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**ANALYTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON THE POTENTIAL OF
TURKEY - UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE) RELATIONS**

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Introduction

The regional and global effects of the, political and social changes in some Arab countries in recent years and the subsequent events have been continued up to the present. As of today, regional and global powers continue struggling to gain influence in and around the Middle East. However, in this process, there have been radical changes in almost every topic, from ideological orientations to geopolitical positioning, and so, the relevant states have recalibrated their positions in order to adapt their policies to this new situation. In this framework, it seems essential to take lessons from the past negative experiences of Turkey-UAE relations and do some mind gym on the future of the bilateral relations for discovering the potentiality and serve the construction of a peaceful regional order.

Turkey-UAE relations are closely related to a wide geography including the Gulf, the Middle East, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Moreover, their relations with systemic actors as third parties offer a capacity to influence the mainstream of both countries' foreign policies. In this respect, when the issue is considered from a broad perspective, it seems essential to evaluate the projections for the stability and future of Turkey-UAE relations on a strategic basis. This study emphasizes the potentiality of bilateral relations and argues that it is possible to build a positive agenda, especially on strategic issues.

This study will firstly share general assessments and observations on the political and social changes in some Arab countries since 2010 and the following period in which bilateral relations have been plagued by various crises. The next section will examine the mutual benefits to be derived from the steady development of bilateral relations for both countries. In order to explore and identify the strategic potentiality in this bilateral relations, an analytical method will be used to examine the military, economic, political and societal sectors.

Assessments on the Arab Uprisings and its Aftermath

In the last days of 2010, the popular uprisings have erupted in Tunisia and spreaded through the Arab countries in a domino effect, undoubtedly symbolized a radical position for the Arab state order. Since their independence, Arab states had been ruled by monarchical regimes, with the exception of revolutionary regimes built through bureaucratically-organized coups. The political and social changes had its impact primarily in the countries where these bureaucratic revolutions took place. Thus, political movements for change based on these popular uprisings began to materialize one after the other.

However, from the perspective of the Arab state order and Arab political-sociology, a highly problematic series of outcomes awaited the region. First of all, these political

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movements upset the relatively stable political atmosphere of the region and opened a new path for the establishment of new balances between states. However, with this outcome, the social and political changes in the Arab countries also paved the way for regional states which were trying to gain influence in the region while becoming part of conflictual processes with one another.¹ Due to these political movements for change, the Arab world suddenly faced the prospect of becoming the site of a potential major war. The Middle East region, where no inter-state wars were fought in the post-Cold War era, was thus potentially destabilized.

Another problematic outcome was that there was only one ideological camp with an organized structure that could be seen as an alternative to actual governments in Arab politics.² The ideological organization known as the Muslim Brotherhood was Islamist in its political speech and practice and had organizations in most of the countries in the region. In this capacity, the Muslim Brotherhood became the sole output of these political movements for change. Against the wishes of the masses who took to the streets demanding a democratic order, an atmosphere was created in which an Islamist perspective could dominate the political landscape.

For the aforementioned reasons, the forces defending the status quo (or status quo ante) have stepped in to prevent the Islamist ascendancy in case it could pave the way for regional interventions. The rise of Islamist populism, one of the most prominent outcomes of the process known as the Arab Uprisings, was attempted to be balanced and defeated by Arab nationalism. It can be argued that this move has been quite successful. But conjunctural gains, especially at the ideological level, may not be permanent. In this context, an ideological transformation at the regional level can only last for many years.

As of today, the Islamist ascendancy in the Middle East and the Gulf region has been pushed back and Arab nationalism and the region have created a space relatively closed to foreign interventions. At this point, Iran's capacity to intervene, in particular, seems to pave the way for the construction of a regional order in a balancing manner, both because of the strong motivation of the Gulf countries in this context and because states such as Turkey and Israel perceive Iran's influence capacity as a threat, even though Iran's intervention capacity continues due to its proxy capabilities.

Although Turkey-UAE relations suffered significant damage in this process, today, especially with the presidential change in the US (2020), positions have been revised and damaged points in bilateral relations have been tried to be repaired. The two states, which took almost opposite positions during the recent political and social changes, are trying to restore their bilateral relations in a stronger way by observing the costs of the political rupture they experienced in this context. From this perspective, one option is to build a positive agenda in bilateral relations and stick to it, while developing selective partnerships. Differences in positions on the ongoing civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya should not be seen as an obstacle to improving bilateral relations. Through close cooperation, it is quite possible to realize common understandings on these foreign policy files. Approached from a positive perspective,

[1] Resurgence of Geopolitical Rivalry in the MENA after the 'Arab spring', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14:2, 194-215, DOI: 10.1080/25765949.2020.1760542.

[2] Solomon, H., & Tausch, A. (2020). The Demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab World?, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 31(1/2), 171-209. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26870794>.

[3] Ibid.

bilateral relations can strongly serve the national interests of both Turkey and the UAE.

Potential of Turkey-UAE Relations

First of all, it should be noted that there is no direct crisis area in bilateral relations. In other words, Turkey and the UAE have actually experienced periods of tension due to their different positions on major regional issues.⁴ However, the aforementioned "normative revolutionary" atmosphere generated by the Arab Uprisings has been replaced by a more status quo-centric, state-oriented atmosphere of increased geopolitical power struggles and the rise of Arab nationalism at the ideological level as a reaction. In another dimension, Gulf states, particularly the UAE, have struggled to prevent external interference in Arab politics. In this context, the tensions that Turkey-UAE relations have indirectly experienced can be left behind in the new era and can be instrumentalized to serve regional peace.

In the remainder of the study, the potential of bilateral relations will be analyzed separately in the military, economic, political and social sectors with an analytical formula, so that potential areas of cooperation can be revealed more clearly.

Military Sector

- **Iran Threat**

First of all, from the military sector's point of view, it should be noted that the rise of Iran and its proxies, which was marked by the Arab Uprising, shows no signs of retreating.⁵ Therefore, thanks to the strategies of the Iran-centered "axis of resistance" in the Middle East and the Levant, the regional order is increasingly destabilizing and moving towards a level where hot conflicts are possible. In this context, a joint struggle against Iran and its proxies at various levels is critical for Turkey-UAE relations.

For the UAE, Iran is a direct threat to the regime's security and territorial integrity, while for Turkey, Iran appears as a confrontational rival through its regional moves. From this perspective, the Iranian threat, which also forms the structural basis of the Abraham Accords, can play a locomotive role in the military sector of Turkey-UAE relations. The backdrop of bilateral relations, especially when combined with Turkey's military capacity and experience on the one hand and the UAE's geographical and economic capabilities on the other, could serve to build a considerable deterrent capacity.

- **Turkey's Capacity**

In this context, it should not be forgotten that the United States of America's (USA) shifting foreign policy priorities, its focus on balancing China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region, and thus its ongoing retreat in the Middle East region, have led its Middle Eastern allies to search for new options. Moreover, the Aqsa Flood attacks carried out by HAMAS on October 7, 2023 showed that Israel is in a state of great incapacity and its deterrence has significantly eroded despite its so-called military prominence. The two states in question, the US and Israel, despite their great stature, raise doubts about being considered as viable partners that can adequately fulfill their military missions at the regional level and serve to enhance deterrence capacity.

[4] Mugurtay, N. & Muftuler-Bac, M. (2023). Turkish power contestation with the United Arab Emirates: an empirical assessment of official development assistance. *Int Polit* 60, 659-684. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00422-8>.

[5] Naghizadeh, Mikael Hiberger. (2019). "Rivalry through Proxies: How Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for regional influence", *St Antony's International Review*, 14:2, 137-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27027741>.

[6] Amitai Etzioni (2014). The United States' retreat from the Middle East and pivot to the Far East is likely to intensify, *Defense & Security Analysis*, 30:4, 304-310, DOI: 10.1080/14751798.2014.964914. An assessment of official development assistance. *Int Polit* 60, 659-684. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00422-8>.

On the other hand, the military capabilities of the Turkish army and its recent successes suggest that it has a functional role in the Gulf region in particular and the Middle East in general. At this stage, it should be noted that the Turkish military is an important security supplier, especially with its navy's recent acquisition of overseas capabilities through its newly produced naval vessels and its unmanned aerial defense/attack capabilities. In this context, the UAE should definitely consider this capacity of the Turkish military in its relations with Turkey.

- Defense Industry

Moreover, with the Abraham Accords, the UAE is rapidly increasing the volume of its trade with Israel, especially in the defense industry. However, the UAE's engagement in a single-supplier trade system could undoubtedly turn into a relative monopoly in favor of Israel. In this context, it is in the interest of the UAE's national security to diversify the sources of imports in its trade for defense/security needs. In this way, it can both increase its bargaining margin and gain exemption from the conditions that the source country may impose in terms of access to strategic products. At this point, Turkey can assume the role of an important defense/security supplier for the UAE.

In addition, the UAE's vast financial capabilities can be functional in funding joint projects that could potentially be developed with the Turkish defense industry. In this framework, bilateral relations can ossify in a strategic area such as the defense industry and help increase deterrent capabilities against regional security threats.

Economic Sector

- Direct Investments

The UAE's vast financial resources can also fulfill an important function given the relative instability of the Turkish economy. Direct investment opportunities, which were on the agenda during both Crown Prince Zayed's visit to Ankara and President Erdoğan's visit to Abu Dhabi, will undoubtedly increase the UAE's share in the Turkish economy, but will also act as a stabilizing factor. Moreover, the actor's position in the Turkish economy through these direct investments can also be functionalized in order to achieve a stable level of social relations and strengthen the UAE's public diplomacy. Thus, through economic interdependence, the UAE will contribute to the strengthening of Turkish-Arab relations at the societal level with the help of public diplomacy.

- Energy Cooperation

With its long-standing role as an energy exporter, the UAE is recognized as an important actor in both regional and global markets. In this context, the UAE is not only one of the leading players in the energy sector but also one of the leading players in the sector with its long years of experience. In recent years, Turkey has also discovered energy reserves, especially in the Black Sea,⁸ and although it has not achieved the status of a regional/global actor, it needs the UAE to benefit from its experience. In this framework, increasing and strengthening initiatives that can be

[7] Rachna Uppal & Yousef Saba. "Turkey's Erdogan signs \$50 billion in deals during UAE visit", July 19, 2023, Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-ends-gulf-tour-with-abu-dhabi-visit-2023-07-19/>.

[8] Ashima Sharma, "Turkey discovers natural gas worth over \$500bn in the Black Sea". April 11, 2023, Offshore Technology. <https://www.offshore-technology.com/news/turkey-discovers-natural-gas-in-black-sea/?cf-view>.

considered as energy cooperation will undoubtedly be an important economic pillar of bilateral relations.

- The Palestinian Question

Political Sector

The Palestinian Question is undoubtedly the main issue to be considered within the political sector. As an unresolved remnant of the Cold War, the Palestinian Question serves as a critical litmus test even today. The unresolved Palestinian Question, the inability of the Palestinians to achieve their independence and the humanitarian costs caused by Israel's hard power policies in the region are constantly laying dynamite under regional and global peace. In this context, the Palestinian Question seems to be an issue that Turkey-UAE relations should jointly address. The fact that both Turkey and the UAE can communicate with Palestinian actors should be seen as a strategic advantage.

Global and Regional Relations

The acceleration and strengthening of Turkey-UAE relations will undoubtedly bring with it the positive image that each country will produce for the other, regionally and globally. It will even go beyond a positive image and become a supportive element in their foreign policies. In other words, the strengthening of bilateral relations could, for instance, improve the UAE's relations with the Turkic republics in Central Asia. In other dimensions, the UAE could have a strengthening effect on Turkish-American relations. In this framework, the development of bilateral relations can be considered as a new positive image gain in the foreign policies of the two states at the political level. In short, with the deepening relations and multidimensionality of cooperation, both states can contribute directly or indirectly to each other's public diplomacy.

Societal Sector

The fact that the societies of the two countries are predominantly Muslim, represents the basis of a common identity for a common future. The UAE's history, which does not intersect with the Ottoman Empire, is also one of the biggest obstacles to conducting bilateral relations within the framework of a manipulated ideology (neo-Ottomanism). Undoubtedly, under these circumstances, the UAE and Turkish societies can be the anchor of friendly relations between the two states by getting to know each other better. In order to achieve this goal, both states should act in the context of diversifying and strengthening each other's public diplomacy capabilities. The stronger the relations between the people of the two countries in the societal sector, the more bilateral relations at the state level can be stabilized. Ultimately, the new generations will be the main bearers of normalization and progress in bilateral relations.

Conclusion

Having a bird's eye view of the history of Turkey-UAE relations reveals that there have been tensions at various levels as a result of differentiated foreign policy orientations, especially in the atmosphere created by the political and social changes in some Arab countries in 2010 and their subsequent events. When the causal relations of these

tensions are analyzed, it is certain that bilateral relations will progress on a much healthier and more stable ground. For the sake of bilateral relations, these experiences should be considered as a factor that both states should take into account in their regional and global moves.

The potential of Turkey-UAE relations evaluated in this study has endeavored to emphasize the elements that can be considered strategic. In this framework, the potentiality in the military sector can assume a dominant mission through partnerships and advancements in the security pillar of bilateral relations and can lead to a regional and global leap in bilateral relations.

In a time of systemic transformation, the declining influence of the United States at the regional level and the emergence of China as a new actor, especially with a commercial profile (for now), are causing regional powers to revise their policy equations with each new day. In this framework, the potentiality of Turkey-UAE relations, to the extent mentioned above, could constitute a strong point of resistance against these systemic and regional transformations. The advancement of bilateral relations on a solid and healthy ground, and breakthroughs in the military, economic, political and societal sectors will make tangible contributions to the national security agendas of both states.