

Regional Solutions to Regional Challenges in the Middle East?*

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Members of two rival camps in the Sunni Middle East — Qatar and Turkey on one side, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, on the other — have continued a sustained diplomatic effort at reconciliation that began early this year. In a sign of the delicate progress between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors, on September 17, the *Saudi Gazette* tweeted [a picture](#) of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman standing beside Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani and Emirati Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, all dressed informally, in the Egyptian resort city of Sharm al-Sheikh. More recently, on November 24, Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of the UAE, met in Ankara with Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a dramatic reversal of what had appeared to be a hostile rivalry.¹ The visit resulted in the Emiratis establishing a \$10 *billion* fund for investment in Turkey.²

These two camps have been principally divided over their conflicting attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood since the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Qatar and Turkey have been pro-Muslim Brotherhood, while Egypt (post-July 2013), Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to domestic and regional security and stability. The two camps also viewed Iran differently. Qatar and

* This is a revised and updated version of an article that was [originally published](#) by the Institut Montaigne in October 2021.

¹ Andrew England, Laura Pitel, and Simeon Kerr, "[UAE vs Turkey: the regional rivalries pitting MbZ against Erdogan](#)," *Financial Times*, October 26, 2020; and, "[Erdoğan hosts MbZ as Turkey, UAE seek to repair bilateral ties](#)," *Daily Sabah*, November 24, 2021.

² Firat Kozok, "[UAE Sets Up \\$10 Billion Fund to Support Turkey as Ties Warm](#)," *Bloomberg*, November 24, 2021.

Turkey have had important economic relationships with Iran,³ which they sought to preserve, while Saudi Arabia and the Emiratis have viewed Iran as an expansionist threat. Egypt, for its part, has tried to stake a middle-ground with respect to Iran.⁴ The rivalry between these two camps has played out across the region and perhaps most visibly in the wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where each camp has actively supported rival groups with material aid, manpower, and arms. While the Iran-Saudi rivalry (often framed in religious terms as a Sunni-Shi'i divide) is the focus of policymakers in the West,⁵ the intra-Sunni hostility has fueled conflict across the region since the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt. What then accounts for the intensive diplomatic effort to end these hostile rivalries that have riven the Sunni world over the last decade and led to competing military interventions across the region?

There are five overlapping explanations for these developments. First, with a new U.S. administration in Washington since January, the leaders in the two rival camps have internalized that the Middle East will not be a priority for the Biden administration.⁶ Second, this intra-Sunni diplomacy is a response to the Iranian-Saudi talks that have been taking place in Baghdad since April;⁷ an effort to promote regional solutions to regional challenges.⁸ Third, the perception that the Muslim Brotherhood is in retreat in Egypt and elsewhere across the Sunni world, has removed some of the ideological intensity of the rivalry between the two camps.⁹ Fourth, Turkey's growing isolation on several fronts has led Erdoğan to seek a reset with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates. Fifth, global shocks —skyrocketing natural gas prices, the severe effects of climate change across the region, and the pandemic induced damage to global trade,

³ Sebnem Arsu, Maximilian Popp, and Alexander Sarovic, "[Shedding Light on an Alleged Plot to Evade Iran Sanctions](#)," *Der Spiegel*, February 26, 2021; Saied Jafari, "[Saudi-led Qatar blockade brings Iran, Turkey together](#)," *al-Monitor*, June 26, 2017.

⁴ Mohamed Maher, "[Understanding Egypt's Limited Involvement in the Campaign Against Iran](#)," Policy Analysis, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), March 21, 2019.

⁵ Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "[America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020.

⁶ Abdel Moneim Said, "[After the American exit from the Middle East](#) [Arabic]," Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS), September 11, 2021; Simon Henderson, "[Tweet Signals Major Upgrade in Relations Between U.S. Gulf Allies](#)," Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), September 20, 2021; Brian Katulis and Peter Juul, "[Seeking a New Balance for U.S. Policy in the Middle East](#)," Center for American Progress (CAP) September 7, 2021; Michael Young, "[Pivoting Away From America](#)," *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center, October 4, 2021.

⁷ "[Experts says the prospects of improving Tehran-Riyadh ties is achievable](#)," *Tehran Times*, September 29, 2021.

⁸ Abdel Moneim Said, "[At the crossroads](#) [Arabic]," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 24, 2021.

⁹ "[Turkey requires the Brotherhood to stop criticizing Egypt...](#) [Arabic]," *al-Arabiya*, September 29, 2021; "[Across the Arab world, Islamists: brief stints in power have failed](#)," *The Economist*, August 28, 2021; "[An end to neo-Islamism in the Middle East?](#)," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, September 15, 2021; Michael Barak, "[Is the Muslim Brotherhood losing Turkey and Qatar in light of the rapprochement with Egypt?](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 15:6, July 14, 2021.

as well as sharper great power competition— have created new economic incentives to explore détente.

Turkey's outreach to the Sunni Arab world, in particular, appears to be a response to its growing isolation in the Middle East. It has experienced tension with Russia and Iran in Syria, Iraq, the Black Sea, and Azerbaijan. While the Russia and Turkey have been effective partners in the Middle East since 2016, they have supported opposing sides of ongoing conflicts in Syria's Idlib Governorate, in Libya, and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's more assertive military deployments in the Black Sea have also given Turkey cause for concern.¹⁰ Turkey has drawn Russia's ire for selling its drones to Poland and Ukraine and for publicly declaring its refusal to recognize Russia's annexation of the Crimea.¹¹ More recently, Turkey appears to be deflecting Russian pressure by entering into gas and arms contracts that if realized will make Turkey more dependent on Russia.¹²

Turkey's relationship with Iran has also frayed in 2021. Turkey's continued occupation of northeast Syria and rejection of the Asad regime, its staunch military support for Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh in the 2020 war, its joint naval exercises between with Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea,¹³ its joint military exercises with Pakistan and Azerbaijan near the Iranian border on September 12,¹⁴ and its military incursions in northern Iraq have created serious tension with Iran on several fronts this year.¹⁵ These specific developments reflect more fundamental differences between Iran and Turkey on the future of Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh), and Afghanistan.

Erdoğan's attempt to repair his relations with his Sunni Arab rivals in the Middle East appears to be a gambit to avoid being left behind as several diplomatic initiatives reshuffle relationships in the Middle East. The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership on August 28 was co-organized by France, with whom Turkey has

¹⁰ Angela Stent, "[Russia's Battle for the Black Sea](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2021; Paul Stronski, "[What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 20, 2021.

¹¹ Amberin Zaman, "[Russian rebuke of Turkey for Crimea support highlights Ankara's delicate balancing act](#)," *al-Monitor*, August 25, 2021.

¹² Omer Taspinar, "[Turkey's Kurdish obsession explains Putin's gains and US strains](#)," *Responsible Statecraft*, The Quincy Institute, October 7, 2021.

¹³ Turkey also held ground and air force exercises with Azerbaijan forces during the same period in the first half of September 2021, see: Joshua Kucera, "[Azerbaijan and Turkey conduct joint military exercises in shadow of Russian peacekeepers](#)," *Eurasianet*, September 10, 2021.

¹⁴ Golnaz Esfandiari, "[Explainer: What's Behind Fresh Tensions On The Iran-Azerbaijan Border?](#)," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (RFERL)*, October 1, 2021.

¹⁵ "[Iran does not tolerate changes at the border](#), [Persian]" *Kayhan*, October 5, 2021; Fehim Tastekin, "[Turkey's Sinjar strikes carry stern messages to Tehran, Baghdad](#)," *al-Monitor*, August 19, 2021.

had major disagreements with in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and elsewhere.¹⁶ While the Baghdad Conference may have been light on substance, and held as much to bolster the re-election prospects of Iraqi President Mustafa al-Khadimi, it did succeed in bringing many of the major regional actors and multilateral institutions together. It was notable that Qatari Emir Tamim met with Egyptian President Sisi for the first time.¹⁷ It was the Egyptian-Qatari rift that helped to bring Turkey and Qatar together in 2013. The Baghdad event should also be seen as a larger outgrowth of a series of tripartite meetings held between Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq to facilitate cooperation in ways that serve their interests.¹⁸ Turkey also finds itself under pressure to repair ties with the Asad regime following King Abdullah of Jordan's effort to reintegrate the government in Damascus back into the Arab fold.¹⁹ The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the Abraham Accords are two additional multilateral initiatives that have also contributed to Turkey's isolation in the Middle East. The EMGF's success has attracted Saudi and Emirati support, and led to Saudi, Emirati joint military exercises in Greece that included the Greek and Egyptian militaries.²⁰ At the same time, Greece and France have entered into a new defense pact, independent of NATO, that appears directed at Turkey.²¹

Turkey's diplomacy, and the broader intra-Sunni diplomacy, also reflects a greater region-wide attention to economic recovery in the midst of a double shock from the coronavirus pandemic and climate change. In August, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s stark report led to a global call to arms on climate change.²² Turkey and others in the Middle East experienced the effects of global warming first-hand during a summer of devastating forest fires and unprecedented

¹⁶ ["Turkey has stopped insulting us but action still needed, France says," Reuters](#), March 3, 2021; Jana Jabbour, ["France vs. Turkey in the EastMed: A Geopolitical Rivalry between a 'Keeper' of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power,"](#) Briefings de l'Ifri, Ifri, May 6, 2021.

¹⁷ Ali Mamouri, ["Baghdad conference to establish cooperation, partnership in region,"](#) *al-Monitor*, August 30, 2021.

¹⁸ Wissam 'Abd al-'Aleem, ["For the fourth time, the meeting of the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq achieves common strategic interests and deepens the path of Arab integration](#) [Arabic], *al-Ahram*, June 27, 2021; Katherine Harvey and Bruce Riedel, ["Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan: A new partnership 30 years in the making,"](#) Order from Chaos, Brookings, July 2, 2021.

¹⁹ Martin Chulov, ["Assad the outcast being sold to the west as key to peace in Middle East,"](#) *The Guardian*, September 26, 2021; Amberin Zaman, ["After Jordan, will Turkey take the plunge with Assad?"](#) *al-Monitor*, October 4, 2021; Maha El Dahan, ["Analysis: Arabs ease Assad's isolation as U.S. looks elsewhere,"](#) *Reuters*, October 10, 2021.

²⁰ ["A Saudi, Emirati, and Egyptian Quadrilateral Exercise with Greek Special Forces](#) [Arabic], *al-Nahar*, September 21, 2021; ["Saudi Arabia, UAE to begin joint military exercises with Greece, Egypt,"](#) *Middle East Monitor*, September 21, 2021.

²¹ ["France and Greece hedge their bets with a new defense pact,"](#) *The Economist*, October 2, 2021.

²² ["The IPCC delivers its starkest warning yet about climate change,"](#) *The Economist*, August 14, 2021.

flooding.²³ Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan faced a summer of drought and water shortages. In Iran, water shortages triggered social unrest in Khuzestan.²⁴ Turkey's lack of rain led to a 21 percent drop in its hydroelectric power production in 2021, slowing its ability to diversify its sources of energy.²⁵ Extreme weather also contributed to dramatic rise in the price of natural gas in 2021, particularly in Europe.

The spike in gas prices could not be worse for Turkey, which is set to renegotiate unfavorable, long-term gas contracts with Russia's Gazprom, scheduled to expire in December 2021. Between 2016 and 2019, Turkey had significantly reduced its gas imports from Russia (by 35% in 2019). It planned to further reduce its dependency on expensive Russian gas imports by negotiating better terms for its piped gas and increasing its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports. Turkey became the second biggest LNG importer in Europe and the eighth biggest in world in 2019 thanks to low LNG prices and its decision to invest heavily in LNG infrastructure between 2016 and 2019. In 2020, the vast majority of its LNG came from the U.S., which was selling for six times less than the price of Turkey's Russian and Iranian gas imports.²⁶ However, in 2021 prices for LNG skyrocketed, undermining Turkey's attempt to use American supplied LNG to diversify its supply of gas away from Russia. The rise in prices was largely due to a combination of increased demand and constrained supply, which included economic recovery in Asia, drought in Brazil, and a combination of industrial recovery and an unusually cold winter and an extremely hot summer in Europe.²⁷ Turkey spends between \$12 and \$15 *billion* per year on its gas imports, and the higher gas prices it faces in its upcoming negotiations with Gazprom come at a time when its economy is already suffering from a liquidity crisis due to its weak currency, which has reached new lows for three consecutive months. Turkey's dependency on Russia also includes the large volumes of imported wheat from Russia, which Turkey uses to

²³ Mehmet Emit Birpinar, "[Fires, floods, mucilage: What's happening in Turkey](#)," *Daily Sabah*, August 16, 2021; Jon Alterman, "[A New Revolution in the Middle East](#)," Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 9, 2021; Anchal Vohra, "[The Middle East Is Becoming Literally Uninhabitable](#)," *Foreign Policy*, August 24, 2021; Durrie Bouscaren, "[Drought in Iraq and Syria could totally collapse food system for millions, aid group warns](#)," *The World*, September 10, 2021.

²⁴ Jack Goodman, "[Iran water: What's causing the shortages?](#)," *BBC*, August 2, 2021; "[Deadly street protests over Iran water shortages](#)," *BBC*, July 26, 2021.

²⁵ Paul Hockenos, "[As the Climate Bakes, Turkey Faces a Future Without Water](#)," *YaleEnvironment360*, Yale School of the Environment, September 30, 2021; Darrell Proctor, "[Hydropower Experiencing Climate Impacts From Drought, Flooding](#)," *Power*, September 1, 2021.

²⁶ Gulmira Rzayeva, "[The Renewal of Turkey's Long Term Contracts: Natural gas market transition or 'business as usual'?](#)," *Energy Insight 72*, The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, September 2020.

²⁷ Simone Tagliapietra and Georg Zachmann, "[Is Europe's gas and electricity price surge a one-off?](#)," *Bruegel.org*, September 13, 2021.

supply its profitable flour exports, another important source of foreign exchange for Turkey.²⁸

Turkey's precarious relations with Russia and the U.S., along with its confrontation with Greece, have pushed Turkey to court Egypt.²⁹ Egypt has the potential to supply Turkey with affordable LNG,³⁰ which would help Turkey diversify its gas imports until it is able to begin producing its own natural gas from the Sakarya field in the Black Sea (prospectively in 2023).³¹ However, it seems unlikely that Turkey will be able to peel Egypt away from its deepening ties with its partners in the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the key question is whether Turkey is willing to compromise on eastern Mediterranean maritime boundaries in order to work with the broader multilateral Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which includes Cyprus, Greece, and Israel (as well as France, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority).³² Whatever the case may be, Turkey's interest in repairing ties with Egypt appears to be driven in no small part by its desire to avoid a renewed dependency on Russian gas.³³

Finally, the intra-Sunni diplomacy reflects a greater need for intra-regional trade and investment opportunities, given the global economic downturn.³⁴ The global economy is still experiencing the shocks from the pandemic, which include global supply chain disruptions and higher transportation costs. Therefore, the potential for greater intra-Sunni trade, tourism, and investment represent significant opportunities to bolster liquidity and capital flows in the region. The UAE's strategy is to leverage its geography and become a global hub for multinational trade and

²⁸ Turkey "[Here is Why Turkey and Iran Grain Imports Surged in August 2021](#)," AgFlow, September 21, 2021; Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "[Russia starts to sow seeds of 'wheat diplomacy'](#)," *Financial Times*, September 2, 2021.

²⁹ "[Turkey-Egypt alliance in E. Med could open new doors](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, April 16, 2021.

³⁰ Ahmed Fouad, "[Egypt's future in the LNG market](#)," The Middle East Institute, September 21, 2021; Motasem A. Dalloul, "[There are limits to the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt](#)," *Middle East Monitor*, September 14, 2021.

³¹ John V. Bowlus, "[Pulling Back the Curtain on the Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy](#)," *War on the Rocks*, August 26, 2020; Omid Shokri Kalehsar, "[Turkey's energy ideal with natural gas reserves](#)," *Daily Sabah*, June 4, 2021.

³² Henri J. Barkey and Ellen Laipson, "[The Prospects for Conflict or Cooperation: Will the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas discoveries lead to regional transformation?](#)," The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, Summer 2020; Salim Cevik, "[Erdogan's Endgame with Egypt](#)," The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, August 6, 2021; Gabriel Mitchell, "[The Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas Forum: Cooperation in the Shadow of Competition](#)," Mitvim, September 2020.

³³ "[Turkey to see unusual gas demand clouded by soaring global prices](#)," *Daily Sabah*, September 21, 2021; Paul Stronski, "[A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia's Role in the Eastern Mediterranean](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2021.

³⁴ Orhan Coskun and Alexander Cornwall, "[Analysis: Turkey and UAE rein in dispute that fueled conflict and hurt economy](#)," *Reuters*, September 6, 2021.

investment. It views trade as jump-starting economic growth, and it would like to drive more inter-regional trade, linking Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.³⁵ As a result of the intra-Sunni rift, UAE and Turkey bilateral trade dropped from \$14.7 billion in 2017 to \$8.5 billion in 2020.³⁶ The Turkey-Emirati rapprochement has led to a rapid return of Emirati foreign direct investment in Turkey, particularly in health, good processing, fintech, and, perhaps most interesting, energy, defense, and port development.³⁷ Turkey, which is facing U.S. and the EU sanctions, views Egypt as a large consumer export market and a gateway to reach potentially lucrative consumer markets in Africa and the Arab world for its industrial exports.³⁸ Turkey may have believed it could capitalize on the sharper economic competition between the Saudis and the Emiratis,³⁹ which emerged during the pandemic, but Turkey's outreach to the Saudis in April has not ended the unofficial Saudi boycott, with Saudi imports from Turkey remaining at a record low.⁴⁰

The intra-Sunni détente has not been evenly pursued. Turkey and the UAE, for different reasons, appear most committed to it. The Emirati and Turkish détente appears to be transactional,⁴¹ but the port and transportation dimensions may suggest a broader strategic vision.⁴² The ideological differences between President Erdoğan and President Sisi remain a major stumbling block in the Egyptian-Turkish normalization.⁴³ Similarly, the deep mistrust and animosity between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed and President Erdoğan has limited any progress between Saudi

³⁵ Thani Al Zeyoudi, "[How the UAE aims to help shape a new era of global co-operation](#)," *The National*, September 9, 2021.

³⁶ Ali Bakir, "[Testing the waters: The economic factor in Turkey-UAE ties](#)," *The New Arab*, September 16, 2021.

³⁷ Ercan Ersoy, Asli Kandemir, and Kerim Karakaya, "[Abu Dhabi's Wealth Funds Weigh Turkey Investments Worth Billions](#)," *Bloomberg*, September 24, 2021; Alexander Cornwall, "[As tensions ease, Turkey says talks to UAE on energy investment](#)," *Reuters*, September 21, 2021; "[Erdoğan hosts MbZ as Turkey, UAE seek to repair bilateral ties](#)," *Daily Sabah*, November 24, 2021.

³⁸ Ahmed Elleithy, "[Why Turkey is wooing Egypt](#)," *al-Monitor*, April 3, 2021; Mustafa Sonmez, "[Is Turkey's export-driven growth sustainable?](#)," *al-Monitor*, September 10, 2021.

³⁹ Neil Quilliam, "[The Rocky New Era of the Saudi-Emirati Relationship](#)," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2021; Hussein Ibish, "[The UAE and Saudi Arabia: The Partnership Endures Despite the Oil Dispute](#)," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), July 8, 2021; Murat Sofuoglu, "[Why the UAE-Saudi differences will continue to escalate](#)," *TRTWorld*, July 13, 2021.

⁴⁰ "[Saudi imports from Turkey still sinking despite push to mend ties](#)," *Daily Sabah*, August 24, 2021; Nur Ozkan Erbay, "[Turkey's normalization policies aim to win over entire region](#)," *Daily Sabah*, September 9, 2021.

⁴¹ Ali Bakir, "[Testing the waters: The economic factor in Turkey-UAE ties](#)," *The New Arab*, September 16, 2021.

⁴² "[New Turkey-UAE TIR trade route two-thirds faster than by sea](#)," IRU.org, October 20, 2021; "[Turkey, UAE, Pakistan agree on new shipping route](#)," *Azernews*, November 1, 2021.

⁴³ Dalia Ziada, "[Core Reason Why Turkey-Egypt Reconciliation Faces Challenges](#)," *Majalla*, September 10, 2021; Ahmed Eleiba, "[Egyptian-Turkish Relations: Obstacles to reconciliation](#)," *Ahram Online*, September 15, 2021.

Arabia and Turkey. On the other hand, Qatari Emir Tamim's late August meeting with President Sisi at the Baghdad Conference suggests a real opportunity to break the longstanding Qatari-Egyptian impasse. The rapprochement between Qatar and the Saudis and Emiratis also appears to be moving forward. These relationships remain fragile and will be tested by the Muslim Brotherhood's continued presence and media activity in Turkey and Qatar; Turkey's military engagement in Libya; developments in Syria and Iraq; and, continued tension over maritime boundaries and gas infrastructure in the Eastern Mediterranean. Global shocks have paved a way to détente, but greater regional integration remain contingent on unresolved and newly emerging regional conflicts.

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