

Turkish Foreign Policy amid Changing Dynamics in the Middle East - Bezen Coşkun



“The ongoing normalization initiatives like Abraham Accords and resolution attempts in the region have a significant impact on regional dynamics. In this context, Turkey has a chance to re-engage in the region and, end its isolation.”

Since 2011, regional geopolitical and security challenges have drawn the primary contours of Turkish foreign policy, which led to Ankara’s military involvement in the region. Besides its military presence in northern Syria, Libya, and Northern Iraq, Turkey also has economic and humanitarian engagements. Given the competition among Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey for regional leadership, Israel and Saudi Arabia’s every move to extend their regional alliance networks directly

affects Turkey. Thus, the region's latest normalization initiatives should be seen as a chance for Turkey to re-engage with these actors and end its isolation. What is more, a less isolated and confident Turkey in the Middle East would also positively affect Ankara's approach towards the EU, since developments in the Middle East have profound effects on Turkey's alignments and the EU's threat perceptions and security interests.

2020 has been an eventful year for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Despite ongoing wars and conflicts, we have also witnessed normalization initiatives in the region. Most notably, the Abraham Accords between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel is followed by the other Gulf States to build relations with Israel. The UAE became the third Arab country, after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, which normalizes/d its relationship with Israel. Bahrain followed the UAE and signed the Abraham Accords in November 2020 to establish full diplomatic relations.

As such, the Abraham Accords have undermined the Saudi-sponsored 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which claimed that Arab states would not establish relations with Israel until it made peace with the Palestinians. However, despite various disagreements, mutual concerns over Iran have gradually brought Israel and Gulf countries closer. There are already reports that the Saudi Arabia is also considering signing the Accords but, fearing a possible domestic backlash, preferring to wait on the sidelines for the time being. Further reports argue that Israel's normalization plans extend beyond the Gulf States, possibly forming a tripartite front with Egypt and Sudan to limit Turkish influence in the Red Sea.

As far as the Abraham Accords are concerned, some analysts view them as an opportunity to rethink the Arab-Israeli conflict, while Israeli policy analysts consider the Accords a political achievement for Israel's regional status. Furthermore, they argue that the Accords have contributed to construction of an anti-Iranian front in the region.

From another perspective, a side effect of the Accords may be creation of a

realignment against Turkey that has a potential to reinforce Turkey's isolation in the region. Seen from this perspective, Turkey objection to the UAE's normalization with Israel from the very beginning and threats to cut ties with the UAE makes sense.

Besides the Arab-Israeli normalization attempts, during the first days of 2021, three-years-long diplomatic crisis between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other emirates was resolved. The blockade that was imposed on Qatar was lifted, and Saudi Arabia reopened its land, air and sea borders with Qatar. Lastly, Saudi Arabia's decision to reopen its Arar border crossing with Iraq to enhance trade between the two countries and talks between Saudi Arabia and Iraq about the Saudi agricultural investment project in Iraq indicate to newer openings in the region.

To counter the emergence of new realignments in the region, which might work against Turkish interests, on November 22, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated at the virtual G20 Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia that Turkey is an important actor in the Middle East. He stressed Turkey's commitment "to contribute to the stability, tranquility and domestic peace of our region." This was considered by some as a signal that Turkey would proactively react to the new developments in the region by re-approaching Saudi-Arabia.

Is Turkey-Saudi Rapprochement on the horizon?

The resolution of disagreements between Qatar and its Gulf brethren may affect Turkey-Qatar partnership. Since the 2017 blockade imposed by several Gulf countries on Qatar, Qatar and Turkey have become close allies in the region. Last month, they pledged to increase bilateral trade to \$2.5 billion, mainly in the energy, defense, and food sectors. Furthermore, Doha's sovereign wealth fund "Qatar Investment Authority" purchased a 10 percent stake in Istanbul's stock exchange.

Ankara attaches great importance to its ties with Qatar. It is likely that the resolution between Qatar and the Gulf states will end Qatar's isolation, and Turkey will not be its primary partner in the region in the near future. Thus the possibility of losing its exclusively connection to Qatar has already paved the way for Turkey to mend ties with Saudi Arabia amid the discussion regarding the latter's suspension of imports of some Turkish goods after President Erdoğan accused Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, of destabilizing the region. Following a phone call between Erdoğan and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia on November 21, 2020, both leaders agreed on keeping the channels for dialogue open to enhance the bilateral relations and settle any existing disagreements. Thus, the 2021 will likely to see a Turkey-Saudi rapprochement following the resolution of the dispute between Qatar and other Gulf states.

It is also important to note that the US's leadership change may have also impacted the timing of Erdogan's and Salman's normalization attempts in the region. They agreed to talk just after both leaders congratulated Biden on winning the US elections. It is expected that Biden will reverse Trump's Middle East policy. For Saudi Arabia, Biden's presidency means the end of US protection provided by President Trump. As pointed out by analysts, the crown prince won't get such a free pass from Biden regarding human rights. In a similar vein, it is expected that Biden will take a harder stance against Ankara. Obviously, a prospective alliance between the regional powers would help them balance the US impact in the region under the Biden administration.

To conclude, despite the difficulties in balancing Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, the current normalization trend in the region is an opportunity for Turkey to end its isolation in the Middle East. Indeed, Turkey has the capacity to balance its connections because of its issue-based, ad-hoc, and compartmentalized foreign policy approach.



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