



## **New Dynamics, Old Problems:** Turkey's Rapprochement Overtures in the Eastern Mediterranean

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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# New Dynamics, Old Problems:

## Turkey's Rapprochement Overtures in the Eastern Mediterranean

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#### Summary

- Over the past year Turkey has slowly worked to reduce tensions with regional rivals, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
- There are limits to how far this process can go. It may produce détente but not a deeper realignment.
- Even though it has not led to elections, the ceasefire and ensuing political process in Libya have benefited and benefited from this reduction in tensions.
- Western governments should support any steps that lessen the risk of military conflict, but should not offer concessions to Ankara in pursuit of this goal.

## Introduction

*“...as Turkish President Erdogan continues to struggle with unprecedented political challenges, he appears for now to be making a virtue of necessity and seeing how far the rhetoric of rapprochement can take him.”*

Over the past several years, the civil war in Libya emerged as a major driver of tensions between Turkey and a number of regional states, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates chief among them. Then, in the last year, a ceasefire in Libya led to the creation of a new Government of National Unity, while rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE culminated in the recent visit of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed to Ankara. Now, with the future of Libya's peace process still uncertain and relations between Turkey and Egypt still strained, the question remains how far regional dynamics will shift. Turkey and its rivals in the Arab world all seem eager to move from active confrontation toward greater stability. The underlying fault lines remain. But as Turkish President Erdogan continues to struggle with unprecedented political challenges, he appears for now to be making a virtue of necessity and seeing how far the rhetoric of rapprochement can take him.

## Overlapping Agendas

Turkey, for its part, sees the current ceasefire and accompanying political process in Libya as an opportunity to consolidate the gains it achieved with its 2019 military intervention. More broadly, Ankara's repeatedly stated desire for rapprochement with countries around the region reflects a recognition that Turkey's confrontational policies had left it in an unsustainable state of isolation. With Turkey's economic situation worsening by the day and Erdogan's political position looking more perilous than it has in years, Ankara has an added incentive to avoid conflicts which do not serve the president's political agenda.

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While Turkey's rivals have not embraced rapprochement with the same zeal as Ankara, they too have reasons to respond to these overtures. In Libya, the failure of Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's effort to unify the country by force led his backers to recalibrate and pursue their interests by engaging with Tripoli and the new unity government. In the Gulf, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had already moved, in the beginning of year, toward rapprochement with Qatar, setting the stage for improved relations with Turkey. Whereas the Trump administration had been happy to back the Saudi-UAE blockade against Qatar, as well as military campaigns in Yemen and Libya, the Biden administration has been much more circumspect and placed a greater priority on regional stability. This shift seems to have accelerated Abu Dhabi's reconsideration of its regional military adventures and put a new premium on diplomatic engagement.

*“Once local participants in the conflict had decided to participate in the formation of a new government, their foreign backers risked being marginalized if they rejected the process completely.”*

Finally, in Libya itself, a number of actors proved willing to seize on the stalemate that emerged in the summer of 2020 to pursue reconciliation. On both sides of the country's frontlines, the U.N. led political process appeared to offer concrete benefits, including renewed access to oil profits and a chance to minimize the growing influence of outside powers. Once local participants in the conflict had decided to participate in the formation of a new government, their foreign backers risked being marginalized if they rejected the process completely. Moreover, the interplay of interests in the current unity government has been complex enough and the eventual outcome of the process as a whole uncertain enough that both Ankara and its rivals can envision a scenario in which they emerge as the winner.

## Progress in Libya

In the fall of 2019, Ankara escalated its involvement in the Libyan civil war in response to Khalifa Haftar's bid to conquer Tripoli and consolidate control of the country. As Haftar's

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forces, backed by a coalition including Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, approached the outskirts of Libya's capital, Turkey deployed military advisors, drones, and Syrian mercenaries to defend the UN-recognized Government of National Accord. Over the course of the next six months, this support enabled GNA forces to repulse Haftar's offensive and, by the summer of 2020, advance toward the city of Sirte. Tensions mounted as Ankara demanded that Haftar's forces retreat from the Sirte and Sisi, in return, announced that an attack on the city could prompt a direct Egyptian military intervention. At this point, both sides and their foreign backers appeared to recognize that the risks of escalation outweighed the potential benefits. This stalemate was then codified into a formal ceasefire in October, which set the stage for the current political process.

*"...the progress of the Libyan peace process appears to be both a cause and consequence of Turkey's attempt to recalibrate its foreign policy writ large."*

The specific combination of motives that drew Ankara so decisively into the Libya conflict remain unclear. At the most practical level, the Turkish government sought to protect its economic investment in Libya, including 16 billion dollars in outstanding contracts that would be lost if the Tripoli government fell. More broadly, since the collapse of the Arab spring, Ankara had been locked in an ideological and geopolitical conflict with an array of anti-Islamist authoritarian governments. In this context, Libya represented an opportunity to push back against this counter-revolutionary axis. Finally, Ankara used its intervention to advance an expansive new position on its Exclusive Economic Zone, compelling the Government of National Accord to sign a Memorandum of Understanding that provided the nominal legal basis for claiming a large swath of the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, by the summer of 2020 Libya had become central to an aggressive reformulation of Turkish foreign policy, and a wide-ranging challenge to Turkey's rivals across the region. Against this backdrop, the progress of the Libyan peace process appears to be both a cause and consequence of Turkey's attempt to recalibrate its foreign policy writ large.

*"In the absence of elections, the jockeying for power among foreign and domestic players in Libya will continue through other means."*

The details and implementation of Libya's ongoing political reconciliation have been carefully calibrated to protect the interests of both local factions and their foreign backers.<sup>1</sup> When Abdulhamid Dabaiba was elected to be head of the new unity government on March 15 this represented a significant victory for Turkey, with which he has close ties. As importantly for Ankara, the negotiations that created the transitional government stipulated that it could not modify the country's existing international agreements, meaning that the status of the Turkey-Libya MoU would remain technically unchanged. At the same time, while Khalifa Haftar and his forces are now nominally under the authority of the country's Presidential Council, the ratification of this provision has been left vague, facilitating an intentional ambiguity beneficial to Haftar's backers. Finally, despite a great deal of discussion about the need to withdraw all foreign troops from the country, both Turkey and Russia have largely maintained their mercenary forces.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge, of course, is that this arrangement is a temporary one that was intended to transition into something more permanent when elections were held on December 24. In the absence of elections, the jockeying for power among foreign and domestic players in Libya will continue through other means.<sup>3</sup> Dabaiba, for his part, will remain dependent on Turkey's military support, but will also seek to stay in power by reaching a modus vivendi with his many rivals. Facilitating his efforts is the fact that the status quo

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/222-libya-turns-page>

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/keeping-libya-settlement-track>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/turkey-sends-mixed-signals-over-syrian-mercenaries-libya>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/podcasts/maghreb-analyst-jalel-harchaoui-turkey-could-find-itself-fighting-libyans-tripoli-wake>  
<https://warontherocks.com/episode/warcast/26192/libyas-political-crisis-deepens/>

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appears tolerable, even to countries such as the UAE that remain politically and ideologically opposed to him. Yet these powers also have means at their disposal, including rival militias within Tripoli itself, they could use to try to pressure or even topple him. It is possible, therefore, that a post-non-election breakdown in Libya's tenuous political order could escalate into the kind of conflict which would derail Turkey's broader regional détente. So far, however, it seems that all sides remain sufficiently committed to this order for it to endure. Although the ceasefire and resulting political compromise has yet to yield a new, unified and democratic government, this was not necessarily the goal of any of the actors involved. Instead the motives and dynamics that led them to accept the current compromise arrangement may be enough to perpetuate it.

### Egypt and the UAE

*“In parallel with developments in Libya, Ankara has been eager to promote its efforts at rapprochement with a host of countries, particularly Egypt and the UAE.”*

In parallel with developments in Libya, Ankara has been eager to promote its efforts at rapprochement with a host of countries, particularly Egypt and the UAE. Amidst widespread skepticism, these efforts made modest progress over the past year, with Turkish-UAE ties seeing a dramatic improvement at the end of 2021.

Following reports of initial intelligence contacts in the fall of 2020, Officials from Turkey and Egypt met in May. Neither side appeared particularly enthusiastic about the outcome. Two days of meetings focused on bilateral and regional issues resulted in a statement that characterized the discussions as “frank and in depth.” Both sides agreed on the “need to achieve peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean region” while promising to “evaluate the outcome of this round of consultations and agree on the next steps.”<sup>4</sup>

The most tangible sign of Erdogan's commitment to the process came when, in advance of the meeting, Muslim Brotherhood TV stations based in Turkey reported that they had been instructed by the Turkish government to tone down their criticism of the Sisi regime. An anonymous source at El-Sharq TV told a reporter from Al-Monitor, “Until noon on March 19, we have been preparing for programs with the same editorial policy and same issues we had been working on. There was no problem at all — until 6 p.m. that day.”<sup>5</sup> He said that in response to requests from a “high level Turkish party” their station “announced the postponement of the programs that were scheduled for that day, including the show of Egyptian actor-turned-TV presenter Hisham Abdullah, whose program was canceled just 40 minutes before going live.” The director of the Watan TV channel confirmed reports of government pressure, but also tried to play them down: “They only asked us to reduce the number of political programs and broadcast more diverse social programs. [The Turkish authorities] said their request was because of a current understanding between the two Egyptian and Turkish sides, and we completely understand this.” Egypt's information minister described these moves as “a good sign to create a suitable atmosphere to discuss disputed cases between the two countries.”<sup>6</sup> But they still fell short of Egypt's expectations, which include the extradition of several Muslim Brotherhood members involved in the 2015 killing of Egypt's chief prosecutor.

Against this backdrop, officials held a second set of meetings in Istanbul in early September. The result was another statement in which both sides “agreed to continue these consultations confirming their desire to make progress in areas under discussion

<sup>4</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/05/06/Egypt-Turkey-say-they-held-in-depth-talks-on-bilateral-regional-issues-in-Cairo>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/turkey-going-crack-down-muslim-brotherhood-aligned-tv-gesture-egypt>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/egypt-praises-turkeys-moves-towards-rapprochement/2181891>

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and the need for further steps to facilitate normalization of their relations.”<sup>7</sup> While Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu optimistically stated that “authorities would take the necessary mutual steps to appoint ambassadors if it were agreed at the meetings” there has been no further progress on this front.<sup>8</sup>

*“Where Cairo still appears to be holding out for more concessions from Ankara, Abu Dhabi has responded more enthusiastically to Turkey’s outreach.”*

Where Cairo still appears to be holding out for more concessions from Ankara, Abu Dhabi has responded more enthusiastically to Turkey’s outreach. Turkey’s tensions with the UAE reflected the same ideological and geopolitical factors as its tensions with Egypt, but sometimes appeared to carry an extra degree of vehemence. Over the past five years, Turkish sources repeatedly accused the UAE of having backed the 2016 coup attempt, specifically naming exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan as the country’s point-man in these plots.<sup>9</sup> In 2020 when the UAE normalized relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, Turkish Presidential Spokesman announced that “History will not forget those who betray the Palestinian people and sell out the Palestinian cause.”<sup>10</sup> Then, despite Turkey’s own longstanding relations with Israel, Erdogan threatened to suspend diplomatic ties with the UAE in response to the accords.

Yet despite this backdrop, diplomatic developments between the Ankara and Abu Dhabi have moved quickly over the last six months. In August, Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan – the crown prince’s brother and national security advisor, made an unannounced visit to Ankara to meet with President Erdogan. Several weeks later, Erdogan spoke by phone with the crown prince himself, and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority expressed its interest in substantial investments in Turkey. Then, in November, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed arrived in Ankara. Erdogan subsequently announced that the visit “went really well” and took place in a “family-like” atmosphere.<sup>11</sup> He announced that “the agreement we signed is a step to begin a new era in Turkey and UAE relations. God willing, I will make a return visit to the UAE in February.” Amidst the signing of a host of bilateral agreements spanning everything from ports to petrochemicals, the UAE announced it was prepared to invest 10 billion dollars in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Turkish officials also reported that they were seeking a \$5bn swap agreement to boost the Central Bank’s foreign currency reserves in the face of a rapidly weakening lira.<sup>13</sup> Speculation also swirled about whether the UAE would extradite mob boss turned Erdogan critic Sedat Peker, who is now in Dubai after fleeing Turkey. If nothing else, he has remained silent over the last several months, quite possibly as a result of pressure from his host government.

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### Other Actors

Even as tensions in Libya have receded and relations with Abu Dhabi have improved, other regional and domestic dynamics are developing in ways that may overshadow this progress.

To take the most striking example, Turkey’s involvement in Libya was many of the many factors fueling its increasingly antagonistic relationship with France.<sup>14</sup> As French President Macron tried to reinvent his country’s presence in the Mediterranean and

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-egypt-desire-to-make-progress-in-areas-under-discussion-167730>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/positive-momentum-in-egypt-uae-relations-fm-cavusoglu-says>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/exclusive-uae-funnelled-money-turkish-coup-plotters-21441671>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1574492>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-uae-erdogan-visit-february-first-years>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/erdogan-katar-emiri-al-thani-ile-gorustu-6812649/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211127-uae-considers-boosting-turkey-foreign-reserves-with-5-billion-currency-deal/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/french-militarys-perception-turkish-military-and-turkeys-expansion>

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northern Africa, and as he embraced a domestically popular anti-Islamist political narrative, Erdogan offered a perfect foil. Indeed, Macron and Erdogan have traded gleefully ahistoric accusations about whose country was the real colonial power in North Africa.<sup>15</sup> French policymakers also saw Turkey’s involvement in Libya as destabilizing, and worried that it would serve to facilitate greater Turkish support for Islamist actors across the continent. When Ankara merged the conflict in Libya with its efforts to challenge Greece’s exclusive economic zone, the stakes for Paris became higher. Now, the dispute with Turkey appeared to bear directly on the European Union’s ability to deploy hard power in the face of challenges to its sovereignty. Thus while Turkey’s Libya policy was not the sole factor at work, it proved instrumental in facilitating the defense agreement that Greece and France signed in the fall of 2021.<sup>16</sup> The Greek-French defense deal has now become a feature of regional geopolitics that serves the interests of both countries, particularly as it enabled France to secure a several valuable contracts for ship and plane sales. As a result, it will take on a life of its own well beyond Libya. What’s more, Turkish officials have vigorously condemned the deal, some in language that will itself further fuel regional tensions.<sup>17</sup>

On the domestic front, Erdogan’s political agenda is also likely to constrain the scope of his efforts toward rapprochement. That is to say, while Erdogan’s economic difficulties have forced him to try to tone down regional rivalries, his corresponding political difficulties have limited the means at his disposal to do so. Facing unprecedented economic and political challenges, Erdogan has little to fall back on besides nationalistic rhetoric and conspiratorial accusations against foreign powers. The consequences of this paranoid climate were on display in November, when two Israeli tourists were arrested on espionage charges in Istanbul after supposedly taking photographs of one of Erdogan’s official residences.<sup>18</sup> The ensuing incident was soon defused and the tourists were released, but anti-Turkish sentiments in Israel lingered.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, while Erdogan remains sufficiently interested in restoring regional ties to avoid new crises, this may not be enough to defuse old ones. As he tries to hold together his dwindling coalition, he will also be loath to offer visible concessions that could be used to call his commitment to national sovereignty or Islamist causes into question. In this context, Ankara has vehemently rejected any suggestion that it would crack down on Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood as part of its efforts to mend ties. “This is not even an option open for negotiation for us” one official recently declared. They added “If we close Hamas’s offices and expel members of [the Muslim Brotherhood], then what will be the next demand, shut down [the Islamist charity] IHH and others and prosecute them?”<sup>20</sup>

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### What’s Next?

In the month since bin Zayed’s visit, pro-government outlets in Ankara have speculated about the positive impact Emirati investment could have on the Turkish economy. Erdogan, in turn, stated that with reference to Israel and Egypt, “just as a step was taken between us and the United Arab Emirates, we will take similar steps with the others.”<sup>21</sup> Shortly after this, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett hosted his Greek and Cypriot counterparts in Jerusalem where he praised them as “true friends” and emphasized that

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-slams-macron-for-describing-ottoman-rule-in-algeria-as-colonialism-news-59123>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/greece-france-seal-strategic-defense-deal-angering-turkey-/6255367.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/certain-politicians-in-greece-try-to-escalate-tensions-akar>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/israeli-couple-among-3-facing-espionage-charges-for-photographing-erdogans-residence/2419536>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/after-israeli-couple-release-dont-fall-into-turkey-appeasement-trap-analysis-685339>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/turkey-not-yet-ready-give-muslim-brotherhood#ixzz7FF7vhWHS>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-turkey-seeks-to-improve-ties-with-egypt-israel-52128>

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their “trilateral alliance” was cooperating against shared security threats.<sup>22</sup>

If Turkey continues with its normalization efforts, if the political process in Libya does not disintegrate, and if future crises do not erupt, Ankara may well manage to send ambassadors back to Cairo and Jerusalem. Both countries would undoubtedly be happy to have relations with Turkey on a less confrontational footing and welcome any concessions they could obtain from Erdogan in the process. Normalized ties could offer trade and investment opportunities to Turkey’s neighbors, which would also give Ankara some positive economic news amidst its current crisis. Most recently, Erdogan has announced he will visit Riyadh in February, suggesting Saudi Arabia could also participate in this détente.<sup>23</sup>

*“Even if Erdogan eventually comes in from the cold, relations with his estranged neighbors are still more likely to heat up than get warm.”*

Yet this progress, while positive, is unlikely to radically shift the geopolitical dynamics in the region. Barring other seismic shifts, suspicions appear too well-entrenched to be overcome during the course of a few high-profile visits. Even if Erdogan eventually comes in from the cold, relations with his estranged neighbors are still more likely to heat up than get warm.

## Recommendations

European governments seeking to deal with the challenge posed by Turkish foreign policy can do little more than cautiously encourage the current rapprochement and hope for the best. The international community already has good reason for embracing the peace process in Libya, and should continue to do so through the turbulence ahead. Without pushing any countries to offer concessions to Ankara, European policymakers should welcome any progress toward further reducing tensions in the region. If Erdogan’s political position becomes untenable, perhaps as a result of a dramatic economic collapse, his calculus might quickly change to favor confrontation over reconciliation. Until then, the current status quo might be the best-case scenario.

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=727575581536590](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=727575581536590)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-to-visit-saudi-arabia-in-february>