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How Does the al-Ula Summit Impact Turkey-UAE Relations?

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit held in the ancient Saudi city of al-Ula on January 5, 2021 resulted in Riyadh, along with its regional allies - the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt - ending their three-and-a-half-year blockade of Qatar. Despite this major breakthrough in efforts to resolve the GCC's Qatar rift, deep divisions and ideological conflicts will probably continue shaping relations between Gulf Arab countries for the foreseeable future. One of these major sources of contention pertains to the question of Turkey's role in the Gulf, specifically the Ankara-Doha alliance.

The Turkey-UAE rift

The UAE is staunchly opposed to Turkey's agenda in the Arab world. When Emirati officials speak about Ankara's conduct throughout the greater Middle East and parts of Africa, the narrative is that Turkey is a "neo-Ottoman" power with "colonial illusions" in the Arab region.¹ Ankara's Islamist-friendly policies heavily inform Abu Dhabi's views of Turkey as an actor that drives 'extremism' and 'terrorism'. The leadership in Abu Dhabi perceives a greater threat from Turkey than from even the Islamic Republic of Iran, which drove the UAE to work on establishing an anti-Turkish Arab coalition beginning in the fall of 2019 and contributed to Abu Dhabi's decision to make diplomatic overtures to Tehran in 2019/2020.²

As Abu Dhabi was the original driver of the blockade of Doha, there is no denying that Qatar's alliance with Turkey was one of the UAE's main motivations for seeking to unite a handful of Arab and African states against Doha in 2017. One of the original 13 demands, which were the blockading states' ultimatum for renormalizing relations with Doha, was closure of the joint Qatari-Turkish base in Qatar.³ Now that the Anti-Qatar Quartet has effectively abandoned these demands, there is substantially less pressure on Doha to close the Tariq bin Ziyad military base. Yet this is not a development that pleases Abu Dhabi.

It seems that the UAE agreed to partially back down from its firmly anti-Qatar position in order to show support to Saudi Arabia and the United States, which in the final weeks of the Trump administration put significant pressure on the parties to resolve the GCC dispute. Yet had the UAE had its own way, experts such as Hussein Ibish believe that the boycott of Qatar would still be in effect.⁴ The fact that the UAE has not restored diplomatic relations with Doha (at least not yet) despite re-opening its air, land, and sea ports to Qatar underscores how Abu Dhabi is far less keen to reconcile with Qatar than either the Saudis or Egyptians.⁵ As the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash explained, the UAE and Qatar must address differences prior to the restoration of full-fledged diplomatic relations.⁶ In all probability, prior to fully re-normalizing ties with Doha, Abu Dhabi would like to see Qatar distance itself from Turkey.

¹ <https://u.ae/en/participate/blogs/blog?id=497>; <https://gulffnews.com/world/mena/uae-warning-to-turkey-keep-out-of-arab-affairs-1.72927568>

² <https://gulff.org/the-uae-struggle-for-turkish-containment-is-it-time-for-a-new-approach/>; <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/08/12/uae-engagement-iran-cold-peace-genuine-rapprochement/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/close-al-jazeera-saudi-arabia-issues-qatar-with-13-demands-to-end-blockade>

⁴ <https://agsiv.org/qatar-boycott-ends-but-core-issues-remain-unresolved/>

⁵ <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-reopens-air-land-and-sea-borders-with-qatar/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-emirates-int/no-diplomatic-ties-to-qatar-yet-but-trade-travel-resuming-says-uae-idUSKBN29C0YI>

But states in the region which would like to see Doha cool its relations with Ankara will likely be disappointed. As Qatar's foreign minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani affirmed shortly after the al-Ula accord's signing, Doha has no intention of changing its alliance with Turkey or partnership with Iran as a consequence of the siege ending.⁷ The Qataris will remain distrustful of the countries which blockaded it for 43 months, and with the underlying issues behind the Gulf crisis still unresolved, officials in Doha know that a future GCC crisis could erupt at a future point. Therefore, Qatar will be keen to maintain strong ties with the non-GCC states that helped Doha weather the storm for three-and-a-half years.

A Saudi Arabia-Turkey rapprochement?

Despite Abu Dhabi maintaining a hardline stance against Turkey, numerous signs indicate that Riyadh seeks to improve its relationship with Ankara.⁸ In the end of 2020, numerous analysts were busy debating the prospects for a Turkish-Saudi rapprochement. Although numerous issues - from the Libyan civil war to the Khashoggi file - will remain stumbling blocks to Riyadh and Ankara overcoming problems in bilateral affairs, the al-Ula summit will improve the chances of a Saudi-Turkish reset in 2021. As Turkey too wants to improve its ties with Riyadh, the lifting of Saudi Arabia's blockade on Qatar and the Kingdom's restoration of diplomatic relations with Doha will enable Ankara to simultaneously pursue better relations with Saudi Arabia without having to do so at the expense of the Turkish-Qatari alliance. Interestingly, Qatar is offering to mediate between Ankara and Riyadh.⁹

How does Turkey view Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's alliance? In Ankara, there has been a debate about how Turkey should approach this relationship.¹⁰ Some argue that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are firmly aligned and that due to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed firm stance against Turkey, the Saudi government will be very limited in terms of how much it can improve Riyadh's relationship with Ankara. Others disagree and maintain that the Turks can successfully lure Saudi Arabia away from Abu Dhabi. If Saudi Arabia and the UAE approach the GCC's Qatar rift differently in the post-Al-Ula period, Turkey could possibly have some success in taking advantage of more opportunities to capitalize on such friction between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

No cooling of friction for the near future

Ultimately, regardless of how much Turkish-Saudi relations improve (if they do at all), it is difficult to imagine the al-Ula summit leading to any significant cooling of friction between Turkey and the UAE. Looking ahead, Ankara and Abu Dhabi are set to remain at loggerheads in numerous conflict zones throughout the Arab region and parts of the African continent. Abu Dhabi will probably remain determined to create as many problems as possible for Turkey in Libya while Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and possibly Yemen too will likely continue being hotspots in the Islamic world where Turkey and the UAE perceive the other as predatory and

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/ea1e7058-960d-416c-93dc-f4f8c7945c12>

⁸ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/12/4/what-is-driving-saudi-arabias-apparent-rapprochement-with-turkey>

⁹ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/qatar-ready-to-mediate-for-turkey-saudi-arabia-following-gulf-rapprochement>

¹⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates-conflict-escalating.html>

aggressive.¹¹ As such, the regime in Abu Dhabi will continue to have grievances with Qatar as a result of Doha's regional policies with the Qatari-Turkish alliance being a main source of contention.

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¹¹ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2021/1/6/what-does-the-future-hold-for-libyas-haftar>;
<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/6/19/iraqi-kurdistan-could-emerge-as-turkey-uae-proxy-battleground>;
<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/race-between-turkey-and-uae-somalia-wins>; <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/11/20/sudans-transitional-process-in-the-face-of-regional-rivalries/>; <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/uae-turkey-libya-syria/>; <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-12/Is-Turkey-entrenching-itself-in-Yemen-amid-escalating-strife-with-UAE--S4heDFiEWQ/index.html>