, in sharp contrast, has long been at odds with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The gap widened and tensions increased between Turkey and the UAE after the overthrow of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was ousted by the Egyptian army in July 2013. Ankara officials saw the UAE as one of the main supporters of the coup. In response to the coup in Egypt, Erdogan refused to engage in any contact with Cairo at the presidential level and required the release of Morsi and his associates as a condition to reconciliation with Egypt. At the other extreme of the spectrum, the Emirati cabinet issued a list of terrorist organizations including the Muslim Brotherhood in 2014—most prominently the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood, the Al Islah group.

More recently—coinciding with the ongoing diplomatic and economic blockade against Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt—Turkey dispatched its first military squad to a base near Doha in June 2017. In mid-November of that year, during the Turkish president’s visit to this base, he confirmed his continuing support for Qatar “in a variety of fields, especially industrial and military.” The deployment of these forces supports Erdogan’s regional ambitions. It is highly unlikely that Erdogan will give up his first foothold in the Gulf easily. This has raised concerns among the Emirates and Saudi Arabia due to the fear that Ankara will use its growing influence in the region as a tool to pressure and provoke the two Gulf allies.

Regarding Syria, Ankara’s position has been based on support for the Muslim Brotherhood-linked opposition and factions of Syrian Turkmen since mid-2011. But last August, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed said: “If Iran and Turkey persist in the same historical, colonial and competitive behavior and perspectives between them in Arab affairs, we will continue in this situation, not just in Syria today but in some other country later on.” He also labeled the downing of the Russian plane by the Turkish army in Syria a terrorist act, saying that the Emirates condemned “the terrorist acts witnessed in many countries, particularly the Russian plane which was downed above the Sinai and the incident of the Russian military fighter plane in Syria.”

In the past few weeks, during the Turkish military campaign against the Kurdish YPG militia in the Afrin area of Syria, the Emirates have stood against this operation, just as Egypt has. Indeed, the Turkish newspaper Yeni Safak, which is close to Erdogan, went so far as to say that YPG were receiving support from Abu Dhabi and Cairo in Afrin and that Saudi Arabia was also involved in these activities.

Parallel tensions play out even further afield in Libya. Libyan domestic conflicts reflect opposing outside forces, especially the powerful new competition between the Turkish-Qatari axis and the Emirati-Egyptian axis. The first axis supports Misrata brigades allied with the Chairman of the Presidential Council, Fayeze al-Sarraj, while the second backs the forces of General Khalifa Haftar. Midway through last January, the spokesman of the Libyan National Army attacked Turkey, saying, “The Turkish intervention has put us in a bind and placed Libya in a very weak position against terrorism and the terrorists.” He warned of a “conspiracy hatched by national forces in the

country, its outlines crystallized in the recent visit of the Turkish president to North Africa." These accusations came after the Greek coast guard captured a boat filled with explosive materials heading from Turkey to Misrata. Haftar also accused Turkey of trying to arm "Islamist militias" against him.

In the Palestinian issue, the UAE and Egypt have tried to reach agreements between the rival Fatah and Hamas movements, including exiled Fatah renegade Mohammed Dahlan, to strengthen Abu Dhabi and Cairo's influence in Gaza and gradually reduce the role of Doha and Ankara in the territory. The Palestinian ambassador in Ankara, Faed Mustafa, was quoted as saying, "Turkey was disturbed by the recent rapprochement between Hamas and Dahlan as the latter is a negative figure from the Turks' point of view." Turkey fears that any rapprochement of this type could weaken its influence over the Palestinian issue.

Unease and competition are also emerging elsewhere in Africa. Ankara intends to bolster the Turkish presence on the continent and restore the Sudanese Red Sea port of Suakin as part of a new, broader strategy to revive Turkish influence in these regions. This has created concerns among Arab countries, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who fear Turkish expansion and its long-term risks. Moreover, considering that Sudan is home to members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Cairo and Abu Dhabi are very concerned about the possibility of expanding Turkish influence among the Sudanese Brothers and their Egyptian counterparts. On the Horn of Africa, both Turkey and the UAE recognize Somalia's possession of some of the world's main shipping routes. As a result, they both see opportunities to build naval ports and other transport infrastructure there.

Thus, with Turkey and the UAE developing their economic and military relationships throughout the Middle East, as well as in North and East Africa, it is likely that their military and economic rivalry will intensify. Their presence in many of these places focuses on the long-term geostrategic situation more than on short-term military operations. Still, many other complicated and interrelated factors will determine the future relationship between Ankara and Abu Dhabi, including the Turkish presidential election next year, as well as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and their impact on Turkey's regional role. There is also the question of Turkey's future firmness toward the Muslim Brotherhood and Ankara's future relations with both Riyadh and Cairo, as well as the uncertainties in the Turkish-Iranian relationship—and, more importantly, in the Turkish-American alliance. In the end, Ankara, whose relations with Washington have deteriorated, knows that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh are inseparable allies backed by the United States. However, it is unlikely that the United States will take any explicit positions or measures regarding the current Turkish-Emirati tensions, since the relationship between Abu Dhabi and Ankara has not yet reached a breaking point. ❖

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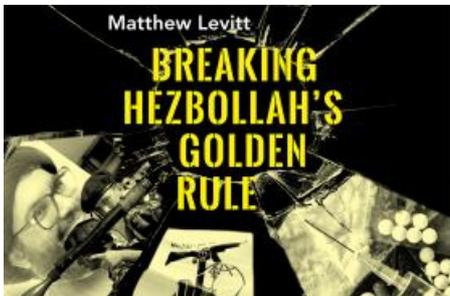
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