

The 2021-2022 “De-Escalation Moment” in the Middle East: A Net Assessment

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ABSTRACT *Starting the end of 2020, the Middle East has witnessed an unprecedented de-escalation among its key regional rivals. Several major players, including Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Israel, the UAE, and Qatar, have been reaching out to one another to reconcile and normalize relations, thus signaling a regional reset. As a result, a rare positive, constructive, and responsible trend of diplomatic engagement has been emerging, prompting the question of whether these reconciliatory and normalization processes will be a temporary situation or a new norm in the region. While investigating this question, the article discusses the rapprochement efforts, reconciliatory initiatives, and normalization processes between the key players in the Middle East from 2021 to 2022. It offers a net assessment of the situation, reviews comprehensively the diplomatic breakthroughs related to the cases in question, explains the primary motives and drivers of involved countries, and highlights the challenges that will likely encounter them. The article concludes by anticipating the prospects of these developments.*

Keywords: Regional Reset, De-escalation in Middle East, Al-Ula Agreement, Reconciliation, Rapprochement

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Introduction

For a long time, the Middle East has been one of the most volatile regions in the world. Instability, conflicts, rivalry, and struggles among its key regional heavyweights have been the norm to the extent that one would not remember the last time when all these players agreed on something. However, in a surprisingly contradicting manner, the Middle East is currently witnessing a rare moment of regional de-escalation and an unprecedented pace of reconciliation among the regional powers. Several key players have been reaching out to each other to normalize relations and open a new page. Business, security, and diplomacy have been at the core of the talks between these countries' top leaders and key decision-makers.

The process started with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reaching out to Iran at the end of 2020 and Saudi Arabia reaching out to Qatar at the beginning of 2021. Afterward, intensive diplomatic engagements kicked off between Egypt and Qatar, Türkiye and Egypt, UAE and Türkiye, Türkiye and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. In most cases, the engagement between the intelligence communities of the adversaries ensured an apolitical and professional environment for the politicians to communicate in order to work out their differences. Likewise, business, trade, and investments provided strong and solid incentives for the involved parties to seek common ground and achieve a win-win situation.

Comprehensive Review

In January 2021, Egypt resumed its diplomatic relations with Qatar after years of tensions.¹ The top diplomats of the two countries exchanged visits. They established a follow-up committee to settle issues of bilateral concern and a high joint committee to boost cooperation between the two capitals.² Egypt's President Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi met Qatar's Emir twice, in Baghdad in August 2021³ and Beijing in November 2021.⁴ As ties improved, Doha pledged in March 2022 to invest \$5 billion in the Egyptian economy in the coming few years, which will add to the billions of dollars it has already invested.⁵

As for Türkiye and Egypt, their rapprochement started officially in May 2021. Delegations from the two countries led by deputy foreign ministers conducted two rounds of exploratory talks in 2021, one in Cairo in May 2021 and the other in Ankara in September 2021.⁶ They addressed bilateral issues and a number of regional issues, particularly the situation in Libya, Syria, and Iraq and the need to achieve peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁷ The normalization has been going forward slowly but steadily. In April 2022, Türkiye's Foreign Minister did not rule out the reciprocal appointment of ambassadors and a meeting at the foreign ministerial level.⁸ Turkish Minister of Treasury and Finance, Nureddin Nebati visited Egypt in June 2022, the first by a Turkish minister to Cairo in nine years.

In 2021, the two regional rivalries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, sat down to-

gether for the first time in years following an Iraqi effort to facilitate talks between them in Baghdad. Riyadh cut off diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016 after the storming of its embassy in Tehran. The first round of the exploratory talks between them kicked off in September 2021.⁹ Despite the short-lived setback in March 2022 when Iran announced the suspension of talks,¹⁰ officials of the two countries conducted a fifth round of talks in April 2022.¹¹ Security issues, Yemen, and the reopening of their embassies were among the topics discussed. While Tehran has stressed the importance of resuming diplomatic relations, Riyadh asserted that it wants to see more practical actions from Tehran first.¹²

The rapprochement between the UAE and Türkiye was surprisingly quick, given the tense state of relations in the last decade or so. Approaching each other with a clear and direct agenda, mostly revolving around the mutual benefits of boosting trade, investment, and business in a win-win situation, was determinant. In November 2021, Abu Dhabi's crown prince at the time and the –de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)– Mohammad bin Zayed (MBZ), paid a visit to Türkiye,¹³ the first of its kind in nine years. His visit was preceded by a visit of the UAE's national security advisor Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed to Ankara in August 2021.¹⁴ Türkiye's President Erdoğan reciprocated by visiting Abu Dhabi in February 2022. A lavish reception was arranged for him, with a cavalry procession, a 21-gun salute, and an aerial show. These visits

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resulted in a number of agreements, MoUs, and deals that inaugurated the opening of a new page between the two capitals.¹⁵

When it comes to Türkiye and Israel, Israel's President Isaac Herzog paid a landmark visit to Ankara in March 2022, the first of its kind for an Israeli President in 15 years. Several developments prepared the ground for this visit, including a rare phone call between the two Presidents in July 2021, a secret visit of Israel's Foreign Ministry Director-General, Alon Ushpiz, to Ankara in January 2022, and a delegation of senior Turkish officials flying to Tel Aviv in February 2022.¹⁶ The (un)involvement of the Israeli government means that re-building bilateral relations must be done in a measured and cautious way. However, during the last year, intelligence cooperation took the upper hand between the two sides. Moreover, the two parties have been mulling over the possibility of carrying Israel's gas to Europe via Türkiye, which –if realized– will be a game-changer in the Eastern Mediterranean. To build on the visit of the Israeli President and consolidate the rapprochement, Tur-

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key's Foreign Minister visited Israel in May 2022, in parallel to visiting Palestine.¹⁷

As for Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, although the rapprochement between the two countries started as early as October 2020, when King Salman and President Erdoğan exchanged several messages and phone calls,¹⁸ the normalization process stalled on certain issues for approximately a year. Two factors contributed to this situation, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's personal position on the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at his country's consulate in İstanbul in October 2018 and the lack of an adequate formula to reset the bilateral relations following this incident. Finally, the two parties managed to achieve a breakthrough, which resulted in the visit of President Erdoğan to Riyadh in April 2022 and his meetings with King Salman and Crown Prince MBS. In reciprocation, Crown Prince MBS is scheduled to visit Ankara in June 2022. Despite the apparent progress, no apparent economic, political, or security agenda was announced till that time.

Primary Drivers and Motives

These normalization processes could not have happened without certain developments on the international, regional, and sub-regional levels. These developments set the scene for regional de-escalation, creating a suitable environment and a common ground for the conflicting parties to sit down together, discuss shared interests, reconcile, and normalize their relations in an unprecedented manner. The defeat of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential elections in November 2020 had a tremendous impact on the nature of the regional dynamics at play since 2021. Countries that depended –for so long– on Trump as a transactional president to prioritize and enforce ideological, divisive, and confrontational regional agendas suddenly found themselves in an unfavorable position following the triumph of Joseph Biden in the U.S. presidential elections.

A new president in the White House meant a new game to play in the region. In particular, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt followed the same path after failing to realize their regional agenda. Israel lost the investment in Kushner's project dubbed "The Deal of the Century." Additionally, Tel Aviv was already undergoing an internal change with the defeat of Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who had stayed in power for 15 years. As for Türkiye, it felt the need to avoid being over-stretched regionally. Therefore, it balanced its hard power with soft power to cash in on its successful



military activism in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Eastern Mediterranean, in terms of political and economic gains.

Al-Ula declaration on January 5, 2021, was the first major outcome of Biden's ascendance to the White House. The declaration stemmed originally from a bilateral understanding between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The agreement ended the blockade imposed by the Saudi-led bloc comprised of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on Doha and opened a new page between Qatar and its neighbors. As a result, the al-Ula agreement accelerated the intra-reconciliation process in the GCC and triggered a chain reaction of several regional diplomatic engagements that opened the door for reconciliatory initiatives. Although the UAE and Egypt were not initially content with the agreement due to the

fact that Saudi Arabia did not consult with them on it, they saw it as an opportunity to follow relatively flexible agendas. This approach helped them diversify their regional relations, prioritize their issues, and advance their own interests. Accordingly, Egypt reached out to Qatar, and the UAE reached out to Türkiye. Likewise, the al-Ula agreement allowed Ankara to strengthen its relations with the small Gulf countries and pursue normalization of relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

In addition to these two major developments, several other critical factors contributed to the new regional dynamics at play, thus creating a rare moment of unprecedented de-escalation and regional reconciliations. These include; the end of the 2011-Arab uprising era, de-prioritizing the region in the U.S. global agenda as well

Turkish President Erdoğan met with Emir of Dubai Sheikh al-Maktoum in Dubai, UAE, on February 15, 2022.

MUSTAFA KAMACI / AA

The regional and international dynamics that have led to this rare moment of de-escalation and reconciliation among the different regional players, are not constant and subject to sudden changes

as decreasing the security commitments to several countries, including Gulf countries, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The continuation of the American re-focus and shift of resources towards rising China prompted the GCC states to accelerate their diversification and hedging strategies. As a result, countries like Türkiye, Israel, and Iran gained more importance in this situation.

The power fatigue resulting from following highly contrasting geopolitical and ideological agendas and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the post-Arab-uprisings era encouraged the conflicting regional players to follow pragmatic behavior and prioritize the economy business, trade, and interest-based agendas rather than ideological ones. As the pandemic began to recede in 2021-2022, these regional players were in a good position to approach each other with a pragmatic/economic mindset that aimed to compensate for the devastating economic and financial

losses caused by the pandemic. This was evident in the case of Egypt-Qatar, UAE-Türkiye, Türkiye-Egypt, and Israel-Türkiye rapprochement efforts. The Russian war against Ukraine gave more importance to the Eastern Mediterranean region and its oil and gas resources, thus creating a positive atmosphere for countries to reach a common ground for a win-win situation, especially in the case of Türkiye, Israel, and Egypt.

Challenges Ahead

Despite the positive impact of this unprecedented de-escalation in the region, there are questions regarding the sustainability of the reconciliation and the resilience of the normalization processes. Moreover, it is not quite clear yet whether this is a temporary situation driven by the tactical calculations of some of the countries involved or a newly emerging norm and trend based on strategic calculations. Regardless, several challenges will soon test this new phenomenon in the Middle East.

The regional and international dynamics that have led to this rare moment of de-escalation and reconciliation among the different regional players, in particular, are not constant and subject to sudden changes. The highly volatile situation means possible shifts in these dynamics in the near future cannot be ruled out and may thus negatively affect the process resulting in a regression. Additionally, one obvious characteristic of the current normalization processes is

that they are highly based on the nature of the personal relations between the decision-makers of the countries in question. While this might be good when it comes to surpassing bureaucratic hurdles that may cause long delays in the normalization of relations, it may indicate weak institutional relations.

An under-institutionalized relation makes the reconciliation between the relevant states fragile and highly vulnerable vis-à-vis political fluctuations in the future. Furthermore, a dramatic change at the top level in any of the primary regional players might trigger different kinds of intra-regional relations. Several other factors are worthy of closer observation in the near future and might test the current regional normalization and de-escalation moment. These factors include:

Firstly, the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, which are very critical and determinant to the region as they might bring another transactional Trump-alike president. A poll conducted by *Associated Press* (AP) in May 2022 found that President Joe Biden's approval rating has hit a new low, with only 39 percent approving his job performance. While AP noted that Republicans' disapproval of Biden has remained steady—less than one in 10 GOP respondents approve of him—his popularity among Democrats has declined throughout his presidency.¹⁹

While no U.S. president served two non-consecutive terms in the U.S.

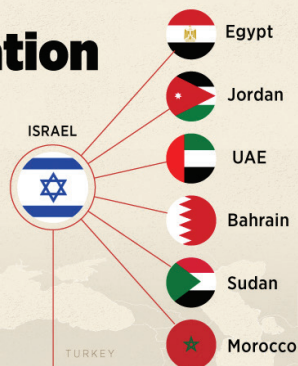
history—with the exception of President Grover Cleveland, who served as the 22nd and 24th president of the United States from 1885 to 1889 and again from 1893 to 1897—²⁰ there are strong speculations on the prospects of Trump coming back in 2024.²¹ The idea that Trump or a Trump-alike president may come in 2024 can potentially encourage some regional states, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt, to follow the same old risky policies.

Second, the 2023 Presidential elections in Türkiye. This election is of high importance to the Turks and the region. Several regional and international powers have been betting for so long on an internal change in Ankara to reshape the regional dynamics in their favor. A scenario in which a government subservient to the West arises will dramatically change Ankara's regional role and the nature of its relations with several regional countries. The main opposition party, the CHP, has pledged to kick the refugees out of Türkiye and resume relations with the Assad regime. Similar trends can be expected towards different issues and different governments. A reversal of Turkish foreign policy and less diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the Middle East might be expected. If it is realized, this scenario would also impact intra-regional relations.

The third is the fate of the 2015-JCPOA nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran. Negotiations between Biden's Administration and the Iranian government to reactivate the deal have

Arab countries' journey of normalization with Israel

In the controversial process of normalizing and establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, initiated by Egypt and continued by Jordan, at first wars and geographical imperatives predominated, while last year's agreements came to add the dimension of alliances



Egypt / 1978 Camp David Accords
State of war between Egypt, Israel ends
Israel withdraws from Sinai Peninsula while Israeli ships gain right to travel through Suez Canal

Morocco / Dec. 10, 2020
In response to recognition of its right of sovereignty over the Western Sahara, Morocco re-establishes diplomatic relations with Israel

Sudan / Oct. 23, 2020
Sudan agrees to normalize ties with Israel in exchange for being removed from list of countries which support terrorism

Jordan / 1994 Wadi Araba (Arava Valley) Treaty
Ends 46-year state of war between Jordan and Israel

Bahrain / Sept. 15, 2020 Abraham Accords
Gulf state of Bahrain calls deal 'historic step'

United Arab Emirates (UAE) / Sept. 15, 2020 Abraham Accords
Relationship evolves to reciprocal visits by officials plus visa exemptions

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Infographic showing history of Israel's normalization process with Arab states.
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been going on for some time. Several regional countries, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, objected to the original deal on the grounds that it would not completely prevent Tehran from producing a nuclear weapon. They also communicated that they would like to block Iran's missile program and force the Iranian regime to

change its regional behaviors and end its malicious activities.

Reactivating the same old deal will empower the Iranian regime, prompting it to continue its expansionist agenda, which will force Iran's regional rivals to adopt confrontational policies to counter it. However,

the "no deal" scenario is no less dangerous as Iran will likely move closer to producing a nuclear bomb.²² This scenario will trigger a nuclear arms race. In both cases, the outcome of the negotiations might reshape the alliances in the region based on the position vis-a-vis Iran.

Fourth is the emerging food insecurity in the Middle East. In 2019, Russia and Ukraine exported more than 25 percent of the world's wheat.²³ Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, as well as sanctions against Russia, are disrupting the exports of wheat, grain, corn, and other essential food sources, causing their price to skyrocket globally. Several Arab countries, as well as Israel and Türkiye, depend on importing wheat from Russia and Ukraine. Egypt, the world's largest importer of wheat, depends on Moscow and Kyiv to secure more than 70 percent of its local demand.²⁴ Besides Egypt, several Arab countries are severely exposed.²⁵ If the war is set to prolong, then one should not rule out that a looming food crisis coupled with the skyrocketing food prices would trigger uprisings.²⁶ This scenario will have political, economic, and security implications. A second wave of Arab Uprisings might force regional players to reconfigure their alliances based on the security of the regimes.

Fifth, spoilers and developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's weaponizing of energy during its war against Ukraine put Europe at the mercy of Moscow. This situation created an urgent interest in

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Europe in finding alternative energy sources to meet the demand, reduce the dependence, and manage the risk exposure vis-à-vis Moscow. One untapped source of gas lies in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Considering the regional de-escalation moment, the U.S. and some European countries have been signaling the possibility of utilizing the hydrocarbon resources of the region. Utilizing the untapped resources of the Eastern Mediterranean and resolving the conflicts between the different players would require taking into account Türkiye's holistic approach on the issue as well as a pipeline that would extend from Israel to Türkiye instead of the unfeasible EastMed pipeline from Israel to Greece via Crete, passing through a water territory claimed by Ankara.²⁷

Not content with these developments and with the fact that its major regional partners –UAE, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia– have been normalizing their relations with Türkiye,

Due to their geographical position, characteristics, or feelings of insecurity, some countries tend to prioritize security relations

Greece has emerged as a spoiler. It is actively working to undermine the de-escalation environment and drag other players, such as the U.S., into its own problems. If this behavior continues, it might negatively impact the region and seriously test some of the reconciliation and normalization processes.

Prospects: Keeping the Momentum and Building the Resilience

Despite the very positive regional atmosphere resulting from the normalization processes, it is hard to anticipate whether some of the relevant players are charting this new path out of genuine desire, or they are just being pragmatic, putting their sword in their sheath, lying low, and waiting for the right moment to return to their old policies. Having said this, if there is a genuine will to turn the de-escalation moment into a sustainable situation, then we should see key regional countries taking at least some of these following measures in the near future.

First, prioritizing the economic aspect of the bilateral relations. The

economic space is a de-politicized space by nature, which can easily help establish a win-win formula for the involved parties. Building on economic interests will cement the reconciliation processes and provide it with real and tangible gains for all parties. Although reinter states might not be so interested in such argumentation, the post COVID-19 pandemic era, the Russian war against Ukraine, and the desire to diversify the economy compel these parties to seriously consider the economic dimension.

Second, identifying areas of common interests in other domains such as security and politics. Then building on these while trying to maintain a separation between politics, economics, and security in times of tension to avoid cutting all ties at once. This way will guarantee minimum damages and enable the parties to keep the communication open on other non-conflicting issues.

Third, engaging in a constructive discussion on the different and/or contrasting views. In this sense, it is quite vital that the involved parties establish a mechanism capable of containing/solving the problems that might arise in the future. Additionally, aiming to keep intelligence channels open and working. Security is important to everyone. Due to their geographical position, characteristics, or feelings of insecurity, some countries tend to prioritize security relations. Keeping an open channel will not only deepen the cooperation on security issues but also might help facilitate the way

to discussing some unresolved political issues.

The absence of these measures will signal weak reconciliation and normalization processes and will make them extremely vulnerable to the aforementioned challenges that are expected to test the current regional configurations sooner or later. ■

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