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# Türkiye-GCC Relations at Turkish Republic's Centennial: Trends, Prospects and Challenges

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## Introduction

On the centennial of the establishment of the republic, Türkiye sits at the intersection of an ever-changing material and ideational environment, both domestically and regionally. On the domestic front, the public debate is concentrated around the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections normally scheduled for June 18, 2023. At the same time, Turkish economy still suffers from high inflation and unemployment rates, and low reserve buffers put Türkiye in dire need of large [external financing](#). On the regional side, Russian offensive on Ukraine still continues, albeit with a lesser intensity, and affects the global economy, particularly energy and food markets. In the eastern border, the popular upheaval in Iran [challenges](#) the political establishment, with a potential destabilizing effect in the region. The Arab Gulf monarchies, on the other hand, set their respective national visions into motion, which seemingly require more hyperactive and assertive foreign policy behavior, even exacerbating the US rivalry with China and Russia in the Gulf and beyond.

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Turkish Republic, the policy makers, thus, design Türkiye's foreign policy in a constant interpretation of those challenges and opportunities in domestic, regional and global levels. Navigating the relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries closely intersects with those parameters. The continuing partnership with Qatar and the latest rapprochement between Türkiye and Gulf monarchies, notably with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), can be assessed within this framework of positioning in the face of challenges and opportunities.

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## Milestones in Türkiye -GCC Relations

The fact that Türkiye's relations with the GCC region gained significant momentum only after Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, has become a common sense in the literature on the topic. In the initial decade of the AKP rule under its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is still in office as the president since 2018, the bilateral relations have expanded from economic realm towards political and social areas. In 2008, Türkiye signed the Strategic Dialogue Mechanism with the GCC, being [the first country](#) that GCC established such a bilateral mechanism.

Then the Arab Uprisings in 2011 has changed the regional outlook significantly. In the new constellations of power, both Türkiye and the GCC states found themselves in a myriad of opportunities to expand their spheres of influence and boost their own identity projects back at home. This led to new patterns of cooperation and conflict with separate GCC countries and Türkiye.

In this new regional context, the Turkish-Qatari relations evolved into an alliance-like structure with a certain degree of institutionalization, including the establishment of a [Turkish military base](#) in Qatari territory, the first time since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Doha and Ankara have stood on the same page on the regional issues, most notably in supporting Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria.

Both countries were also quite prompt in supporting each other at the time of crisis of any kind. Qatar was the [first Arab country](#) in condemning the failed 2016 coup attempt against the AKP rule. A year later, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a total blockade against Qatar in 2017, Türkiye did not hesitate to support Doha both politically and economically. Just two days after the crisis erupted in the Gulf, Turkish Parliament [ratified](#) the agreement to allow Turkish troops to be deployed in Qatar. Türkiye also sent [cargo planes](#) with food supplies to alleviate food shortages due to the air, land and naval blockade against Qatar. The [trade volume](#) between Qatar and Türkiye reached 1.76 billion US\$ in 2021. The bilateral [trade volume](#) stood at 913 million US\$ in 2017 and jumped to 1.43 billion US\$ in 2018, following the Qatar blockade. During the last two decades, the political relations between the two countries remained cordial and friendly,

as frequent high-level visits attest. Most recently, Turkish president Erdogan attended opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar where he also [briefly met](#) with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Erdogan also attended the final match and the closing ceremony of the World Cup 2022 in Qatar.

While Türkiye and Qatar emerged as 'foul weather friends' in the region after the Arab Uprisings, Ankara's relations with some GCC countries reached new lows. Indeed, Türkiye's involvement in regional politics and Turkish-Qatari partnership became a source of contestation in intra-GCC relations. This was most evident in blockading countries' 13-point list of demands from Qatar to end the contention as they [demanded](#) "Immediately shut down the Turkish military base, which is currently under construction, and halt military cooperation with Türkiye inside of Qatar". Qatar dismissed all the 13 demands.

The decade after the Arab Uprisings, Türkiye's relationships with Saudi Arabia and UAE was marked by intense ideological and geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite the mismatch in the size and capabilities, the conflictual attitudes of Ankara and Abu Dhabi towards each other exemplified one of the deepest rifts in the same period.

The rift between Ankara and Abu Dhabi, and to some extent Riyadh, became visible in 2013 following the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Egyptian president Muhammed Morsi in a military coup backed by some [Gulf monarchies](#). Türkiye together with Qatar, strongly opposed the coup against this friendly regime in Egypt. Three years later, the UAE has become one of 'the foreign collaborator' of the failed coup attempt in Türkiye, as Turkish [intelligence sources](#) blamed Abu Dhabi for financing the plot. Since then, Turkish-Emirati rivalry in the region found avenues in Libya, Syria, and Horn of Africa with devastating local consequences.

Turkish-Saudi political relations, on the other hand, deteriorated most significantly following the murder of [Jamal Khashoggi](#), a US-based Saudi journalist, in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate in 2018. Following the murder, Türkiye leaked the investigation results and claimed the killing was ordered from [high-level officials](#) in Saudi Arabia, indirectly pointing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The economic indicators in Saudi-Türkiye relations also went sour. Saudi Arabia [blocked](#) 80 Turkish trucks to enter the kingdom in 2019, and started [an informal boycott](#) on Turkish products. The call for boycott also included investing in [real estate sector](#) and [tourism](#) activities in Türkiye.

Against this conflictual background of relationships, the rapprochement between Türkiye and Saudi-Emirati bloc that started in 2021 and a new [“very positive and friendly”](#) chapter in bilateral accord appeared as a ‘180-degree turn’ in aforementioned states’ foreign policy orientations.

Following the [Al-Ula Agreement](#) to end the Gulf crisis in January 2021, Türkiye’s relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia started to warm up. The UAE leader Mohammed bin Zayed paid a visit to Ankara in November 2021 for the first time since 2012. The strengthening bilateral economic relations dominated the tone of the visit as the UAE pledged to [invest 10 billion USD](#) in strategic sectors in Türkiye. Both countries signed a \$4.9 billion currency [swap agreement](#) in January 2022. Erdogan reciprocated by paying [a visit to Abu Dhabi](#) in February 2022, first time since 2013.

Gradual rapprochement between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia started only after Ankara decided to halt Jamal Khashoggi’s [trial](#) and to transfer it to Riyadh in April 2022. Reportedly, Saudi authorities’ request for the case transfer was considered a way forward to reset relations in March 2022. Türkiye [claimed](#) that it has exhausted all the legal means to deliver justice amid the stalled prosecution due to Saudi defendants’ absentia. President Erdogan traveled to Jeddah in the following days and met with Saudi leaders. Saudi Crown prince’s [visit to Ankara](#) in June 2022 came against this development as both countries signaled their determination to start a ‘new era’ in bilateral relations.

### **Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Gulf**

In recent years, Türkiye’s foreign policy with many of its neighbors started to be characterized by the co-existence of cooperation and conflict. This co-existence at times takes the form of compartmentalization and at other times as symbiosis and co-existence of conflict and cooperation. Turkish-Iran relations has historically been characterized as such. Similarly, Türkiye’s relations with Russia demonstrated these qualities in the 1990s and became more complex in recent years. Türkiye’s relations with Israel, on the other

hand, has been an example of a compartmentalization where, despite very problematic relations between 2010-2020, economic relations between the two countries continued to flourish.

In order to make sense of Turkish foreign policy dynamics and patterns towards the Gulf region, conceptualization of the simultaneity of cooperation and conflict might also help to analyze the nature of this relationship in the long term. Türkiye's relations with the UAE could be an example. Türkiye has deployed a repertoire of statecraft, including integration and fragmentation, in its relations with the UAE during the same period when political relations deteriorated to a level of rivalry. Economic and military cooperation via arm sales between the two countries has continued as numbers speak. The UAE was [the second largest market](#) for Turkish goods after Iraq in Asia in 2015, 2016, and 2017. According to data from SIPRI, between 2014-2018, Türkiye was the number 14 among arm exporters and the UAE was the number one (% 30 of the arms exports went to the UAE) client of Turkish arms sale during the same period. In addition, the UAE was the seventh largest importers of arms in 2014-2018 and Türkiye was the third main arm supplier to the Emirates after the US and France.

On the other hand, relations with Saudi Arabia also characterized by compartmentalization up until the murder of Khashoggi. Before that although Saudi Arabia was disturbed by Türkiye's policy towards Egypt, the two countries cooperated in Syria and their economic relations continued to develop. In 2015, Turkish President Erdogan also [expressed](#) Ankara's support for Saudi Arabia's military operations against Houthis in Yemen. However, when the Khashoggi affair broke out, Saudi leadership perceiving this as a threat to their rule and their image responded by downgrading bilateral relations and adopting a quite hostile discourse.

### **Prospects and Challenges**

Despite the recent normalization drive, there seems to be several challenges for the future development of relations between Türkiye and the Gulf states:

First challenge is related to Türkiye's cuspness. According to [Philips Robins](#), cusp states refer to the "states that lie uneasily on the political and/or normative edge of what

is widely believed to be an established region". Due to material and ideational reasons, Türkiye is not comfortably part of this region. Even the AKP with its ideology has not been able to affectively deal with this challenge. It is because Türkiye's cuspness is not only about how Türkiye sees itself but also about how others see Türkiye . For the Gulf, as well as other Arab states, this is ultimately an Arab region and non-Arab states can be part of it only to the extent that they allow.

This factor can be particularly observed in decisions of the Arab League regarding Türkiye's military operations in Iraq and other Arab countries. The Arab League (LAS) is a regional organization formed in 1945 with headquarters in Egypt and all six GCC states are members of it. In 2020, Arab League secured enough votes to [condemn](#) Türkiye over Ankara's military interventions in Iraq, Syria and Libya. On September 2022, the Arab League repeated its condemnation on Türkiye over its military interventions in northern part of Iraq. Only Qatar registered its reservation to the resolution.

During the same meeting, the Arab League also [convened](#) the "Fifth Meeting of the Arab Committee at the Ministerial Level on the Turkish Interference in the Internal Affairs of Arab States" which is comprised of the Arab Republic of Egypt (Chair of the Committee), the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In a [communiqué](#), the committee expressed "its concern over the Turkish military presence in a number of Arab States and over forms of Türkiye 's interference in the internal affairs of Arab States and the repeated Turkish violations of Security Council resolutions related to the imposition of an arms embargo on Libya". Thus, despite a seemingly normalization between Türkiye and Arab states (including Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Türkiye's increasing activism even in economic or soft power realms, but especially in security realm seems to create a sense of threat in the region.

The second challenge is the lack of institutionalization of the relations with the GCC. So far, the relations have been transactional and issue-based, rather than based on any strategy towards the region. In 2005, Türkiye and the GCC states [signed](#) the Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation to initiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Yet, despite the strong economic foundations of this relationship, an FTA agreement has not been reached yet. Such a nature of relations between Türkiye and

the Gulf allows for flexibility, as we have seen in the last two years in the normalization of relations in such a quick fashion. However, it also creates instability and uncertainty.

The third possible challenges which is linked to the second one is the uncertainty about the future of relations in case there is a change of government in Türkiye after the elections. Current government's MENA policy in general has been the target of criticism by the opposition bloc. Change of government in the upcoming elections may, thus, mean downgrading of relations with the Gulf as well.

Türkiye's close relations with Qatar over the last decade has been increasingly securitized by the main opposition parties to carve space to criticize current government's foreign and security policies. In September 2022, main opposition Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) leader [pledged](#) to 'return' full ownership of tank-truck factory to Turkish military. In 2021, Qatar [financed](#) 49% Turkish state-owned tank track factory in Sakarya province. A change in government may particularly affect relations with Qatar, which is seen as a supporter of the AKP government by [the opposition](#).

## **Conclusion**

On its centennial, the Republic of Türkiye stands as a ['modified middle power'](#) in the global international order. In a changing global order, Ankara's relations with the GCC states are contingent upon several material, ideational, regional and domestic factors. From the Turkish side, domestic foreign policy makers' conceptions of Türkiye's place in the regional order appears to be an important dimension of this relationship. In the junction of upcoming presidential elections, this factor has particularly come to the fore. On the other side, GCC states' own visions for themselves and perceptions towards Türkiye will likely have an impact on the future of the bilateral relations.