

TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

First Monitoring: September 2023-January 2024

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After a long period of muscular approaches in the region, since 2021 Türkiye has entered a new phase of normalization in the relations with some historical competitors. From the Mediterranean to the Middle East, Gulf and Caucasus, Ankara today aims at establishing itself as a 'stabilizing' power, constantly aims to balance its strategic assets towards the different areas in order to avoid regional isolation and implementing 'win-win' diplomatic approaches in every direction. The strategic objective is to reduce the degree of regional uncertainty, as well as to position itself as a key interlocutor at a bilateral, regional, and global level. However, this ambition has to cope with changing regional dynamics, as the current Israel-Palestine war shows.

Therefore, in the framework of the project 'TURKEY AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION PROCESSES: WHAT IMPACT ON THE INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF ITALY AND EUROPE?' – supported by the Analysis, Programming Statistical and Historic Documentation Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – CeSPI Observatory on Türkiye and its partner institution Kalyoncu Middle East Research Center (KALMEC) monitored the main developments in Türkiye's relations with the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf, and Caucasus region taking place between September 2023 to January 2024, by paying attention to the main key players with whom normalization has already started. In addition to the analysis of main events, the objective was also to highlight the sustainability of the normalization processes and related critical issues, not only at a bilateral but also at a regional level. In this regard, CeSPI team has coordinated the tasks and worked mainly on the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, while the Middle East and Caucasus have been under Kalmec's competency.

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1. The Century of Türkiye, between vision, ambitions and reality

On the 100th anniversary of foundation of the Republic of Türkiye's (1923), under the slogan '*Türkiye Yüzyılı*' Erdoğan and his government formalized a new approach in regional affairs, aiming to some extents to seal the processes of dialogue and normalization already initiated some years ago. The goal is to present Ankara as a regional balancing actor, attempting to mediate tensions and diminishing the margin of uncertainty in the regional chessboard characterized by instability. The new and strengthened engagement with the Gulf countries, also to be understood as a reflection of the normalization that took place between them in 2021; the growing Iranian influence and the American approach in the region, have been pushing factors for Türkiye's rising role. In addition, economy, and energy element, as well as factors related to domestic security and ideological aspects, have to be considered. Indeed, according to Turkish policymakers, '*As Türkiye is located in a very challenging region, it has been pursuing and defending its legitimate interests by responding to its geographical necessity, while it is also embedded in the international architecture (NATO; UN; EU candidacy, etc) and enjoys positive relations with Africa, Russia, China*'¹. Hence, Türkiye aims at balancing the strategic assets coming from each area, by avoiding the self-isolation, as it happened in the past, and by implementing constructive diplomatic efforts in any direction. Hence, also the great investments in the defense industry contributed to arise Türkiye as hard power which, combined with the capillary soft power tools, makes Türkiye as '*A well-functioning smart power able to act as a hub of peace in the region and for the world*'².

As a matter of facts, the significance of Türkiye as a key-actor in the region, politically, military and economically, increased in the light of Russia-Ukraine war and nowadays Ankara's goal is to capitalize out of its mediation efforts. Since Turkish diplomacy entered a new and delicate stage of normalization and stabilization with historical competitors by enhancing the role of Muslim democracy in the region, must cope with new regional developments as well as with the perception of the international community, mainly the West, on its foreign policy approach and vision. Indeed, this is related not just to ideology or vision, but also to pragmatic, response-oriented, and nation-interest-based considerations. Thus, the domestic political and social dynamics, economy, and security issues are important driving factors. Although the country is experiencing a time of great financial hardship given the high, and not always sustainable, inflation rate, combined with the devaluation of the local currency (TL) against the Dollar and

¹ Daily Sabah, '*Century of Türkiye,*' revolution to bring peace to world: Erdoğan, October 2022. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/elections/century-of-turkiye-revolution-to-bring-peace-to-world-erdogan>
Daily Sabah, *Türkiye finds its own axis in the world: Presidential spokesperson*, April 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-finds-its-own-axis-in-the-world-presidential-spokesperson>

² Daily Sabah, *Turkish FM signals transformative foreign policy in 'Century of Türkiye'*, October 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-fm-signals-transformative-foreign-policy-in-century-of-turkiye>

M.Ataman, 'The Century of Türkiye. A New Foreign Policy Vision to build a Turkish axis', Insight Turkey, Summer 2023, vol. 25, n.3 ,pp.73-96

Euro, with direct effects on the purchasing power of citizens, macroeconomic data show great resilience in terms of growth and industrial productivity. This is a point Erdoğan cherishes, showing Türkiye's ability to penetrate the region in terms of exports. 'Our goal is not to leave any country where Turkish products are unrecognized and our exporters have not set foot', he affirms. While the economy expanded by a more-than-expected 5.9% year-over-year in the third quarter, accelerating from an upwardly revised 3.9% growth in the second quarter and 4% in the first quarter of 2023, according to government data, average monthly exports have reached \$21.3 billion, compared to just \$3 billion back in 2002. This was considered as a positive record by the government.³

However, economy has been a main issue in the last political and presidential elections affected also by the challenges posed by the united opposition front aimed at opposing Erdoğan; the traditional internal fault lines exacerbated by the most recent devastation of February 6, 2023, earthquakes. Though they were hard-fought, Erdoğan and his government marked a new triumph leading the way to the 'Century of Türkiye', intended to formalize a new course in domestic and foreign affairs by perpetuating the national power and its autonomy. Hence, the return to an orthodox economic approach, thanks to the appointment of the new team headed by Minister Mehmet Şimşek and Hafize Gaye Erkan as Governor of the Central Bank. Moreover, the arrival of Hakan Fidan, before head of Turkish intelligence, at the heights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, set the new political course, strengthening the image of a strong Türkiye and of the 'Axis of Türkiye'.

1.1 Domestic developments

On the other hand, while the opposition parties have effectively put an end to the Nation Alliance designed to counter Erdoğan's power, in November 2023 the largest party CHP has unset its long-standing leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, by appointing as party's General Secretary, Özgür Özel, politician and pharmacist. Currently, there is a broad underway debate on the possible alliance of the major opposition, namely İYİ and CHP parties, which appears, at least on the media scene, increasingly divided both internally and regarding the eventuality of conducting a united electoral campaign. However, although traditional social polarization persists, Erdoğan's AK Party axis with the nationalist MHP continues, while there are some intestine rumors opening up to a flirt with some conservative groups who in the last elections joined the opposition. Nevertheless, Erdoğan confirmed to be a leader with undisputed power who brought back the Turkish identity at the center of the domestic and regional scene. His goal is now to further increase his power in the upcoming local elections set for March 31, with the aim of winning back Istanbul by ousting the current CHP mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Recently, during a public ceremony, the names of the main AKP candidates were revealed and Murat Kurum, former Minister of the Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change (2018-2023) and before manager of TOKİ (Mass Housing Development Administration), was confirmed as reference man for Istanbul, focusing heavily on the need of an effective anti-seismic plan, given the city's natural propensity to earthquakes. Along AKP and MHP unveiling candidates, the new electoral campaign in Türkiye has *de facto* begun.

³ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye's exports soar to record \$255.8 billion in 2023: Erdoğan*, January 2024. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiyes-exports-soar-to-record-2558billion-in-2023-erdogan>

Before its launch, the domestic discourse has been centered on *Türkiye Yüz Yılı* (Türkiye Century) and its several celebrations culminated with the final rally of October 29, attended by many international and diplomatic guests. Erdoğan's mood, however, was visibly affected by the developments in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, since the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Palestine, much attention has been focused on the Palestinian cause and related humanitarian situation. Although the President waited days before expressing himself personally on the situation, after the withdrawal of Israeli diplomatic personnel from Türkiye under 'security concerns', he did not spare harsh accusations and words, reiterating his role as supporter of the oppressed Palestinians, by not departing from his traditional rhetoric also regarding Hamas. Contacts with the political wing of Hamas, considered by Türkiye as a civil resistance movement and not a terrorist organization, have always been assiduous in the search for a sustainable solution that would lead to the release of the hostages and the end of hostility. The ultimate goal, according to Ankara, would be the creation of two states according to the 1967 borders. In this regard, Turkish public diplomacy and state media have become the main channels denouncing Israeli humanitarian crimes and the ineffectiveness of the international community in halting the violence. Several peaceful rallies and protests have taken place in Istanbul and in the main Turkish cities under the slogan #stopgenocide while mass campaigns have been organized to boycott the sale of Israeli products. As well, the Israeli-Palestine conflict has created some spill over on Turkish domestic environment leading to some stability and security concerns. In recent months, security measures have been increased by the Ministry of the Interior who, through intelligence, would have thwarted infiltration attempts by the Mossad, leading to the arrest of a large number of people. As the fight against the foreign interference in the internal affairs of Türkiye are sensitive issues in the social psychology of the Country, therefore also used instrumentally in the political rhetoric, the anti-terrorism measures have been tightened by a presidential decree following the meeting of the security council. This move has to be intended also in response to the exacerbation of violence on the Syrian border and in Iraq, which led to new casualties among Turkish soldiers stationed across the border.

1.2 The wider regional context

At the same time, faced with the umpteenth failure of the relations with Israel, recently fully normalized and sealed after February 2023 earthquakes, Turkish diplomacy has intensified communications and dialogue with all regional and international actors, calling for an end to hostilities. In front of violence escalation in the region, intense diplomatic traffic has been taking place in Ankara. Aware that in a highly fragmented and divided context, the goal is to maximize the cooperative spirit and to narrow the margins of friction. In this perspective, at the beginning of December an important result was signed in Athens along the meeting between Erdoğan and his delegation with the counterparts. The appeasement with Greece, a fundamental interlocutor on many dossiers of political, economy and energy importance, from Europe to the wider Mediterranean and beyond, is today again on the table of decision makers, revitalized also in its objectives. This is also the result of the achieved normalization with Egypt, in light of the challenges involving both Türkiye and Europe, despite in the background persists the pending issue of the division of the island of Cyprus and the renewed nationalist spirit of the Turkish Cypriot administration which, supported by the Erdoğan government, claims the formation of

two states. From the Mediterranean to Middle East to Caucasus, Türkiye's role has been on rise. However, although Ankara's strategic autonomy has been so much emphasized, there are some obstacles proving that absolute autonomy is difficult to persevere. Indeed, along the strengthening of domestic security measures aimed at countering terrorist acts and guaranteeing internal stability, there is an escalation of military actions against 'terrorist' targets at regional level. Hence, the resumption of a new nationalist rhetoric, which could also be used instrumentally for electoral purposes. The continuous contacts with the major regional and international players and the delegations organized by Türkiye to raise awareness in the Western community on the need of a ceasefire between Israel and Palestine proves Ankara's ambition to establish itself as a mediator. In this regard, Ankara has proposed a four-party mechanism of guarantor states, which, although it is difficult to implement, remains a crucial dossier on the table of Turkish decision makers. The meeting between Erdoğan and Raisi in Ankara and Putin's visit confirm Türkiye's aims as well to dialogue and mediation. As well of crucial importance is the relationship with the United States, sealed by the visits of the Secretary of State Blinken, which have produced a détente in relations and Türkiye openness on Sweden's access to NATO, a dossier already signed by President Erdoğan and halted by the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Lastly, on 23 January the Turkish Parliament approved Sweden NATO membership with a reflected effect on the maneuvers of Biden, who finally wrote to Congress urging approval of a 20 billion sale of F-16 aircraft and modernization aircraft to Türkiye.

Lastly, it is also worth mentioning the visit of the Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, the first since her election, whose dossiers concerned not only bilateral relations but also various queenly matters. In this regard, particular importance would have been dedicated to migration issue and cooperation on the Libyan scene.

2. Mediterranean Region

2.1 Greece – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

September 2023 started with the meeting between the foreign ministers of Greece and Türkiye Giorgos Gerapetritis and Hakan Fidan in Ankara to reach ‘common ground’ for resolving decades-old disputes.⁴ At the core of the meeting, the situation in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Few weeks later, at the margins of the UN General Assembly held in New York, Erdogan and Mitsotakis held a closed-door meeting as part of their bilateral engagements, the second after their re-election.⁵ According to Turkish media, the meeting was productive and aimed at building confidence between the Parties. Few weeks later, the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye and Greece, Ambassador Burak Akçapar and Mr. Konstantinos Fragogiannis, respectively, met in Athens for the 5th round of discussions on the Joint Action Plan on October 16, 2023, reaffirming their common goal to provide concrete outcomes for the Positive Agenda between the two countries which includes business-economy, tourism, transportation, energy, science and technology, agriculture, environment, social security & health, youth, education and sports.⁶

In a sign of further warming in relations, a “confidence-building meeting” was held in November 13. The exchange, hosted by Turkish Defense Ministry, took place in Ankara between a defense delegation of Greece and its Turkish counterpart.⁷ According to the official statement of Turkish MD the meeting was held in a positive spirit: the two sides agreed on implementing or reactivating a number of previously agreed CBMs⁸ during year 2024 and to establish a POC mechanism to remain in contact and facilitate their implementation.

On December 7, 2023, the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) was held in Greece, with Erdoğan paying a landmark visit to the country, thus opening a “new era” in bilateral relations. Erdoğan and Mitsotakis agreed on a roadmap for political dialogue, low-level fields of cooperation and confidence-building steps.⁹

⁴Al Jazeera, *Ministerial meeting heralds warmer relations between Greece and Turkey*, September, 2023. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/5/ministerial-meeting-heralds-warmer-relations-between-greece-and-turkey>

⁵ The first meeting between the Parties was held in July, at the sidelines of the Vilnius NATO summit.

⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hellenic Republic, Joint Statement following the consultations between the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Türkiye, Athens, 17.10.2023, See <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-statement-following-the-consultations-between-the-deputy-foreign-ministers-of-the-hellenic-republic-and-the-republic-of-turkiye-athens-17102023.html>

⁷ Daily Sabah, *Turkish, Greek defense delegations gather for rare meeting*, November 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-greek-defense-delegations-gather-for-rare-meeting>

⁸ Türkiye and Greece had adopted around two dozen confidence-building measures since the late 1980s in order to avoid military confrontation. See Hurriyet Daily News, *Ankara, Athens agree to enhance confidence in Aegean*, November 2023. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-athens-agree-to-enhance-confidence-in-aegean-187830>

⁹ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye-Greece declaration reflects political will to deepen ties*, December 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-greece-declaration-reflects-political-will-to-deepen-ties>

2.1.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

After years of downs mainly linked to the disputes over territorial waters, airspace violations and militarization of the Aegean Islands, the two neighboring countries are walking the path for full rapprochement. While both “*regional resistance and economic necessity have moderated Türkiye’s pursuit of the maximalist Mavi Vatan maritime posture*”¹⁰ the so-called ‘disaster diplomacy’ has undoubtedly triggered the process, with Greece sending assistance to Türkiye following the February earthquake and Türkiye offering condolences after the deadly train accident in Greece. Although considering that re-approach attempts have had fluctuating courses, the political willingness to move from “friendship in times of trouble” to a sustainable partnership is there, and the bilateral developments of the last few months confirm the purpose. Indeed, the positive attitude of both Greece and Türkiye towards the normalization of bilateral relations continues, mainly cemented by the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) of December 7. Athens and Ankara signed a joint declaration of 16 points, with MoUs on investment promotion and cooperation, including in the field of small and medium sized enterprises, implementation of the project NEW AC400 kV Interconnection line Türkiye-Greece; Joint declarations on a number of fields such as Agriculture and rural development, sport, vocational education, science and technology cooperation; a statement on the construction of a second border crossing road bridge between the two countries in Kipi-Ipsala, among the other things.

Thus, Greece and Türkiye agreed to reboot their relations and usher in a new era of ties boosting trade, and energy and establishing communication channels between coastguards to tackle migration. After the tensions over the so-called “open door policy” and the pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish border, the two neighbors are now dealing with the issue in a positive climate. During the December 7 meeting, Mitsotakis welcomed the reduction in migratory flows towards Greece, adding that this comes because of the greater cooperation between the police and the coastguards of the two countries.¹¹ Furthermore, the Greek Prime Minister assured Erdogan that Athens supports the simplification of visa granting for Turkish citizens within the framework of the European *acquis*,¹² announcing that following EU’s approval there will be the possibility for short-term visas for Turkish citizens to visit ten Greek islands.

In the light of a re-engagement between Athens and Ankara, already existent spaces of collaboration also between the EU and Türkiye can be enhanced, and mutual trust rebuilt. Although the resumption of the accession negotiation process is stuck, the migratory issue remains among the main fields for cooperation between the EU and Türkiye. At the end of September, Migration Minister Dimitris Kairidis declared that Greece seeks an agreement for expanding the 2016 Euro-Turkish deal “with Greece’s initiative” as Athens has an immediate interest as a frontline migration state.¹³ During the second Türkiye-EU High-Level Dialogue on

¹⁰ IISS, *Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Security and Energy Dynamics*, November 2023 see <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/strategic-dossier-preview-turbulence-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

¹¹ Euronews, *Greece and Turkey agree to reboot relations following landmark talks in Athens*, December 2023. See <https://www.euronews.com/2023/12/07/greece-and-turkey-agree-to-reboot-relations-following-landmark-talks-in-athens>

¹² Agenzia Nova, *Greek-Turkish relations enter new phase: Mitsotakis and Erdogan sign declaration of good neighborliness*, December 2023. See <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/greece-turkey-relations-enter-new-phase-mitsotakis-and-erdogan-sign-declaration-of-good-neighborliness/>

¹³ Hurriyet Daily news, *Greece seeks EU-Türkiye migration deal expansion: Minister*, September 2023. See <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/greece-seeks-eu-turkiye-migration-deal-expansion-minister-186506>

Migration and Security held in Brussel at the end of November 2023 the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson and Türkiye Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya discussed the prevention of irregular migration, border security and the fight against migrant smuggling, cooperation of their respective migration and law enforcement agencies, counterterrorism and the fight against organized crime as well as Dialogues on Visa liberalization.¹⁴

A rapprochement between Greece and Türkiye will also be crucial for maintaining calm in the Eastern Mediterranean. Confidence-building measures in defense and military will be vital for the scope together with people-to-people diplomacy as underlined by Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis in London in late November.¹⁵ The topic is sensitive since in November 2023 the Council of the EU renewed for an additional year its restrictive measures on Türkiye for the 2019 unauthorized drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶

With the Eastmed pipeline seemingly set aside, major potential competition in the Eastern Mediterranean “remains between energy and infrastructure projects transiting through a southern route -Israel and/or Egypt- and others through a northern one -Türkiye-”¹⁷ with countries seeing their “connector” potential between Asia and Europe as a key opportunity to arise as energy hubs.

That said, a full re-engagement between Greece and Türkiye, which is also deepening relations with Egypt, could at least help initiatives of regional cooperation once the war in Gaza is over, including the EU’s idea for a Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean which has failed to materialize in the last 3 years. Indeed, “A permanent conference on the Eastern Mediterranean as an inclusive yet flexible and demand-driven platform could serve as a framework for discussing and developing possibilities for cooperation, including in the context of new EU legislation and instruments in specific areas such as energy and economic security, connectivity, digital and green transition, and industrial policy.”¹⁸

The positive climate between the Parties could also facilitate intra-NATO relations. US State Department’s decision to notify Congress of the warplane \$23bn agreement after Turkish parliament’s approval of Sweden’s NATO membership,¹⁹ means a step forward in bilateral ties. However, many issues remain between US and Ankara and a long-lasting positive attitude

¹⁴ EU Commission, *Joint press release on EU-Türkiye High Level Dialogue on Migration and Security*, November 2023. See https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-press-release-eu-turkiye-high-level-dialogue-migration-and-security-2023-11-24_en

¹⁵ Gerapetritis asserted that Türkiye and Greece “have decided to focus not on things to actually separate us, but the things that actually unite us”. A. Bicer, *‘Window of opportunity’: Athens, Ankara look to rise above differences to strengthen ties, says Greek foreign minister*, Anadolu Agency, November 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/window-of-opportunity-athens-ankara-look-to-rise-above-differences-to-strengthen-ties-says-greek-foreign-minister/3066873>

¹⁶ The restrictive measures consist of an asset freeze for listed persons and entities and EU citizens and companies are forbidden from making funds or economic resources available to those listed. In addition, a travel ban to/through the European Union applies to listed persons. Currently, two individuals are listed. See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/09/unauthorised-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-prolongs-restrictive-measures/>

¹⁷ IISS, *Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Security and Energy Dynamics*, November 2023. See <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/strategic-dossier-preview-turbulence-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

¹⁸ See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0050>

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, *Turkey’s parliament approves Sweden’s NATO bid*, January 2024. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/23/turkeys-parliament-set-to-vote-on-swedens-nato-bid-this-week-reports>

towards Greece can provide Türkiye additional credit in front of its NATO allies. Indeed, as reported by Al Jazeera, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin -chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee- stated that his approval of Türkiye's request to purchase F-16 aircraft "*was not a decision I came to lightly, I look forward to beginning this new chapter in our relationship with Turkey, expanding the NATO alliance, and working with our global allies in standing up to ongoing Russian aggression*".²⁰

That said, weaknesses in the process for full normalization remain. During High-Level Cooperation Council Erdoğan declared "there's no problem that cannot be solved" between Türkiye and Greece. However, no discussion was held on the delimitation of the continental shelf and Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. According to Mitsotakis, the issue will be raised at the next political dialogue.²¹

The other open chapter is Cyprus. Despite Erdoğan's declaration that "fair and sustainable resolution of Cyprus dispute will benefit everyone", positions still differ on the path to follow. During the 40th anniversary of the Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence from the southern part of the island,²² Greece has called on Türkiye to adhere to UN resolutions on the ethnically split Mediterranean island.²³ The issue has also been recalled by the EU report on Türkiye, underlining Brussels commitment to support the UN-led process for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem "in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions and in line with the principles on which the EU is founded and the *acquis*".²⁴ Cyprus Greek administration and most international community position is to work toward a single state through a bizonal, bicomunal federation with political equality, a vision that is not supported by Ersin Tatar, current president of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as well as Erdoğan, that push for the two-state solution.²⁵ In September, Greek FMA George Gerapetritis declared that plans for a two-state solution are out of the negotiation agenda, confirming its alignment to the RoC government.²⁶

²⁰Al Jazeera, *US approves sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey*, January 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/27/us-approves-sale-of-f-16-fighter-jets-to-turkey>

²¹ E. Stamatoukou, H.F. Buyuk, *Greece, Turkey, Plot New Path With Friendship Declaration*, Balkan Insight, December 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/07/greece-turkey-plot-new-path-with-friendship-declaration/>

²² The self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established on November 15, 1983. Although having functioning state mechanism, TRNC lacks international recognition, except for Turkey.

²³ Ekathimerini, *Greece urges Turkey to adhere to UN resolutions on Cyprus*, November 2023. See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1224936/greece-urges-turkey-to-adhere-to-un-resolutions-on-cyprus/>

²⁴ EU Commission, *Türkiye 2023 Report*. November 2023. See https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_696%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20report.pdf

²⁵ To go into depth, see International Crisis Group, *How to Reinvigorate the UN's Mediation Efforts in Cyprus*, August 2023. See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europe-mediterranean/cyprus/how-reinvigorate-uns-mediation-efforts-cyprus>

²⁶ Ekathimerini, *Gerapetritis rebuts Erdogan call for 2 states in Cyprus*, September 2023. See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1220436/gerapetritis-rebuts-erdogan-call-for-2-states-in-cyprus/>

2.2 Egypt –Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

After a decade of deep polarization and diplomatic tensions, Egypt and Türkiye have engaged renewed relations in different fields and strategic issues. 2023 marked an important turning point in the bilateral relations characterized by the increasing tensions in Palestine bringing the two sides closer than ever. In September 2023, just a month before the October 7 attack on Israel, Egypt and Türkiye pushed forward the reconciliation by dispatching, in July 2023, ambassadors for the first time in years²⁷.

This breakthrough has been followed by G20 in India meeting during which Türkiye's President Erdoğan met his Egyptian counterpart al-Sisi to discuss a possible increasing in terms of energy, trade, and economic cooperation²⁸. However, the actual turning point has been that related to the crisis opened in Gaza after the October 7 attack. Since October 9, different phone calls demonstrated a major cooperation in finding a political solution for the political and humanitarian crisis in Gaza²⁹. The focus has notably been in the delivering of the humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, which translated in November 2023 in an Action Group among Muslim countries, among the others, Türkiye and Egypt³⁰.

Besides al-Sisi and Erdoğan, the cooperation on Gaza have been characterized also by the role of the respective *first ladies*. Indeed, in November 2023 Egyptian First Lady Intissar al-Sisi received a phone call from her Turkish counterpart Emine Erdoğan for discussing humanitarian aid (51 containers of medical supplies, generators and 20 ambulances, with necessary permissions, were loaded onto a ship from Izmir's Alsancak port and sent to Egypt³¹) to Gaza as well as cooperation on the empowerment of women, youth, and children³².

On the defense and security level, although Libya represent a major political challenge, Egypt and Türkiye are moving on an incremented cooperation in defense industry as demonstrated by the arms expo held in Egypt wherein several major Turkish defense firms signed memoranda of understanding (MOU) with Egyptian companies³³.

²⁷ AP News, *Turkey and Egypt reappoint ambassadors and end years of tensions between the regional powers*, July 2023. See <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-egypt-reappoint-ambassadors-9060f3b61e4d01a5c21fdb905f8c09a3>

²⁸ Reuters, *Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's Sisi discuss energy cooperation at G20 Summit*, September 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-egypts-sisi-discuss-energy-cooperation-g20-summit-turkish-2023-09-10/>

²⁹ Hafez, 2023 Yearender: *Cairo - The peace broker*, al-Ahram, December 2023. See: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/514281/AIAhram-Weekly/Egypt/-Yearender-Cairo--The-peace-broker.aspx>

³⁰ Daily Sabah, *Muslim countries create action group for Gaza conflict diplomacy*, November 2023. See: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/muslim-countries-create-action-group-for-gaza-conflict-diplomacy>

³¹ Reuters, *Turkey sends field hospital aid ship to Egypt for Gaza*, November 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-sends-field-hospital-aid-ship-egypt-gaza-2023-11-10/>

³² Egypt Today, *Egyptian First Lady receives phone call from Turkish counterpart on Gaza*, November 2023. See: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/128418/Egyptian-First-Lady-receives-phone-call-from-Turkish-counterpart-on>

³³ Kayaoglu, *Is Turkey-Egypt rapprochement turning into a long-term defense partnership?* al-Monitor, December 2023. See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/12/turkey-egypt-rapprochement-turning-long-term-defense-partnership#ixzz8OEsbxQOOQ>

2.2.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

The normalization path carried on by the two countries, Egypt and Türkiye shared some common goals and challenges given by a renewed regional context. The diplomatic and political tensions animating the past decade have been characterized by an ideological substratum since the ousting of the first Egyptian democratically elected president Mohamed Mursi by a coup d'état carried out by the former ministry of defense, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Türkiye along with Qatar, notably since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, vigorously sustained Mursi presidency sharing with him the ideological view of political Islam incarnated by the Muslim Brotherhood³⁴. The coup and the following generalized repression of the Islamists pushed Türkiye in assuming a rigid position toward Egypt. The reception of a great deal of the Islamist militants in Türkiye and the regional polarization developed among regional powers, generated a general tension bringing, between 2017 and 2020, to the pick of political clash with Libya and East Mediterranean as the main battlefield.

The resumption of the diplomatic channel between the two countries has been slow and gradual since the challenges at the regional and international level have opened a new era of diplomatic patterns. The failure in 2020 of General Haftar (supported by Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia) to take Tripoli (governed by Islamists backed by Türkiye, Qatar and part of the West) and the shock provoked by the war in Ukraine brought the two actors closer³⁵.

Although the ideological division persists between Erdoğan and al-Sisi, it became less central since the regional and geopolitical context shifted towards a more realist approach translated into several normalization process starting from the Qatari reintegration in the Gulf Cooperative Council, the breakthrough of the Iranian-Saudi relations and the reintegration of Syria within the Arab League³⁶. This approach is the result of an ideological distention among regional powers notably after the deep economic and trade crisis given by covid-19 and the Russian war. This brought regional actors to start a political process that also influenced Egypt and Türkiye.

Indeed, although the two countries have never stopped the economic relations, the political polarization negatively influenced their role in some key contexts: energy and security.

The energy crisis after the Russian war in Ukraine have shaped the development in the reproachment of the two countries since Egypt have become the one of the main LNG exporters in the region and Türkiye one of its main importers³⁷. This dossier is directly intertwined with the last five years move of Türkiye foreign policy notably in respect of East Mediterranean issues and its energetic knots. Indeed, if on one side the signature of the MoU between Ankara and Tripoli on the delimitation of maritime zones triggered the tensions with Greece and Cyprus with the official support of Egypt, on the other, as outlined by experts and Egyptian officials, the accords resulted strategic for Egyptian interests, as it would have granted Egypt a sizable maritime concession³⁸. It is not a case that the July 2023 diplomatic relaxation draws on the

³⁴ Amara, *Fall of Egypt's Mursi splits region*, Reuters, July 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-protests-reaction-idINDEE9630CX20130704/>

³⁵ See the section on Libya.

³⁶ For a broader analysis, see: SWP, *Normalization and Realignment in the Middle East*, SWP Comment 2021. See: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C45/>

³⁷ Reuters, *Egypt to resume LNG exports this month, minister says*, October 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N3B900T/>

³⁸ Mada Masr, *what comes after the collapse of Haftar's western campaign?* June 2020. See: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/08/feature/politics/what-comes-after-the-collapse-of-haftars-western-campaign/>

energetic dossier as the main cornerstone of this renewed political and economic normalization. This is the main core of the recent diplomatic relations since they could be crucial for both countries: on the one hand it could be strategic for Türkiye in order to go out from isolation within the East Med Gas Forum (given Egypt has been one of the main promoter of the initiative) and on the other it would increase the centrality of Egypt in terms of Natural Gas exporter.

These moves would also be fruitful in terms of security of the region especially in two central contexts: Palestine and Libya.

Since Egypt and Türkiye have been in opposite side in the Libyan civil war, this regional and bilateral normalization could be the core for a new path towards a political solution to curb with the instability in the country³⁹. In this sense, the two countries are playing a central role (demonstrated by the recurrent visits of the Libyan officials in Türkiye and Egypt) in mediating among the different actors on the ground. Although the improvements on the ground (freezing the conflict), Libya is still embedded within an internal polarization and political clash that could lead to new tensions and shaping new alliances even at the international level.

However, what seems to be the main security challenge is the war of Israel on Gaza. This event has triggered tensions and worries along the region with a high risk of conflict's expansion. In this context, Türkiye and Egypt seemed to be the most active actors in the region along with Qatar in terms of mediation. The conflict represents indeed a crucial dossier to both, for a number of reasons: security, political legitimacy and energy as well.

Being both actors involved in a broader process of normalization with Israel (despite Egypt formally did not activate a formal process)⁴⁰, they historically, at least on paper, maintained a strong position in condemning Israeli actions against Gaza and since the 2000s they played a major role in mediating between the parts. This time, given the situation on the field and the dimension of the aggression on Gaza, both actors are in front of a broader process. The forced displacement of more than 1 million people to the south of the Strip represents a real threat for the stability of the Egyptian border with the risk of a mass migration within the Sinai⁴¹. This would jeopardize the stability of an already destabilized area on the Egyptian soil (due to the presence of radical jihadists groups). On the Turkish side, the US consider Türkiye a key actor in the region in terms of mediation, even if Erdoğan refused to meet Blinken in November. Much better was the meeting in the first days of January 2024, between Turkey Minister of Foreign Affairs Fidan and US State Secretary Anthony Blinken during which they discussed about the Gaza crisis and the next steps in terms Sweden accession to NATO. More importantly, this time also Erdoğan met US diplomatic chief with the aim to encourage the political path for Gaza's war by guaranteeing Türkiye a more central role in terms of mediation. The leverage of Türkiye

³⁹ For an in-depth analysis, see: Megerisi, *Libya's global civil war*, ECFR Policy Brief, June 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/libyas_global_civil_war1/

⁴⁰ For Türkiye's normalization with Israel, see: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-09-19/ty-article/turkeys-erdogan-reportedly-supports-possible-israel-saudi-normalization-agreement/0000018a-adeb-dddd-a1aa-bfef2cb00000>. Egypt has a long history of diplomatic ties with Israel starting, at least, in 1979 after Camp David Accords. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/-1979-israel-egypt-normalization-meant-to-remove-cairo-from-arab-israeli-conflict-/2546743>

⁴¹ Yeranian, *Egypt Expresses Opposition to Allowing Palestinians from Gaza Into Sinai*, VOA news, October 2023. See: <https://www.voanews.com/a/egypt-expresses-opposition-to-allowing-palestinians-from-gaza-into-sinai/7310915.html>

on Hamas and Palestinian National Authority pushed the US to sponsor Erdoğan as one of the main focal points for the region.

Finally, for both actors, their position on Palestine represents an internal challenge in terms of legitimacy and credibility. The strong Palestinian sentiment within both countries manifested more than once their opposition to the Israeli aggression showing their solidarity with Palestine. For this reason, at least in this phase, both governments are maintaining critique position towards Israel and also towards the international community⁴². Furthermore, both actors are fully aware of the risk of a conflict expansion and their repercussions on other strategic dossier that are leading the process of normalization. Given both Israel and Palestinian Authority are in the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), both countries have a heavy responsibility on their back in terms of economic and energetic interests.

2.3 Libya-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The last months of 2023 have been characterized by intensifying diplomatic moves among Türkiye and Libya although tension and instability in the North African country remained central. Indeed, the flood that stuck Eastern Libya in September 2023 represented an opportunity to present their condolences for the victims of the flood to the Head of the Libyan Presidential Council al-Menfi and providing humanitarian by sending a cargo ship⁴³.

In October, given the continuing tensions in the country, the Turkish parliament voted for an extension of the presence of Turkish troops until 2026 (notably deployed in the Western part) with the aim to ensure the ceasefire in the country and guarantee the implementation of the political dialogue. The bill has then ratified in December.

In addition, in October, during the meeting Türkiye-Africa Business and Economic Forum, the Libyan foreign Minister, Mohammed Al-Huweij, and his Turkish counterpart, Ömer Bolat, met to reinforce the economic cooperation between the two countries⁴⁴.

In the same month, Türkiye and Libya revived the controversial accord on Gas and Oil exploration in the Mediterranean, but this time, as outlined by officials and experts, should be a turning point since it seems to be in line with the broader general interests of all actors in the region (notably Egypt and Greece)⁴⁵.

In November 2023, an increasing diplomatic course took its way by the visit of the President of the Libyan House of Representative (HoR) to Türkiye with the aim to unify the Libyan institutions and to have a narrow relation in terms of economic development and trade.

⁴² For an in-depth analysis, see: Aydıntaşbaş; Huggard, *Understanding Turkey's response to the Israel-Gaza crisis*, Brookings, December 2023. See:

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-turkeys-response-to-the-israel-gaza-crisis/>

⁴³ Bayar, *Turkish president extends condolences to Libya over deadly floods*, AA, September 2023. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-president-extends-condolences-to-libya-over-deadly-floods/2990464>

⁴⁴ Assad, Libya, *Turkey discuss strengthening trade cooperation*, Libya Observer October 2023. See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/libya-turkey-discuss-strengthening-trade-cooperation>

⁴⁵ Nordic Monitor, *Turkey retrieves controversial oil and gas deal with Libya from the shelf*, October 2023. See: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2023/10/turkey-retrieves-controversial-oil-and-gas-deal-with-libya-from-the-shelf/>

2.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Libyan-Turkish relations in these last months have been characterized by continuing diplomatic, military, and humanitarian exchanges. Libya was stuck by floods in which more than 4,300 people were killed, causing dams to burst and destroyed buildings in many towns, particularly in Al Bayda, Al Marj and in the coastal city of Derna. The storm also caused significant damage to critical infrastructure, including bridges, roads, and electricity grids. This pushed Türkiye to intervene and sending humanitarian aid, notably a cargo for hospitals facilities and goods for basic needs. The support of the Turkish government to the Eastern region is too significant in terms of political and diplomatic sense since it is managed by the Lord war Khalifa Haftar, one of the main rivalries of the Western Libya government, which is supported by the UN and international community along with Türkiye.

Furthermore, what seems to have been advancing on the political side is the general normalization of the region affecting the situation in Libya with the main actors, who have been involved in the conflict, starting to take on a political dialogue. In this context the three main challenges this new phase of the conflict has to deal with are: security, energy and the Libyan political dialogue.

The choice of the Turkish parliament to confirm their military presence in Libya confirmed a certain centrality of the security. Despite the opposition of the Eastern governments Libya (opposing the Turkish presence) for Tripoli it means a strategic presence to avoid further tensions and attacks from the East. Indeed, if on one side foreign forces are present on both sides (mercenaries from Sudan and Syria are supporting Haftar, along with logistical and military support from UAE), the Turkish intervention in 2020 after the East's attack on Tripoli, prevented a debacle of the UN backed government and, in some ways, saved the weak institutions created. For this reason, although Libya as it was in 2020 needs an external neutral force, to advance the political process, the presence of Türkiye, as many officials in Tripoli claimed, could support the empowerment of the military capacity of Libya.

The military presence's extension should be conceived also in terms of increasing economic and trade interests between the two countries. The official meetings in September and December had at their core the energy and economic dossier notably in terms of investments, energy deal and infrastructure reconstruction. The first move in this direction has been the removing of tariffs on Libyan imports in Türkiye to avoid a double taxation and excluding Libya from the 40 percent tax imposed on Libyan companies, as a guarantee by Turkish banks, and accepting cash payment instead of suspended bank transfers from Libyan banks⁴⁶. This has been facilitated by the institutional infrastructure that the two countries built in the recent times. The Libyan-Turkish Joint Committee represents the main platform to reinforce the relationship in terms of economic interests. This would also include the energy challenges and involve the whole Mediterranean since the MoU signed in 2019 between Libya and Türkiye triggered tensions among regional states as Greece, Egypt, Cyprus and Israel⁴⁷. The MoU should be considered a move by Türkiye

⁴⁶ Zaptia, *Turkey-Libyan trade agreement to remove tariffs on Libyan imports, prevent double taxation*, October 2023. See: <https://libyaherald.com/2023/10/turkey-libyan-trade-agreement-to-remove-tariffs-on-libyan-imports-prevent-double-taxation/>

⁴⁷ Critics argued that the agreement also poses legal and sovereignty concerns, particularly concerning the 2019 agreement between Turkey and the former Libyan Government of National Accord on the delimitation of maritime borders and its potential impact on the eastern Mediterranean. See: Nordic Monitor, *Turkey retrieves controversial oil and gas deal with Libya from the shelf*, October 2023. See: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2023/10/turkey-retrieves-controversial-oil-and-gas-deal-with-libya-from-the-shelf/>

to curb with a regional isolation since the formation of the East Med Gas Forum. However, the regional normalization along with the modifies of the MoU (the new draft does not mention the 2019 accord) should facilitate, despite is still a real challenge, the dialogue among the countries of the Forum. In this respect, either Egypt or Greece, two main opponents of the MoU, in recent time showed a more moderate position since the meeting at United Nations General Assembly in New York in September, President Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis held discussions with the aim to de-escalate tensions between the two countries. This would also affect the internal dynamic of Libya since the energy resources are the main source of the State to maintain a certain stability of the country but also would ease the political dialogue.

Indeed, despite differences in terms of ideology remained and are still provoking tensions in the country, the normalization with Egypt (opposing the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood within Tripoli's government) would increment the national dialogue⁴⁸. The de-escalation within the region among different political views (Brotherhood vs Islamists), could facilitate the national dialogue. However, it should be underlined that the main factions that are now animating the tensions within the country should deconstruct all their territorial power that go beyond the simple ideological schema. Local groups, tribes, and divisions of the country into two main opposite parts require a broader transitional process that could be supported by a 'neutral' third part.

⁴⁸ See the section on Egypt.

3. The Middle East

3.1. Syria-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The intention of Turkish MoFA to directly communicate with his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Mekdad, was a turning point for the normalization efforts of Türkiye in the Middle East.⁴⁹ In this frame, the former FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu informed the public that he could meet FM Mekdad early in February 2023. This attitude was earliest of its kind since the 2011 Syrian revolt. As an early reaction to Türkiye's attempt to normalize with the Assad Regime, Assad worded Türkiye as 'foe-enemy' claiming the conditions for a probable normalization. He delineated the provisions such as the withdrawal of the Turkish military from Syria and stopping the support of the Syrian National Army.⁵⁰ The response of the Turkish President Erdoğan was loaded with optimism, proposing a peace process. For him, the Ministers of Defense of Russia, the Assad Regime, and Türkiye would meet in Moscow before another trilateral meeting of Ministries of Foreign Affairs.⁵¹ The Defense Ministers met in Moscow at the end of December 2022 as was agreed through Russian facilitation. Russia's quest⁵² was consistent with the interests of both Russia and Türkiye by excluding Iranians. The initial assessments after this statement were that Russia intended to balance Iran with Türkiye after the Russian aggression on Ukraine not to lose initiative in Syria's landscape. Being aware of such an attitude, the Iranian approach to the normalization effort of the Turkish government was gradual and cautious. The initial Russian and Turkish position to exclude Iran from the process mobilized the Iranian Foreign Minister Abdullahiyan to pay a visit to Damascus on 14 January 2023. Syria's Foreign Minister Mekdad repeated the regime's narrative that the normalization is an impasse unless the Turkish withdrawal from Syria is realized.⁵³ The Iranian Foreign Minister was more balanced since Iran pushed itself into the Moscow Mechanism by a request to Russians, proposing Iran's 'constructive contribution'.⁵⁴ Hence, the visit of the Abdullahiyan to Damascus was to

⁴⁹ REUTERS, *Turkish foreign minister says he could meet Syrian counterpart early February*, The Jerusalem Post, 12 January 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-728377>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁰ REUTERS, *Assad says Turkey talks must be based on ending 'occupation'*, The Jerusalem Post, 13 January 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-728463>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵¹ REUTERS, *'Leaders of Turkey, Syria could meet for peace – Erdogan'*, REUTERS, 06 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/leaders-turkey-syria-could-meet-peace-erdogan-2023-01-05/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵² SETH J. FRANTZMAN, *'Russia still working on 'historic' meeting with Turkey, Iran and Syria'*, The Jerusalem Post, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-730584>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵³ BBC Türkçe, *'Suriye Dışişleri Bakanı: "İşgal sona ermeden ilişkiler normalleşemez"*, 14 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51ldx8lyg8o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁴ Ece Göksedef, *'İran, Türkiye-Suriye görüşmelerine ve normalleşme sürecine nasıl bakıyor?'*, BBC Türkçe, 25 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cp4q94vp8y7o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

emphasize Iran's vital influence on the Assad Regime as if they will not let the Regime normalize with Türkiye unless they are at the table.

The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) responded to the circulation of this statement with a balanced stance. The PM of SIG Abdurrahman Mustafa informed that they are not worried about such an initiative.⁵⁵ On the other hand; the armed groups, which are oriented with conservative teachings - mainly in Idlib, reacted to the words of President Erdoğan. Both Heyet-e Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ahrar-u Sham opposed the idea of normalization and claimed that they would not settle with the Assad Regime.⁵⁶

The February 6th earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, on the other hand, positively shifted the course of normalization. Türkiye, devastated by earthquakes, opened the border to the north of Syria, disregarding SNA or the Regime-held areas for humanitarian aid.⁵⁷ As a response, the Assad Regime facilitated the UN aid to reach the SNA-held areas, after a long period of obstruction to the UN aid to civilians in the north.⁵⁸ The positive atmosphere praised the normalization efforts that led to a quartet meeting in Moscow by the representation of vice Ministers of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the Assad Regime.⁵⁹ The hope was another meeting facilitating a ministerial quartet to conclude concrete steps.⁶⁰ Russian statement was to have both Syria and Türkiye to avoid focusing on 'pains of the past' through constructive and flexible communication.⁶¹ The Russian method was to set a roadmap for the parties.⁶² President Erdoğan's comment on the normalization with Assad was with welcoming words prior to his visit to the Gulf countries. Erdoğan delineated his intention with clear words: 'We are not closed to meet Bashar Assad. They demand the withdrawal of our forces from the north. There cannot be such an issue. We are countering terrorism there. There must be a fair approach. We can overcome all problems'. This statement portrayed the exact Turkish stance to continue the normalization in July 2023.⁶³ Assad, on the other hand, replied Erdoğan with a negative

⁵⁵ BBC Turkish, 'Suriyeli muhalifler, Türkiye ve Suriye arasındaki yeni sürece nasıl bakıyor?', BBC Türkçe, 04 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c2vnqeiyv7do>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁶ BBC Türkçe, 'Suriye'deki Esad karşıtı silahlı İslamcı gruplar Ankara'nın Şam ile normalleşme çabalarına tepkili', 06 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjmvv2gm7k3o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁷ REUTERS, 'Turkey may open border to Syrian government-held region for aid', The Jerusalem Post, 10 February 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-731206>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁸ BBC Türkçe, 'BM: Türkiye'den açılan sınır kapısından Suriye'nin kuzeyine ilk yardım konvoyu geçiş yaptı', 14 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cl4vg00rjvno>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁵⁹ BBC Türkçe, 'Türkiye-Suriye normalleşme süreci: İran'ın da katılımıyla ikinci aşamaya geçiliyor', BBC Türkçe, 08 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cl5jky27kkwo>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁶⁰ Sefa Karacan, 'Suriye konulu toplantı Moskova'da başladı', Anadolu Ajansı, 04 April 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriye-konulu-toplanti-moskovada-basladi/2862799>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁶¹ BBC Türkçe, 'Rusya'dan 'kapsamlı normalleşme' görüşmelerini sürdüren Türkiye ve Suriye'ye çağrı: Geçmiş acılara odaklanmayın', 05 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/ceq5z21ney3o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁶² Aljazeera, 'Russia, Syria, Turkey and Iran hold high-level talks in Moscow', Aljazeera, 10 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/10/russia-syria-turkey-and-iran-hold-high-level-talks-in-moscow>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁶³ Medyascope, 'Erdoğan: "Esed'le görüşmeye kapalı değiliz"', Medyascope, 17 July 2023, <https://medyascope.tv/2023/07/17/erdogan-esedle-gorusmeye-kapali-degiliz/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

connotation: “I will not meet Erdoğan under the conditions of him. We cannot meet to drink orange juice”.⁶⁴ The negative attitude of Assad did not change lately whilst Türkiye appears insistent on negotiations with no conditions. The Turkish soldiers, for the Turkish leadership, may return home only if there can be set a stable Syria through a democratic transition under the UN observation.

3.1.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Türkiye hosts approximately 3,7 million registered Syrians with the status of ‘person under protection’. The ones with no registration are illegally in the country. Besides any escalation at the north may potentially push at least 4 to 5 million Syrians towards Türkiye or the other neighboring countries. The continuous conflicts in Idlib are an essential concern for the Turkish authorities since the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is such high that an escalation of the armed groups or Russia and Iran-backed Assad forces may suddenly increase tension causing a mass demographic movement. Nevertheless, irregular immigration has been a calm social phenomenon for the last term. On the other hand, Türkiye’s election in 2023 provoked the debates on Syrians in Türkiye and critiques of President Erdoğan’s ‘open door’ policy for the ones deprived of security due to conflicts. The opposition parties started campaigns to forcefully send Syrians back to their countries or any other destination. Per the atmosphere of the May 2023 elections, another input on the Syrians in Türkiye was the impact of the February 6th earthquakes. This natural disaster has ruined the major cities close to the Syrian border such as Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, or the districts in the vicinity. A small number of Syrians returned their country after the earthquakes.⁶⁵ The tense election campaign led the Turkish politicians and intellectuals blended with polarized views on the governmental policies regarding Syria crisis or immigration. In this context, the opposing figures harshly criticized President Erdoğan’s ‘Syria policy’ because direct communication with Bashar Assad was their proposal during the last decade. The Syrians ‘under protection’ was the forerunning heading in the public debates and social media. The voters in favor of Erdoğan were more prone to comply with the already practiced policies based on humanitarian concerns, while the ones, prone to the opposition, harshly circulated negative narratives. After all, the polarization of the public came to a culmination point when the Erdoğan-led Government qualified for another five-year term after the elections. Nowadays, due to the financial crisis combined to an increased nationalist spirit, the sentiment towards Syrians in Türkiye is experiencing a critical turning point. The balance remains fragile.

Another crucial element, in the relations with Syria is the security. PKK’s Syria and Iraq basing, which has become a permanent posture, is a primary security concern for Turkish leadership. Once three political resolutions of the terror issue have failed for the last four decades, Türkiye started an active and pre-emptive counterterror strategy after the July 15th Coup Attempt of FETO. The Euphrates Shield Operation and three concurrent military campaigns targeted both

⁶⁴ BBC Türkçe, “*Suriye lideri Esad: Erdoğan ile onun koşulları altında görüşmem*”, Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 09 August 2023, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/dunya/suriye-lideri-esad-erdogan-ile-onun-kosullari-altinda-gorusmem-2107002>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁶⁵ Euronews, “*Türkiye’de depremde etkilenen Suriyelilerin bir kısmı ülkelerine geri dönüyor*”, Euronews, 17 February 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/02/17/turkiyede-depremde-etkilenen-suriyelilerin-bir-kismi-ulkelerine-geri-donuyor>, accessed on 21 December 2023

DAESH and PKK in Syria while Türkiye continuously hit PKK's bases in Iraq. The recent term witnessed PKK attacks targeting the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Ankara on 1 October 2023⁶⁶. Türkiye retaliated these attacks through air raids on PKK/PYD bases in Syria on 5 October 2023 targeting critical infrastructure built by the support of the U.S.-led Coalition. The response of the USA was downing a Turkish UAV, which was navigating to search PKK targets on the same day, claiming a self-defense justification⁶⁷. Hence, Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts have become also an issue of friction between Türkiye and the US. Hence, PKK started three other waves of terror attacks on Turkish soldiers in Iraq at the end of December 2023 and in January 2024. Moreover, PKK cells infiltrated the positions of Turkish military units in two concurrent attacks on 22 and 23 December 2023⁶⁸. The third attack was on 11 January 2024 targeting another Turkish base. Türkiye's response was asymmetric by focusing on the PKK infrastructure in Syria, mainly the depots, bases, and oil facilities. Foreign Minister Fidan announced that there is no demarcation between Iraq and Syria in terms of responding any terror attack. Minister of Defense Yaşar Güler, on the other hand, pointed out a series of further operations with an increasing pace, targeting PKK⁶⁹. Erdoğan's complementing speech confirmed the Turkish Ministers circulating a probable massive military campaign either in Iraq or in Syria during the coming months⁷⁰.

3.2. Israel/Palestine - Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The normalization process between Türkiye and Israel has matured through talks between intelligence services and track-II diplomacy efforts of civil society organizations. The normalization efforts started in 2015 despite the verbal tensions. Within this framework, the parties held direct talks at the levels of the Presidents, Prime Minister, and Ministers of Foreign Affairs, resulting in the appointment of Ambassadors to the Capitals. President Herzog, first, visited Ankara in March 2022 and the former Israeli PM Yair Lapid met with President Erdoğan on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2022 afterward.

Erdoğan talked about joint energy projects following the meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu in New York, which signaled a new phase after normalization⁷¹. Turkish leadership was expecting Netanyahu to sign an agreement if the October 7th attack would not change the course of normalization in the frame of a joint visit by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in

⁶⁶ MoI, <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/bakanligimiz-emniyet-genel-mudurlugu-girisine-saldiri-girisiminde-bulunan-ve-engellenerek-oldurulen-2-teroristin-kimligi-hakkinda-basin-aciklamasi>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

⁶⁷ EURONEWS, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/10/05/abd-f-16si-suriyede-turk-insansiz-hava-aracini-dusurdu>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

⁶⁸ BBC Turkish, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cq51dnyrq5ro>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

⁶⁹ BBC Turkish, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cye6rw67ynro>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

⁷⁰ Directorate of Communications, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turkiye-basarili-sinir-otesi-operasyonlariyla-topraklari-uzerinde-ameliyat-yaptirmayacagini-cok-acik-ve-net-gostermistir>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

⁷¹ Toi Staff, ‘‘Erdoğan says hopes to soon start work with Israel on energy drilling, networks’’, The Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-says-hopes-to-soon-start-work-with-israel-on-energy-drilling-networks/>, 22.09.2023, accessed on 21 December 2023

July 2023⁷². Energy cooperation was the primary heading in the expected visit that could facilitate the transfer of energy resources to European markets. Netanyahu postponed his visit due to his health conditions and the Israeli military campaign permanently stopped the positive resonance of both countries. Erdoğan also dropped his reciprocal visit from the agenda due to the Gaza intervention and humanitarian situation⁷³.

The response of Israel to the October 7th challenged the relations of both countries another time. The Ambassadors returned to their countries for security reasons⁷⁴ or consultations while narratives of leaderships left a limited hope for the sake of continuing the repaired ties⁷⁵. Erdoğan was selective in his wording after the October 7th, though; the civilian casualties due to the indiscriminate targeting of Gaza increased the tension in his speeches. Erdoğan warned Israel to “act like a state or be treated as an organization” other than the option of being tried before the International Criminal Court. On the other hand, Netanyahu claimed ‘Kurds’ to build a parallel wording. An article on the expected activities of MOSSAD to assassinate the Hamas members in Lebanon, Türkiye or Jordan provoked Erdoğan’s speech emphasizing “a very heavy price” on Israel once they attempt it⁷⁶. Despite the Minister of Foreign Affairs and MIT warned the Israeli diplomats not to act in Türkiye, the Turkish Intelligence started an operation on 2 January 2024 rounding up 30 Mossad members⁷⁷. The circulated media announcement of the Turkish Intelligence clearly informed the public about the methods used by MOSSAD and their identified activities⁷⁸. Despite the escalating narratives of both Israel and Türkiye, Erdoğan left room for a probable facilitation effort with concrete proposals⁷⁹. In this frame, President Erdoğan and FM Fidan delineated a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders⁸⁰. Another proposal was

⁷² Daily Sabah, “*Palestinian President Abbas, Israeli PM Netanyahu to visit Türkiye*”, Daily Sabah, 20 July 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/palestinian-president-abbas-israeli-pm-netanyahu-to-visit-turkiye>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁷³ Doğan Keskinlik, “*Türkiye’s Erdogan scraps Israel trip over ‘inhumane’ Gaza war*”, Middle East Monitor, 27.10.2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231027-turkiyes-erdogan-scraps-israel-trip-over-inhumane-gaza-war/>, accessed on 21.12.2023

⁷⁴ TOI Staff, “*Israel bringing diplomats home from Turkey after warning its citizens to leave*”, 19 October 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-bringing-diplomats-home-from-turkey-after-warning-citizens-to-leave/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁷⁵ Dilara Şenkaya, “*Turkey recalls ambassador to Israel over ‘humanitarian tragedy in Gaza’*”, Aljazeera, 04 November 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/4/turkey-recalls-ambassador-to-israel-for-consultations-as-gaza-bombing-rages>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁷⁶ Toi Staff, “*Erdogan warns Israel of ‘very heavy price’ if Hamas members harmed on Turkish soil*”, The Times of Israel, 6 December 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-warns-israel-of-very-heavy-price-if-hamas-members-harmed-on-turkish-soil/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁷⁷ Al Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/only-first-step-turkeys-erdogan-flaunts-anti-mossad-op-against-israel>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

⁷⁸ AA, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/3-soruda-mitten-mossada-son-darbe-nekropol-operasyonu/3103055>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

⁷⁹ Andrew Wilkins, “*Gaza war pushes tumultuous Israel-Turkey ties into ‘deep freezer’*”, Al Jazeera, 14.11.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/gaza-war-pushes-tumultuous-israel-turkey-ties-into-deep-freezer>, accessed on 21 December 2023

⁸⁰ TRT World, “*Turkish foreign minister calls for Gaza ceasefire, two-state solution*”, TRT World, 21 December 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkish-foreign-minister-calls-for-gaza-ceasefire-two-state-solution-16335466>, accessed on 21 December 2023

to set a guarantor modal that would include Türkiye and the other countries in charge of observing the situation in Gaza and securing Israel.⁸¹ The idea appears to be a not-favored solution for the Israeli side, even though there was no response for it. This option, actually, was not a course after Erdoğan called Israel as a ‘terror’ state but Hamas is not⁸². Another narrative of Erdoğan was that Israel’s act was a “massacre” because “even wars have amorality”⁸³. Finally, Türkiye started a political campaign to urge the Muslim and Arab countries present solidarity and resilience in resolving the Gaza conflict and overall Palestinian issue. FM Fidan consulted to the other ministers to build a Contact Group comprised of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The purpose was to persuade the other countries to come to the terms of a permanent ceasefire. It was a conclusive effort because the UN General Assembly made five decisions favoring the Palestinian cause⁸⁴. Moreover, Türkiye backed ICJ’s resolution to South Africa’s genocide case against Israel providing material as well taken in Gaza by State News Agency *Anadolu*.⁸⁵ In this sense, The Turkish objective of running a judicial mechanism on Israel has been proceeding in the long run.

3.2.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Ideology and religion are a critical factor as for Türkiye is related to the status of Jerusalem. Türkiye does not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel despite the efforts of the Trump-led U.S. Government. Türkiye’s initial reaction to the October 7th attack and Israeli campaign was loaded with a sensitive red line, which is Jerusalem. In this sense, Türkiye projected the courses on what could happen as far as the conflict escalates and reminded the Masjid-i Aksa as ‘not-touchable’ in the frame of religious faith. As a matter of fact, Türkiye’s public is more prone to Palestinian cause although the October 7th attack finds no sympathy. The circulated images in the media, after the Israeli military campaign, provoked the anti-Israel emotion in hearts and minds. On the other hand, this discourse did not become a widespread political wave other than protests. Shortly, Erdoğan’s Palestinian-centric narrative, on the other hand, finds a landscape in Türkiye. Therefore, the normalization, which was concluded, has stalled for another long term. In this context, both countries will be hesitant to build a constructive ‘win-win’ strategy until the Gaza issue is fairly resolved. Erdoğan is more focused on Netanyahu in the initial stage of the Israeli intervention, though; the relations will remain frozen due to his narratives like ‘Hamas is not a terrorist organization’, ‘Israel should act as a state, not an organization’, or “Israel is a terror

⁸¹ Murat Aslan, “Türkiye’s guarantor proposal and the failure of Netanyahu”, AA, 28 December 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-turkiyes-guarantor-proposal-and-the-failure-of-netanyahu/3094777>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

⁸² Jerusalem Post Staff, ‘Turkey’s Erdogan calls Israel ‘terror state’, slams West’, The Jerusalem Post, 15.11.2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-773316>, accessed on 21.12.2023.

⁸³ Aljazeera, ‘Turkey’s Erdogan calls Israeli siege and bombing of Gaza a ‘massacre’’, Aljazeera, 11.10.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/11/turkeys-erdogan-calls-israeli-siege-and-bombing-of-gaza-a-massacre>, accessed on 21.12.2023

⁸⁴ Awad Rjoob, Mehmet Nuri Uçar, “BM Genel Kurulu, Filistin lehine 5 kararı kabul etti”, AA, 8 Aralık 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/bm-genel-kurulu-filistin-lehine-5-karari-kabul-etti/3076592#:~:text=%C4%B0%C5%9Fgal%20alt%C4%B1nda%20bulunan%20Filistin%20topraklar%C4%B1nda ki,%C3%BCIke%20ise%20oylamada%20%C3%A7ekimser%20kald%C4%B1>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

⁸⁵ Z. Demirci and S. Aksunger, *Turkish parliament delegation urges swift resolution in South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at ICJ*, AA, January 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-parliament-delegation-urges-swift-resolution-in-south-africas-genocide-case-against-israel-at-icj/3107012>

state”. On the other hand, the Israeli response through ‘Kurds’ deepened the division of both countries. That is why PKK’s attack on the 22nd and 23rd of December in the north of Iraq has been correlated to a conspiracy theory, in which the experts blamed the Israeli government for ordering the PKK attack targeting Turkish soldiers⁸⁶. Besides, another critical element is related to migration concerns. Israeli Government has put forward the idea that all Gaza residents are Hamas and must be deported to other countries. In this sense, Israel proposed Egypt accept the Palestinians to be settled in Sinai Dessert with a pledge of paying the Egyptian debts to the IMF⁸⁷. The Egyptian government rejected this proposal, though; the Israeli government did not announce what strategy they would pursue as far as they fully control Gaza. Such a course will increase the concerns about an immigration wave in the coming months. Türkiye currently accepts a limited number of severely wounded other than the patients in need of cancer treatment. However, Türkiye’s mediator role in this conflict is difficult to accomplish. The EU and Türkiye are politically divided on the Gaza issue, mainly because Ankara does not recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, energy and security may experience new frictions. Already, the fight on PKK/PYD, groups considered be supported by Israel, may further escalate.

⁸⁶ See paragraph on Syria.

⁸⁷ Katherine Hearst, “*Israel-Palestine war: Israel reportedly proposed writing off Egypt's debts for hosting Gaza refugees*”, MEE, 31 October 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-netanyahu-lobbied-eu-push-egypt-accept-gaza-refugees>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

4. Gulf Region

4.1 UAE – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) agreed between the UAE and Türkiye earlier in March, entered into force in September 2023. CEPA aims to strengthen economic relationships and increase bilateral trade between the UAE and Türkiye by establishing a free trade area, eliminating or reducing tariffs, removing trade barriers, and providing a favorable climate for trade.⁸⁸ It aims to reach a trade volume between the two countries of \$25 billion within five years.⁸⁹ Also in September, UAE Ministry of Education Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi signed an MoU with Council of Higher Education (HE) in Türkiye aimed at collaborating in HE sector by sharing knowledge in scientific and educational areas, including by creating and enhancing joint degree programs across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.⁹⁰

After the outbreak of Israel-Hamas war, exchanges between the Parties have increased and, later in October, Hakan Fidan paid a 2-day visit to the UAE.⁹¹ Turkey's MFA was received by President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss efforts to enhance the humanitarian response for civilians affected by the crisis in the Gaza Strip and the responsibility of the international community towards achieving a just, comprehensive, and stable peace in the Middle East, as well as cooperation and joint efforts between the UAE and Türkiye.⁹² Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended 2023 UN Climate Change Conference in the UAE, held between 30 November and 12 December. In mid-December Erdogan and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al Nayan spoke by phone over Gaza. During the call Erdogan underlined the need of implementing the decisions taken at the joint summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League and continuing initiatives to increase the international community's support for Palestine in the "spirit of unity".⁹³

⁸⁸ Deloitte, *Türkiye Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)*, October 2023. See <https://www2.deloitte.com/xs/en/pages/tax/articles/turkiye-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement.html>

⁸⁹ M. ÇELİK, *UAE open to new defense agreements with Türkiye: Envoy*, Daily Sabah, September 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/uae-open-to-new-defense-agreements-with-turkiye-envoy>

⁹⁰ S.A. Joseph, *UAE Ministry of Education signs MoU with Council of Higher Education in Turkey*, GCC Business News, September 2023. See <https://www.gccbusinessnews.com/uae-signs-mou-with-turkey/>

⁹¹ M. E. Calli, *Turkish foreign minister starting 2-day visit to UAE to discuss deepening bilateral cooperation*, Anadol Agency, October 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-starting-2-day-visit-to-uae-to-discuss-deepening-bilateral-cooperation/3030260>

⁹² Emirati news, *UAE President receives Foreign Minister of Türkiye*, October 2023. See <https://emirati.news/uae-president-receives-foreign-minister-of-turkiye/>

⁹³ E. Tekin, *Turkish, UAE presidents discuss Gaza situation*, Anadol Agency, December 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkish-uae-presidents-discuss-gaza-situation/3083903>

4.2. Saudi Arabia – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

At the sidelines of G20 summit in September, Erdoğan held direct talks with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. During the meeting, bilateral relations, regional and global issues were discussed, including new opportunities for cooperation in the energy sector.⁹⁴ In mid-October the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, the Türkiye Exporters Assembly and the Turkish Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD) met in Istanbul within the Saudi-Turkish Business Forum to discuss investment opportunities and increase trade exchange.⁹⁵

Few days after the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Turkish President discussed by phone with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the military escalation in Gaza, with the aim of joint coordination to stop the ongoing escalation.⁹⁶ Along the same efforts and commitments, Erdoğan paid a visit to Riyadh in November to attend the extraordinary joint Arab-Islamic summit, which addressed the situation in Gaza. During the meeting Erdoğan stated that Israel's attacks had reached the level of a massacre, and that the Islamic world should work in unity to ensure peace in the region, also expressing Türkiye's continuous assistance to humanitarian aid for providing medical assistance to the people in need.⁹⁷

4.3. Qatar – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

September 2023 marked the anniversary of 50th year of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Qatar. Cooperation between the countries, that has strengthened particularly since 2011, cover various fields including trade, investments, military, and defense, that also translates into joint participation to military exercises of third Parties, as happened with the Eternal Brotherhood-II military exercise held in Pakistan between 17-30 September 2023.⁹⁸

At the beginning of October Qatar-Türkiye Business Forum was held in Doha. During the meeting, Turkish Minister of Trade Omer Bolat praised the relations between the two countries, noting that these close strategic relations cover all fields, especially the economic and commercial spheres. The forum reviewed cooperation relations and investment climate between Qatar and Türkiye.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ TRT Italy, *Erdoğan, incontro con Salman e al-Sisi a Nuova Delhi*, September 2023. See <https://www.trt.net.tr/italiano/turkiye-4/2023/09/10/erdogan-incontro-con-salman-e-al-sisi-a-nuova-delhi-2035343>

⁹⁵ Ajel news, *Saudi-Turkish Business Forum Discusses Increasing Volume of Trade*, October 2023. See <https://english.ajel.sa/business/saudi-turkish-business-forum-discusses-increasing-volume-of-trade-2>

⁹⁶ Arab news, *Saudi crown prince, Turkish president discuss military escalation in Gaza*, October 2023. See <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2389636/saudi-arabia>

⁹⁷ AKP Parti, *Statement on President Erdoğan's meeting with Crown Prince bin Salman of Saudi Arabia*, see <https://www.akparti.org.tr/en/news/statement-on-president-erdogan-s-meeting-with-crown-prince-bin-salman-of-saudi-arabia-11-11-2023-23-36-24/>

⁹⁸ F. Salari, *Qatar and Türkiye join Pakistan in 'Eternal Brotherhood-II' military exercise*, Doha News, September 2023. See <https://dohanews.co/qatar-turkey-join-pakistan-in-eternal-brotherhood-ii-military-exercise/>

⁹⁹ Qatar News Agency, *Qatar, Türkiye Enjoy Close Strategic Relations in Various Fields, Says Turkish Trade Minister*, October 2023. See <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2023-10/02/0052-qatar.-turkiye-enjoy-close-strategic-relations-in-various-fields,-says-turkish-trade-minister>

With the outbreak of the war in Gaza, and due to their links with Hamas, Qatar and Türkiye coordinated their efforts to facilitate the release of hostages. In addition, a month on the war in Gaza, Moza bint Nasser, Sheikha of Qatar, participated in “United for Peace in Palestine”, a high-level summit hosted by Emine Erdogan. The event brought together First Ladies and government officials from around the globe to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and call for a ceasefire.¹⁰⁰

Cooperation on regional issues is also boosted by economic, political, and cultural bilateral relations. Following Türkiye-Qatar High Strategic Committee meeting held at the beginning of December in Doha, Ankara and Doha signed indeed 12 cooperation agreements on political consultations, cultural cooperation, bilateral labor cooperation, humanitarian aid, military, information and technology, science, industry, investment promotion, exports, among the others.¹⁰¹

4.3.1. Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

The regional rift that put Saudi Arabia and UAE vs Türkiye and Qatar since of the latter's support of Political Islam in the post Arab uprisings¹⁰² seem to be overcome. Although several reasons, including the outbreak of Covid19 and the war in Ukraine contributed to the shifts of the regional powers, Türkiye has been carrying out a policy of détente with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia with the end of the Gulf crisis in 2021. Besides ideological complementarities, indeed, Doha and Ankara have strengthened their relations over a variety of fields in the last decade. Since the establishment of the Qatari-Turkish Supreme Strategic Committee in 2014, nearly 100 documents were signed to optimize the cooperation level¹⁰³ and the partnership cemented by Türkiye's continued alignment with Qatar, -going so far as to station Turkish troops in the country- when Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt blockaded Qatar by air, land, and sea in 2017.¹⁰⁴

The process of normalisation between Türkiye and the Gulf has kept on also with the outbreak of the war in Gaza. After a first phase of ‘soft condemnation’ linked to the *up to the war* path for normalizing relations with Tel Aviv, Türkiye has then adopted harsh positioning towards Israel, without criticising “UAE and Saudi Arabia's relatively low-key diplomacy on the war”¹⁰⁵.

Indeed, while Ankara and Tel Aviv have once again reached the lowest with the most recent arrests in Türkiye of 34 alleged Mossad agents as well as Ankara's support to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, the UAE have not questioned the Abram Accords albeit calling for avoiding escalations, rejecting displacement of Palestinians, and ending hostilities. As well, Saudi Arabia has not excluded the possibility to normalise

¹⁰⁰See <https://istanbul.consulate.qa/en/media/news/detail/1445/05/02/the-participation-of-her-highness-sheikha-moza-bint-nasser-in-istanbul-in-a-high-level-summit-entitled-united-for-peace-in-palestine->

¹⁰¹ Z. F. Beyaz, *Türkiye, Qatar sign 12 agreements, issue joint declaration after high strategic committee meeting*, December 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-qatar-sign-12-agreements-issue-joint-declaration-after-high-strategic-committee-meeting/3073023>

¹⁰² See Egypt and Libya sections.

¹⁰³ Qatar News Agency, *Qatar and Türkiye: Strategic Partnership, Mutual Support, Identical Political Visions*, December 2023. See <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/Special-News/2023-12/04/0065-qatar-and-turkiye-strategic-partnership-mutual-support-identical-political-visions---report>

¹⁰⁴ The blockade was lifted in 2021 with the “Al-Ula Statement”.

¹⁰⁵ G. Dalay, *What does Turkey's policy on the Gaza war mean for the region?*, Chatham House, December 2023. See <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/what-does-turkeys-policy-gaza-war-mean-region>

relations with Israel, while binding it to the creation of a Palestinian state.¹⁰⁶ Despite that, Erdoğan underlined that “unlike in previous crises, the Islamic world has stood more united and in solidarity”.¹⁰⁷ The presence of Erdoğan in both the Islamic cooperation council and the 44th Gulf Cooperation Summit, indicates Türkiye is “supporting and complementing roles of key Arab states, rather than competing with them”.¹⁰⁸

This attitude relies on convenience grounds and suggests that the normalisation process circumvented the first potential obstacle.

On the one hand, despite the strong frictions with Tel Aviv, Türkiye still have the possibility of playing a role in de-escalating the conflict and serving as a guarantor power¹⁰⁹ in the aftermath of the war, also since its special economic, security and ideological links with Doha. Qatar, that already played as regional broker in US-Taliban and US-Iran negotiations,¹¹⁰ has now the most prominent role in mediating in Gaza, thanks to its leverage on Hamas. A position that Türkiye could complement. However, to realise Ankara’s ambitious role of stabilizing power, cooperation with the other *once-at-odds* Gulf countries will be vital as well. This would also facilitate Türkiye’s credit as *stabilizing* regional power at the eyes of the Western countries, despite Ankara’s current vocal condemnation of Israel. To be noted that Blinken’s early January visit to Türkiye included discussions on ‘*the role that Turkey can play, both in the day after for Gaza, in terms of the challenging questions of Palestinian-led governance, security, rebuilding, as well as the work that it can do to try to produce more lasting durable peace and security in the region*’.¹¹¹

In addition, Türkiye has all its interests in maintaining warm relations with the Gulf due to its financial necessity that matches with GCC *know-how* demand. Indeed, Ankara is facing dramatic currency crisis and cash support from the Gulf is an incentive to keep the normalisation process on track. The GCC’s extensive foreign reserves offer a solid ground for partnership. Since 2022, Qatar invested the most to Türkiye contributing with \$9.9 billion, with a \$5 billion bilateral trade target set in December 2023.¹¹² The UAE comes in second with \$3.4 billion, and Saudi Arabia is third with \$500 million.¹¹³ According to quote by Turkish Trade Minister Ömer Bolat, bilateral trade between the UAE and Türkiye is set to jump by 50 percent to hit \$15 billion by the end of the year following the signing of the comprehensive economic cooperation agreement (Cepa) in September.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Gulf countries, which are carrying out their programmatic

¹⁰⁶ D. Guldogan, *Saudi Arabia interested in normalization with Israel after Gaza war: Envoy*, Anadolu Agency, January 2024. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-arabia-interested-in-normalization-with-israel-after-gaza-war-envoy/3104593>

¹⁰⁷ See <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-intensifies-diplomatic-contacts-for-gaza>

¹⁰⁸ G. Dalay, *What does Turkey’s policy on the Gaza war mean for the region?*, Chatham House, December 2023. See <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/what-does-turkeys-policy-gaza-war-mean-region>

¹⁰⁹ M. Bryza, *Can Turkey help resolve the Israel-Hamas war?*, Atlantic Council, January 2024. See <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/can-turkey-help-resolve-the-israel-hamas-war/>

¹¹⁰ S. Çevik, *Erdoğan, Gaza, and Turkey’s Regional Reconciliation*, Arab Center Washington DC, November 2023. See <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/erdogan-gaza-and-turkeys-regional-reconciliation/>

¹¹¹ Al Jazeera, *US diplomat Blinken meets Turkey’s Erdogan, kicking off Gaza diplomacy tour*, January 2024. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/6/us-diplomat-blinken-meets-turkeys-erdogan-kicking-off-gaza-diplomacy-tour>

¹¹² P. Kumar, *Turkey and Qatar aim to double trade to \$5bn*, Arabian Gulf Business Insight, December 2023. See <https://www.agbi.com/articles/turkey-and-qatar-aim-to-double-trade-to-5bn/>

¹¹³ See <https://gcc-turkiye.net/>

¹¹⁴ P. Kumar, *UAE-Turkey trade set for 50% rise to \$15bn in 2023*, Arabian Gulf Business Insight, November 2023. See <https://www.agbi.com/articles/uae-turkey-trade-set-for-50-rise-to-15bn-in-2023/>

Visions,¹¹⁵ see Türkiye as a hub for investment but also a major partner for economic diversification and cooperation in the sectors of entertainment, tourism, education, construction, defence, energy, both at the regional level and abroad. Turkish firms have indeed long penetrated Gulf markets and contributed to megaprojects (airports, highways, and stadiums). During the first half of 2023 was also reported that a group of executives representing roughly 80 Turkish building companies met with Saudi Aramco in Ankara for discussions about \$50bn of potential projects to be realized in the Saudi Arabia¹¹⁶ and at the end of October Turkish finance minister Mehmet Şimşek paid visits to Gulf countries to introduce investments opportunities. In addition, Türkiye's increasing prominence in defence industry production materialises in cooperation over technology transfer, training programs and arms sales to the GCC, as happened with the Turkish made Bayraktar drones. In 2018, Doha signed a contract with Turkey that requested TB2s, ground control station systems, and a training simulator.¹¹⁷ Then in 2022 the UAE made a significant purchase drones from Türkiye and in July 2023, during the International Defense Industries Fair (IDEF) in Istanbul, Türkiye and the UAE signed a defense cooperation agreement between the Defense and Aviation Group (OSSA) and the Black Cobra Military Equipment Company (BCMS) in Abu Dhabi.¹¹⁸ In the same month, during Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia, agreements were signed by the defense ministry and the Turkish company Baykar to localize the production of drones and their systems within the Kingdom, ensuring technology transfer and joint production.¹¹⁹ So thus, defense cooperation between Türkiye and GCC has been strengthened over the last years, also thanks to GCC's aspiration to build an indigenous defense industry, and due to their willingness to lower their dependence from the Western military equipment, also considering that Türkiye's products are more competitive in terms of prices.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, Türkiye could also serve as a hub between Europe and the Gulf region, thanks to its geographical location. The Development Road project is set to support this potential by connecting Türkiye to the Persian Gulf via a road and rail network¹²¹ throughout Iraq. The DPR, with an estimated cost of \$17 billion, is scheduled to be completed in its first phase by 2028 and it aims at facilitating the diversification of energy markets, providing European countries with more alternatives.¹²² If completed, together with the improvement of trade and infrastructures

¹¹⁵ With "Saudi Vision 2030", Saudi Arabia aims at strengthening its status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds; becoming a global investment powerhouse; a global hub connecting three continents, Asia, Europe, and Africa. Also, the UAE, with "We the UAE 2031", aim at continuing their development path for the next 10 years, with focus on social, economic, investment and development aspects.

¹¹⁶ E. Miliken, G. Cafiero, *What does Erdogan's re-election mean for Turkey-Gulf relations?*, Al Jazeera, June 2023. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/6/what-does-erdogans-re-election-mean-for-turkey-gulf-relations>

¹¹⁷ A. Bakir, *Turkey's defense industry is on the rise. The GCC is one of its top buyers*, Al Jazeera, August 2023. See <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>

¹¹⁸ M. Celik, *UAE open to new defense agreements with Türkiye: Envoy*, Daily Sabah, September 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/uae-open-to-new-defense-agreements-with-turkiye-envoy>

¹¹⁹ K. Hamadeh, *Turkey asserts its place in the GCC's new multipolar security structure*, Al Majalla, July 2023. See <https://en.majalla.com/node/296371/politics/turkey-asserts-its-place-gccs-new-multipolar-security-structure>

¹²⁰ A. Bakir. Op. cit.

¹²¹ S. Tomac, *Turkish contractors steer route to Development Road Project*, Anadolou Agency, December 2023.

See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-contractors-steer-route-to-development-road-project/3089621>;; M. Heyes, *Turkey and Iraq unveil plans for US\$17 billion Development Road project*, Construction briefing, January 2024. See <https://www.constructionbriefing.com/news/turkey-and-iraq-unveil-plans-for-us-17-billion-development-road-project/8034131.article>

¹²² B. Elmani, *OPINION - Türkiye's 'Development Road' and geopolitics of interconnectedness*, Anadolou Agency, October 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-turkiyes-development-road-and-geopolitics-of-interconnectedness/3005929>

between Iraq and Türkiye, it could also represent a key opportunity for facilitating trade¹²³ and logistics between GCC and Türkiye. However, issues still arise on both the feasibility and sustainability of the project, mainly due to the evolution of Türkiye's operations in Northern Iraq and to the potential competition with Iran's port in the Persian Gulf.¹²⁴

Thus, together with a renewed cooperation in the regional arena, Türkiye's FDI's needs and GCC's diversification efforts seemingly translate into a *win-win* rapprochement process led by economic and security pragmatism. Not to be excluded also, the fact that the normalisation between Türkiye and the Gulf countries could have positive repercussion on Türkiye's positioning into the Eastern Mediterranean, contributing to open spaces for Ankara, also thanks to its renewed relations with Greece and Egypt.

At the current stage, risks for GCC- Türkiye normalisation are unlikely. However, uncertainties remain over the *spillover* effects of the Gaza war and their potential impacts on the Middle East chessboard. Indeed, despite the resumption of relations between Teheran and Riyadh after years of proxy competition in Yemen, it is to be seen whether the tensions at the Red Sea shores between Houthi rebels and USA/UK forces¹²⁵ will have consequences over the regional and international alliance reshape.

¹²³ I. Aktas, *Türkiye-Iraq Development Road could be key for Iraq's stability*, Daily Sabah, October 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkiye-iraq-development-road-could-be-key-for-iraqs-stability>

¹²⁴ B. Elmani op cit.

¹²⁵ See <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/1/12/us-and-uk-launch-air-strikes-against-yemens-houthis>

5. Caucasus

5.1 Armenia- Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Numerous attempts have been made to normalize relations between Türkiye and Armenia. Following the favorable political circumstances that emerged after the 2nd Karabakh War, Türkiye and Armenia initiated direct dialogue without preconditions for the gradual normalization of relations. Special Representatives were appointed, and after several meetings, direct commercial flights between the two countries commenced on February 2, 2022. An agreement was reached to open the Türkiye-Armenia border to third-country citizens on July 1, 2022, and to initiate air cargo trade. In a broader context, Türkiye aims to continue the normalization process with Armenia, emphasizing the establishment of good neighborly relations without preconditions. The approach includes confidence-building measures, proceeding gradually, and considering regional developments. This stance reflects Türkiye's commitment to fostering stability and cooperation in the South Caucasus region. The positive developments post-2nd Karabakh War, including direct dialogue and practical agreements, signify a proactive diplomatic approach amid changing regional dynamics. Acknowledgment of nuanced perspectives in the aftermath of the 44-Day War demonstrates an understanding of the evolving regional landscape and the challenges and opportunities it presents.

5.1.2 Sustainability of the normalisation process and its implications

Türkiye's emphasis on a gradual and confidence-building approach underscores a strategic commitment to long-term stability and regional cooperation.

Within the context of the issues outlined thus far, the primary problematic areas in Türkiye-Armenia relations can generally be categorized under three headings:

- (1) Armenians' claims to secure recognition of "genocide" allegations on the international stage.
- (2) The land border between Türkiye and Armenia remains closed.
- (3) The Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven surrounding provinces of Azerbaijan have been tangled up in an unresolved situation for over 30 years¹²⁶ and the Minsk Group's efforts have proven insufficient in resolving the issue.

Potential solutions to the aforementioned problem areas hold the promise of positive outcomes, including the resolution of issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the indirect normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan continued before, during, and after the Karabakh Operation. Türkiye has consistently opposed what it considered an occupation of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region by Armenia, supporting a resolution within the framework of international law. The outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

¹²⁶ TASAM (2023), "Türkiye - Ermenistan İlişkilerinde Sorun Ne?", <https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/3122/turkiye - ermenistan iliskilerinde sorun ne>

in late 2020 led to a significant victory for Azerbaijan, resulting in a tripartite ceasefire agreement on November 10. The subsequent demarcation saw Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic losing a substantial portion of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with ongoing ceasefire violations and tensions leading to a military operation launched by Azerbaijan in September 2023. Türkiye's stance post-conflict involves supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory. Baku's strategic approach factors in the necessity of avoiding unnecessary antagonism with Russia, recognizing the potential complexities of NATO membership, and adopting a nuanced policy toward Russia in resolving the Karabakh problem. Hence, the challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement. However, the opening of the Türkiye-Armenia land border would establish a more direct connection and transportation route with the West, thereby positively impacting the Armenian economy. Moreover, the creation of new pipelines and railway lines, running parallel to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route and traversing Armenia, could facilitate the transfer of natural gas resources from the Caucasus and Central Asia to EU countries in need. Additionally, these alternative routes could offer flexibility in resource flow, mitigating the risk of disruptions in potential crisis situations. In light of the assessments thus far, the collaborative efforts of Türkiye and Italy have significant potential roles. Such cooperation could positively contribute to the overall integration of South Caucasus countries, especially Armenia, with the West. Developments in this direction also hold the potential to influence Armenia's diplomatic approaches to Russia and Iran.

5.2. Georgia – Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments

Türkiye steadfastly supports Georgia's territorial integrity and rejects the purported independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Advocating for peaceful resolutions within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Türkiye also backs Georgia's aspirations to integrate with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

A focal point in Türkiye-Georgia relations is the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to their homeland. Türkiye closely monitors this issue, emphasizing the removal of obstacles hindering the return of Ahıska Turks to Ahıska.

The prominence of economic collaboration underscores the practical and mutually beneficial aspects of the Türkiye-Georgia relationship. The establishment of mechanisms like the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (YDSK) and participation in trilateral/quadrilateral meetings reflects a commitment to structured and sustained cooperation. Türkiye's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic aspirations showcases a strategic diplomatic approach to regional challenges.

Despite challenges posed by certain Turkish/Muslim elements in Georgia, Ankara and Tbilisi have successfully navigated these issues. The bond between Türkiye and Georgia is intensifying through political solidarity, economic collaboration, and joint efforts in transporting Caspian oil and natural gas, countering Russia's regional policies.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ TASAM (2023), “Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri”, <https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/3123/turkiye-gurcistan-iliskileri>.

When evaluating Türkiye-Georgia relations, it becomes evident that most of the existing issues between the two nations, albeit limited, stem from the Turkish/Muslim minorities residing in Georgia with historical ties to Türkiye. The burgeoning commercial ties between Türkiye and Georgia, and notably the facilitation of Caspian oil and natural gas to the global market via Georgia through Türkiye, alongside collaborative efforts to counter Russia's influence in the region, significantly impact Ankara-Tbilisi relations. The alignment in Caucasus policies, particularly in response to Russia, serves as the foundation for political and security relations between Georgia and Türkiye. In this context, Türkiye and Georgia (1) collaborate on trade and energy transmission lines and (2) jointly address security concerns.¹²⁸

The presence of Azeri Turks in Georgia, along with Turkish minorities from other tribes, directly influences public opinion in Türkiye, particularly concerning events in Georgia and the North Caucasus. Therefore, explaining the relations between Türkiye and Georgia solely on political, strategic, and economic grounds becomes challenging. In Türkiye, where governments are elected, the identities and inclinations of the electorate inevitably shape Ankara's foreign policy. The connection between Türkiye and Georgia is thus influenced not only by geopolitical considerations but also by the sociocultural ties stemming from the diverse ethnic composition within Georgia.¹²⁹

Ankara believes that the most viable path for Abkhazia is to remain a robust autonomous region within Georgia, which is a much smaller and weaker state compared to Russia. This solution is seen as the best alternative for Western countries and the EU.

Türkiye holds a strategic position for Georgia, providing an avenue to break free from Russia's political and economic influence while creating new investment and trade opportunities. Türkiye stands as the second-largest investor in Georgia after the United States and is the second-largest trading partner after Russia.

The U.S. policy of isolating Iran and the Azeri-Armenian conflict stemming from the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute has positioned Georgia as the sole gateway to the Caucasus and Central Asia for Türkiye. Ankara, being the main transit route for Caspian oil, benefits from oil and natural gas pipelines, creating opportunities for job creation, refining, and exporting oil. Moreover, the revenues generated from oil and natural gas exports play a crucial role in revitalizing Türkiye's economy and increasing its foreign trade volume. The Caspian fossil fuel resources, particularly since 2010, have contributed significantly to meeting Türkiye's domestic energy demand. This strategic collaboration enhances economic ties between Türkiye and Georgia, reinforcing their mutual interests in the region.

The Kars-Tbilisi Railway and Rize-Poti Fiber Optic Cable Line projects represent long-standing collaborative efforts between Türkiye and Georgia. The Kars-Tbilisi Railway, in particular, is expected to significantly boost regional trade. Given the closed Türkiye-Armenia border, Georgia has become the primary route for Turkish shipments to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. For riparian countries with abundant oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea, a key challenge is the lack of direct access to international markets. The former Soviet Republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are seeking alternative routes to reduce their dependence on Russia and Iran. In response, Türkiye and Georgia provide these countries with a secure and

¹²⁸ Selçuk ÇOLAKOĞLU (2004), "Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri (Turkey-Georgia Relations)", *Stratejik Öngörü*, TASAM, Vol.6, No.2.

¹²⁹ Selçuk ÇOLAKOĞLU (2004), "Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri (Turkey-Georgia Relations)", *Stratejik Öngörü*, TASAM, Vol.6, No.2.

viable alternative route, helping them diversify their trade routes and establish connections with international markets. The strategic infrastructure projects and partnerships between Türkiye and Georgia play a crucial role in facilitating these economic and trade endeavors for the Caspian riparian countries.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a pioneering project in the realm of pipelines, has been completed and actively transports Azeri oil. This line has played a crucial role in preventing the reliance on the Baku-Novorossiysk line for Azerbaijan's early oil supply. Running in parallel, the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), developed alongside the BTC, facilitates the global transportation of Azerbaijan's natural gas from the Shah Deniz field via Georgia and Türkiye.

In addition to energy and trade collaborations, Türkiye and Georgia maintain close military cooperation. The Georgian Military Academy, established by the Turkish Army in the early 2000s, witnessed the training of Georgian officers by their Turkish counterparts for an extended period. Turkish military training extended to include Georgian Special Forces and Commando Units, both in Türkiye and Georgia. Every year, a specific number of Georgian students continue their training at Military Schools, the Military Academy affiliated with the National Defense University, and the Partnership for Peace Training Center (PfP Training Center) in Türkiye.

Furthermore, the collaborative efforts of Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are evident in the annual Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises, conducted in one of the countries within the scope of generic scenarios focused on the safety of pipelines. The most recent exercise, "Eternity-2023," took place in October 2023 at the Military Games Center of the Military Management Institute of the Azerbaijan National Defense University. These joint initiatives reflect the ongoing cooperation and coordination in military training and strategic planning among the three nations.

5.3. Azerbaijan-Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments

The multidimensional and strategic nature of Türkiye's relations with Azerbaijan is evident in intensive mutual high-level visits, symbolizing a longstanding tradition of prioritizing such engagements following significant developments or changes in office.

Tripartite and quadrilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan and Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Iran platforms, contribute significantly to regional stability, peace, and prosperity. Special attention is given to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic¹³⁰, which holds a distinctive role in bilateral relations due to its unique land connection between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

The close military cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan extends beyond energy and trade collaborations. The Azerbaijan Military Academy, established by the Turkish Army in the late 1990s, has been a focal point for the training of Azerbaijani officers by their Turkish counterparts for an extended period. Turkish military training has also encompassed Azerbaijan Special Forces and Commando Units, conducted in both Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Annually, a designated number of Azerbaijani students continue their training at Military Schools, the

¹³⁰ Nakhichevan is an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan which shares a border with Türkiye and the south east of Armenia. The designed Zengezur Corridor will link Azerbaijan and Nakhchevan from the very South of Armenia once a peace deal is achieved.

Military Academy affiliated with the National Defense University, and the Partnership for Peace Training Center (PfP Training Center) in Türkiye.

Moreover, collaborative efforts involving Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are demonstrated through the annual Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises, carried out in one of the countries with a focus on generic scenarios related to the safety of pipelines, as mentioned previously. The most recent exercise, "Eternity-2023," occurred in October 2023 at the Military Games Center of the Military Management Institute of the Azerbaijan National Defense University. These joint initiatives underscore the ongoing cooperation and coordination in military training and strategic planning among the three nations, reflecting a commitment to regional security and stability.

The relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is characterized by a special bond, often articulated within the framework of the principle of "One nation, two states." This principle emphasizes a strong sense of kinship between the two nations. In international matters that concern either of the states, Türkiye and Azerbaijan tend to prefer acting together, and this approach is evident in various domains, spanning from energy and trade routes to security and media issues.

This close relationship was particularly visible in the Nagorno-Karabakh operation conducted by Azerbaijan. Türkiye not only provided pre-operation training but also supplied significant material support, including weapons, vehicles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), to the Azerbaijani army. The collaboration displayed the depth of cooperation and coordination between the two countries.

Given the strong public support for this joint approach, it is anticipated that bilateral cooperation will continue to strengthen, reflecting the shared commitment of Türkiye and Azerbaijan in addressing regional challenges and advancing their common interests. The "One nation, two states" principle remains a guiding force in shaping the special relationship between these two nations.

Türkiye and Azerbaijan share membership in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), formerly known as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council)¹³¹. The organization, as of 2022, comprises Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye, with observer status held by Hungary, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Turkmenistan. The OTS serves as an international cooperation platform for Turkish-speaking states. During the Extraordinary Leaders' Summit held by the OTS on March 16, 2023, several significant agreements were reached:

- (1) The Turkish Investment Fund Founding Agreement was signed, aiming to provide support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), development projects, transportation and logistics chains, infrastructure projects, investments in agriculture and tourism, and renewable energy studies,
- (2) Discussions focused on enhancing the human, administrative, and financial structure of the organization's secretariat,
- (3) Participants explored extensive cooperation opportunities spanning from the Adriatic to Asia.

¹³¹ Ahmet Keser, İbrahim Çütcü & Mehmet Vahit Eren (2022) Does country-level governance matter for national development? An analysis on the founding states of Turkic council, *Applied Economics*, 54:5, 522-535, DOI: 10.1080/00036846.2021.1966373

The organization serves as a platform for both Türkiye and Azerbaijan to strengthen relations with other member states. In a recent meeting, strategic agreements were made on the establishment of common media and broadcasting organs, collaborative initiatives on Turkish Language and Culture, and the creation of a common investment fund. The decision was made to initially establish a fund of \$500 million to facilitate joint investments in various sectors. This signifies the commitment of member states to deepen their cooperation across economic, cultural, and strategic dimensions within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States.

As a natural consequence of the reasons stated above, Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan continued before, during, and after the Karabakh Operation. Türkiye has consistently opposed Armenia's presence in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region, supporting a resolution within the framework of international law. The outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in late 2020 led to a significant victory for Azerbaijan, resulting in a tripartite ceasefire agreement on November 10. The subsequent demarcation saw Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic losing a substantial portion of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with ongoing ceasefire violations and tensions leading to a military operation launched by Azerbaijan in September 2023.

Türkiye's stance post-conflict involves supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory. Baku's strategic approach factors in the necessity of avoiding unnecessary antagonism with Russia, recognizing the potential complexities of NATO membership, and adopting a nuanced policy toward Russia in resolving the Karabakh problem.

The challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement.

The main features of the relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan can be evaluated as follows:

Special attention to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic underscores its unique role as the sole land connection between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, emphasizing its strategic importance in regional dynamics. The aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's subsequent investments in demining infrastructure, and economic development signal a commitment for both Türkiye and Azerbaijan to serve in post-conflict reconstruction.

Recently a Forum was organized in December 2023 between the two countries' representatives. Minister of Commerce Ömer Bolat (TUR), Head of the Presidential Finance Office Göksel Aşan (TUR), Chief Public Auditor Şeref Malkoç (TUR), and many business people from Turkey attended the forum organized in cooperation with the Azerbaijan Export and Investment Promotion Agency (AZPROMO) and Türkiye-Azerbaijan Businessmen and Industrialists Association (TÜİB). Büyükfırat (Head of TÜİB), reminding that Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev set an annual trade volume target of 15 billion dollars, said, "This year, the trade volume (between Turkey and Azerbaijan) exceeded 7 billion dollars. It was an important meeting that will take us to this goal." "We will establish a tracking system for the work we have done in line with this goal shared his knowledge¹³².

¹³² Aksam.org. (2023). [Türkiye ve Azerbaycan'dan kritik hamle: Türk dünyasını birleştiren bir sürece giriyoruz](https://www.aksam.com.tr/turkiye-ve-azerbaycan-dan-kritik-hamle-turk-dunyasinı-birlestiren-bir-surece-giriyoruz) (aksam.com.tr)

TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Second Monitoring: January - April 2024

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TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION. IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Second Monitoring: January - April 2024

Authors: Valeria Giannotta, Aurora Ianni, Mattia Giampaolo, Murat Aslan, Ahmet Keser

Within changing regional dynamics, the normalization path initiated by Türkiye with partners in the broader Mediterranean has been partially accomplished. Economic and security needs, along the war in Gaza, are the main driving factors of alignments. Between January and April 2024 Ankara's normalisation processes carried on with Greece and many Arab partners, while relations with Israel reached the lowest and some challenges in the Caucasus remain. Turkish dynamism continues to encompass domestic, regional, and international levels, which overlap when necessary.

Hence, in the framework of the project 'TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION PROCESSES: WHAT IMPACT ON THE INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF ITALY AND EUROPE?' – supported by the Analysis, Programming Statistical and Historic Documentation Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – CeSPI Observatory on Türkiye and its partner institution Kalyoncu Middle East Research Center (KALMEC) monitored the main developments in Türkiye's relations with the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf, and Caucasus region taking place during the first four months of 2024. CeSPI team has coordinated the tasks and worked mainly on the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, while the Middle East and Caucasus have been under Kalmec's competency.

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1. Türkiye's 2024 regional agenda: security, stability, and dialogue

For Türkiye, the first months of 2024 have been challenging from both a diplomatic and political point of view. Regional issues, indeed, have a role of primary importance in the Turkish government's agenda, which is mainly focused on the Israeli-Palestinian dossier and attempts to conflict de-escalation. The Turkish stance has been clear: support to the Palestinians and long-lasting solution that involves the creation of two states. Thus, the urgency of a sustainable ceasefire is the top priority of Turkish policy makers, diplomatically active on many tables. The continuous contacts and visits to Qatar and with the political leaders of Hamas, but also with other regional and international stakeholders, should be read in this sense, although it seems that the proposed 'guarantee mechanism' is at a standstill.

Worthy of note, is the completed normalization with Al Sisi's Egypt, sealed by the state visit of President Erdoğan who, accompanied by a large delegation, last February signed various significant agreements in Cairo in many fields, including defense and energy. This stands out, as well as the important alignment on the Palestinian issue and on joint action in the humanitarian field. The resumption of constructive relations is further confirmed by the trip of the Egyptian Foreign Minister to Ankara, which will be followed by the visit of President Al Sisi.

In the first months of 2024, Ankara witnessed out intense diplomatic traffic, to be understood as well as containment of any spill-over. The Iranian president Raisi also visited Erdoğan, and the meeting ended with the signing of various sector agreements, including trade and industry and with joint declarations regarding the fight against terrorism and the need for a solution to the Gaza war. Although much debated, the visit to Ankara recorded a divergence of views regarding the Turkish position towards Israel, openly criticized by some Iranian media portraying Erdoğan as *de facto* supporting Israel. Although the criticism did not generate any reaction from the Turkish side, along the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and above all following the Iranian offensive on Israel on the night of 14 April, the rhetoric of the Turkish President has become more markedly aligned to Iran. The denunciation of Israeli crimes in Gaza, especially in terms of 'humanitarian catastrophe', combined to the Turkish effort in terms of humanitarian aid, to the more recent decision to suspend Turkish Airlines flights to Tel Aviv until March 2025 and to halt bilateral trade, should be read as a further point in the bilateral friction. On the Israeli side as well, there was no shortage of biting criticism towards Erdoğan's Türkiye. In addition to the non-stop media coverage, which costed casualties to Turkish crews, the Turkish effort aimed at supplying the populations through the constant sending of humanitarian aid; till now Türkiye has reached 50 thousand tons of aid to Gaza, standing as the first international humanitarian donor to the Strip. The Israel war on Gaza, therefore, has been a crucial topic on the domestic political debate, contributing to redirecting the choices of the Turkish electorate on March 31.

1.1 Domestic issues and March 31 elections

In the first months of 2024, the domestic agenda was mainly occupied by the electoral campaign of the local elections of March 31, although with visibly lower tone and liveliness compared to the previous rounds. In the electoral running, there were many parties and candidates, but the real match was between the Republican People's Party CHP and the ruling party AK Party. As it is known, following the general elections of May 2023, the Nation Alliance, composed by the main opposition groups, fell apart and this has led to single candidatures, as far as the opposition is concerned. Nevertheless, CHP has managed to catalyze a large part of the Kurdish vote. In the government bloc, however, the alliance between AK Party and MHP has remained, even if the far

conservative *Yeniden Refah* Party left by taking very harsh positions regarding government's economic approach, which was criticized as well for being too ambiguous in its stances towards Israel. In a socio-political environment, tired and concerned over economy issues, an unusual, limited presence of Erdoğan rallying in the cities have been recorded. A few weeks before the elections, Turkish president indicated the current as last political candidacy, a move that beyond the surprise effect should have been understood as an emotional lever to influence the vote. However, with a relatively low turnout (75%), the local elections marked a turning point in Türkiye's recent political history: the CHP won the Country's largest cities (Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara) and a large part, not only of urban districts, but also of Anatolian cities, which for a long time have been traditional bastions of the AKP. Worth noting, also from future perspectives, that the *Yeniden Refah* Party alone managed to capitalize on the consensus in the southern east city of Şanlıurfa. The reasons for Erdoğan's defeat could be attributed mainly to the economic data and the difficulties that Turks encounter on a daily basis in terms of purchasing power, given the persistent high rate of inflation (over 60%), the continuous devaluation of the Turkish Lira and rising taxes on consumer goods. On the other hand, the fear of handing Türkiye over the power of a single man in command also played a significant role. In addition to the protest vote and to the choices of the new young voters, the selection of political representatives to the cities also counted a lot. In Ankara and Istanbul, the CHP reconfirmed Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu, while the AKP opted for acknowledged figures at a central institutional level, but little connected with the electoral base. In any case, when ballot had closed, Türkiye found itself in a new political scenario: the İYİ party witnessed a breakdown along the resignation of its general secretary Meral Akşener; the CHP capitalized on the Kurdish support as it was evident along the protests taking place the city of Van, in eastern Anatolia, where the pro-government ranks attempted to proceed with the annulment of the vote until they retreated in the face of the citizens' unrest. On the other side, Erdoğan had to take into account the new reality. Following the defeat, the President's tone was immediately moderate, congratulating the people of Türkiye for their profound democratic spirit, admitting responsibility for the defeat and questioning citizens about their perceptions. As first remedial actions, following the rift with the *Yeniden Refah* Party and along the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Palestine, the Ministry of Commerce announced a series of restrictive measures on the trade of some products with Israel, in addition to the stop of Turkish Airlines flights towards Israel. That was the outcome of the domestic and regional dynamics and more recently it has been followed by a complete halt on the trading relations.

Nevertheless, domestically economy is still a dominant issue. As matter of facts, Erdoğan has no choice, but to continue supporting an orthodox approach with the current team in charge of Economy and Finance (already at the beginning of the year there was a change of outlook at the top of the Turkish Central bank after the resignation of Hafize Gaye Erkan, following a scandal that allegedly involved her father). The Minister of Finance Mehmet Şimşek, on many occasions, as well in a meeting with the Italian industrial representatives, stated that the process of normalizing the accounts requires time and 'sacrifices'.

Currently, however, the atmosphere in Türkiye is calm and 'business' is back as usual in a stable environment. At the end of January, the Country was the target of a terrorist attack to the Italian church in Istanbul, which led to further tightening of the anti-terrorism legislation and vast operations leading to the arrest of numerous exponents of DAESH and other illegal organizations.

Ankara has also been the protagonist of operations aimed at securing national border defense, conducting operations against PKK mainly in Iraq and Syria. In this sense, the most recent collaboration signed with the Iraqi government is noteworthy, considered a milestone in the history of bilateral relations, which should be understood as the beginning of a new and more positive phase between the two countries.

1.2 Türkiye and key international partners: the challenges ahead

Considering the growing tensions between Tehran and Israel, Turkish diplomacy has been active in a logic of risk containment and de-escalation, also at the explicit request of the United States. The continuous and regular contacts with the American counterpart, especially between the Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan and Secretary of State Blinken, but also the frequent exchange of visits between delegations indicates a new trend in the Turkish-American relations. This has been also proven by the most recent appointment of the new Turkish ambassador to the United States, Sedat Onal, a career diplomat who replaces Hasan Murat Mercan, who previously had been politically appointed by Erdoğan. Although there were high expectations on the imminent visit to Washington of President Erdoğan, some changes have occurred in the program without formal explanations, which however may lead to mutual disappointments regarding each other's stances on Gaza. Nevertheless, US-Türkiye greater coordination in regional issues is still plausible, including on the Russia-Ukraine dossier. In this sense, Ankara has continued to maintain contacts with both Moscow and Kyiv. On March 8, Ukrainian President Zelensky met Erdoğan in Istanbul, signing several bilateral agreements, especially in the trade and defense fields. The visit took place, almost unexpectedly, at a time when the hypothesis of an imminent trip by the Russian President, Putin, to Türkiye, which apparently is still on the agenda. It is important to notice, however, that on March 2 Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov participated in a single talk in an open session on the 'New Global Order' at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. Lavrov was a significant presence within a flagship event of Turkish public diplomacy, which this year greatly emphasized the need for a new world order, representing the demands of the Global South, another theme very present in the Turkish dossiers.

At European level, attention should be paid to the agenda of the European Council of 17 April, which, for the first time after a long period, again included the item 'Türkiye'. After the conclusions relating mainly to the stability of the eastern Mediterranean, referable to the Cyprus issue, on the Turkish side arose a certain criticism.

Briefly, in the recent months the centrality of Türkiye as focal point and interlocutor for various dossiers has emerged. The current Turkish efforts are a proof of that. As well, Turkish dynamism needs to be read at multiple levels (domestic, regional, international), which overlap when necessary. Domestic stability widely depends on regional stability; hence, Ankara's effort is to capitalize on the ongoing normalization processes and the cooperative spirit with other regional stakeholders, narrowing as much as possible the margins of friction, risk factors and any spillovers that could further destabilize the region and therefore disrupt its own interest.

2. Mediterranean region

2.1 Türkiye-Greece: meaningful bilateral developments

At the beginning of February 2024, the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum was organized in Istanbul by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK).¹ As part of the Forum, the Türkiye-Greece Joint Economic Commission (JEC) 6th Term Meeting was also held and the JEC Protocol was signed. In the JEC meeting, views were exchanged on energy, agriculture, transportation, industry, agriculture, customs, tourism and social security.²

Following the December meeting between Erdoğan and Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime minister suggested exempting Turkish citizens from Schengen visa requirements for seven days to visit the eastern Aegean islands. In line with the proposal, Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis announced that the application process would commence on March 30, covering five islands initially and later extended to ten.

Within the framework of the political dialogue between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Türkiye, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Alexandra Papadopoulou, and the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Ambassador Burak Akçapar, held discussions in Ankara on March 11, 2024. Talks focused on bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye, as well as regional and international developments.³ Also, the two sides reiterated their joint commitment to build on the existing positive atmosphere in line with the Athens Declaration, exploring further areas of bilateral and international cooperation. They reviewed the preparations for the upcoming visit of Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Türkiye in May and took stock of progress in the existing dialogue channels.⁴

However, in the beginning of April, Greece announcement to create two marine parks in the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea have resurfaced bilateral challenges over maritime disputes in the Aegean. Türkiye's foreign ministry accused Athens of exploiting environmental issues to push its geopolitical agenda, while his Greek counterpart stated that Ankara was politicizing the topic.⁵

Despite that, delegations from Greece and Türkiye were meeting in Athens in April, 22 to discuss confidence-building measures.⁶ Also, Mitsotakis confirmed his visit to Ankara in May, 13.

2.1.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Mitsotakis' visit to Ankara falls within the path of restoring dialogue between the two foes that started with February's earthquake response and then strengthened with Erdoğan's visit to Athens in December 2023. Up to now, Greece and Türkiye have managed to carry on cooperation in various fields, by increasing confidence building talks and strengthening ties, following their commitment to implement the agreed Positive Agenda.

¹TRT World, *Türkiye and Greece strengthen ties, targeting \$10B bilateral trade*, February 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-greece-strengthen-ties-targeting-dollar10b-bilateral-trade-16858597>

² *Ibid.*

³Hellenic Republic of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024; <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/political-dialogue-between-greece-and-turkiye-ankara-1103-2024.html>

⁴ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024; <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ve-yunanistan-disisleri-bakan-yardimcilari-arasinda-gerceklesen-siyasi-diyalog-toplantisi-sonrasinda-yapilan-ortak-aciklama.en.mfa>

⁵ E. Becatoros, *Greece plans 2 marine protected areas. But rival Turkey and environmental groups aren't impressed*, AP News, April 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/greece-ocean-conference-marine-parks-turkey-biodiversity-c25b4992d0a6f93a0a2630db014284e5>

⁶Ekathimerini, Greek and Turkish delegations meet in Athens, April 2024. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1237028/greek-and-turkish-delegations-meet-in-athens/>

In the frame of a renewed economic cooperation, in 2023 Türkiye and Greece's bilateral trade volume hit \$5.8 billion. During the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum in Istanbul, organized by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) Turkish Deputy Trade Minister Mustafa Tuzcu said "*We (Turks) are neighbors, friends and allies with Greece. We need to use the time well, we need to close the trade deficit*". Also, Tuzcu emphasised the significance of the 15 agreements signed in December across diverse fields, and expressed confidence in achieving the targeted \$10 billion bilateral trade volume.⁷ During the forum and after the signing of the JEC protocol, the parties stressed that a more secure and sustainable electricity transmission infrastructure will be established and that the second bridge to be built at the Kipi-Ipsala border gate will carry cooperation in freight and passenger transportation forward. In addition, talks were held over the "10th Turkish Greek Tourism Forum" to be organized in the next future.⁸ Cooperation on tourism was indeed part of the Positive Agenda, and visa facilitation for Turkish tourists to Greek islands can be considered a groundbreaking move to promote people-to-people relations.

Whether in terms of economy and tourism the sides have shown their commitment to reach common ground, Aegean disputes remain pending. During High-Level Cooperation Council Erdoğan declared: "there's no problem that cannot be solved" between Türkiye and Greece. However, no discussion was held on the delimitation of the continental shelf and Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.⁹ And the issue soon came up again, indeed.

In February, tensions arose over Greece military exercise around some Aegean Island.¹⁰ Months later, Greece's announcement to create two new marine parks in the Ionian and Aegean seas¹¹ has triggered Ankara's reaction that contests the sovereignty of some of the maritime territory involved. Mutual accusations followed of "politicizing" environmental issues and the quarrel resurfaced over maritime/continental shelves boundaries. On his side, Mitsotakis stated that Greece exercises its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea based on international law and the law of the sea underling he was surprised by Türkiye's negative reaction.¹² Ömer Çelik responded that Ankara would not allow marine parks to be created in the Aegean and called on Athens to abandon plans that would "harm" efforts to improve ties.

However, the Aegean is not the only open chapter between the two. European Council's conclusion of mid-April touched indeed the importance of security in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the need for a comprehensive resolution of the Cyprus issue.

Although reiterating EU's interest for a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye, the Council stated the importance to resume and progress in the Cyprus settlement talks to further enhance EU-Türkiye cooperation, underlining EU's commitment to the comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem within the UN framework. In addition, the EU has welcomed the

⁷TRT World, *Türkiye and Greece strengthen ties, targeting \$10B bilateral trade*, February 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-greece-strengthen-ties-targeting-dollar10b-bilateral-trade-16858597>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ E. Stamatoukou, H.F. Buyuk, *Greece, Turkey, Plot New Path With Friendship Declaration*, Balkan Insight, December 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/07/greece-turkey-plot-new-path-with-friendship-declaration/>

¹⁰ A. Bozcurt, *Turkey has threatened Greece with a loss of sovereignty over islands in the Aegean*, Nordic Monitor, February 2024. <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/02/turkey-has-threatened-greece-with-a-loss-of-sovereignty-on-islands-in-aegean/>

¹¹ The first will span 11 groups of deserted islands and islets from west of the island of Milos to Nisyros, known as "the Greek Galapagos," due to their rich biodiversity. The second will encompass an area starting north of Kefalonia and ending at Kythera and Antikythera. See G. Lialios, *Greece to declare two new national marine parks*, Ekathimerini, April 2024 <https://www.ekathimerini.com/society/1235624/greece-to-declare-two-new-national-marine-parks/>

¹² Ekathimerini, Mitsotakis to meet Erdogan on May 13 in Ankara, April 2024. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1236776/mitsotakis-to-meet-erdogan-on-may-13-in-ankara/>

appointment of Maria Angela Holguin Cuéllar as the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Cyprus.¹³

Nevertheless, visions and positions for a comprehensive and agreed solution of the Cyprus issue still differ. At the end of January Türkiye expressed support for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) over the latter's outrage on the renewal of the mandate of the UNFICYP for another year as they see the mandate's extension as an "outdated and exhausted model for a possible settlement"¹⁴. EU's vision for Cyprus follows that of most of the international community such as the single state solution through a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation with political equality. A vision that is opposed by Northern Cyprus President Tatar and Türkiye, who support the two-state solution.

Türkiye has thus criticized the Council conclusions, accusing the EU of lacking strategic vision on both Türkiye and global developments, underlining that Türkiye will never accept an approach that links progress in Türkiye-EU relations to the Cyprus issue.¹⁵ However, although the EU cooperates continuously with Türkiye across many sectors including trade, border management, and migration¹⁶, the settlement of the Cyprus issue remain core for thawing the accession process. Also, together with the solution of the Aegean disputes, it can ensure the sustainability of Türkiye-Greece bilateral rapprochement. In this sense, together with the Parties' willingness, joint and multilateral efforts by USA, NATO and the EU should be deployed to facilitate dialogue on pending disputes. Security in the Eastern Mediterranean could indeed benefit everyone, considering the multiple threats arising and the existing spillover effects of both the war in Ukraine and Gaza. It is indeed to be underlined that during Blinken's visit to Türkiye last March, discussions with Fidan covered the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the importance of preserving stability and channels for communication, as well as the ongoing engagement between Türkiye and Greece.¹⁷

Thus, Mitsotakis' visit to Ankara show that, although still deeply problematic, Türkiye-Greece Aegean issues do not prevent the Parties from building a Positive Agenda at the current stage. But not addressing long-lasting disagreements, whether a potentially workable measure to put fire aside in the short term, could be risky in the long run. There cannot be full and sustainable normalization indeed without dealing with them unless the parties are settling for a sectorial and fluctuating partnership.

2.2 Türkiye- Egypt: Meaningful bilateral developments

The process of diplomatic normalization between Türkiye and Egypt has been going on during the first months of 2024. This process culminated with the first visit in 12 years of the President Erdoğan in Egypt on 14 of February¹⁸. The visit was anticipated by a new military deal on the 4th of

¹³ European council website, Main results of the special meeting held between 17-18 April 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2024/04/17-18/>

¹⁴ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye backs Northern Cyprus after UN extends peacekeeping force*, January 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-backs-northern-cyprus-after-un-extends-peacekeeping-force>

¹⁵ TRT World, *Türkiye slams 'EU's lack of vision', rejects Cyprus link in relations*, April 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-slams-eus-lack-of-vision-rejects-cyprus-link-in-relations-17825519>

¹⁶ For a broader analysis of EU-Turkey relations see I. O. Lesser, P. T. Levin, K. Taştan, Ö. Ünlühisarcıklı *Prospects for EU-Türkiye Foreign Policy Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Turbulence*, German Marshall Fund, April 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/EU%20Türkiye%20Paper.pdf>

¹⁷ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024 <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-%E2%80%93-abd-stratejik-mekanizmasi-hakkinda-ortak-aciklama.en.mfa>

¹⁸ Egypt and Turkey renew ties over Israel's looming offensive on Rafah in southern Gaza, AfricaNews, 15/02/2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2024/02/15/egypt-and-turkey-renew-ties-over-israels-looming-offensive-on-rafah-in-southern-gaza/>

February stipulating a trade agreement on Turkish armed drones for the Egyptian military¹⁹. In addition, Erdoğan's visit was also the occasion to increase the reinvigorated economic cooperation. Al-Sisi and his Turkish counterpart increased an economic agreement of \$15 billion notably in the energy and military fields. This visit will be followed by another visit in Türkiye by the Egyptian President in the coming months (maybe in May)²⁰.

But it is important to underline that the normalization is boosted by the situation in the broader Middle East and Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. The regional context was indeed the core of bilateral exchanges through phone calls and institutional meetings within the first four months of 2024, notably among the Turkish and Egyptian diplomatic representatives.

Soon after the Erdoğan's visit in Egypt a diplomatic meeting was held in Türkiye between Assistant Foreign Minister for African Affairs Ehab Awad and General Director of Eastern and Southern Africa of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Elif Ülgen in order to discuss West Africa and Sahel. The aim of the meeting was to increase cooperation in securing the region²¹.

Although not directly involved in the conflict, Egypt and Türkiye have maintained a prominent and internationally recognized role in de-escalation, particularly since Israel and Iran attacked each other. Indeed, US Secretary of State Blinken, called both Türkiye and Egypt to cooperate and take part in the broader alliance along with Jordan and Saudi Arabia to switching off the tensions in the region,²² with the aim at avoiding an enlargement of the conflict.

2.2.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

As said, the normalization process between Türkiye and Egypt is going on without any structural problem. This is proven by the increasing of economic cooperation and the willingness of the two parts to overcome not only the political-ideological problems, but also other core issues. This commitment is showed by the great numbers of delegates accompanying Türkiye's President to Cairo. Different Ministers and diplomats were in Cairo to developing and strengthening cooperation. The main issues covered by the visit was the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the energy dossier.

On the Palestinian issue, both countries are assuming a leading position in the diplomatic process notably in terms of ceasefire and the liberation of the hostages. Indeed, if Egypt hosted, despite no positive outcomes emerged, delegations from Israel and Qatar, Türkiye welcomed Palestinian delegations (both Hamas and Palestinian National Authority) in order to find an internal solution for reconciliation.

Both Egypt and Türkiye, through diplomatic talks are also engaging in the future of Gaza and its reconstruction and this was very clear in Erdoğan's claim in Cairo "[Türkiye is] ready to work with Egypt for the recovery and reconstruction of Gaza in the medium term"²³. This means that both countries are trying to assume a leading position as other crucial countries, such as Saudi Arabia (given their diplomatic process with Iran) or Qatar (due to their link with Hamas leadership). In this

¹⁹Turkey agrees to provide drones to Egypt, Reuters, 04/02/2024 [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-agrees-provide-drones-egypt-2024-02-04/#:~:text=ANKARA%2C%20Feb%204%20\(Reuters\),Hakan%20Fidan%20said%20on%20Sunday](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-agrees-provide-drones-egypt-2024-02-04/#:~:text=ANKARA%2C%20Feb%204%20(Reuters),Hakan%20Fidan%20said%20on%20Sunday).

²⁰ Umm Uras, Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's el-Sisi meeting updates: Erdogan arrives in Cairo, al-Jazeera, 14/02/2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/2/14/sisi-erdogan-meeting-live-gaza-in-focus-as-egypt-turkey-presidents-meet#:~:text=El%2DSisi%20accepted%20an%20invitation,over%20the%20next%20few%20years>.

²¹Egyptian, Turkish diplomats meet in Ankara on African issues, State information Service, 17/02/2024, <https://www.sis.gov.tr/Story/191649/Egyptian%2C-Turkish-diplomats-meet-in-Ankara-on-African-issues?lang=en-us>

²² Blinken calls up Turkish, Egyptian, Jordanian and Saudi counterparts following Iranian attacks on Israel, AniNews, 15/04/2024; <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/middle-east/blinken-calls-up-turkish-egyptian-jordanian-and-saudi-counterparts-following-iranian-attacks-on-israel20240415070336/>

²³ Egypt and Turkey Agree to Reset Relations, Work to End Regional Conflict, Voa Africa, 15/02/2024, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/egypt-and-turkey-agree-to-reset-relations-work-to-end-regional-conflict/7488341.html>

sense, Egypt and Türkiye seem to be freer in terms of political and diplomatic maneuver. However, their positions have to deal with the internal situation, both economic and political. The weakness of the Egyptian economy and its political implications as well as the situation of the political landscape of the Turkish scenario could jeopardize this broader political role in the region.

It is not surprising that a great emphasis, in these last meetings, have been dedicated to the economic and energy cooperation in order to boost both the economies. In this sense, Türkiye's BOTAŞ and Egypt's EGAS signed an agreement on LNG trading opportunities, cooperation on natural gas infrastructure and underground storages, (and) sharing of technical information and experience²⁴. This, besides the bilateral level, could further expand regional cooperation, as well between Türkiye and the actors of the East Med Gas Forum (Greece and Cyprus included), other than Egypt.

Furthermore, what seems to be an important point is the new military agreement and cooperation that marked an actual U-turn in terms of strategic cooperation in this field but also demonstrates the pragmatism of Erdoğan and al-Sisi. Indeed, the Turkish drones are sold in many countries in the region and Africa, including Ethiopia, that is a permanent tension with Egypt due to the Nile water management²⁵. It is also a turning point considering some frictions between the two countries, as they remain in opposite positions in Libya, meaning that in this crucial moment realpolitik seems to be at the core of the regional relations (see Libya section).

Finally, the effects of this increasing normalization are being translated in some political commitment by both sides in the internal political front. Just some days after Erdogan's visit to Egypt, Türkiye took action on the Egyptian Brotherhood figures exiled in the country by revoking Turkish citizenship to the former MB Supreme Guide, Mahmud Hussein²⁶.

2.3 Türkiye-Libya: Meaningful bilateral developments

During the last 4 months Libya and Türkiye have been going to reinforce their cooperation in different fields and issues. In January, Italy and Türkiye agreed to cooperate on the migration dossier. Indeed, the official meeting of the Italy's PM to Türkiye focused, among other things, on a new deal on migration with Libya and more properly with Tripoli's government²⁷. This is also to be seen as a move in further strengthening Italy-Türkiye strategic partnership.

In addition, Libya and Türkiye held an official meeting in Dubai, in which the two countries stressed on reinforcing previous agreements on economy cooperation and to find a political solution for the Libyan internal divisions²⁸. This development has been followed by further visits, notably that of the Minister of Technical Education Ikhlef Al-Sifaw to Ankara, which led to the signing of

²⁴ Türkiye, Egypt plan to deepen energy cooperation as ties grow closer, Daily Sabah, 15/02/2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkiye-egypt-plan-to-deepen-energy-cooperation-as-ties-grow-closer>

²⁵ Gashaw Ayferam, The Nile Dispute: Beyond Water Security, Carnegie Endowment, 19/02/2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88842#:~:text=The%20long%2Drunning%20dispute%20over,about%20more%20than%20physical%20resources.&text=As%20climate%20change%20accelerates%2C%20the,%2C%20food%2C%20and%20energy%20security.>

²⁶ Mohamed Hamama and Rana Mamdouh, Turkey revokes citizenship of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mahmoud Hussein, among others, Mada Masr, 20/02/2024, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2024/02/20/news/u/turkey-revokes-citizenship-of-muslim-brotherhood-leader-mahmoud-hussein-among-others/>

²⁷ Erdogan seeks to send Europe a message on migration through joint agreement with Italy and Libya, Nordic Monitor, 24/01/2024, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/01/erdogan-seeks-a-message-to-europe-on-migration-with-a-joint-agreement-with-italy-and-libya/>

²⁸ Dbeibeh, Erdogan hold talks in Dubai, Libya Update, 13/02/2024, <https://libyaupdate.com/dbeibeh-erdogan-hold-talks-in-dubai/>

another agreement in the field of education and training with Turkish Minister of Education Yusuf Tekin²⁹.

In the same month, during the Libya Food Expo, Libyan part presented to several Turkish companies some cooperation opportunities to increase trade and commercial relations along with facilitating movements of both capital and people³⁰.

In March, other meetings took place. This time energy cooperation has been at the core within the Energy summit organized by Tripoli's government, wherein Ministry of Oil and Gas, Mohammed Aoun and Minister of State for Prime Minister's Affairs, Adel Jumaa, and the Turkish Ambassador to Libya discussed on the implementation in energy cooperation.

On the political side, Libya's PM Dbaiba and President Erdogan, agreed in February on a new political path for the resolution of the crisis in the Mediterranean country. The aim was to reinforce the Western leadership (Tripoli) and to demand elections in the short term. This visit confirmed also common view within the regional scenario especially on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The Libyan government sees the Turkish moves at the diplomatic level as a positive move that could solve the crisis in the Strip³¹.

Finally, Türkiye and Libya in March have been protagonists of diplomatic efforts in Sudan in order to find a political solution between Hamedti and al-Burhan and put an end to the bloody civil war which is striking the country since at least two years³².

2.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Although the reality on the Libyan ground seems to be frozen by a permanent tension between Western government and the Eastern one, diplomatic relations continue without any obstacle. Türkiye, as known, continues to play a central role in Libya by supporting the internationally recognized Government of National Unity in Tripoli and maintaining an opened diplomatic channel for reaching a comprehensive political agreement among all parts.

This has been facilitated by the new regional and geopolitical landscape thanks to the end of polarization in the Gulf and after the normalization track with Egypt (supporting the Libyan Eastern government). The cooperation on economic field and energy represents another brick in the long-term strategy of Türkiye in Libya.

Despite Türkiye's privileged position in the country, the relationship with Libya faced in the last months some critical points, influenced by the internal political landscape of Libya. In February 20 the Appeal Court of Tripoli cancelled the energy agreement (MoU) signed in 2022 by Ankara and Tripoli³³. However, as underlined by many experts and analyst, this move has been a first step in modifying the MoU in order to have a broader agreement also with Eastern counterpart³⁴.

This last development could be proved with the regional reconciliation and the new normalization with Egypt, which supports General Haftar in the East. In this context, the Egyptian President al-Sisi, during his meeting with President Erdoğan, claimed that Egypt and Türkiye implemented cooperation in order to reach a comprehensive agreement in order to guarantee stability and security

²⁹ Safaa al-Harathy, Libya, Turkey sign MoU cooperation in vocational and technical education, Libya Observer, 25/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/libya-turkey-sign-mou-cooperation-vocational-and-technical-education>

³⁰ Safaa al-Hawathy, Hweij discusses trade cooperation with Turkish companies, Libya Observer, 03/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/hweij-discusses-trade-cooperation-turkish-companies>

³¹ Safaa al-Harathy, Erdogan backs direct Libyan elections, avoiding further transitional stages, Libya Observer, 14/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/erdogan-backs-direct-libyan-elections-avoiding-further-transitional-stages>

³² See (in Arabic): البرهان يوافق على التفاوض مع حميدتي بواسطة ليبيا وتركيا: urlly.it/3_m6q

³³ See (in Arabic): المحكمة الليبية تلغي اتفاق طاقة مع تركيا... إليك الأسباب: urlly.it/3_m6r

³⁴ The memorandum of understanding cancelled by Libya aimed to develop projects related to the exploration, production, transportation and trade of oil and gas, in accordance with the procedures and laws followed in Libya, and to strengthen cooperation between the two countries.

in the country. Despite the good intention, the presence of Türkiye in Libya is still representing an obstacle for reaching an agreement to put an end to the conflict. Military presence and the support of the Turkish military to the Western Government of Tripoli is indeed crucial to find a political solution. However, as known, the Turkish presence in the country is due to the Russian presence within the ranks of the Eastern government of Haftar. In this sense, the military role of Türkiye should be intended as a sort of deterrence force rather than as a political tool³⁵.

Indeed, the cooperation in different fields between the Libyan GNU and Türkiye is continuing without any fundamental obstacles. In March, the Libyan Iron and Steel industry signed an agreement with the Turkish Sancor to develop an industrial cooperation for the production of gas cylinders³⁶. This move seems to be strategic for the Libyan government since the last month some cities of the south mobilized against the government for not providing enough gas cylinders for daily use. The aim is to produce 400.000 cylinders in order to cover the entire need of the population and avoid tensions that could jeopardize the stability of the government³⁷.

The relations between the two countries have been influenced also by the international landscape. The visit of the Italian PM Meloni in Türkiye has been the occasion, among other things, to express the willingness to cooperate on migration in Libya³⁸. On the one hand, indeed, Italy's already strong cooperation with the Government of National Unity of Tripoli in the field of migration could find additional support in Türkiye. But beyond migration, an enhanced cooperation between Rome and Ankara has a broader political meaning since it could help revive the political process in Libya; ensure legitimacy to the Western Government of Tripoli and reinforce both the Italian and Turkish leverage in the country as well as their role at the international level.

Finally, there are international dossiers wherein Libya and Türkiye seem to be protagonists in the diplomatic efforts. This is the case of Sudan, wherein the two countries, since March 2024, are playing a mediation role between Hamedti and al-Burhan³⁹. Here, the role of the two countries is explained by two interlinked factors: migration and security. The invitation of the two rival forces of Sudan to Tripoli marked a turning point in the diplomatic efforts to end the conflict⁴⁰. The aim of Libya and Türkiye is to find a political solution for a transitional period and elections.

Libya and Sudan have always been linked notably in the last five years where, besides the presence of refugees, Libya has been one of the main countries hosting Sudanese mercenaries participating in the civil war within the two main parts.

³⁵ This is clear since years, when the Tripoli government was about to fall after the offensive of Khalifa Haftar against the capital.

³⁶ See (in Arabic): «توقيع اتفاقية لإنشاء مصنع لأسطوانات غاز الطهي بشراكة تركية» <https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/425986>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Federica Pascale, Erdogan promises Meloni to curb migrant flows, Euractiv, 22/01/2024, see: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/erdogan-promises-meloni-to-curb-migrant-flows/>

³⁹ The leaders of the two rival forces in Sudan.

⁴⁰ Abdel Kader, Assad, Sudan agrees to indirect negotiations led by Libya and Turkey to resolve conflict, Libya Observer, 05/03/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/sudan-agrees-indirect-negotiations-led-libya-and-turkey-resolve-conflict>

3. The Middle East

3.1. Syria-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Türkiye – Syria relations during the January-April term have not developed but kept a slow pace. After the stalled quadrilateral Moscow process, the normalization process has lost its depth.

The High-Level Meeting on Syria was a low-profile meeting held in Astana on 24-25 January 2024⁴¹, that facilitated the communication of the Deputy Ministers of the respective countries, other than Kazakh and the UN representatives. The agenda of the meeting was designated as the situation on the ground, the fight against terrorism, regional developments, the political process, the return of Syrians as well as matters of humanitarian assistance. The meeting was concluded with a joint statement, though; it did not include concrete improvement. The agenda of the respective countries was blended with primary concerns such as escalations with Israel and the USA for Iran, PKK threat for Türkiye, Ukraine and its impacts on Russia, or humanitarian assistance for the UN.

A diplomatic achievement was the Syrian consensus to deliver humanitarian aid to Syrians through Türkiye's border crossing until 13 May 2024 after the Astana High-Level Meeting.⁴² This commitment ensured non-interference to the UN's humanitarian aid, especially to the deprived Syrians in the north of Syria. By this decision, three border crossings are designated as secured gates to Syria, which are the Bab al-Salam, Al Ra'ee crossings, and the Bab al-Hawa.

However, Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan's speech during a TV interview pointed out the Syrian demands for a smooth transition to normalized ties, which could not be acceptable for Türkiye.⁴³ The Syrian condition for an established meeting with Türkiye is the withdrawal of Turkish military contingents from the north of Syria and the dissolution of the Syrian National Army.

Another hot topic on the agenda of the Turkish government was security due to terror threats based in either Syria or Iraq. Leaving Iraq to the following section of this analysis, Türkiye has been motivated by the repelling and punishing of the terror attacks of PKK in Istanbul, Ankara, the north of Iraq, and Syria. In this sense, the basic argument of Turkish leadership leans on two distinct arguments. The initial one is to build a security belt across the Turkish border repelling the PKK/PYD/YPG units 30 to 40 km away from the border line. The purpose is to secure the border from the long-range artillery, howitzer, or rocket attacks of terror cells as they did in 2015. The second argument is to counter national security threats beyond its borders. Hence, Turkish security forces, mainly Turkish Intelligence (MIT) hit high-value targets deep in Syria.

Per the attacks of PKK, Erdoğan emphasized widening operations against PKK in Syria and Iraq pointing out the spring and summer term after a full encirclement.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) started a winter operation, which may be called the 'punish and deter' strategy, after the PKK hit the Turkish military in the north of Iraq. This strategy confirmed the previous pattern of the TAF in implementing the military response to PKK attacks: Iraq and Syria

⁴¹ MoFA, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-15_-24-25-ocak-2024-tarihlerinde-astana-da-duzenlenen-suriye-konulu-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-hk.en.mfa, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁴² Michel Nichols, "Syria allows UN to keep delivering aid from Turkey", 11 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-allows-un-keep-delivering-aid-turkey-2024-02-12/>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁴³ CNN Türk, "Dışışleri Bakanı Hakan Fidan CNN TÜRK'te", 18 March 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQnYZWRsvLw>, accessed on 1 April 2024.

⁴⁴ AP, "Turkey's Erdogan vows to widen operations against Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq", 16 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/erdogan-syria-iraq-kurdish-militants-c31b579cd8a487bbdf63861110560965>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

have been circulated as ‘one’ area of operation. As PKK attacks in Iraq, Türkiye retaliates in Syria targeting the strategic PKK facilities, such as oil fields being run in partnership with the USA.⁴⁵

As well, the Gaza War needs to be delved into in terms of its impact on Türkiye – Syria relations. There has been no joint effort of both countries denouncing the Gaza conflict or acts of Israel. On the other hand, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the Israeli attack on the Iranian Consulate killing seven high-ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers since it violates international regulations on respect and protection of diplomatic missions. On the other hand, Türkiye preferred to be a low-profile observer between the Israeli and Iranian escalation in Syria.

3.1.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The relations between Syria and Türkiye appear to be at their lowest point despite the normalization calls of the Turkish leadership. The main reason why Assad is not interested in consolidating the relations is his self-perception. An Assad regime more embraced by the Gulf-led Arab League and Iran believes that the Regime has the flexibility to counter the Türkiye-backed Syria National Army. In this sense, the Assad regime is more interested in increasing the leverage of probable bargaining. That is why the regime conditions a normalization in correlation with the withdrawal of the Turkish military. In a sense, Assad regime does not expect any gain from a probable normalization with Türkiye since it could allegedly legitimize Turkish military presence in the north of Syria. Contrary to the belief of Assad, Türkiye argues that there must be a political process in the frame of the UNSC Resolution 2254, and under the UN Watch, between the Assad regime and the Syrian National Coalition. Hence, promising progress in the political compromise should be ensured to prevent further security concerns and irregular immigration waves due to a probable exploitation of the process.

An escalatory developing situation in Syria, especially if Türkiye sacrifices its military presence for the sake of normalization, would ignite an immigration wave from Syria towards Europe. Indeed, another conflict in the Levant region, after Gaza, could complicate the European policies to sustain a crisis management.

3.2. Israel/Palestine - Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Israel – Türkiye normalization has been frozen and far from reality as far as Israel continues the military campaign in Gaza. President Erdoğan is still selective in terms of wording his attitude and diverts Israel and Netanyahu-led cabinet, though he clearly accuses Israel of committing a genocide and claims that ‘Israel will be convicted’.⁴⁶ In this sense, Türkiye has joined the countries circulating statements against Israel before the International Criminal (ICJ). Türkiye prepared an evidence folder and expanded its scope to solidify the allegations through the hands of an expert group.

The counter-narratives of Israeli policy and decision-makers fore fronted accusations of alleged discrimination against Kurds and congratulated the qualifiers of the Turkish opposition after the local elections of 31 March 2024.⁴⁷ The message was in Turkish and provoked the pro-AK Party

⁴⁵ 24 TV, “TSK, Kamışlı’da PKK’nın kontrolündeki petrol üretim tesislerini vurdu”, 13 Ocak 2024, <https://www.yirnidort.tv/gundem/kara-ates-destek-vasitalariyla-pkkypgnin-petrol-uretim-tesisleri-vuruldu-147547>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

⁴⁶ Times of Israel, “Erdogan says Turkey providing evidence for genocide case: ‘Israel will be convicted’”, 13 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-says-turkey-providing-evidence-for-genocide-case-israel-will-be-convicted/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁴⁷ T24, “İsrail Dışişleri Bakanı’ndan Türkçe mesaj: İmamoğlu ve Yavaş’ı kutlarım; Erdoğan yeni malzemeler bulmalı!”, 1 April 2024, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/israil-disisleri-bakani-ndan-turkce-mesaj-imamoglu-ve-yavas-i-kutlarim-erdogan-yeni-malzemeler-bulmali.1158685>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

government to circulate ‘who’ congratulated the mayors-elected. On the other hand, Netanyahu, himself, had congratulated President Erdoğan after the 28 May 2024 Presidential elections. Two elections with two extreme Israeli reactions indicate the transformation of Israeli–Turkish relations.

Moreover, Israeli spying case in Türkiye has been on the public agenda due to detained 34 MOSSAD members.⁴⁸ Turkish security forces raided 57 addresses in January. The individuals were allegedly seeking to carry out "tactical tasks such as reconnaissance, monitoring, assault, and kidnapping against foreign nationals residing in our country".⁴⁹ The second operation was in February and Turkish police detained another seven individuals.⁵⁰

Per the Gaza conflict and escalating tension with Israel, Türkiye started a gradual limitation approach to the relations with Israel. Despite the public protest to Israeli companies or companies providing support to Israel, Türkiye was not restricting the trade with Israel, until recently. At first Türkiye opted for removing Israel from the ‘favored export’ destination not to subsidize the companies trading with Israeli companies.⁵¹

The Turkish diplomacy on Gaza was intense and committed to stop the violence through a well-established ceasefire. Türkiye was not directly included in the indirect negotiations of Hamas and Israel, though Turkish policy makers intensified their efforts, first, to tell the regional and global audience about the ‘injustice’ and ‘suffering’.⁵² Even, FM Fidan worded unilateral actions for the sake of sending humanitarian support to the people of Gaza.⁵³ Meanwhile, the visit of President Erdoğan to Egypt on 14 February 2024 has been of great significance either on Gaza or the overall normalization process for two reasons.⁵⁴ Both countries expressed their concerns and agreed on humanitarian aid to the deprived Palestinians. The second issue is about Turkish–Egyptian normalization since Gaza and shared understanding of Israel has multiplied the process between the two countries. In other words, worsening relations with Israel eased the Turkish-Egyptian normalization faster.

Contrary to Turkish – Egyptian rapprochement, the narrative challenge of President Erdoğan and PM Netanyahu deepened the creek between Israel and Türkiye. Erdoğan called Netanyahu as ‘today’s Nazi’, calling Israel a 'terrorist state', and accused him of conducting a 'genocide' in Gaza.⁵⁵

As a response, Netanyahu claimed Armenians and accused Erdoğan of denying them.⁵⁶ The polarization through harsh statements devastated the Israeli-Turkish normalization with a great impact on the future projects in the Eastern Mediterranean.

⁴⁸ Paul Kirby, “Turkey detains 34 on suspicion of spying for Israel”, 2 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67861377>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Times of Israel, “7 detained in Turkey for allegedly selling intel to Mossad via private detectives”, 2 February 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/7-detained-in-turkey-for-allegedly-selling-intel-to-mossad-via-private-detectives/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁵¹ Times of Israel, “Turkey delists Israel as favored export target amid tension over Hamas war”, 22 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkey-said-to-delist-israel-as-favored-export-target-amid-tension-over-hamas-war/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁵² AA, “Dışişleri Bakanı Fidan: Gazze konusunda derhal harekete geçmemiz yönünde büyük bir beklenti var”, 5 Mart 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/disisleri-bakani-fidan-gazze-konusunda-derhal-harekete-gecmemiz-yonunde-buyuk-bir-beklenti-var/3156192>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵³ Sümeyye Dilara Dinçer, Mustafa Deveci, Mehmet Şah Yılmaz, Büşranur Koca, “Bakan Fidan: Gazze konusunda tek taraflı adım atılması gerektiğini dile getirenler var, bunu destekliyoruz”, 3 Mart 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/bakan-fidan-gazze-konusunda-tek-taraflı-adım-atılması-gerektiğini-dile-getirenler-var-bunu-destekliyoruz/3153807>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵⁴ Esra Tekin, “Turkish president arrives in Egypt for official visit”, 14 February 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-president-arrives-in-egypt-for-official-visit/3137407>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵⁵ I24 News, “m”, 9 March 2024, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-turkey/1709981618-turkey-s-erdogan-compares-israel-s-netanyahu-to-hitler-and-stalin>, accessed on 14 March 2024.

Other than political strains, Turkish FM Fidan announced a series of measures on 8 April 2024, which is designed by a Presidential decree directing the Turkish institutions to identify the steps to be taken.⁵⁷ The reasons of the measures, for Fidan, is the attitude of Israel denying a ceasefire, preventing humanitarian support to Gazans, and not permitting the Turkish humanitarian air-drops per the request of the Turkish government. In this sense, the Turkish Ministry of Trade restricted exports of 54 items to Israeli markets, which covers industrial semi-products.⁵⁸ This move was actually a beginning of a series of measures upon the negative developments in Gaza. By that way, Türkiye also repelled the public accusations that the trade with Israel still continues and indeed trade was officially halted at the beginning of May 2024. Meanwhile, the measures have become a pioneering process to the regional countries, and the South to start a ‘deter and punish’ wave against Israel.

Another significant development was the Israeli – Iranian mutual low-profile attacks. After the Israeli air force hit the Damascus Consulate of Iran on April 1st and killed seven Iranian military men, Iran retaliated with a mass strike of rockets and loitering drones. On the other hand, most deliveries have been shot by the U.S. military and the countries on the way to Israeli aerospace (Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan). The Israeli response was to strike Iranian military facilities in Isfahan city other than failing rockets found in Iraq heading to an unknown destination on April 19, 2024. Although Israeli institutions were silent on claiming responsibility, it has become clear that the attack was a minor reminder of the intentions of both countries. The global audience has felt the danger of a probable burst of military escalation endangering the countries en route, though; both countries are blamed for starting a ‘pre-informed and consulted show of force’.

3.2.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The Gaza conflict becomes the essential base of Turkish–Israeli relations after the Israeli intervention in Gaza. It would be wise to claim that another normalization will depend on a change of leadership in both countries as far as the Palestinian issue is on the agenda of the international community. In this scope, the negatively motivated narratives of both parties will create a snowball effect on the relations in the short-term. As the situation in Gaza worsens, Türkiye will be more interactive with the international community to push Israel to accept the rights of Palestinians. Israeli and Iranian retaliatory ‘show of force’, on the other hand, alerted the Turkish leadership to be prepared for a regional escalation in the way to fasten the armament program, mainly Turkish-made air defense systems.

3.3. Iraq–Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

PKK’s attacks in December 2023 and January 2024 have transformed the Türkiye’s counter terrorism policy and relevant Iraq strategy. The frequent visits of Turkish Foreign and Defense Ministers, Fidan and Akar, and MIT Chief Kalın, ignited a comprehensive strategy. MIT Chief Kalın started the shuttle diplomacy with a visit to Iraqi President Rashidi and PM Sudani on 23

⁵⁶ Jonothan Lis, “Netanyahu Accuses Erdogan of Denying Armenian Genocide as Ties Between Countries Worsen”, Haaretz, 10 March 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-10/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-publicly-accuses-turkey-of-denying-the-armenian-holocaust/0000018e-287a-d152-ad8e-29fa35a10000>, accessed on 14 March 2024.

⁵⁷ NTV, “Bakan Fidan: İsrail’e yönelik bir dizi yeni tedbir almayı kararlaştırdık”, 9 April 2024, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/bakan-fidan-israile-yonelik-bir-dizi-yeni-tedbir-almayi-kararlastirdik,4CvLrUrBHE-8PsrIU3neJw>, accessed on 9 April 2024.

⁵⁸ NTV, “Türkiye, İsrail’le ticarete kısıtlama getirdi: 54 ürün grubunda ihracata sınır”, 9 April 2024, https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/turkiye-israile-ticarete-kisiltama-getirdi,mmDjCAuU1kSjs-_-7Vo1XA, accessed on 9 April 2024.

January 2024.⁵⁹ The schedule of Kalın's visit included the Shia, Turkoman, and Sunnah opinion leaders with the significance of PKK threat, the Development Road Project, Gaza, and regional issues in question.⁶⁰ Kalın scheduled another meeting on 28 January 2024 with the Iraq Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) officials and the leader of the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP), Masood Barzani.⁶¹

The very well-known strain of Türkiye and KDP with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Bafel Talabani, had been the primary debate on how to divert PUK with PKK in this travel. Türkiye's argument is that PUK is collaborating with PKK, as Bafel Talabani confirms, and has closed the Turkish aerospace to Sulaymaniyah city, which is under the control of PUK. As complementary step to the negotiations in Erbil, Turkish FM Fidan warned Bafel Talabani to distance himself from PKK in March 2024.⁶²

Another diplomatic attempt was on Defense Minister Güler, accompanied by Turkish Chief of General staff Metin Gürak, with a special focus on countering terrorism.⁶³ In this sense, both defense officials paid a visit to the leaders of KRG on what to do and how to engage with PKK's presence in the north of Iraq. Finally, the media of Iraq circulated that the visit of President Erdoğan to conclude a series of agreements with Iraq.⁶⁴ The Turkish media, on the other hand, focused a probable Spring Operation to eradicate PKK from Iraq.⁶⁵ In this scope, the meeting of the Turkish 2nd Army Commander Metin Toker and Iraqi generals attracted the media's interest to question if Türkiye and Iraqi (including KRG) soldiers would start a joint operation. Consequently, both countries announced that they would build a joint operation center to coordinate the military acts. President Erdoğan, then, addressed the public on the occasion of local elections stating that Türkiye will not permit a 'terroristan'.

The visit of President Erdoğan to Baghdad and Erbil has become a new page to build a positive agenda between two countries on April 22, 2024. President Erdoğan and PM Sudani concluded and inked 25 agreements that will further the relations of both countries. In this sense, Türkiye urged the Iraqi government to take effective measures against PKK while granting promises to release more water from the rivers. On the other hand, both countries were keen to promote the Development Road linking Europe and the Gulf region. The 20 billion USD-worth investment, which will be comprised of land and rail road other than oil and gas pipelines has the potential to be an alternative to Indian initiative circulated by Indian PM Modi on the sidelines of G20 Summit. Besides, China and the Gulf countries (mainly the UAE and Qatar) are supportive to the Development Road, although Saudi Arabia keeps her silence.

⁵⁹ Zafer Fatih Beyaz, "MİT Başkanı Kalın, Irak Cumhurbaşkanı Reşid ve Irak Başbakanı es-Sudani ile görüştü", 23 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/mit-baskani-kalin-irak-cumhurbaskani-resid-ve-irak-basbakani-es-sudani-ile-gorustu/3116288>, accessed on 21 March 2024

⁶⁰ Murat Yetkin, "MİT Başkanı Kalın'ın seyahatları Ankara'da diplomatların merak konusu", 5 February 2024, <https://yetkinreport.com/2024/02/05/mit-baskani-kalinin-seyahatleri-ankarada-diplomatlarin-merak-konusu/>, accessed on 21 March 2024

⁶¹ Saduman Turkay, "Turkish intel chief visits Iraq for 2nd time", AA, 28 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-intel-chief-visits-iraq-for-2nd-time/3121534>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁶² Daily Sabah, "FM Fidan warns Talabani's PUK in Iraq to distance itself from PKK", 18 March 2024, http://sabahdai.ly/_1wfr, accessed on 20 March 2024.

⁶³ Daily Sabah, "Turkish defense chief meets KRG officials in Iraq visit", 7 February 2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-defense-chief-meets-krp-officials-in-iraq-visit>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁶⁴ RUDAW, "'Yaşar Güler Ankara'nın yeni güvenlik anlaşması teklifini Bağdat'a sundu'", 6 February 2024, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middleeast/iraq/060220243>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁶⁵ Nır Banu Aras and Şahin Şen, "İşte Irak'ta PKK'yı bitirme stratejisi", 6 March 2024, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/iste-irakta-pkkyi-bitirme-stratejisi-4606887>, accessed on 6 March, 2024.

3.3.1 Sustainability of bilateral relations

The Turkish attempts to consolidate the relations with Iraq can be based on three categories of mutual concerns. The first category is security and stability on both sides of the shared border due to PKK's presence. PKK has become a threat, not only to Türkiye but also to Iraq. PKK is active in both Iraq and Syria. Hence, PKK is perceived as a challenging actor by Iraqi and KRG authorities except for Bafel Talabani due to his long-lasting competition with the Barzani family. Talabani cooperates with PKK to dominate the north of Iraq by benefitting from PKK's presence, Iran's influence, and interestingly American support. Due to the lack of military capacity of the Iraqi central government and KRG, Türkiye appears to be the actor providing military support against PKK. Meanwhile, Türkiye will have the exemption of implementing active measures in coordination with Iraqi authorities.

The second category is economy and trade between the two countries. Iraq is the fifth country in Turkish exports whilst Türkiye shares only 5% of the Iraqi imports. Hence, there exists a great potential that could promote the economic expectations of both countries once a balanced resonance is set. The Development Road will pave a prosperity avenue for the micro, mezzo, and macro spectrum of both communities with a combination of land, rail, and energy transportation. The resentments of 2022 in Basra and Baghdad indicate that a live economy and trade will stabilize Iraq. Nevertheless, both PKK and DAESH presence in Iraq challenge the realization of the Development Road project.

The third category is about the regional dynamics. The Gulf market, with a potential of 800 billion USD, should be integrated to Europe en route Iraq and Türkiye that makes this avenue a matter of competition. In this sense, the projects such as Chinese Road and Belt Initiative or India-Middle East-Europe Road will compete with the Development Road Project. Hence, Türkiye perceives the new resonance with Iraq as an opportunity to facilitate the easiest and fastest way of logistics as far as the security threats on the other projects are concerned. Moreover, Türkiye considers terrorist threat in Iraq not only a matter of national security, but also an impediment for the regional prosperity.

4. Gulf region

4.1 UAE – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

As major step in normalization between the countries, Erdoğan attended the World Governments Summit in Dubai as “guest of honor” in mid-February,⁶⁶ underlining that Türkiye’s trade volume with the UAE has surpassed the level of 20 billion dollars, but the aim is to increase it above the level of 50 billion dollars. During his stay in the UAE Erdoğan met Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss on action to achieve the goals of the comprehensive economic partnership between the two countries as well as regional developments, with a focus on the ongoing situation in the Gaza Strip, underlining the need of international action to secure a ceasefire and protection for civilians.⁶⁷

Bilateral exchanges continued later in the month and beyond. At the end of February Al Nahyan and Erdoğan spoke on the phone to enhancing cooperation and strengthening ties across various sectors, with a special emphasis on economic and developmental areas.⁶⁸ Also, at the beginning of Ramadan Erdoğan exchanged a call with Al Nahyan, and invited him to Türkiye for the first meeting of the High Level Strategic Council established between the two countries.⁶⁹ Türkiye also extended condolences for a flood disaster that took place in the UAE in mid-April.⁷⁰

However, alignment was also reported over the regional trade sphere: Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the UAE signed a preliminary deal to cooperate on the Development Road project⁷¹ that is expected to stimulate economic growth and promote economic integration and sustainability between East and West.⁷²

4.2 Qatar – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

At the beginning of February, Istanbul hosted the Qatar-Türkiye Business Forum. The meeting touched on trade and economic co-operation between the two countries, reviewed the investment climate and the incentives and opportunities available to strengthen economic relations.⁷³ Few weeks later, a meeting between Qatar Chamber First Vice-Chairman Mohamed bin Twar Al Kuwari and the Chairman of Kalkavan Global Group Faruk Kalkavan was held in Doha,⁷⁴ reflecting the strong economic ties and mutual investment interests between the two countries.

⁶⁶ Gulf News, *Turkish President Erdogan at World Governments Summit in Dubai calls for global unity as crises loom*, February 2024. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/turkish-president-erdogan-at-world-governments-summit-in-dubai-calls-for-global-unity-as-crises-loom-1.101029619>

⁶⁷ K. Al Amir, *WGS 2024: UAE and Turkish Presidents discuss enhancing bilateral relations*, Gulf News, February 2024. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/wgs-2024-uae-and-turkish-presidents-discuss-enhancing-bilateral-relations-1.101025628>

⁶⁸ See <https://www.mohamedbinzayed.ae/en/news-and-media/2024/02/UAE-and-Turkiye-Presidents-discuss-bilateral-relations-and-regional-developments>

⁶⁹ G. Bayar, *Turkish president speaks with UAE counterpart over phone*, Anadolu Agency, March 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-speaks-with-uae-counterpart-over-phone/3161855>

⁷⁰ F. Zorlu, *Turkish President conveys condolences to UAE counterpart for flood disaster*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-conveys-condolences-to-uae-counterpart-for-flood-disaster/3194453>

⁷¹ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, UAE sign deal on Development Road project*, April 2024; <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-iraq-qatar-uae-sign-deal-on-development-road-project>

⁷² See section related to Türkiye-Iraq.

⁷³ Gulf Times, *Turkiye is an ‘important’ destination for Qatari investments: Sheikh Khalifa*, February 2024. <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/677021/business/turkiye-is-an-important-destination-for-qatari-investments-sheikh-khalifa>

⁷⁴ Qatar Tribune, *Qatar-Turkish business meet explores new commercial partnerships*, February 2024. <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/109044/business/qatar-turkish-business-meet-explores-new-commercial-partnerships>

However, bilateral cooperation continues to encompass many sectors. Hulusi Akar, the Chairman of the Committee on National Defense of the Turkish National Assembly, met in Ankara with the head of the Qatar-Türkiye Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group, Ahmed bin Hitmi Al Hitmi in mid-February. During the visit, the parties emphasized both the efforts in defense and security relations, as well as those in economy, education, health and tourism.⁷⁵

In the context of the Gaza war, Qatar and Türkiye have also kept on with their humanitarian and diplomatic efforts towards Palestinians. At the end of March, Qatar has announced its collaboration with Türkiye in reuniting wounded Palestinians from the Gaza Strip receiving treatment in Türkiye with their relative's undergoing treatment in Qatar.⁷⁶

In mid-April, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met Al-Thani in Doha, to discuss the situation in Palestine as well as the regional developments.⁷⁷ Türkiye's MFA trip included talks with Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas political bureau, to discuss the latest on Gaza conflict, humanitarian assistance to the Strip, cease-fire, as well as hostages.⁷⁸

4.3 Saudi Arabia – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

Economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries continued to strengthen over the last few months. In mid-February, Istanbul hosted the Turkish-Saudi Investment and Business Forum in which 28 memoranda of understanding were signed both at governmental and private sector level, covering the fields of human capital, innovation, tourism, construction, real estate, manufacturing, industry, hospitality, vocational training, games, financial services, logistics, and information and communication technology, among the others.⁷⁹

Along the line of trade and economic relations, Riyadh hosted the 27th IBF Türkiye-Saudi Arabia business forum and Turkish export products fair at the beginning March 2024, in partnership with the Riyadh chamber of commerce, MUSIAD and IBF.⁸⁰

Later in March bilateral relations as well as regional developments were discussed by phone between Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan. During the call, the parties touched also the latest on Gaza.⁸¹

Within the framework of the joint efforts toward the end of hostilities, Turkish FM Fidan attended a meeting in Riyadh organized by the Gaza Contact Group in April, to discuss steps to boost recognition of a state of Palestine and increase pressure on Israel and its supporters.⁸²

⁷⁵ A. Ekiz, Turkish, *Qatari parliamentary officials discuss bilateral ties*, Anadolu Agency, February 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-qatari-parliamentary-officials-discuss-bilateral-ties/3139082>

⁷⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, *Qatar Announces Reunification of Wounded Palestinians in Doha in Cooperation with Türkiye*, March 2024. <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2024/03/20/qatar-announces-reunification-of-wounded-palestinians-in-doha-in-cooperation-with-turkiye>

⁷⁷ G.N. Cebi, *Turkish foreign minister to visit Qatar for bilateral talks*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-to-visit-qatar-for-bilateral-talks/3192799>

⁷⁸ G. N. Cebi, *Turkish foreign minister meets Hamas chief in Qatar*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-meets-hamas-chief-in-qatar/3194483>

⁷⁹ Saudi Agency Press, *Turkish-Saudi Investment, Business Forum Starts in Istanbul*, February 2024. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/zh/N2048793>

⁸⁰ See IBF-International Business forum <https://ibfturkiyesaudiarabia.ibforum.org/index.html#about>

⁸¹ C. Efesoy, Turkish, *Saudi foreign ministers discuss bilateral ties, Gaza*, Anadolu Agency, March 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-saudi-foreign-ministers-discuss-bilateral-ties-gaza/3180055>

⁸² E. Tekin, *Turkish foreign minister attends Contact Group meeting on Gaza in Saudi capital*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-attends-contact-group-meeting-on-gaza-in-saudi-capital/3205611>

4.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

In the reporting period, relations between Türkiye and the Gulf countries have continued following two main axes: economy and regional diplomacy, with the first emerging as the main driver for consolidating the normalization process.

The quartet shares the common goal of ending hostilities in Gaza, hence they all continued exchanges towards de-escalation both in bilateral talks and within the framework of the Gaza Contact Group with the “Islamic world standing more united and in solidarity unlike in previous crises”,⁸³ even if their relations with the Parties in conflict as well as their ways to react to the Israeli moves vary. Türkiye maintains strong relations with Hamas. During his visit to Doha as part of Türkiye’s effort to prevent war in Gaza from being overshadowed by the Israel-Iran tensions,⁸⁴ Türkiye’s MFA Hakan Fidan was reported to meet Hamas leaders based in the Qatari capital. Later in April, Erdoğan hosted Hamas’ chief Haniyeh in Istanbul, urging Palestinians to be united. Also, Türkiye went so far as to announcing the will of joining South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as well as to halting exports and imports to and from Israel.⁸⁵

From their part, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have underlined that the future of Gaza and its administration should stay under the control of the Palestinian people as well as the need for a two State solution. At the current stage, however, the UAE did not suspend ties with Israel⁸⁶ and Saudi Arabia, while not having normalized relations with Israel despite US led efforts, has moved as its “activism to end the war in Gaza will not overtake its domestic and foreign policy strategies to achieve Vision 2030 goals”.⁸⁷

Moreover, two things are worth noting here: even if the past rift between Türkiye/Qatar and the Saudi/UAE has been overcome, ideological differences between them still exist. However, the parties have buried the hatchet to the best interest of economy, trade and security. This attitude is likely to be maintained, considering the latest developments.

At the end of March, Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have signed a deal to launch negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the aim of liberalizing trade in goods and services, facilitate bilateral investments and trade with the region. The FTA would represent one of the world’s largest free trade areas between Türkiye and members of the GCC, with a total value of \$2.4 trillion.⁸⁸

And this, on the one hand is totally in line with the economic trends of last year: according to TİM data, in 2023 the UAE was Türkiye’s ninth largest trading partner: Turkish exports increased by 63.4 percent over 2022 to USD 8.58 billion compared to USD 5.25 billion in the previous year. Turkish exports with Saudi Arabia also increased in 2023 (the third largest market for Turkish goods by percentage increase compared to 2022); although these volumes were lower than trade with the

⁸³ See <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-intensifies-diplomatic-contacts-for-gaza>

⁸⁴ E. Akin, *Turkey’s FM to visit Qatar as regional diplomacy seeks to contain Iran-Israel tension*, Al-Monitor, April 2024.

⁸⁵ Al Jazeera, *Turkey says it halts trade with Israel over Gaza aid access*, May 2024; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/2/turkey-says-it-halts-trade-with-israel-over-gaza-aid-access>

⁸⁶ Reuters, *Fact Check: UAE did not suspend ties with Israel, diplomats say*, April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/uae-did-not-suspend-ties-with-israel-diplomats-say-2024-04-10/>

⁸⁷ M. Muasher, A. Hamzawy, R. ji, M. H. Ali, E. al-ketbi, Y. Farouk, *Governing Gaza After the War: The Regional Perspectives*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, February 2024 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/02/16/governing-gaza-after-war-regional-perspectives-pub-91663>

⁸⁸ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye, Gulf states to launch talks for free trade agreement*, March 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-gulf-states-to-launch-talks-for-free-trade-agreement>

UAE.⁸⁹ Also with Qatar, that has long lasting relations with Ankara, trade volume stood at approximately 1.2 billion USD in 2023.⁹⁰

On the other hand, FTA between Türkiye and the GCC would represent a step forward in the sustainability of normalization since it goes beyond the rapprochement at the bilateral level. To be noted that the resolution of the Gulf crisis paved the way for a resumption of GCC economic integration activities, which include a renewed effort to negotiate FTA agreements as a regional bloc.⁹¹ Simultaneously with the Türkiye discussions, the GCC is engaged in FTA negotiations with several other countries including the United Kingdom.⁹² Interestingly, in early March, also Türkiye and UK have announced the formal launch of negotiations on a new FTA with a view to including services as well as goods in a new deal.⁹³

In this framework, the rapprochement between Türkiye and GCC could also open new spaces for cooperation in the Middle East and enhance interconnectivity in the region. Türkiye, has indeed kept on in its support to the Iraqis Development Road project, by agreeing with Qatar, Iraq and the UAE to enhance cooperation over the project at the end of April.⁹⁴ Although considering the numerous challenges around the feasibility of the corridor, the Development Road, if realized, will have not only the potential to boost cross-border trade and connectivity among Iraq, Gulf countries and Türkiye but also among others in Asia, Europe, and Africa, fostering economic integration between East and West.

In the context of evolving Middle East dynamics, both Türkiye and the Gulf States seem to have resized their competition for regional 'primacy' in favor of a successful partnership based on economic and security grounds, at least for now. Türkiye remains indeed interested in maintaining warm relations with the Gulf due to its financial necessity and the GCC's remain committed in their strategy for diversifying their revenue sources and economies, to which Ankara can contribute.

If the EU can seize the opportunity, this détente could also benefit its role in the region, both in terms of improving neighborly relations, strengthening trust in business and trade, and perhaps regaining centrality in mediation efforts towards regional conflicts.

⁸⁹ I rapporti economico-commerciali tra Turchia, Emirati Arabi Uniti e Arabia Saudita nel 2023 fotografati dall'Assemblea degli Esportatori Turchi (TİM).

⁹⁰ Gulf times, *Qatar-Türkiye trade reaches QR4.4bn in 2023*, February 2024. <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/677665/business/qatar-turkiye-trade-reaches-qr44bn-in-2023>

⁹¹ N. Habibi, *Turkey-GCC Trade Talks Mark Another Step Toward Rapprochement with Arab World*, Stimson, April 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/turkey-gcc-trade-talks-mark-another-step-toward-rapprochement-with-arab-world/>

⁹² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/trade-update-uk-gulf-cooperation-council-fta-negotiations>

⁹³ Arab News, *UK and Türkiye launch talks on a new free trade deal*, March 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2476691/business-economy>

⁹⁴ The Development Road is the name given by the Iraqi government to what was known as the dry canal that connects the Al-Faw Grand Port in southern Iraq with the Turkish territories through railway networks and roads. It will extend for 1,200 kilometers from Al-Faw port town in southern Iraq to Faysh Khabur town in the northern Iraqi governorate of Duhok. A. Salem, *Iraq, Turkey, UAE, Qatar to hold four-way summit on Development Road project*, Iraqi News, May 2024; <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraq-turkey-uae-qatar-to-hold-four-way-summit-on-development-road-project/>

5. Caucasus

The South Caucasus region experienced a relatively calm period between January and April 2024, but it was quite active in terms of foreign affairs and bilateral diplomatic relations. During this period, apart from some exceptional negative statements, it was observed that the leaders of the countries in the region and official state representatives were using cautious language and trying to avoid provoking each other. If a similar approach continues to be adopted in the following period and if international third-party actors also support this positive atmosphere, normalization in the region could gain momentum. It seems possible that both economic and trade relations as well as political relations between the countries in the region could be shaped within the framework of mutual respect and the interests of all parties. In this context, the reflection of the relations between Türkiye and the three countries in the South Caucasus region during the January-April 2024 period has been examined under the following subheadings.

5.1 Meaningful bilateral developments between Armenia – Türkiye

During this period, the Republic of Türkiye has maintained its strong ties with Azerbaijan on one hand, while also making careful efforts to normalize relations with Armenia. Türkiye has been cautious not to use language that would provoke the parties involved and has particularly emphasized the importance of third parties such as the United States and the European Union adopting a neutral stance in resolving the issues in the region.

Within the period, the statements made by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the "Security Environment" program of the State Radio on February 01, 2024, carry a self-critical nature concerning Armenia's contribution to solving the problems in the region. In his statement, Pashinyan expressed the need for a reassessment of the Armenian Constitution and Declaration of Independence, stating that peace could not be achieved if state policy was not conducted in line with the elements in the Declaration of Independence⁹⁵. Still, instead, war would erupt. Implicitly, Pashinyan's speech suggests that some articles in the DoI could be perceived as a threat by other countries in the region. The need for correction in this DoI is highlighted with the following statements: "We always look at the issues from Azerbaijan's perspective, but why don't we consider how our other neighbors perceive this? How do they perceive creating a state that will restore historical justice? What does restoring historical justice mean? For example, problems in Armenia are generally considered in terms of how Azerbaijan and Türkiye perceive them, but the question of how Georgia perceives them is never asked. Why does Georgia have deep defense relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye instead of Armenia? Could this be related to the messages we have laid down as a state?"⁹⁶

Naturally, Pashinyan's autocritique remarks were met with reactions and criticism from some circles within Armenia. In response to criticisms that the decision to reassess the constitution and declaration of independence was made in line with Azerbaijan's demands, Pashinyan stated that "there is a need to reassess the declaration, and that peace can never be established if state policy is pursued in the direction of reuniting Karabakh with Armenia, and this would lead to war."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ DoI of Armenia: DoI is the main document designating the frame of the establishment of the Independent State of Armenia and framing the assessments and objectives for the future. So, the issues carrying out hostility and/or offensive articles can potentially deteriorate the mutual relations with the neighboring countries.

⁹⁶ AA (2024), "Paşinyan'a göre Ermenistan'ın Bağımsızlık Bildirgesi'ndeki unsurlar barış getirmeyecek, aksine savaş çıkaracak", <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/pasinyana-gore-ermenistanin-bagimsizlik-bildirgesindeki-unsurlar-baris-getirmeyecek-aksine-savas-cikaracak/3125451>

⁹⁷ AA (2024), ibid.

Considering that Pashinyan's statements in this direction have the potential to contribute in bringing the sides closer, they are expected to be closely monitored by third-party countries and international organizations.

Another significant development during the period was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to the capitals of the three countries in the South Caucasus region. Within this frame, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus to affirm NATO's support to long-standing partners Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.⁹⁸ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg concluded his tour of the South Caucasus on Tuesday, 19 March 2024 in Yerevan, Armenia, where he met with President Vahagn Khachaturyan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. On stability in the South Caucasus, the Secretary-General urged Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach an agreement to pave the way for the normalization of relations and a sense of durable peace. "This matters for Euro-Atlantic security as we face a more dangerous world," he emphasized, reiterating that "NATO supports Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and your peaceful aspirations. During his visit, the Secretary-General discussed the progress in Armenia's domestic reforms. He highlighted Armenia's commitment to ensuring democratic control of its armed forces, including by participating in NATO's building integrity program."⁹⁹

Following this visit, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that "if no agreement could be reached with Baku on the return of some strategic territories, war could be on the agenda".¹⁰⁰ Pashinyan held a meeting with residents of border areas near some abandoned Azerbaijani villages in the Tavush region in northern Armenia, which has been under Yerevan's control since the early 1990s. In recent weeks, Pashinyan has signaled his willingness to return some villages to Azerbaijan because they control the main road to the Georgian border. In light of these statements, Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to have come a step closer in relations.

Another official call made by Türkiye to Armenia on April 4, 2024, has been recorded as an important step in the region's security efforts. In a written statement issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was reminded that the United Nations General Assembly declared April 4 as the "International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action" to draw attention to the dangers of mines and unexploded ordnance. The statement included the expression: "Türkiye is a country that provides concrete contributions to combating both land and sea mines worldwide and in the region." The statement emphasized the need to support the Ottawa Treaty, which bans the use, storage, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines, and supports international cooperation efforts in this regard. Armenia was invited to deliver its mine maps to Azerbaijan accurately, and it was stated that Türkiye's strong support to countries combating mine risks would continue both in the field and internationally.¹⁰¹

Another significant development in the last days of April was a phone call between Prime Minister Pashinyan and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. According to a statement from the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia, "On April 28, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had a phone conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Pashinyan expressed satisfaction with the bilateral relations with the United States and conveyed a positive view on the process initiated for the delineation and demarcation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border. It was noted that the mutual recognition of territorial integrity and sovereignty by both countries and the delineation and

⁹⁸NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peece>

⁹⁹ NATO (2024), *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Euronews (2024), "Ermenistan Başbakanı Nikol Paşinyan, bazı stratejik topraklarının iadesi konusunda Bakü ile uzlaşılabilmesi halinde savaşın gündeme gelebileceğini söyledi.", <https://tr.euronews.com/2024/03/19/pasinyan-daglik-karabagda-topraklarin-iadesi-konusu-yeni-savasa-neden-olabilir>

¹⁰¹ Aksam (2024), "Türkiye'den, Ermenistan'a çağrı: Azerbaycan'a haritaları teslim edin", <https://m.aksam.com.tr/guncel/turkiyeden-ermenistana-cagri-azerbaycana-haritalari-teslim-edin/haber-1463977>

demarcation of borders based on the same principles as the Alma-Ata Declaration process paved the way for the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement."¹⁰²

When Prime Minister Pashinyan's statements are considered alongside the recent remarks from Aliyev and Erdogan as mentioned in the Azerbaijan section below, it is observed that the process toward a lasting peace agreement is progressing. Both sides are endeavoring to take careful diplomatic steps, and there seems to be a positive atmosphere for a permanent solution.

5.1.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Some critical points for normalization emerged ahead of the Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting of April 5.

Ankara, indeed, rejected the meeting as a risk to fuel tensions instead of peace, since Azerbaijan was not included. In the statement of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated April 4, 2024, numbered 55, titled "Regarding the Trilateral Meeting in Brussels on April 5, 2024, between Armenia, the United States, and the European Union"¹⁰³ the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that:

“In such a critical period where the success of this historic opportunity is within reach, it has become even more crucial for third-party actors, especially those outside the region, to approach the process fairly and impartially, and to refrain meticulously from causing harm to the process. (3) In this context, Türkiye feels a responsibility to clearly state that the trilateral meeting planned between Armenia, the EU, and the US on April 5, 2024, will undermine the neutrality approach that should be the basis for resolving the complex issues in the region. (4) This initiative, which excludes Azerbaijan, will not serve peace but rather pave the way for the South Caucasus to become a geopolitical battleground. To establish long lasting peace in the region, Ankara reiterated a call to third countries “to approach the parties with equal distance” as well as its commitment to “encourage the utilization of the historic opportunity for lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia”.¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, the trilateral meeting was held to incentivizing Armenia to maintain its westward geopolitical shift; hence the EU-US role in supporting the Country’s reform efforts and in enhancing further cooperation in the region on the scope of an “increasingly aligned” West-Armenia relations, counterbalancing the influence of the other regional actors.¹⁰⁵

Besides, some military tension between Baku and Yerevan were reported during this period, despite the efforts and developments put forward by the parties for peace. Such developments are among critical issues that negatively affect peace efforts in the region and require urgent resolution with the contribution of all parties.

5.2. Meaningful bilateral developments between Georgia - Türkiye

In the period between January and April 2024, Türkiye’s support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Georgia's aspirations to integrate with Euro-Atlantic institutions continued.

¹⁰² Ermenihaber (2024), “Paşinyan ve Blinken, Ermenistan-Azerbaycan ilişkilerini telefonda görüştü”, <https://www.ermenihaber.am/tr/news/2024/04/29/Ermenistan-Azerbaycan-ABD/273934>

¹⁰³ MFA of Türkiye (2024), “No: 55, 4 Nisan 2024, Ermenistan, ABD ve AB Arasında 5 Nisan 2024 Tarihinde Brüksel’de Düzenlenecek Üçlü Toplantı Hk.”, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-55_-ermenistan--abd-ve-ab-arasinda-5-nisan-2024-tarihinde-bruksel-de-duzenlenecek-uclu-toplanti-hk.tr.mfa

¹⁰⁴ MFA of Türkiye (2024), *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ A. Avetisyan, *European Union, United States woo Armenia with economic assistance package*, Eurasianet, April 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/european-union-united-states-woo-armenia-with-economic-assistance-package>

During this period, one of the most significant developments regarding bilateral relations between Türkiye and Georgia was the approval of the Customs Facilitation Agreement signed between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in 2022. In summary, the decision to approve the "Agreement on Facilitation of Customs Transit Procedures for the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Project between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye, the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Government of Georgia"¹⁰⁶ signed on August 18, 2022, in Baku, was published in the Official Gazette on April 7, 2024, with the signature of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and it entered into force.

Another significant development regarding Georgia was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to the capital Tbilisi and the statements made there. Within this frame, "NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg continued his tour of the South Caucasus on 18th of March 2024, meeting with President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgia in Tbilisi".¹⁰⁷ During his visit, the Secretary-General discussed ways to further strengthen NATO's partnership with Georgia. NATO is stepping up its cooperation with Georgia in areas such as crisis management, cyber security, military engineering, and secure communications. Mr. Stoltenberg underlined NATO's commitment to support Georgia's path towards stronger democracy and full Euro-Atlantic integration, including the 2008 Bucharest decision that Georgia will become a member of NATO. At the same time NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's explanations as "Georgia is one of NATO's closest partners. We highly appreciate your substantial contributions to NATO missions and operations, and we fully support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia"¹⁰⁸ are in convenience with Türkiye's approach to Georgia and the South Caucasus region.

5.2.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The situation in Abkhazia and the continued Russian occupation of territories in South Ossetia maintain their status as the most critical and sensitive issues for Georgia's territorial integrity and regional security. The current situation not only threatens Georgia, but also endangers the security of vital transit routes such as trade routes extending from East to West and pipelines like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Consequently, the implementation of customs facilitation agreements and cooperation between Georgia, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, supported by European countries, and increasing functionality and partnerships will ensure European natural gas and fuel security and sustainable resource supply. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is of critical importance for both the integration of regional countries with the West and the safe and economic flow of goods exported from the West to the region. Therefore, the security of these trade routes and pipelines is not only crucial for regional countries but also holds critical importance for European countries in terms of connectivity towards the region.

5.3. Meaningful bilateral developments between Azerbaijan – Türkiye

Tripartite and quadrilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan and Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Iran platforms, continued to contribute significantly to regional stability, peace, and prosperity in the period between January to April 2024 as well.

¹⁰⁶ Haberturk (2024), "Türkiye, Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki gümrük anlaşması Resmi Gazete'de", <https://www.haberturk.com/turkiye-azerbaycan-ve-gurcistan-arasindaki-gumruk-anlasmasi-resmi-gazete-de-3676010>

¹⁰⁷ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peece>

¹⁰⁸ NATO (2024), ibid.

Türkiye's stance in supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory also continued in a similar vein.

One of the significant activities in terms of Azerbaijan's foreign relations during the period of January-April 2024 was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to Baku. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg arrived in Baku on the 17th of March 2024, within the frame of a three-day, tri-nation tour of the South Caucasus. Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev, the Secretary-General welcomed Azerbaijan's long-standing collaboration with the Alliance, saying he looked forward to further strengthening the partnership. Mr. Stoltenberg welcomed the opportunity to discuss energy security, saying: "Energy matters for our security and I welcome that Azerbaijan is developing closer and closer ties with several NATO Allies."¹⁰⁹ He further pointed to a track record of work on issues of mutual concern and thanked Azerbaijan for its contributions to NATO-led operations and missions – including in Kosovo and Afghanistan – since Azerbaijan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994. Stoltenberg also asserted that "On the situation in the South Caucasus, the Secretary-General underlined that "peace and stability are not only important here but for security more broadly".¹¹⁰ He said: "Armenia and Azerbaijan now have an opportunity to achieve an enduring peace after years of conflict." He added: "I can just encourage you to seize this opportunity to reach a lasting peace agreement with Armenia". It can be evaluated that Secretary-General's discourse also presents a convenient approach with Türkiye's support for peace in the region.

One of the significant recent statements regarding the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan came from President Aliyev. President Aliyev of Azerbaijan made the following statements at an international forum he attended in Baku: "Aliyev, addressing the negotiations for a peace agreement to be signed with Armenia, said, "We are closer to signing a peace agreement than ever before. We were never this close during the occupation period. Back then, we couldn't even agree on basic principles. Now, we have a common understanding of what the peace agreement should be like. We just need to work out the details. But of course, both sides need time."¹¹¹

When analyzed alongside the positive evaluations made by Turkish President Erdoğan upon his return from Iraq regarding Pashinyan's statements, these statements, along with Aliyev's remarks, indicate that Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Armenia are all cautiously trying to facilitate positive progress in the process. Diplomatic efforts in the coming period could foster a positive atmosphere for a lasting peace agreement. However, in line with Aliyev's allegations, third-party countries need to refrain from activities that could potentially fuel conflicts.

5.3.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement.

Although the Azerbaijani and Armenian administrations expressed willingness to sign a formal peace agreement regarding Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, negotiations have stalled due to a lack of full consensus on certain issues, particularly the demarcation of the 1000 km border. This situation not only poses the most critical obstacle to the signing of a permanent peace agreement but also delays the emergence of sustainable and lasting peace and economic potential in the South Caucasus region. Therefore, it would expedite the peace efforts for third-party countries to offer a neutral and fair approach within the framework of international law, to approach the parties with

¹⁰⁹ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peee>

¹¹⁰ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peee>

¹¹¹ AA (2024), "Aliyev: Üç ülke Ermenistan'ı bize karşı silahlandırıyor", <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/aliyev-uc-ulke-ermenistan-i-bize-karsi-silahlandiriyor-p41543>

equal distance, and to support the resolution efforts, including offering financial aid, credits, or rewards to countries for the post-resolution period.

TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Final analysis and policy proposals

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TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION. IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Final analysis and policy proposals

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In the regional normalization processes initiated by Türkiye in the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf and Caucasus there is a general trend towards accomplishment. Dialogue, cooperation and distinctive policies have been driving forces in the relations with regional actors, marking a clear turning point in Ankara's regional approach, aiming at arising Türkiye as a key player and promoter of stability. Moreover, the evolution of domestic, regional and international dynamics has contributed to enforcing cooperative zeal by playing as pushing factors.

However, critical issues remain, mainly due to the ongoing disputes in the area and to the persistent war between Israel and Palestine. Given the still existing potential of friction but also the expansion of cooperative margins, this analysis aims at providing Italy ad hoc policy proposals with specific and distinct regional focus related to main areas of interest. The proposals are submitted as well in the light of the already existing synergies linking Italy and Türkiye, whose strategic partnership entangles bilateral, regional, and international levels.

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Former outcomes include two periodic reports that monitored Türkiye's relations with the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf, and Caucasus between September 2023 and April 2024.

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Mediterranean Region

Greece

Türkiye's less assertive policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean, Erdoğan and Mitsotakis's re-election, the 2023 disaster diplomacy following the devastating February earthquakes and the train accident/fires in Greece, have furthered Türkiye-Greece rapprochement. The Parties have managed to set 'productive normality'¹ by working on three levels: political dialogue, positive agenda and confidence-building measures. Since September 2023 Erdoğan and Mitsotakis met twice reaffirming the commitment for implementing the Positive Agenda between the two countries. Last December they confirmed their willingness to focus on areas where they can find common ground such as, among the others, trade, energy, tourism, education and culture.

Indeed, since the time of Erdoğan's visit to Athens in December 2023, the former regional rivals have maintained high-level contacts to promote dialogue and confidence building measures, translating the rapprochement in concrete steps. Visa exemption for Turkish citizens to visit 10 Greek islands, the organization of the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum in Istanbul by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) are among the main initiatives in this sense.² During the meeting, visions were exchanged on energy, agriculture, transportation, industry, customs, tourism and social security.³ An attitude that has been reaffirmed by Mitsotakis's visit to Ankara in May, when the two reiterated mutual commitment to intensify bilateral contacts and cooperation.

The process of rapprochement can be defined accomplished if we consider the aspects of trade, economy, tourism as well as political dialogue, but pending issues remain. In the first half of 2024 tensions arose over Greece military exercise around some Aegean Island and they were followed by mutual accusations of "politicizing" environmental issues over Greece's announcement to create two new marine parks in the Ionian and Aegean. Also, regarding Cyprus, positions have not changed despite the efforts of the newly appointed UN envoy Cuellar to organize a trilateral meeting to revive dialogue.⁴ As underlined by recent declarations of EU Commission's lead spokesperson for foreign affairs and security, Cyprus issue remains a major hurdle to the improvement of EU-Türkiye relations.⁵

Hence, until today Türkiye and Greece have been managing to put aside problems, "agreeing to disagree" over certain issues and focusing on 'sectorial' partnerships, instead.

Here some things are worth noting. The setting of a Positive Agenda and the reiterated commitment to implement it are, with no doubt, among the main goals already reached in the rapprochement process between Ankara and Athens. However, within this frame, visa exemption for tourism in certain Greek Island is landmark measure. First, as the initiative was pledged by Mitsotakis himself when commenting last May meeting in Ankara, by underling the importance of the measure not only in economic terms but also for mutual communication. Secondly, as the issue of visa liberalization for Turkish citizen to the EU has been, since the EU-Türkiye Joint agreement (2016), a matter of extreme disappointment at the eyes of Ankara. Trying to broaden this measure also at the European level, even with openings for tourism and for short-term periods, could help re-building mutual understanding and trust between Ankara and Brussels. Exchanges also in terms of higher education,

¹ See Mitsotakis' statements after his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2024/05/13/34218>

² TRT world, *Türkiye and Greece strengthen ties, targeting \$10B bilateral trade*, February 2024 <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-greece-strengthen-ties-targeting-dollar10b-bilateral-trade-16858597>

³ Ibid.

⁴ See https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch?utm_campaign=cw_menu_link

⁵ S. V. Rasquinho and A. U. Seker, *Türkiye, EU need each other, says EU Commission spokesperson*, Anadolu Agency, June 2024

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkiye-eu-need-each-other-says-eu-commission-spokesperson/3245879>

that are among the soft power measures taken by Türkiye to expand its influence internationally, can also be boosted to that end. It is no coincidence that two countries that are still at odds over many issues are strengthening dialogue with *win-win* measures such as trade and tourism.

Those initiatives should also be considered by Italy that can play a crucial role in mediating between the EU, other member states and Türkiye, benefitting its already positive relationship with Ankara, that also counts on a widespread presence of Italian businesses in Türkiye, continuity in investments, and exchanges in trade.

With a look into the Aegean Sea, the persisting disagreements over maritime borders/militarization of Aegean Island, and the Cyprus issue, despite being set aside at the current stage, could affect the sustainability of full, long-term normalization or create obstacles along the path. Although Mediterranean countries are somehow dealing with changing dynamics and many *former-at-odds* countries are trying to avoid further confrontation, it is to be underlined that Türkiye and Greece disagree over security and borders. Something that cannot be swept under the rug if the two want to explore the full potential of their bilateral normalization. Solving Aegean problems can indeed benefit the Mediterranean countries in terms of energy supply and the overall security of seas. Hence, multilateral efforts need to be put in place to facilitate the process. Timing could be right in this sense since of Türkiye and Greece gradual rapprochement, but Eastern Mediterranean issues need the USA, UE and member States to be involved for their solution. Member States such as Italy, thanks to its privileged partnership with both Greece and Türkiye, but also to the common membership within NATO, can play a crucial role in this mediation, pushing for the process to materialize. Beyond complementarities in trade and security, Italy shares with both potential for renewable energy investment and cooperation, but also urgency in terms of migration management. This move, together with its own economic benefit, could further strengthen Italy's role both within the EU and abroad.

Egypt, Libya

The new path of normalization between Türkiye and Egypt is the result of a broader reshape in relations within the entire Mediterranean region. This track of new diplomatic relations started with the end of political, economic and ideological polarization among Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE.

The main reasons behind the normalization are, without doubts, the multilevel crisis opened with Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The crisis pushed for a broader regional cooperation, developing new networks of solidarity in the pandemic period and providing new diplomatic channels with Russia and Ukraine due to the deep dependence from the shortage of grain and crops of some countries in the region, namely Tunisia and Egypt. The mediation of Türkiye with Russia and Ukraine and the economic support of some Gulf countries to manage the effects of the economic crisis have been the main tools for furthering major cooperation.

Furthermore, this normalization was also alimented by the need of energy supplies by Western countries after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Qatar as well as Egypt, Algeria and Libya have been the main LNG (Liquid Natural Gas) suppliers for Europe. This trend witnessed a great protagonism of Italy and its capacity to develop new accords to guarantee new supplies of this vital resource, due to its good relations with those countries.

In this broader scenario, Türkiye attempted -until now successfully- to regain diplomatic relations with Egypt. Ideological and geopolitical tensions between the two countries were due to the support of the former and the hostility of the latter towards political Islam affiliated groups, in this case the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye's hosting political figures of the islamist movement and Ankara's support to some figures affiliated to them in Libya (notably in the internationally recognized government of Tripoli) provoked tensions between the two countries. The effects were the deep polarization that has been translated in an open confrontation in Libya wherein the two actors found themselves in opposite sides: Egypt supporting, along with Saudi Arabia and UAE, the Eastern government and General Khalifa Haftar, and Türkiye backing the Western one. The failed Haftar's

offensive in Tripoli in 2019-2020 re-opened a new path of diplomatic ties. Although it is still an ongoing process, this new course has been influenced by the broader regional normalization as well by the Libyan scenario⁶.

In 2020, rapprochement between Egypt and Türkiye started with timid diplomatic ties and continued along official events such as the hand shaking between Erdoğan and al-Sisi during the Football World Cup in 2022 in Qatar and in the 2023 India G20. The final rapprochement happened in September 2023 when Egypt and Türkiye pushed forward the reconciliation by dispatching, in July 2023, ambassadors for the first time in years⁷.

Cooperation projects, in terms of energy, infrastructure and more importantly in defense, has been the main pillars of this new diplomatic path. In addition, the two countries have been involved directly in the Gaza crisis, emerging as mediators and opening new channels of collaboration. But also, since Egypt and Türkiye have been in opposite side in the Libyan civil war, this regional and bilateral normalization could be the core for a new path towards a political solution to curb with the instability in the country. In this sense, the two countries are playing a central role (demonstrated by the recurrent visits of the Libyan officials in Türkiye and Egypt) in mediating among the different actors on the ground. Libya is still embedded within an internal polarization and political clash that could lead to new tensions and shaping new alliances even at the international level⁸.

In this context, Türkiye -Egypt renewed relations influenced the international scenario and has effects on Italy and Europe.

Indeed, the normalization of the diplomatic relations between the abovementioned countries could represent a great opportunity to develop a major cooperation in stabilizing the region. In this sense, Libya is one of the most important dossiers. Here, Egyptian and Turkish interests do not necessarily clash with those of Italy. Türkiye and Egypt are indeed trying to develop an intra-Libyan dialogue in order guarantee a political solution for the Libyan crisis; this is what Italy has been doing since, at least, 2019 by supporting all the international initiatives and promoting a comprehensive dialogue with all parties.

This would ease also some other issues that could jeopardize the political dialogue such as the Russian presence in the Eastern part of Libya. Türkiye, with its military presence in the country, seems to represent a deterrence force in counterbalancing that of Russia's Wagner. Russia, today, represents the main threat for the stability in Libya, hence a major cooperation between Italy, EU and Türkiye, also within NATO framework, could represent a starting point to implement the political process and limit the Russia influence. This cooperation is also useful in order to manage the security and irregular migration. In this sense, Italy and Türkiye are great partners and both are part of NATO. This is crucial in order to further enhance cooperation notably in terms of security and limiting the Russian presence in Libya as a destabilizing actor.

In this sense, Italy should act, along with EU institutions, in implementing the ongoing intra-Libyan dialogue. If Türkiye is supplying defensive tools, Italy and EU should provide the political tools for the electoral process and reinforcing their relations in terms of economic resilience. In this way, Italy has further margins in increasing the effectiveness of the so called "Mattei's plan for Africa" aiming at better implementing political and economic tools to trigger sustainable development in Libya and the continent.

⁶ Mada Masr, what comes after the collapse of Haftar's western campaign? June 2020. See: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/08/feature/politics/what-comes-after-the-collapse-of-haftars-westerncampaign/>

⁷ Reuters, Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's Sisi discuss energy cooperation at G20 Summit, September 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-egypts-sisi-discuss-energy-cooperation-g20-summit-turkish-2023-09-10/>

⁸ Abdul kader Assad, UN commends Italy's Mattei Plan in support of African countries, including Libya, Libyan Observer, 13/06/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/un-commends-italys-mattei-plan-support-african-countries-including-libya>

In addition, the normalization process between Egypt and Türkiye could help facilitating cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean region. By pivoting on its own role, Italy is in the position to reinforce and promote regional cooperation in terms of energy and guarantee a more inclusive approach. However, this is not achievable without a process of de-escalation of the conflicts among some regional stakeholders (Greece/Greek Cypriots and Türkiye) and the ongoing tensions between Israel and Palestine.

Gulf countries

During the last year, Türkiye and Gulf Countries have managed to maintain their normalization process on track, further strengthening diplomatic, security and economic ties. After more than a ten-year phase of polarization in the regional landscape, the paradigm has switched from confrontation to cooperation, with persisting ideological differences not preventing space for joint commitments. Boosting the process, a variety of reasons, starting from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the resolution of the Gulf crisis, Türkiye's financial necessities, Saudi Arabia and the UAE know how needs, especially in terms of defense industry. An approach that has not been affected by the outbreak of the war in Gaza nor by its spill overs, as Israel-Iran near-war or the tensions at the Red Sea and Lebanon.

After a gradual rapprochement made by high level bilateral visits, relations were institutionalized with a variety of agreements encompassing economy and defense both with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The Comprehensive economic partnership between UAE and Türkiye that entered into force in September 2023, and the 28 memoranda of understanding signed with Saudi Arabia during the Turkish-Saudi Investment and Business Forum of mid-February, are just some examples of consolidated common ground. The size of projects that the Turkish companies have undertaken in Saudi Arabia reached \$3 billion as of the end of 2023, a volume that totals about \$74 billion when it comes to the GCC countries.⁹ Moreover, in terms of defense industry, frameworks agreements were signed to booster cooperation of direct trade investments and co-production with the UAE¹⁰ and joint military exercises took place, the most recent in Izmir in May, seeing the participation of the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces.¹¹

The bilateral rapprochement has later been complemented by the broader agreement, with Türkiye consolidating ties with the Gulf neighbors as a regional bloc. At the end of March, Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have signed a deal to launch negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the aim of liberalizing trade in goods and services, facilitate bilateral investments and trade with the region. The FTA would represent one of the world's largest free trade areas between Türkiye and members of the GCC, with a total value of \$2.4 trillion.¹² At the beginning of June, Sixth Ministerial Meeting of Türkiye-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) High Level Strategic Dialogue was held in Doha, serving as an indication of the strength of the strategic and deep partnership between the GCC countries and Türkiye.¹³ The meeting extended the GCC-Turkey Joint Action Plan until 2029¹⁴ *de facto* providing a longer perspective to the normalization and its sustainability.

With due consideration to the developments in Gaza, as well as between Israel, Iran and proxies, the EU and its Member States should look favorably to the rapprochement between Türkiye and the Gulf as a first step for stability in the region. It is indeed the first time in years that, although with due differences in terms of 'exposure', the Islamic world has stood more united than in the past towards the war in Gaza. The cooperative approach has been shown by the meetings of the Arab-Islamic summit in November and the Gaza Contact Group in April, as well as the Türkiye-GCC High Level

⁹ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye foresees 'golden year' in relations with Saudi Arabia*, March 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-foresees-golden-year-in-relations-with-saudi-arabia>

¹⁰ See <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2023/10/13/turkey-uae-strengthen-defense-industry-ties-with-dozens-of-deals/>

¹¹ Arab News, *Saudi Armed Forces participate in military exercise in Türkiye*, May 2024 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2507026/saudi-arabia>

¹² Daily Sabah, *Türkiye, Gulf states to launch talks for free trade agreement*, March 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-gulf-states-to-launch-talks-for-free-trade-agreement>

¹³ See <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/MediaCenter/NewsCooperation/News/Pages/news2024-6-9-8.aspx>

¹⁴ A News, *Gulf Cooperation Council, Türkiye extend joint action plan to 2029*, June 2024 <https://www.aneews.com.tr/economy/2024/06/10/gulf-cooperation-council-turkiye-extend-joint-action-plan-to-2029>

Strategic Dialogue, in which the situation in Gaza was also addressed. In this framework, the EU and its member States should further engage in strategic and political dialogue with the actors already moving towards de-escalation, to regain credibility and centrality in mediation efforts towards regional conflicts, including Sudan and Yemen.

Stability in relations will also benefit trade and investments and could enhance already existing partnership between Gulf, Türkiye and the EU. Indeed, while insisting on diverse trans-border projects between Asia and Europe, the EU and Italy should support initiatives that strengthen cooperation between Gulf and Türkiye, as the Development Road Project. Although considering the potential challenges to its effective realization, the DRP could enhance connectivity between the Gulf and Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, but also helping stabilizing Iraq both politically and economically, which is priority to the EU and Member States also in terms of migration management and development cooperation.

In addition, the rapprochement between Türkiye and Gulf countries could also benefit Italy and the EU by opening new spaces for cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, even considering that the war in Gaza has strained the relationships between Israel and Türkiye.

Already in the past years Gulf monarchies have shown interests in the Mediterranean shores by engaging in initiatives as the Philia Forum, aimed at “building friendship, peace and prosperity from the Mediterranean to the Gulf” by strengthening the role of Greece as connector between West Asia, North Africa and Europe, but without including Türkiye. Nowadays, Greece and Türkiye rapprochement, together with Ankara strengthening ties with Egypt’s and the Gulf could help, if not solving Aegean disputes, materializing initiatives of regional cooperation serving as a framework for discussing energy and economic security, connectivity, digital and green transition. To this end, Italy could lead intra-EU dialogue to facilitate issue-based cooperation in the basin, including with Türkiye and the Gulf, by supporting mechanisms for joint use of resources and revenue sharing.

The Middle East

Syria

The complex nature of political and security situations in and around Syria pushed Türkiye to act proactively to comply with the prerequisites of the challenging regional developments. In this sense, the *de facto* divided Syria is the primary ‘situation’ for Türkiye’s foreign policy, especially regarding the risk of radicalization and terrorism coming from its borders.

In the relations between Türkiye and the European Union (EU), Syria is a matter of concern primarily perceived in the context of migration. The flow of migration from Syria to neighboring countries has been a societal security issue whilst Europe is the latest destination. As migration is a crucial dossier, the EU has been already engaged in financially transferring resources to Syrians, mostly living in Türkiye. As agreed in 2016 along the so called ‘refugees deal’, the financial support has been part of EU crisis management efforts; however, a review of the strategy is much warmed. Indeed, despite EU short and medium-term vision pivoting mainly on funds assistance, migration issue implies to further address social cohesion and integration measures in the long term.

Nevertheless, Syria is not a frozen conflict but continues through soft threats and low-profile tactics. In this regard, EU and Italy should encourage the external and local actors to comply with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in the frame of a political initiative. Thus, as Türkiye and EU (including Italy) perceive the Syria case as a matter of concern when it comes to terrorism and illegal/irregular migration, EU and Türkiye may expand the scope of joint cooperation in handling Syria-based concerns. In this sense, a permanent high-level coordination mechanism may be on the agenda of both entities. Worth mentioning that for the essential resolution of the Syrian case, the efforts should be political. Indeed, Bashar al-Assad Regime is not consistent with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and relevant initiatives for a political transition. Hence, a Comprehensive Syria Policy as a referent document is much needed.

Israel/Palestine

The normalization process between Türkiye and Israel has matured through talks between intelligence services and track-II diplomacy efforts of civil society organizations. Within this framework, the parties held direct talks at the level of the President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Ministers, resulting in the appointment of Ambassadors to the Capitals.¹⁵ In 2023, Erdoğan talked about joint energy projects following the meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu in New York, which signaled a new phase of normalization. Turkish leadership was expecting Netanyahu to sign an agreement if the October 7th attack would not change the course of normalization.

While the problems and attempts to repair the process were successful, the attacks by Hamas and Israel's ground operation against Gaza had a negative impact on Türkiye-Israel relations. Türkiye first emphasized regional stability with balanced statements; it increased its criticism towards Israel as civilian casualties increased. However, President Erdoğan circulated statements against Netanyahu, but he refrained from insulting President Herzog or the Israeli public. Stating that the background of the issue should be examined correctly, Turkish leadership increased their efforts to seek a permanent solution to the Palestinian problem. As the Palestinian civilian casualties increased, Türkiye solidified a firm stance against the Netanyahu-led ultra-conservative government, not only through narratives but also sanctions.

¹⁵ Gülru Gezer, “Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerine bakış”, Independent Türkçe, 31 October 2022, <https://www.indyrturk.com/node/570471/turkiyeden-sesler/turkiye-israil-iliskilerine-bakis>, accessed on 16 December 2023.

There is no doubt that Palestinians and Israelis deserve a peaceful and stable life in their own lands. The problem is the maximized securitization and de-securitization efforts due to lacking trust, blurring lines and zero-sum calculation. In this frame, the EU should be direct in charge of pushing the parties to come together and draw clear lines not to escalate. Technically, EUSR for the Middle East Process should be more active in coordination with the U.S. correspondence. On the other hand, Türkiye's soft power and influence on the Palestinians may be a tool to start a facilitation and mediation process. The EU may contribute to such an initiative through building a permanent mechanism. In this sense, Türkiye and the EU should complement each other's efforts by the joint efforts of Turkish Foreign Ministry and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs. A framework on a joint Turkish-EU policy may be drafted to build referencing principals.

Iraq

Iraq and Türkiye are two neighboring countries that share the same history, are intertwined culturally and have security concerns indexed to each other. In the economic context, Iraq is Türkiye's largest export destination with 12 billion 786 million dollars. Türkiye's share in Iraq's import portfolio is around 5 percent while Türkiye's imports from Iraq are around 11 billion US dollars. In other words, Türkiye and Iraq have the potential to move their economic relations forward.

With the Red Sea no longer a maritime trade route after the Israeli intervention in Gaza, the Development Road project reminded the importance of the cooperation of these two countries. This project, which claims to connect Europe with the Gulf countries, which have a market worth approximately of 800 billion dollars, has strengthened Iraq and Türkiye's will to become welfare states by benefitting the regional trade and connectivity opportunities. In this frame, Iraq, with its vast energy resources, may satisfy the energy needs of Europe. The joint energy projects of the EU and Türkiye may ease the stress of lacking energy inflow from Russia and risks at the other supplying countries. Italy and Türkiye may start joint consortiums to link Iraqi energy to Turkish and European energy grids. Furthermore, from development and connectivity perspective, the involvement of Italy in the Development Road Project throughout the already confirmed participation of an Italian company is quite relevant. As this project intends to link the Gulf region to Europe through Türkiye, the EU and Italy should promote the project and invest in infrastructure.

The second issue for Iraq is internal security. After the fight against DAESH, there is still a marginalized DAESH profile underground. Social cohesion is the second link in the internal security chain. There is still no promising success story in this regard. However, the Development Road project is seen as a starting point for social reconciliation. The essential risk is due to the competing Kurdish wings at the north and PKK. The priority for Türkiye is the PKK's presence in Iraq and so Ankara seems determined to fight against PKK together with Iraq after the intensified visits of policy and decision makers. In this framework, the EU may observe the activities of PKK to evaluate if it breaches the values, security and stability of the EU. The cases such as drug and human trafficking, forced child conscription, or organized criminal activities of PKK usually finds its root in Iraq, and Syria as well. A monitoring process and intelligence sharing also supported by the EU, would promote easing concerns over border security, due to the very complicated border line between Türkiye and Iraq, which makes it vulnerable to infiltrations and illegal trespassing.

Caucasus

Caucasia has historically been a locus of ethnic conflicts, serving as a battleground for regional and global economic interests and a transit route for goods and people traveling between the East and West. Türkiye places importance on regional cooperation and development projects in this region, especially in the South Caucasus. The Caucasus faces intertwined challenges, including climate change impacts, food insecurity, and the economic effects of geopolitical conflicts.¹⁶ Türkiye emphasizes the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia in advocating for a peaceful resolution to current conflicts in the South Caucasus. The Black Sea-Caucasus region is poised to remain a critical focus of international challenges, including frozen conflicts, Russian-Western relations, East-West energy flow, and proximity to the Middle East and the Caspian Sea.¹⁷

In recent period, apart from some exceptional negative statements, it was observed that the leaders of the countries in the region and official state representatives were using cautious language and trying to avoid provoking each other. If a similar approach continues to be adopted in the following period and if international third-party actors also support this positive atmosphere, normalization in the region could gain momentum. Therefore, a reevaluation of Türkiye and Italy's policies is imperative to address emerging challenges in the Black Sea and neighboring areas. In this context, the following subheadings examine the reflection of relations between Türkiye and the three countries in the South Caucasus region.

Armenia

Türkiye's emphasis on a gradual, confidence-building approach underscores its strategic commitment to long-term stability and cooperation in the region. Recently, the political contacts between the parties have been positive: in June, Türkiye President Erdoğan and Armenia Prime Minister Pashinyan in a phone call discussed bilateral and regional matters and their political will to fully normalize their relations. As immediate outcome of the call, to be seen as a clear sign of constructive dialogue, is the Armenian recognition of Palestine as independent state. Moreover, regarding the closed border between Türkiye and Armenia, Armenia has to be motivated to withdraw its military forces from all occupied Nagorno-Karabakh lands and the return of territories to Azerbaijan in line with the international agreements. This situation has contributed to fostering a positive climate for the potential reopening of the border. However, some issues are still pending and require joint efforts to accomplish a full normalization. In this regard, a peace agreement which holds the promise of not only reopening the Türkiye-Armenia land borders but also facilitating the establishment of the Zangezur corridor has to be supported for sustainable security in the region. Signing of a peace agreement to definitively address the problem, facilitated by impartial mediators can be proposed as a model instead of the unsuccessful activities of Minsk Group countries. Initiatives in this direction, particularly through the collaboration of Türkiye and Italy, hold the potential to expedite the process toward a conceivable peace agreement.

Furthermore, within the frame of United Nations General Assembly declaration on April 4, 2024, as of the "International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action" to draw attention to the dangers of mines and unexploded ordnance, Türkiye and Italy can collaborate with the regional countries for clearance and neutralization of the land mines in the region.

¹⁶ Sabyrova, Lyaziza (2023). "Q&A: Addressing Intertwined Challenges in Central Asia and the Caucasus through Regional Cooperation". Asian development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/news/features/qa-addressing-intertwined-challenges-central-asia-caucasus-through-regional-cooperation>

¹⁷ MFA-Türkiye (2023). "Güney Kafkasya Ülkeleri", ibid.

In general, thus, the leaders of the regional countries have to be motivated to refrain from statements escalating the conflict in the region so that the security situation shall not deteriorate. It is evaluated that supporting such positive and constructive steps can accelerate the peace process.

Georgia

The relationship between Türkiye and Georgia has evolved into a strategic partnership marked by significant economic collaboration. The establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC – YDSK in Turkish) mechanism has further propelled the development of Türkiye-Georgia relations. Türkiye steadfastly supports Georgia's territorial integrity and rejects the purported independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this frame, the Kars-Tbilisi Railway and Rize-Poti Fiber Optic Cable Line projects represent long-standing collaborative efforts between Türkiye and Georgia. The Kars-Tbilisi Railway is expected to boost regional trade significantly. Given the closed Türkiye-Armenia border, Georgia has become the primary route for Turkish shipments to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Türkiye and Italy have to take part jointly in similar projects which increase the integration level of the region with Europe.

Possible military cooperation and training of Georgian military personnel is another potential collaboration area between Italy and Türkiye. Italy may take part in joint exercises like Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises conducted between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

When it comes to energy, joint efforts in transporting Caspian oil and natural gas, countering Russia's regional policies can provide another potential cooperation field between Türkiye and Italy which will also create alternative solutions for other EU countries. For riparian countries with abundant oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea, a key challenge is the lack of direct access to international markets. The former Soviet Republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are seeking alternative routes to reduce their dependence on Russia and Iran. By utilizing Caspian resources, Italy-Türkiye cooperation can help meet the fossil resource needs of Türkiye and EU countries, offering an alternative route that bypasses Russia. Collaborative efforts in energy infrastructure, such as pipelines and trade routes, can enhance the region's energy security and contribute to the diversification of energy sources.

Azerbaijan

The multidimensional and strategic nature of Türkiye's relations with Azerbaijan is evident in intensive mutual high-level visits, symbolizing a longstanding tradition of prioritizing such engagements following significant developments or changes in office. In this environment, Italy and Türkiye could collaborate to support peace-building efforts and promote peaceful conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. This could involve diplomatic initiatives aimed at de-escalating tensions, supporting dialogue between conflicting parties, and facilitating negotiations. Both Türkiye's and Italy's experience in diplomatic mediation and conflict resolution could complement the ongoing diplomatic efforts in the region. As matter of facts, Türkiye and Italy have significant cooperation opportunities that can actively contribute to addressing the challenges and opportunities especially in energy sector. The focus on energy lines and trade routes presents a strategic alternative, particularly concerning energy security. This could include investing in the expansion of existing infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC), Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Natural Gas Pipeline (BTE), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line (BTK).

Moreover, possible bilateral collaboration between Türkiye and Italy regarding the security issues in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus would expedite the peace efforts and the possible peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Conducting joint exercises, jointly training security forces can be a potential collaboration field. Hence, Italy and Türkiye could promote cultural and educational exchange programs to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the South Caucasus region. This could involve facilitating student exchanges, military

personnel education, academic collaborations, and cultural events to promote dialogue and foster intercultural communication.