

# Situating Turkish Security Relations with the Arab Gulf States

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A series of recent international and regional factors have brought Turkey and the Arab Gulf states into closer alignment, led by de-escalation in the Gulf and the search for greater stability to support economic diversification and growth. Both sides seek to continue to increase and broaden out their economic engagement, with Mehmet Şimşek's reappointment as minister of finance a signal that President Erdogan is prioritizing market stability and a positive investment climate in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Turkey's bilateral trade with the GCC states has grown from \$2.1 billion in 2002 to \$22.7 billion in 2022.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the leading GCC trading partners were UAE (\$8.56 billion total trade), followed by Saudi Arabia (\$3.76 billion), Qatar (\$1.8 billion) and Oman (\$1.5 billion).<sup>3</sup> As part of a UAE – Turkey reconciliation in 2021, Abu Dhabi Development Holding Company allocated a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey. Turkey has since struck a wider framework for \$50 billion in bilateral investment with the UAE in 2023, as well as with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.<sup>4</sup> These will be essential in enabling Turkey to recover quickly from the earthquakes experienced in February 2023 to develop its economy more broadly.

## Turkey – GCC State Bilateral Relations

Turkey – GCC state bilateral relations have been stymied by a number of factors in recent years, including: accusations of neo-Ottomanism following the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 and its interest in expanding Turkish cultural influence<sup>5</sup>, including in Africa. There have been major differences over the Arab Uprisings (especially in Egypt, Syria and Libya). Perhaps most important has been Turkey's role during the GCC crisis from 2017-21 when Turkish forces played an important deterrence role in Qatar. The 'Khashoggi crisis' from 2018 affected relations, most notably between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Ongoing indirect issues to consider include Turkey's relations with Greece, the EU and the US.

At the international level, we have also seen more assertive GCC state foreign policies, on Yemen for example, pushback against US conditionality about China, on Ukraine, and on energy prices, and greater international balancing or hedging. This is likely to be a prelude to when the Visions strategies translate into a greater focus on homeland security and potentially, greater autonomy. Of course, the US will still have a major role to play through security provision, technology transfer and expertise, but that role is no longer being accepted at any cost, and could potentially be played by relying on multiple security partners if necessary.

Amid a push for regional de-escalation from 2019 after UAE withdrawal from Yemen and the Iran-sponsored attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais, new opportunities have quickly opened up for more GCC state cooperation with Turkey. Whilst the Abraham Accords, including security relations between the UAE and Israel in places such as the Red Sea highlight how UAE security interests remain tied to the Arabian Peninsula, the Israeli war against Hamas in Gaza shows how GCC state popular interests remain rooted in the Israel-Palestine conflict and match the AKP's focus on Islamist and Arab Islamist affairs. In the context of the Israeli incursion into Gaza, Qatar and Turkey's relationship with Hamas is, and could remain, consequential. So too Turkey's relationship with Iran, despite the 2023 Saudi – Iranian normalization deal brokered by Iraq, Oman and China. In targeting the Muslim world, Turkey remains front and center of any attempts to improve regional ties and in the advancement of regionalism writ large.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/whats-behind-growing-ties-between-turkey-and-the-gulf-states/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.agbi.com/articles/turkeys-trade-with-gcc-soars-11-fold-in-2-decades/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.grc.net/documents/642d6e761e0afTurkey.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-19/uae-turkey-agree-on-51-billion-of-deals-adq-may-buy-bonds?sref=BtkSCofS>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683849.2021.1970543>

For example, in 2011, Saudi King Abdullah allegedly raised the possibility of Turkey taking on a great security role in the Kingdom, especially in relation to Iran and fears of collusion between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> It's not the first time closer ties with Turkey have been considered by some GCC states. Turkish military advisers were in Kuwait in 1979, along with another group of Turkish F-5 and F-104 pilots sent to Khamis Miushait air base (now King Khalid air base) in Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> The Arab uprisings generated a great degree of instability for the Arab Gulf monarchies, and absent significant US forces in the Kingdom and in the context of US diplomacy with Iran in the lead up to the JCPOA in 2015, the Kingdom clearly saw the benefits in further diversifying its security relations. It was also in 2015 that President Erdogan raised the possibility of establishing a military base in the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> The situation has changed somewhat since then, with the 'Visions' strategies of various GCC states having been announced around that time. The significance of these 'Visions' is the inclusion of indigenous military – industrial projects which are expected to contribute to the economic transition to a post-rentier state through jobs, development and income.

### **Turkey, GCC State 'Visions' Strategies and Evolving Security and Defence Requirements**

Having achieved rapid growth, especially since the AKP was elected in 2002, Turkey's defence industry now meets around 70 percent of domestic demand, and has become a major supplier of arms.<sup>9</sup> Production has focused on aerial, naval, land, electronics and ammunitions.<sup>10</sup> After the 2021 Al Ula agreement all but Oman have signed defence industry cooperation agreements with Ankara, and there is an opportunity to extend arms sales much further given high GCC military expenditures.<sup>11</sup> So far, there have been deals such as Qatar's acquisition of 49 percent of BMC in 2014. Saudi Arabia or the UAE was in the market for Turkish light aircraft in 2015.

However, the window of opportunity is narrowing. Saudi Vision 2030 includes a target of 48 percent local military procurement.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 aims to strengthen local defence companies.<sup>13</sup> Building on international defence exhibitions such as IDEX (from 1993) and NAVDEX (from 2019), the UAE has gone from strength to strength in building domestic capacity. In 2014, the UAE integrated 16 small firms to create the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC), which is the country's largest arms manufacturing and services company. The Tawazun Economic Council (TEC) plays a vital role in financing. The UAE Advanced Military Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Center (AMMROC) has worked in a joint venture with Lockheed Martin and Sikorsky Aerospace on military maintenance and repair, primarily for the Emirates Air Force.<sup>14</sup> Abu Dhabi Ship Building (ADSB) has branched out from contracts with the UAE Navy to exporting landing craft to Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait. The UAE has focused on boosting expertise on cybersecurity and secure communications, but not always without controversy. Tawazun Industrial park, part of Tawazun Economic Council, set up Watheq cyber security laboratory which works with CPX Holding, a local company, and EDGE Group set up secure communications firm Digital14.<sup>15</sup> Israel will continue to feed into these initiatives, through an agreement to develop cyber security and deep tech in September 2022.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.juancole.com/2020/10/boycott-security-umbrella.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-gulf-security-alliances-forefront-how>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683849.2023.2182686>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.straturlka.com/seven-turkish-defence-companies-in-defence-top-100-list/#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20first%20time%20in%20the%20country%E2%80%99s,other%20six%20Turkish%20defense%20companies%20in%20the%20list.>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/publications/localisation-in-military-industries.html#:~:text=To%20support%20Saudi%20Vision%202030%2C%20all%20industries%20are,the%20country%E2%80%99s%20income%20sources%20and%20decreasing%20import%20dependency.>

<sup>13</sup> <https://government.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/local-governments-strategies-and-plans/abu-dhabi-economic-vision-2030>

<sup>14</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79121>

<sup>15</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/11/with-shows-acquisitions-and-partners-uae-hopes-to-emerge-as-cybersecurity-secure-comms-hub/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/11/with-shows-acquisitions-and-partners-uae-hopes-to-emerge-as-cybersecurity-secure-comms-hub/>

There are plenty of regional and international partnerships and joint ventures to suggest great potential in the scope of further Turkish security and defence cooperation. In 2022, Saudi Arabia had 12 joint ventures, and in 2023 others were being negotiated with companies such as Airbus, Boeing, Lockheed Martin and possibly Hanwha.<sup>17</sup> Saudi Arabia and Russia also signed a military cooperation deal in 2021, signaling its possible openness towards further agreements.<sup>18</sup> China has stepped up cooperation with the kingdom in the production of ballistic missiles and has been successful in supplying drones.<sup>19</sup> The US has responded in 2022 with the Red Sands Integrated Experimentation Center to help counter missile and drone attacks, with a focus on “people, partnerships and innovation”.<sup>20</sup>

Walid Abukhaled, CEO of Saudi Arabia Military Industries (SAMI), stated in November 2023 that the conglomerate is “investing in developing our own products across all domains, but the key ones are really AI and command and control systems”.<sup>21</sup> After President Erdogan met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2022, a Bayraktar deal with Saudi Arabia was announced during President Erdogan’s July 2023 Gulf tour. It was the biggest defence contract in the history of Turkish Republic, serving domestic economic issues whilst including technology transfer and phased joint to local manufacturing for the kingdom by 2026.<sup>22</sup> SAMI cites Turkey as being very good at land systems, air defence and UAVs, but there is wide competition across a number of partners.<sup>23</sup> Absent any Saudi – Israeli normalization deal soon, Turkey could seize the initiative and push for a broader and deeper security deal but in a way which avoids creating a new ‘security dilemma’ between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But to do it in a way which meets Saudi balancing objectives and in line with Turkish competitive advantages will be challenging.

For the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar that are more advanced in their military industrial rollout, Turkey might continue to advance arms sales, joint ventures (drones), technology transfer, skill-sharing, intelligence-sharing, and military bases. 2023 heralded more deals to advance bilateral defence cooperation. The UAE and Turkey, for example, are focusing on technologies to produce components, weapons and other materials for aerospace, part of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). With greater emphasis on maritime security in the Gulf and Red Sea, there is great potential here for warships. So far, security relations in the GCC have been dominated by the Turkey – Qatari relations and Turkish forces stationed at the Tariq bin Ziyad base. However, even here there are limits to advancing defensive relations, such as the stationing of Turkish jets, which was opposed to by Iran. Tehran remains key in controlling the land bridge between Turkey and the Gulf through Syria and Lebanon.

For GCC states such as Kuwait and Oman that have small populations, are less advanced than Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the rollout of their military industrial projects, and have ongoing concerns about Iranian-sponsored terrorism and escalation among larger neighbours, they might be interested in further military cooperation with Turkey, including a base agreement. This appeared to be the message from the Turkish Ambassador to Kuwait, Toubia Sonmez, in August 2022.<sup>24</sup> Turkey and Kuwait signed a comprehensive joint defence plan at the end of 2018 and procured the Turkish Bayraktar (TB2) attack drones in 2023. Following on from reinstated joint military training with the UK in 2022, there could be further

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<sup>17</sup> <https://gulffif.org/saudi-arabian-military-industries-sami-fueling-the-growth-of-saudi-defense-industry/#:~:text=As%20of%20November%202022%2C%2012%20joint%20ventures%20were,MBDA%2C%20Lockheed%20Martin%2C%20and%20possibly%20South%20Korea%E2%80%99s%20Hanwha.>

<sup>18</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/08/24/Saudi-Arabia-Russia-sign-deal-to-develop-joint-military-cooperation>

<sup>19</sup> <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/04/03/saudi-chinese-cooperation/#:~:text=Saudi-Chinese%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Production%20of%20Ballistic%20Missiles,3%20Understand%20collaboration%20in%20a%20broader%20context%20>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/red-sands-future-middle-east-defense-cooperation>

<sup>21</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/11/sami-exec-on-saudi-arabian-localization-push-turkish-deal-prospects-and-future-plans/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.alraimedia.com/article/1654887/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA>

opportunity to develop a base agreement in Oman, but this could compromise the country's important and delicate mediation role.

The risks of military cooperation with Bahrain, amid high tensions with Iran and after the Abraham Accords, would appear to limit the country's appeal. Furthermore, the new US and Bahrain have recently signed the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement across air and missile defence, as well as the maritime domain, in addition to Bahrain being host to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet.<sup>25</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

After escalation during the GCC crisis and the attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019, the demise of the JCPOA and the potential regional fallout from the latest Israel – Hamas conflict, there are many reasons to expect that GCC state security concerns and threat perception remain high and therefore remain open to building cooperation with Ankara.

While Turkey has shown efficacy in diverse theatres of conflict such as Syria, Libya, Nagorno Karabagh, Qatar, Somalia and Ethiopia, domestic political imperatives and regional flux will probably make permanent security commitments in the GCC states unsustainable. The structure of Turkish defence commitments in GCC states beyond Qatar may also prove to be a sticking point.

One could envisage with US support and Iranian acquiescence that progress could be made. Despite being an integral NATO member, Turkey - US relations have been undermined by a close Russia – Turkey defensive relationship highlighted by the deployment of the S400 missile system on Turkish territory. But recently discovered gas supplies in the Black Sea, better (until recently) Turkish relations with Israel, and/or escalation in Ukraine could draw the US and Turkey closer and help facilitate Turkish potential in the Gulf. A greater security role for Turkey and India might be more preferable to the US and European allies when compared to Russia and China's involvement at a time when US security guarantees have been questioned.

Certainly, Turkish – GCC state security cooperation will continue to develop, supporting existing forms of Turkish security influence in the Mediterranean and the Gulf within the confines of domestic, regional and international constraint and opportunity. The risk being that under current unstable macro conditions and drive for military – industrial complexes, relations remain short-term and transactional rather than strategic.

Thank you.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/09/the-new-us-bahrain-security-agreement-is-light-on-big-changes-but-could-be-a-blueprint-analysts/>