



Brief n. 42/February 2022

**Abu Dhabi's Charm Offensive:
Deciphering UAE - Turkey Normalization**

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Con il sostegno di



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di San Paolo

On February 14, Turkey's President Erdoğan landed in Abu Dhabi for a two-day visit. His official trip to the oil-rich Gulf state was the first in almost ten years. The trip resulted from a long track of carefully crafted messages and high-level shuttle diplomacy initiated by Abu Dhabi in January 2021. In August 2021, UAE's national security advisor Tahnoun bin Zayed visited Ankara to set the stage for the normalization process. Soon after, Abu Dhabi's crown prince and de facto ruler of the UAE, Muhammad bin Zayed (MBZ), visited Ankara. In return, Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's visit to the UAE in December 2021 paved the way for Erdoğan's visit to the Gulf state.

More than a normalization process

There is a consensus among observers, experts, and even some official circles in the region that the arrangements and the welcoming ceremony prepared by the Emirati officials to receive President Erdoğan in Abu Dhabi were extraordinary by all means. Erdoğan's visit to the UAE is critical because it puts the normalization process between the two countries on the right track. Wooing the Turkish President by this unique reception was meant to send a strong message that Abu Dhabi wants more than just a normalization process and is serious about it.

The two States focused on the economic aspect of the relations as an entry point to facilitate the normalization process and overcome their long strained ties. Indeed, the economy, investments, tourism, infrastructure, etc., can potentially lay the ground for shared interests and a win-win situation. During the visit, the two sides signed 13 bilateral agreements and MoUs in health, climate change, industry, technology, trade, economy, culture, agriculture, business, economy, youth, transportation, disaster management, meteorology, communication, archive, and defense industry.

How was this point reached? The broader context of the normalization process between the UAE and Turkey, which reflects an outside-inside approach, helps explain what appears to many as a complex issue. International, regional, and local factors played a significant role in bringing the two regional players towards each other.

The Broader Context

Since the beginning of 2021, the Middle East has witnessed what I call a rare "de-escalation moment" prompted by the onset of a new administration in the US and the al-Ula agreement that ended the 2017-Gulf crisis and blockade against Qatar. The al-Ula declaration, in particular, unlocked the untapped potentials of the regional players and initiated new dynamics in the relationships between them. It prompted Saudi Arabia and Qatar to swiftly normalize their relations. Following this step, Egypt normalized its relations with Qatar, and Cairo and Ankara initiated rapprochement efforts. Similarly, Turkey and Saudi Arabia made diplomatic efforts to mend fences, while Saudi Arabia and Iran resorted to dialogue and talks.

The de-escalation moment encouraged the involved parties to focus primarily on promoting dialogue, shared interests, and economic benefits after a long period of rivalry, struggle, and power fatigue. The harsh implications of the pandemic served as a catalyst to those countries looking for fresh economic opportunities to re-vitalize their economies. The UAE was not involved in these new intra-actions between the regional players, which indicated that Abu Dhabi was heading towards isolation. In contrast to those of Trump's administration, the policies of Biden's

administration towards the GCC countries downgraded Abu Dhabi and elevated Doha. This policy was evident in several regional topics, such as the Afghan issue.

Realizing that it had been lagging behind all these new interactions, Abu Dhabi launched a charm offensive. The primary goal of this move is to stay in the regional game, empower UAE's connectivity with the leading regional players, overcome the de-facto isolation in the post Trump era, deflect any Saudi pressure amid their growing differences, and guard against the perceived negative implications of a possible nuclear deal between Tehran and Washington. Business-wise, Abu Dhabi wants to utilize the de-escalation moment to boost its regional standing in the post-pandemic era and compensate for the losses of its former confrontational agenda.

Concerning Turkey, the reach out from UAE came at a very convenient time to Ankara. The normalization process started when Turkey was shifting from hard power to soft power mode in its foreign policy. Having scored several gains in a number of regional theatres such as Syria, Libya, Nagorno Karabakh, and Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara's approach during the regional de-escalation moment has been to cash in these gains in the form of political and economic gains through diplomacy rather than hard power. This mode and regional dynamics prompted Turkey to reach out to all concerned regional players. The financial situation and the deep depreciation of the lira made this step even more determinant. On the Gulf level, Turkey was already banking on the Al-Ula agreement to strengthen its relations with the GCC as a unified regional body. Additionally, Turkey was already in communication with Saudi and Bahraini officials. Therefore, normalization with the UAE could not have come at a better time.

Tactical vs. Strategic Shift?

Given the recent developments, the question is whether the normalization between the UAE and Turkey is of tactical or strategic nature. On the one hand, the external factors played a critical role in triggering this normalization - just like the other regional rapprochements, which means that such dynamics are highly susceptible to foreign agents. Consequently, any future change in the international environment, particularly in US policies, is likely to affect this emerging relationship between Turkey and the UAE.

On the other hand, the fact that the two parties are working to create a space of shared interests to pave the way for their emerging relationship to stand on solid ground means that there is a chance that their normalization turns into a strategic partnership in the long run. Having said this, the latter scenario is not challenge-free. While the focus on the economic benefits in the current normalization process will offer the necessary time to Ankara and Abu Dhabi to test each other, moving beyond that might prove challenging.

We should always bear in mind that instability and short-term arrangements are the norm in the Middle East region. Despite the de-escalation moment in the region, the situation is still volatile in some theatres, and the rapprochement efforts are fragile. Additionally, the US continues its strategic disengagement from the region, while the fate of the negotiations with Iran is still vague. In this context, the emerging relationship between the UAE and Turkey will be tested soon against regional and international factors. In 2023, there will be critical elections in Turkey that will have implications beyond Turkey's border. In 2024, the US will witness no less important Presidential elections. A radical change in the US administration that brings a Trump-alike figure is highly likely to affect the relations between Ankara and Abu Dhabi.

Regardless, it is customary to expect challenges in this emerging relationship. The bottom line is whether they will be able to create a mechanism to contain possible political disagreements and disputes in the future without significantly harming this relationship.