

TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Second Monitoring: January - April 2024

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May 2024

With the support of




Ministero degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale

*This monitoring report has been realized in the framework of the project **TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION PROCESSES: WHAT IMPACT ON THE INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF ITALY AND EUROPE?** which is supported by the Unit for Analysis and Policy Planning of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in accordance with Article 23- bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967.*

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Within changing regional dynamics, the normalization path initiated by Türkiye with partners in the broader Mediterranean has been partially accomplished. Economic and security needs, along the war in Gaza, are the main driving factors of alignments. Between January and April 2024 Ankara's normalisation processes carried on with Greece and many Arab partners, while relations with Israel reached the lowest and some challenges in the Caucasus remain. Turkish dynamism continues to encompass domestic, regional, and international levels, which overlap when necessary.

Hence, in the framework of the project 'TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION PROCESSES: WHAT IMPACT ON THE INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF ITALY AND EUROPE?' – supported by the Analysis, Programming Statistical and Historic Documentation Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – CeSPI Observatory on Türkiye and its partner institution Kalyoncu Middle East Research Center (KALMEC) monitored the main developments in Türkiye's relations with the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf, and Caucasus region taking place during the first four months of 2024. CeSPI team has coordinated the tasks and worked mainly on the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, while the Middle East and Caucasus have been under Kalmec's competency.

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1. Türkiye's 2024 regional agenda: security, stability, and dialogue

For Türkiye, the first months of 2024 have been challenging from both a diplomatic and political point of view. Regional issues, indeed, have a role of primary importance in the Turkish government's agenda, which is mainly focused on the Israeli-Palestinian dossier and attempts to conflict de-escalation. The Turkish stance has been clear: support to the Palestinians and long-lasting solution that involves the creation of two states. Thus, the urgency of a sustainable ceasefire is the top priority of Turkish policy makers, diplomatically active on many tables. The continuous contacts and visits to Qatar and with the political leaders of Hamas, but also with other regional and international stakeholders, should be read in this sense, although it seems that the proposed 'guarantee mechanism' is at a standstill.

Worthy of note, is the completed normalization with Al Sisi's Egypt, sealed by the state visit of President Erdoğan who, accompanied by a large delegation, last February signed various significant agreements in Cairo in many fields, including defense and energy. This stands out, as well as the important alignment on the Palestinian issue and on joint action in the humanitarian field. The resumption of constructive relations is further confirmed by the trip of the Egyptian Foreign Minister to Ankara, which will be followed by the visit of President Al Sisi.

In the first months of 2024, Ankara witnessed out intense diplomatic traffic, to be understood as well as containment of any spill-over. The Iranian president Raisi also visited Erdoğan, and the meeting ended with the signing of various sector agreements, including trade and industry and with joint declarations regarding the fight against terrorism and the need for a solution to the Gaza war. Although much debated, the visit to Ankara recorded a divergence of views regarding the Turkish position towards Israel, openly criticized by some Iranian media portraying Erdoğan as *de facto* supporting Israel. Although the criticism did not generate any reaction from the Turkish side, along the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and above all following the Iranian offensive on Israel on the night of 14 April, the rhetoric of the Turkish President has become more markedly aligned to Iran. The denunciation of Israeli crimes in Gaza, especially in terms of 'humanitarian catastrophe', combined to the Turkish effort in terms of humanitarian aid, to the more recent decision to suspend Turkish Airlines flights to Tel Aviv until March 2025 and to halt bilateral trade, should be read as a further point in the bilateral friction. On the Israeli side as well, there was no shortage of biting criticism towards Erdoğan's Türkiye. In addition to the non-stop media coverage, which costed casualties to Turkish crews, the Turkish effort aimed at supplying the populations through the constant sending of humanitarian aid; till now Türkiye has reached 50 thousand tons of aid to Gaza, standing as the first international humanitarian donor to the Strip. The Israel war on Gaza, therefore, has been a crucial topic on the domestic political debate, contributing to redirecting the choices of the Turkish electorate on March 31.

1.1 Domestic issues and March 31 elections

In the first months of 2024, the domestic agenda was mainly occupied by the electoral campaign of the local elections of March 31, although with visibly lower tone and liveliness compared to the previous rounds. In the electoral running, there were many parties and candidates, but the real match was between the Republican People's Party CHP and the ruling party AK Party. As it is known, following the general elections of May 2023, the Nation Alliance, composed by the main opposition groups, fell apart and this has led to single candidatures, as far as the opposition is concerned. Nevertheless, CHP has managed to catalyze a large part of the Kurdish vote. In the government bloc, however, the alliance between AK Party and MHP has remained, even if the far

conservative *Yeniden Refah* Party left by taking very harsh positions regarding government's economic approach, which was criticized as well for being too ambiguous in its stances towards Israel. In a socio-political environment, tired and concerned over economy issues, an unusual, limited presence of Erdoğan rallying in the cities have been recorded. A few weeks before the elections, Turkish president indicated the current as last political candidacy, a move that beyond the surprise effect should have been understood as an emotional lever to influence the vote. However, with a relatively low turnout (75%), the local elections marked a turning point in Türkiye's recent political history: the CHP won the Country's largest cities (Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara) and a large part, not only of urban districts, but also of Anatolian cities, which for a long time have been traditional bastions of the AKP. Worth noting, also from future perspectives, that the *Yeniden Refah* Party alone managed to capitalize on the consensus in the southern east city of Şanlıurfa. The reasons for Erdoğan's defeat could be attributed mainly to the economic data and the difficulties that Turks encounter on a daily basis in terms of purchasing power, given the persistent high rate of inflation (over 60%), the continuous devaluation of the Turkish Lira and rising taxes on consumer goods. On the other hand, the fear of handing Türkiye over the power of a single man in command also played a significant role. In addition to the protest vote and to the choices of the new young voters, the selection of political representatives to the cities also counted a lot. In Ankara and Istanbul, the CHP reconfirmed Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu, while the AKP opted for acknowledged figures at a central institutional level, but little connected with the electoral base. In any case, when ballot had closed, Türkiye found itself in a new political scenario: the İYİ party witnessed a breakdown along the resignation of its general secretary Meral Akşener; the CHP capitalized on the Kurdish support as it was evident along the protests taking place the city of Van, in eastern Anatolia, where the pro-government ranks attempted to proceed with the annulment of the vote until they retreated in the face of the citizens' unrest. On the other side, Erdoğan had to take into account the new reality. Following the defeat, the President's tone was immediately moderate, congratulating the people of Türkiye for their profound democratic spirit, admitting responsibility for the defeat and questioning citizens about their perceptions. As first remedial actions, following the rift with the *Yeniden Refah* Party and along the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Palestine, the Ministry of Commerce announced a series of restrictive measures on the trade of some products with Israel, in addition to the stop of Turkish Airlines flights towards Israel. That was the outcome of the domestic and regional dynamics and more recently it has been followed by a complete halt on the trading relations.

Nevertheless, domestically economy is still a dominant issue. As matter of facts, Erdoğan has no choice, but to continue supporting an orthodox approach with the current team in charge of Economy and Finance (already at the beginning of the year there was a change of outlook at the top of the Turkish Central bank after the resignation of Hafize Gaye Erkan, following a scandal that allegedly involved her father). The Minister of Finance Mehmet Şimşek, on many occasions, as well in a meeting with the Italian industrial representatives, stated that the process of normalizing the accounts requires time and 'sacrifices'.

Currently, however, the atmosphere in Türkiye is calm and 'business' is back as usual in a stable environment. At the end of January, the Country was the target of a terrorist attack to the Italian church in Istanbul, which led to further tightening of the anti-terrorism legislation and vast operations leading to the arrest of numerous exponents of DAESH and other illegal organizations.

Ankara has also been the protagonist of operations aimed at securing national border defense, conducting operations against PKK mainly in Iraq and Syria. In this sense, the most recent collaboration signed with the Iraqi government is noteworthy, considered a milestone in the history of bilateral relations, which should be understood as the beginning of a new and more positive phase between the two countries.

1.2 Türkiye and key international partners: the challenges ahead

Considering the growing tensions between Tehran and Israel, Turkish diplomacy has been active in a logic of risk containment and de-escalation, also at the explicit request of the United States. The continuous and regular contacts with the American counterpart, especially between the Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan and Secretary of State Blinken, but also the frequent exchange of visits between delegations indicates a new trend in the Turkish-American relations. This has been also proven by the most recent appointment of the new Turkish ambassador to the United States, Sedat Onal, a career diplomat who replaces Hasan Murat Mercan, who previously had been politically appointed by Erdoğan. Although there were high expectations on the imminent visit to Washington of President Erdoğan, some changes have occurred in the program without formal explanations, which however may lead to mutual disappointments regarding each other's stances on Gaza. Nevertheless, US-Türkiye greater coordination in regional issues is still plausible, including on the Russia-Ukraine dossier. In this sense, Ankara has continued to maintain contacts with both Moscow and Kyiv. On March 8, Ukrainian President Zelensky met Erdoğan in Istanbul, signing several bilateral agreements, especially in the trade and defense fields. The visit took place, almost unexpectedly, at a time when the hypothesis of an imminent trip by the Russian President, Putin, to Türkiye, which apparently is still on the agenda. It is important to notice, however, that on March 2 Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov participated in a single talk in an open session on the 'New Global Order' at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. Lavrov was a significant presence within a flagship event of Turkish public diplomacy, which this year greatly emphasized the need for a new world order, representing the demands of the Global South, another theme very present in the Turkish dossiers.

At European level, attention should be paid to the agenda of the European Council of 17 April, which, for the first time after a long period, again included the item 'Türkiye'. After the conclusions relating mainly to the stability of the eastern Mediterranean, referable to the Cyprus issue, on the Turkish side arose a certain criticism.

Briefly, in the recent months the centrality of Türkiye as focal point and interlocutor for various dossiers has emerged. The current Turkish efforts are a proof of that. As well, Turkish dynamism needs to be read at multiple levels (domestic, regional, international), which overlap when necessary. Domestic stability widely depends on regional stability; hence, Ankara's effort is to capitalize on the ongoing normalization processes and the cooperative spirit with other regional stakeholders, narrowing as much as possible the margins of friction, risk factors and any spillovers that could further destabilize the region and therefore disrupt its own interest.

2. Mediterranean region

2.1 Türkiye-Greece: meaningful bilateral developments

At the beginning of February 2024, the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum was organized in Istanbul by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK).¹ As part of the Forum, the Türkiye-Greece Joint Economic Commission (JEC) 6th Term Meeting was also held and the JEC Protocol was signed. In the JEC meeting, views were exchanged on energy, agriculture, transportation, industry, agriculture, customs, tourism and social security.²

Following the December meeting between Erdoğan and Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime minister suggested exempting Turkish citizens from Schengen visa requirements for seven days to visit the eastern Aegean islands. In line with the proposal, Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis announced that the application process would commence on March 30, covering five islands initially and later extended to ten.

Within the framework of the political dialogue between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Türkiye, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Alexandra Papadopoulou, and the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Ambassador Burak Akçapar, held discussions in Ankara on March 11, 2024. Talks focused on bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye, as well as regional and international developments.³ Also, the two sides reiterated their joint commitment to build on the existing positive atmosphere in line with the Athens Declaration, exploring further areas of bilateral and international cooperation. They reviewed the preparations for the upcoming visit of Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Türkiye in May and took stock of progress in the existing dialogue channels.⁴

However, in the beginning of April, Greece announcement to create two marine parks in the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea have resurfaced bilateral challenges over maritime disputes in the Aegean. Türkiye's foreign ministry accused Athens of exploiting environmental issues to push its geopolitical agenda, while his Greek counterpart stated that Ankara was politicizing the topic.⁵

Despite that, delegations from Greece and Türkiye were meeting in Athens in April, 22 to discuss confidence-building measures.⁶ Also, Mitsotakis confirmed his visit to Ankara in May, 13.

2.1.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Mitsotakis' visit to Ankara falls within the path of restoring dialogue between the two foes that started with February's earthquake response and then strengthened with Erdoğan's visit to Athens in December 2023. Up to now, Greece and Türkiye have managed to carry on cooperation in various fields, by increasing confidence building talks and strengthening ties, following their commitment to implement the agreed Positive Agenda.

¹TRT World, *Türkiye and Greece strengthen ties, targeting \$10B bilateral trade*, February 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-greece-strengthen-ties-targeting-dollar10b-bilateral-trade-16858597>

² *Ibid.*

³Hellenic Republic of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024; <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/political-dialogue-between-greece-and-turkiye-ankara-1103-2024.html>

⁴ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024; <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ve-yunanistan-disisleri-bakan-yardimcilari-arasinda-gerceklesen-siyasi-diyalog-toplantisi-sonrasinda-yapilan-ortak-aciklama.en.mfa>

⁵ E. Becatoros, *Greece plans 2 marine protected areas. But rival Turkey and environmental groups aren't impressed*, AP News, April 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/greece-ocean-conference-marine-parks-turkey-biodiversity-c25b4992d0a6f93a0a2630db014284e5>

⁶Ekathimerini, Greek and Turkish delegations meet in Athens, April 2024. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1237028/greek-and-turkish-delegations-meet-in-athens/>

In the frame of a renewed economic cooperation, in 2023 Türkiye and Greece's bilateral trade volume hit \$5.8 billion. During the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum in Istanbul, organized by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) Turkish Deputy Trade Minister Mustafa Tuzcu said "*We (Turks) are neighbors, friends and allies with Greece. We need to use the time well, we need to close the trade deficit*". Also, Tuzcu emphasised the significance of the 15 agreements signed in December across diverse fields, and expressed confidence in achieving the targeted \$10 billion bilateral trade volume.⁷ During the forum and after the signing of the JEC protocol, the parties stressed that a more secure and sustainable electricity transmission infrastructure will be established and that the second bridge to be built at the Kipi-Ipsala border gate will carry cooperation in freight and passenger transportation forward. In addition, talks were held over the "10th Turkish Greek Tourism Forum" to be organized in the next future.⁸ Cooperation on tourism was indeed part of the Positive Agenda, and visa facilitation for Turkish tourists to Greek islands can be considered a groundbreaking move to promote people-to-people relations.

Whether in terms of economy and tourism the sides have shown their commitment to reach common ground, Aegean disputes remain pending. During High-Level Cooperation Council Erdoğan declared: "there's no problem that cannot be solved" between Türkiye and Greece. However, no discussion was held on the delimitation of the continental shelf and Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.⁹ And the issue soon came up again, indeed.

In February, tensions arose over Greece military exercise around some Aegean Island.¹⁰ Months later, Greece's announcement to create two new marine parks in the Ionian and Aegean seas¹¹ has triggered Ankara's reaction that contests the sovereignty of some of the maritime territory involved. Mutual accusations followed of "politicizing" environmental issues and the quarrel resurfaced over maritime/continental shelves boundaries. On his side, Mitsotakis stated that Greece exercises its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea based on international law and the law of the sea underling he was surprised by Türkiye's negative reaction.¹² Ömer Çelik responded that Ankara would not allow marine parks to be created in the Aegean and called on Athens to abandon plans that would "harm" efforts to improve ties.

However, the Aegean is not the only open chapter between the two. European Council's conclusion of mid-April touched indeed the importance of security in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the need for a comprehensive resolution of the Cyprus issue.

Although reiterating EU's interest for a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye, the Council stated the importance to resume and progress in the Cyprus settlement talks to further enhance EU-Türkiye cooperation, underlining EU's commitment to the comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem within the UN framework. In addition, the EU has welcomed the

⁷TRT World, *Türkiye and Greece strengthen ties, targeting \$10B bilateral trade*, February 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-and-greece-strengthen-ties-targeting-dollar10b-bilateral-trade-16858597>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ E. Stamatoukou, H.F. Buyuk, *Greece, Turkey, Plot New Path With Friendship Declaration*, Balkan Insight, December 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/07/greece-turkey-plot-new-path-with-friendship-declaration/>

¹⁰ A. Bozcurt, *Turkey has threatened Greece with a loss of sovereignty over islands in the Aegean*, Nordic Monitor, February 2024. <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/02/turkey-has-threatened-greece-with-a-loss-of-sovereignty-on-islands-in-aegean/>

¹¹ The first will span 11 groups of deserted islands and islets from west of the island of Milos to Nisyros, known as "the Greek Galapagos," due to their rich biodiversity. The second will encompass an area starting north of Kefalonia and ending at Kythera and Antikythera. See G. Lialios, *Greece to declare two new national marine parks*, Ekathimerini, April 2024 <https://www.ekathimerini.com/society/1235624/greece-to-declare-two-new-national-marine-parks/>

¹² Ekathimerini, *Mitsotakis to meet Erdogan on May 13 in Ankara*, April 2024. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1236776/mitsotakis-to-meet-erdogan-on-may-13-in-ankara/>

appointment of Maria Angela Holguin Cuéllar as the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Cyprus.¹³

Nevertheless, visions and positions for a comprehensive and agreed solution of the Cyprus issue still differ. At the end of January Türkiye expressed support for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) over the latter's outrage on the renewal of the mandate of the UNFICYP for another year as they see the mandate's extension as an "outdated and exhausted model for a possible settlement"¹⁴. EU's vision for Cyprus follows that of most of the international community such as the single state solution through a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation with political equality. A vision that is opposed by Northern Cyprus President Tatar and Türkiye, who support the two-state solution.

Türkiye has thus criticized the Council conclusions, accusing the EU of lacking strategic vision on both Türkiye and global developments, underlining that Türkiye will never accept an approach that links progress in Türkiye-EU relations to the Cyprus issue.¹⁵ However, although the EU cooperates continuously with Türkiye across many sectors including trade, border management, and migration¹⁶, the settlement of the Cyprus issue remain core for thawing the accession process. Also, together with the solution of the Aegean disputes, it can ensure the sustainability of Türkiye-Greece bilateral rapprochement. In this sense, together with the Parties' willingness, joint and multilateral efforts by USA, NATO and the EU should be deployed to facilitate dialogue on pending disputes. Security in the Eastern Mediterranean could indeed benefit everyone, considering the multiple threats arising and the existing spillover effects of both the war in Ukraine and Gaza. It is indeed to be underlined that during Blinken's visit to Türkiye last March, discussions with Fidan covered the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the importance of preserving stability and channels for communication, as well as the ongoing engagement between Türkiye and Greece.¹⁷

Thus, Mitsotakis' visit to Ankara show that, although still deeply problematic, Türkiye-Greece Aegean issues do not prevent the Parties from building a Positive Agenda at the current stage. But not addressing long-lasting disagreements, whether a potentially workable measure to put fire aside in the short term, could be risky in the long run. There cannot be full and sustainable normalization indeed without dealing with them unless the parties are settling for a sectorial and fluctuating partnership.

2.2 Türkiye- Egypt: Meaningful bilateral developments

The process of diplomatic normalization between Türkiye and Egypt has been going on during the first months of 2024. This process culminated with the first visit in 12 years of the President Erdoğan in Egypt on 14 of February¹⁸. The visit was anticipated by a new military deal on the 4th of

¹³ European council website, Main results of the special meeting held between 17-18 April 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2024/04/17-18/>

¹⁴ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye backs Northern Cyprus after UN extends peacekeeping force*, January 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-backs-northern-cyprus-after-un-extends-peacekeeping-force>

¹⁵ TRT World, *Türkiye slams 'EU's lack of vision', rejects Cyprus link in relations*, April 2024. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-slams-eus-lack-of-vision-rejects-cyprus-link-in-relations-17825519>

¹⁶ For a broader analysis of EU-Turkey relations see I. O. Lesser, P. T. Levin, K. Taştan, Ö. Ünlühisarcıklı *Prospects for EU-Türkiye Foreign Policy Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Turbulence*, German Marshall Fund, April 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/EU%20Türkiye%20Paper.pdf>

¹⁷ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 2024 <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-%E2%80%93-abd-stratejik-mekanizmasi-hakkinda-ortak-aciklama.en.mfa>

¹⁸ Egypt and Turkey renew ties over Israel's looming offensive on Rafah in southern Gaza, AfricaNews, 15/02/2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2024/02/15/egypt-and-turkey-renew-ties-over-israels-looming-offensive-on-rafah-in-southern-gaza/>

February stipulating a trade agreement on Turkish armed drones for the Egyptian military¹⁹. In addition, Erdoğan's visit was also the occasion to increase the reinvigorated economic cooperation. Al-Sisi and his Turkish counterpart increased an economic agreement of \$15 billion notably in the energy and military fields. This visit will be followed by another visit in Türkiye by the Egyptian President in the coming months (maybe in May)²⁰.

But it is important to underline that the normalization is boosted by the situation in the broader Middle East and Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. The regional context was indeed the core of bilateral exchanges through phone calls and institutional meetings within the first four months of 2024, notably among the Turkish and Egyptian diplomatic representatives.

Soon after the Erdoğan's visit in Egypt a diplomatic meeting was held in Türkiye between Assistant Foreign Minister for African Affairs Ehab Awad and General Director of Eastern and Southern Africa of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Elif Ülgen in order to discuss West Africa and Sahel. The aim of the meeting was to increase cooperation in securing the region²¹.

Although not directly involved in the conflict, Egypt and Türkiye have maintained a prominent and internationally recognized role in de-escalation, particularly since Israel and Iran attacked each other. Indeed, US Secretary of State Blinken, called both Türkiye and Egypt to cooperate and take part in the broader alliance along with Jordan and Saudi Arabia to switching off the tensions in the region,²² with the aim at avoiding an enlargement of the conflict.

2.2.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

As said, the normalization process between Türkiye and Egypt is going on without any structural problem. This is proven by the increasing of economic cooperation and the willingness of the two parts to overcome not only the political-ideological problems, but also other core issues. This commitment is showed by the great numbers of delegates accompanying Türkiye's President to Cairo. Different Ministers and diplomats were in Cairo to developing and strengthening cooperation. The main issues covered by the visit was the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the energy dossier.

On the Palestinian issue, both countries are assuming a leading position in the diplomatic process notably in terms of ceasefire and the liberation of the hostages. Indeed, if Egypt hosted, despite no positive outcomes emerged, delegations from Israel and Qatar, Türkiye welcomed Palestinian delegations (both Hamas and Palestinian National Authority) in order to find an internal solution for reconciliation.

Both Egypt and Türkiye, through diplomatic talks are also engaging in the future of Gaza and its reconstruction and this was very clear in Erdoğan's claim in Cairo "[Türkiye is] ready to work with Egypt for the recovery and reconstruction of Gaza in the medium term"²³. This means that both countries are trying to assume a leading position as other crucial countries, such as Saudi Arabia (given their diplomatic process with Iran) or Qatar (due to their link with Hamas leadership). In this

¹⁹Turkey agrees to provide drones to Egypt, Reuters, 04/02/2024 [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-agrees-provide-drones-egypt-2024-02-04/#:~:text=ANKARA%2C%20Feb%204%20\(Reuters\),Hakan%20Fidan%20said%20on%20Sunday](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-agrees-provide-drones-egypt-2024-02-04/#:~:text=ANKARA%2C%20Feb%204%20(Reuters),Hakan%20Fidan%20said%20on%20Sunday).

²⁰ Umm Uras, Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's el-Sisi meeting updates: Erdogan arrives in Cairo, al-Jazeera, 14/02/2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/2/14/sisi-erdogan-meeting-live-gaza-in-focus-as-egypt-turkey-presidents-meet#:~:text=El%2DSisi%20accepted%20an%20invitation,over%20the%20next%20few%20years>.

²¹Egyptian, Turkish diplomats meet in Ankara on African issues, State information Service, 17/02/2024, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/191649/Egyptian%2C-Turkish-diplomats-meet-in-Ankara-on-African-issues?lang=en-us>

²² Blinken calls up Turkish, Egyptian, Jordanian and Saudi counterparts following Iranian attacks on Israel, AniNews, 15/04/2024; <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/middle-east/blinken-calls-up-turkish-egyptian-jordanian-and-saudi-counterparts-following-iranian-attacks-on-israel20240415070336/>

²³ Egypt and Turkey Agree to Reset Relations, Work to End Regional Conflict , Voa Africa, 15/02/2024, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/egypt-and-turkey-agree-to-reset-relations-work-to-end-regional-conflict/7488341.html>

sense, Egypt and Türkiye seem to be freer in terms of political and diplomatic maneuver. However, their positions have to deal with the internal situation, both economic and political. The weakness of the Egyptian economy and its political implications as well as the situation of the political landscape of the Turkish scenario could jeopardize this broader political role in the region.

It is not surprising that a great emphasis, in these last meetings, have been dedicated to the economic and energy cooperation in order to boost both the economies. In this sense, Türkiye's BOTAŞ and Egypt's EGAS signed an agreement on LNG trading opportunities, cooperation on natural gas infrastructure and underground storages, (and) sharing of technical information and experience²⁴. This, besides the bilateral level, could further expand regional cooperation, as well between Türkiye and the actors of the East Med Gas Forum (Greece and Cyprus included), other than Egypt.

Furthermore, what seems to be an important point is the new military agreement and cooperation that marked an actual U-turn in terms of strategic cooperation in this field but also demonstrates the pragmatism of Erdoğan and al-Sisi. Indeed, the Turkish drones are sold in many countries in the region and Africa, including Ethiopia, that is a permanent tension with Egypt due to the Nile water management²⁵. It is also a turning point considering some frictions between the two countries, as they remain in opposite positions in Libya, meaning that in this crucial moment realpolitik seems to be at the core of the regional relations (see Libya section).

Finally, the effects of this increasing normalization are being translated in some political commitment by both sides in the internal political front. Just some days after Erdoğan's visit to Egypt, Türkiye took action on the Egyptian Brotherhood figures exiled in the country by revoking Turkish citizenship to the former MB Supreme Guide, Mahmud Hussein²⁶.

2.3 Türkiye-Libya: Meaningful bilateral developments

During the last 4 months Libya and Türkiye have been going to reinforce their cooperation in different fields and issues. In January, Italy and Türkiye agreed to cooperate on the migration dossier. Indeed, the official meeting of the Italy's PM to Türkiye focused, among other things, on a new deal on migration with Libya and more properly with Tripoli's government²⁷. This is also to be seen as a move in further strengthening Italy-Türkiye strategic partnership.

In addition, Libya and Türkiye held an official meeting in Dubai, in which the two countries stressed on reinforcing previous agreements on economy cooperation and to find a political solution for the Libyan internal divisions²⁸. This development has been followed by further visits, notably that of the Minister of Technical Education Ikhelif Al-Sifaw to Ankara, which led to the signing of

²⁴ Türkiye, Egypt plan to deepen energy cooperation as ties grow closer, Daily Sabah, 15/02/2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkiye-egypt-plan-to-deepen-energy-cooperation-as-ties-grow-closer>

²⁵ Gashaw Ayferam, The Nile Dispute: Beyond Water Security, Carnegie Endowment, 19/02/2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88842#:~:text=The%20long%2Drunning%20dispute%20over.about%20more%20than%20physical%20resources.&text=As%20climate%20change%20accelerates%2C%20the,%2C%20food%2C%20and%20energy%20security.>

²⁶ Mohamed Hamama and Rana Mamdouh, Turkey revokes citizenship of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mahmoud Hussein, among others, Mada Masr, 20/02/2024, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2024/02/20/news/u/turkey-revokes-citizenship-of-muslim-brotherhood-leader-mahmoud-hussein-among-others/>

²⁷ Erdogan seeks to send Europe a message on migration through joint agreement with Italy and Libya, Nordic Monitor, 24/01/2024, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/01/erdogan-seeks-a-message-to-europe-on-migration-with-a-joint-agreement-with-italy-and-libya/>

²⁸ Dbeibeh, Erdogan hold talks in Dubai, Libya Update, 13/02/2024, <https://libyaupdate.com/dbeibeh-erdogan-hold-talks-in-dubai/>

another agreement in the field of education and training with Turkish Minister of Education Yusuf Tekin²⁹.

In the same month, during the Libya Food Expo, Libyan part presented to several Turkish companies some cooperation opportunities to increase trade and commercial relations along with facilitating movements of both capital and people³⁰.

In March, other meetings took place. This time energy cooperation has been at the core within the Energy summit organized by Tripoli's government, wherein Ministry of Oil and Gas, Mohammed Aoun and Minister of State for Prime Minister's Affairs, Adel Jumaa, and the Turkish Ambassador to Libya discussed on the implementation in energy cooperation.

On the political side, Libya's PM Dbaiba and President Erdogan, agreed in February on a new political path for the resolution of the crisis in the Mediterranean country. The aim was to reinforce the Western leadership (Tripoli) and to demand elections in the short term. This visit confirmed also common view within the regional scenario especially on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The Libyan government sees the Turkish moves at the diplomatic level as a positive move that could solve the crisis in the Strip³¹.

Finally, Türkiye and Libya in March have been protagonists of diplomatic efforts in Sudan in order to find a political solution between Hamedti and al-Burhan and put an end to the bloody civil war which is striking the country since at least two years³².

2.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Although the reality on the Libyan ground seems to be frozen by a permanent tension between Western government and the Eastern one, diplomatic relations continue without any obstacle. Türkiye, as known, continues to play a central role in Libya by supporting the internationally recognized Government of National Unity in Tripoli and maintaining an opened diplomatic channel for reaching a comprehensive political agreement among all parts.

This has been facilitated by the new regional and geopolitical landscape thanks to the end of polarization in the Gulf and after the normalization track with Egypt (supporting the Libyan Eastern government). The cooperation on economic field and energy represents another brick in the long-term strategy of Türkiye in Libya.

Despite Türkiye's privileged position in the country, the relationship with Libya faced in the last months some critical points, influenced by the internal political landscape of Libya. In February 20 the Appeal Court of Tripoli cancelled the energy agreement (MoU) signed in 2022 by Ankara and Tripoli³³. However, as underlined by many experts and analyst, this move has been a first step in modifying the MoU in order to have a broader agreement also with Eastern counterpart³⁴.

This last development could be proved with the regional reconciliation and the new normalization with Egypt, which supports General Haftar in the East. In this context, the Egyptian President al-Sisi, during his meeting with President Erdoğan, claimed that Egypt and Türkiye implemented cooperation in order to reach a comprehensive agreement in order to guarantee stability and security

²⁹ Safaa al-Harathy, Libya, Turkey sign MoU cooperation in vocational and technical education, Libya Observer, 25/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/libya-turkey-sign-mou-cooperation-vocational-and-technical-education>

³⁰ Safaa al-Hawathy, Hweij discusses trade cooperation with Turkish companies, Libya Observer, 03/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/hweij-discusses-trade-cooperation-turkish-companies>

³¹ Safaa al-Harathy, Erdogan backs direct Libyan elections, avoiding further transitional stages, Libya Observer, 14/02/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/erdogan-backs-direct-libyan-elections-avoiding-further-transitional-stages>

³² See (in Arabic): البرهان يوافق على التفاوض مع حميدتي بواسطة ليبيا وتركيا: urly.it/3_m6q

³³ See (in Arabic): المحكمة الليبية تلغي اتفاق طاقة مع تركيا... إليك الأسباب: urly.it/3_m6r

³⁴ The memorandum of understanding cancelled by Libya aimed to develop projects related to the exploration, production, transportation and trade of oil and gas, in accordance with the procedures and laws followed in Libya, and to strengthen cooperation between the two countries.

in the country. Despite the good intention, the presence of Türkiye in Libya is still representing an obstacle for reaching an agreement to put an end to the conflict. Military presence and the support of the Turkish military to the Western Government of Tripoli is indeed crucial to find a political solution. However, as known, the Turkish presence in the country is due to the Russian presence within the ranks of the Eastern government of Haftar. In this sense, the military role of Türkiye should be intended as a sort of deterrence force rather than as a political tool³⁵.

Indeed, the cooperation in different fields between the Libyan GNU and Türkiye is continuing without any fundamental obstacles. In March, the Libyan Iron and Steel industry signed an agreement with the Turkish Sancor to develop an industrial cooperation for the production of gas cylinders³⁶. This move seems to be strategic for the Libyan government since the last month some cities of the south mobilized against the government for not providing enough gas cylinders for daily use. The aim is to produce 400.000 cylinders in order to cover the entire need of the population and avoid tensions that could jeopardize the stability of the government³⁷.

The relations between the two countries have been influenced also by the international landscape. The visit of the Italian PM Meloni in Türkiye has been the occasion, among other things, to express the willingness to cooperate on migration in Libya³⁸. On the one hand, indeed, Italy's already strong cooperation with the Government of National Unity of Tripoli in the field of migration could find additional support in Türkiye. But beyond migration, an enhanced cooperation between Rome and Ankara has a broader political meaning since it could help revive the political process in Libya; ensure legitimacy to the Western Government of Tripoli and reinforce both the Italian and Turkish leverage in the country as well as their role at the international level.

Finally, there are international dossiers wherein Libya and Türkiye seem to be protagonists in the diplomatic efforts. This is the case of Sudan, wherein the two countries, since March 2024, are playing a mediation role between Hamedti and al-Burhan³⁹. Here, the role of the two countries is explained by two interlinked factors: migration and security. The invitation of the two rival forces of Sudan to Tripoli marked a turning point in the diplomatic efforts to end the conflict⁴⁰. The aim of Libya and Türkiye is to find a political solution for a transitional period and elections.

Libya and Sudan have always been linked notably in the last five years where, besides the presence of refugees, Libya has been one of the main countries hosting Sudanese mercenaries participating in the civil war within the two main parts.

³⁵ This is clear since years, when the Tripoli government was about to fall after the offensive of Khalifa Haftar against the capital.

³⁶ See (in Arabic): «توقيع اتفاقية لإنشاء مصنع لأسطوانات غاز الطهي بشراكة تركية» <https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/425986>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Federica Pascale, Erdogan promises Meloni to curb migrant flows, Euractiv, 22/01/2024, see: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/erdogan-promises-meloni-to-curb-migrant-flows/>

³⁹ The leaders of the two rival forces in Sudan.

⁴⁰ Abdel Kader, Assad, Sudan agrees to indirect negotiations led by Libya and Turkey to resolve conflict, Libya Observer, 05/03/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/sudan-agrees-indirect-negotiations-led-libya-and-turkey-resolve-conflict>

3. The Middle East

3.1. Syria-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Türkiye – Syria relations during the January-April term have not developed but kept a slow pace. After the stalled quadrilateral Moscow process, the normalization process has lost its depth.

The High-Level Meeting on Syria was a low-profile meeting held in Astana on 24-25 January 2024⁴¹, that facilitated the communication of the Deputy Ministers of the respective countries, other than Kazakh and the UN representatives. The agenda of the meeting was designated as the situation on the ground, the fight against terrorism, regional developments, the political process, the return of Syrians as well as matters of humanitarian assistance. The meeting was concluded with a joint statement, though; it did not include concrete improvement. The agenda of the respective countries was blended with primary concerns such as escalations with Israel and the USA for Iran, PKK threat for Türkiye, Ukraine and its impacts on Russia, or humanitarian assistance for the UN.

A diplomatic achievement was the Syrian consensus to deliver humanitarian aid to Syrians through Türkiye's border crossing until 13 May 2024 after the Astana High-Level Meeting.⁴² This commitment ensured non-interference to the UN's humanitarian aid, especially to the deprived Syrians in the north of Syria. By this decision, three border crossings are designated as secured gates to Syria, which are the Bab al-Salam, Al Ra'ee crossings, and the Bab al-Hawa.

However, Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan's speech during a TV interview pointed out the Syrian demands for a smooth transition to normalized ties, which could not be acceptable for Türkiye.⁴³ The Syrian condition for an established meeting with Türkiye is the withdrawal of Turkish military contingents from the north of Syria and the dissolution of the Syrian National Army.

Another hot topic on the agenda of the Turkish government was security due to terror threats based in either Syria or Iraq. Leaving Iraq to the following section of this analysis, Türkiye has been motivated by the repelling and punishing of the terror attacks of PKK in Istanbul, Ankara, the north of Iraq, and Syria. In this sense, the basic argument of Turkish leadership leans on two distinct arguments. The initial one is to build a security belt across the Turkish border repelling the PKK/PYD/YPG units 30 to 40 km away from the border line. The purpose is to secure the border from the long-range artillery, howitzer, or rocket attacks of terror cells as they did in 2015. The second argument is to counter national security threats beyond its borders. Hence, Turkish security forces, mainly Turkish Intelligence (MIT) hit high-value targets deep in Syria.

Per the attacks of PKK, Erdoğan emphasized widening operations against PKK in Syria and Iraq pointing out the spring and summer term after a full encirclement.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) started a winter operation, which may be called the 'punish and deter' strategy, after the PKK hit the Turkish military in the north of Iraq. This strategy confirmed the previous pattern of the TAF in implementing the military response to PKK attacks: Iraq and Syria

⁴¹ MoFA, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-15_-24-25-ocak-2024-tarihlerinde-astana-da-duzenlenen-suriye-konulu-yuksek-duzeyli-toplanti-hk.en.mfa, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁴² Michel Nichols, "Syria allows UN to keep delivering aid from Turkey", 11 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-allows-un-keep-delivering-aid-turkey-2024-02-12/>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁴³ CNNTürk, "Dışişleri Bakanı Hakan Fidan CNN TÜRK'te", 18 March 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQnYZWRsvLw>, accessed on 1 April 2024.

⁴⁴ AP, "Turkey's Erdogan vows to widen operations against Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq", 16 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/erdogan-syria-iraq-kurdish-militants-c31b579cd8a487bbdf63861110560965>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

have been circulated as ‘one’ area of operation. As PKK attacks in Iraq, Türkiye retaliates in Syria targeting the strategic PKK facilities, such as oil fields being run in partnership with the USA.⁴⁵

As well, the Gaza War needs to be delved into in terms of its impact on Türkiye – Syria relations. There has been no joint effort of both countries denouncing the Gaza conflict or acts of Israel. On the other hand, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the Israeli attack on the Iranian Consulate killing seven high-ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers since it violates international regulations on respect and protection of diplomatic missions. On the other hand, Türkiye preferred to be a low-profile observer between the Israeli and Iranian escalation in Syria.

3.1.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The relations between Syria and Türkiye appear to be at their lowest point despite the normalization calls of the Turkish leadership. The main reason why Assad is not interested in consolidating the relations is his self-perception. An Assad regime more embraced by the Gulf-led Arab League and Iran believes that the Regime has the flexibility to counter the Türkiye-backed Syria National Army. In this sense, the Assad regime is more interested in increasing the leverage of probable bargaining. That is why the regime conditions a normalization in correlation with the withdrawal of the Turkish military. In a sense, Assad regime does not expect any gain from a probable normalization with Türkiye since it could allegedly legitimize Turkish military presence in the north of Syria. Contrary to the belief of Assad, Türkiye argues that there must be a political process in the frame of the UNSC Resolution 2254, and under the UN Watch, between the Assad regime and the Syrian National Coalition. Hence, promising progress in the political compromise should be ensured to prevent further security concerns and irregular immigration waves due to a probable exploitation of the process.

An escalatory developing situation in Syria, especially if Türkiye sacrifices its military presence for the sake of normalization, would ignite an immigration wave from Syria towards Europe. Indeed, another conflict in the Levant region, after Gaza, could complicate the European policies to sustain a crisis management.

3.2. Israel/Palestine - Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Israel – Türkiye normalization has been frozen and far from reality as far as Israel continues the military campaign in Gaza. President Erdoğan is still selective in terms of wording his attitude and diverts Israel and Netanyahu-led cabinet, though he clearly accuses Israel of committing a genocide and claims that ‘Israel will be convicted’.⁴⁶ In this sense, Türkiye has joined the countries circulating statements against Israel before the International Criminal (ICJ). Türkiye prepared an evidence folder and expanded its scope to solidify the allegations through the hands of an expert group.

The counter-narratives of Israeli policy and decision-makers fore fronted accusations of alleged discrimination against Kurds and congratulated the qualifiers of the Turkish opposition after the local elections of 31 March 2024.⁴⁷ The message was in Turkish and provoked the pro-AK Party

⁴⁵ 24 TV, “TSK, Kamışlı'da PKK'nın kontrolündeki petrol üretim tesislerini vurdu”, 13 Ocak 2024, <https://www.yirmidort.tv/gundem/kara-ates-destek-vasitalariyla-pkkypgnin-petrol-uretim-tesisleri-vuruldu-147547>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

⁴⁶ Times of Israel, “Erdogan says Turkey providing evidence for genocide case: ‘Israel will be convicted’”, 13 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-says-turkey-providing-evidence-for-genocide-case-israel-will-be-convicted/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁴⁷ T24, “İsrail Dışişleri Bakanı'ndan Türkçe mesaj: İmamoğlu ve Yavaş'ı kutlarım; Erdoğan yeni malzemeler bulmalı!”, 1 April 2024, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/israil-disisleri-bakani-ndan-turkce-mesaj-imamoglu-ve-yavas-i-kutlarim-erdogan-yeni-malzemeler-bulmali.1158685>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

government to circulate ‘who’ congratulated the mayors-elected. On the other hand, Netanyahu, himself, had congratulated President Erdoğan after the 28 May 2024 Presidential elections. Two elections with two extreme Israeli reactions indicate the transformation of Israeli–Turkish relations.

Moreover, Israeli spying case in Türkiye has been on the public agenda due to detained 34 MOSSAD members.⁴⁸ Turkish security forces raided 57 addresses in January. The individuals were allegedly seeking to carry out "tactical tasks such as reconnaissance, monitoring, assault, and kidnapping against foreign nationals residing in our country".⁴⁹ The second operation was in February and Turkish police detained another seven individuals.⁵⁰

Per the Gaza conflict and escalating tension with Israel, Türkiye started a gradual limitation approach to the relations with Israel. Despite the public protest to Israeli companies or companies providing support to Israel, Türkiye was not restricting the trade with Israel, until recently. At first Türkiye opted for removing Israel from the ‘favored export’ destination not to subsidize the companies trading with Israeli companies.⁵¹

The Turkish diplomacy on Gaza was intense and committed to stop the violence through a well-established ceasefire. Türkiye was not directly included in the indirect negotiations of Hamas and Israel, though Turkish policy makers intensified their efforts, first, to tell the regional and global audience about the ‘injustice’ and ‘suffering’.⁵² Even, FM Fidan worded unilateral actions for the sake of sending humanitarian support to the people of Gaza.⁵³ Meanwhile, the visit of President Erdoğan to Egypt on 14 February 2024 has been of great significance either on Gaza or the overall normalization process for two reasons.⁵⁴ Both countries expressed their concerns and agreed on humanitarian aid to the deprived Palestinians. The second issue is about Turkish–Egyptian normalization since Gaza and shared understanding of Israel has multiplied the process between the two countries. In other words, worsening relations with Israel eased the Turkish-Egyptian normalization faster.

Contrary to Turkish – Egyptian rapprochement, the narrative challenge of President Erdoğan and PM Netanyahu deepened the creek between Israel and Türkiye. Erdoğan called Netanyahu as ‘today’s Nazi’, calling Israel a 'terrorist state', and accused him of conducting a 'genocide' in Gaza.⁵⁵

As a response, Netanyahu claimed Armenians and accused Erdoğan of denying them.⁵⁶ The polarization through harsh statements devastated the Israeli-Turkish normalization with a great impact on the future projects in the Eastern Mediterranean.

⁴⁸ Paul Kirby, “Turkey detains 34 on suspicion of spying for Israel”, 2 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67861377>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Times of Israel, “7 detained in Turkey for allegedly selling intel to Mossad via private detectives”, 2 February 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/7-detained-in-turkey-for-allegedly-selling-intel-to-mossad-via-private-detectives/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁵¹ Times of Israel, “Turkey delists Israel as favored export target amid tension over Hamas war”, 22 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkey-said-to-delist-israel-as-favored-export-target-amid-tension-over-hamas-war/>, accessed on 15 February 2024.

⁵² AA, “Dışişleri Bakanı Fidan: Gazze konusunda derhal harekete geçmemiz yönünde büyük bir beklenti var”, 5 Mart 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/disisleri-bakani-fidan-gazze-konusunda-derhal-harekete-gecmemiz-yonunde-buyuk-bir-beklenti-var/3156192>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵³ Sümeyye Dilara Dinçer, Mustafa Deveci, Mehmet Şah Yılmaz, Büşranur Koca, “Bakan Fidan: Gazze konusunda tek taraflı adım atılması gerektiğini dile getirenler var, bunu destekliyoruz”, 3 Mart 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/bakan-fidan-gazze-konusunda-tek-tarafli-adim-atilmasi-gerektigini-dile-getirenler-var-bunu-destekliyoruz/3153807>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵⁴ Esra Tekin, “Turkish president arrives in Egypt for official visit”, 14 February 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-president-arrives-in-egypt-for-official-visit/3137407>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁵⁵ I24 News, “m”, 9 March 2024, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-turkey/1709981618-turkey-s-erdogan-compares-israel-s-netanyahu-to-hitler-and-stalin>, accessed on 14 March 2024.

Other than political strains, Turkish FM Fidan announced a series of measures on 8 April 2024, which is designed by a Presidential decree directing the Turkish institutions to identify the steps to be taken.⁵⁷ The reasons of the measures, for Fidan, is the attitude of Israel denying a ceasefire, preventing humanitarian support to Gazans, and not permitting the Turkish humanitarian air-drops per the request of the Turkish government. In this sense, the Turkish Ministry of Trade restricted exports of 54 items to Israeli markets, which covers industrial semi-products.⁵⁸ This move was actually a beginning of a series of measures upon the negative developments in Gaza. By that way, Türkiye also repelled the public accusations that the trade with Israel still continues and indeed trade was officially halted at the beginning of May 2024. Meanwhile, the measures have become a pioneering process to the regional countries, and the South to start a ‘deter and punish’ wave against Israel.

Another significant development was the Israeli – Iranian mutual low-profile attacks. After the Israeli air force hit the Damascus Consulate of Iran on April 1st and killed seven Iranian military men, Iran retaliated with a mass strike of rockets and loitering drones. On the other hand, most deliveries have been shot by the U.S. military and the countries on the way to Israeli aerospace (Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan). The Israeli response was to strike Iranian military facilities in Isfahan city other than failing rockets found in Iraq heading to an unknown destination on April 19, 2024. Although Israeli institutions were silent on claiming responsibility, it has become clear that the attack was a minor reminder of the intentions of both countries. The global audience has felt the danger of a probable burst of military escalation endangering the countries en route, though; both countries are blamed for starting a ‘pre-informed and consulted show of force’.

3.2.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The Gaza conflict becomes the essential base of Turkish–Israeli relations after the Israeli intervention in Gaza. It would be wise to claim that another normalization will depend on a change of leadership in both countries as far as the Palestinian issue is on the agenda of the international community. In this scope, the negatively motivated narratives of both parties will create a snowball effect on the relations in the short-term. As the situation in Gaza worsens, Türkiye will be more interactive with the international community to push Israel to accept the rights of Palestinians. Israeli and Iranian retaliatory ‘show of force’, on the other hand, alerted the Turkish leadership to be prepared for a regional escalation in the way to fasten the armament program, mainly Turkish-made air defense systems.

3.3. Iraq-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

PKK’s attacks in December 2023 and January 2024 have transformed the Türkiye’s counter terrorism policy and relevant Iraq strategy. The frequent visits of Turkish Foreign and Defense Ministers, Fidan and Akar, and MIT Chief Kalın, ignited a comprehensive strategy. MIT Chief Kalın started the shuttle diplomacy with a visit to Iraqi President Rashidi and PM Sudani on 23

⁵⁶ Jonothan Lis, “Netanyahu Accuses Erdogan of Denying Armenian Genocide as Ties Between Countries Worsen”, Haaretz, 10 March 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-10/ty-article/.premium/netanyahu-publicly-accuses-turkey-of-denying-the-armenian-holocaust/0000018e-287a-d152-ad8e-29fa35a10000>, accessed on 14 March 2024.

⁵⁷ NTV, “Bakan Fidan: İsrail'e yönelik bir dizi yeni tedbir almayı kararlaştırdık”, 9 April 2024, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/bakan-fidan-israile-yonelik-bir-dizi-yeni-tedbir-almayi-kararlastirdik.4CvLrUrBHE-8PsrIU3neJw>, accessed on 9 April 2024.

⁵⁸ NTV, “Türkiye, İsrail’le ticarete kısıtlama getirdi: 54 ürün grubunda ihracata sınır”, 9 April 2024, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/turkiye-israile-ticarete-kisiltama-getirdi.mmDjCAuU1kSjs--7Vo1XA>, accessed on 9 April 2024.

January 2024.⁵⁹ The schedule of Kalın’s visit included the Shia, Turkoman, and Sunnah opinion leaders with the significance of PKK threat, the Development Road Project, Gaza, and regional issues in question.⁶⁰ Kalın scheduled another meeting on 28 January 2024 with the Iraq Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) officials and the leader of the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP), Masood Barzani.⁶¹

The very well-known strain of Türkiye and KDP with Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Bafel Talabani, had been the primary debate on how to divert PUK with PKK in this travel. Türkiye’s argument is that PUK is collaborating with PKK, as Bafel Talabani confirms, and has closed the Turkish aerospace to Sulaymaniyah city, which is under the control of PUK. As complementary step to the negotiations in Erbil, Turkish FM Fidan warned Bafel Talabani to distance himself from PKK in March 2024.⁶²

Another diplomatic attempt was on Defense Minister Güler, accompanied by Turkish Chief of General staff Metin Gürak, with a special focus on countering terrorism.⁶³ In this sense, both defense officials paid a visit to the leaders of KRG on what to do and how to engage with PKK’s presence in the north of Iraq. Finally, the media of Iraq circulated that the visit of President Erdoğan to conclude a series of agreements with Iraq.⁶⁴ The Turkish media, on the other hand, focused a probable Spring Operation to eradicate PKK from Iraq.⁶⁵ In this scope, the meeting of the Turkish 2nd Army Commander Metin Toker and Iraqi generals attracted the media’s interest to question if Türkiye and Iraqi (including KRG) soldiers would start a joint operation. Consequently, both countries announced that they would build a joint operation center to coordinate the military acts. President Erdoğan, then, addressed the public on the occasion of local elections stating that Türkiye will not permit a ‘terroristan’.

The visit of President Erdoğan to Baghdad and Erbil has become a new page to build a positive agenda between two countries on April 22, 2024. President Erdoğan and PM Sudani concluded and inked 25 agreements that will further the relations of both countries. In this sense, Türkiye urged the Iraqi government to take effective measures against PKK while granting promises to release more water from the rivers. On the other hand, both countries were keen to promote the Development Road linking Europe and the Gulf region. The 20 billion USD-worth investment, which will be comprised of land and rail road other than oil and gas pipelines has the potential to be an alternative to Indian initiative circulated by Indian PM Modi on the sidelines of G20 Summit. Besides, China and the Gulf countries (mainly the UAE and Qatar) are supportive to the Development Road, although Saudi Arabia keeps her silence.

⁵⁹ Zafer Fatih Beyaz, “MİT Başkanı Kalın, Irak Cumhurbaşkanı Reşid ve Irak Başbakanı es-Sudani ile görüştü”, 23 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/mit-baskani-kalin-irak-cumhurbaskani-resid-ve-irak-basbakani-es-sudani-ile-gorustu/3116288>, accessed on 21 March 2024

⁶⁰ Murat Yetkin, “MİT Başkanı Kalın’ın seyahatleri Ankara’da diplomatların merak konusu”, 5 February 2024, <https://yetkinreport.com/2024/02/05/mit-baskani-kalinin-seyahatleri-ankarada-diplomatlarin-merak-konusu/>, accessed on 21 March 2024

⁶¹ Saduman Turkyay, “Turkish intel chief visits Iraq for 2nd time”, AA, 28 January 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-intel-chief-visits-iraq-for-2nd-time/3121534>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁶² Daily Sabah, “FM Fidan warns Talabani's PUK in Iraq to distance itself from PKK”, 18 March 2024, http://sabahdai.ly/_1wfr, accessed on 20 March 2024.

⁶³ Daily Sabah, “Turkish defense chief meets KRG officials in Iraq visit”, 7 February 2024, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-defense-chief-meets-krg-officials-in-iraq-visit>, accessed on 14 February 2024.

⁶⁴ RUDAW, “Yaşar Güler Ankara’nın yeni güvenlik anlaşması teklifini Bağdat’a sundu”, 6 February 2024, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middleeast/iraq/060220243>, accessed on 6 March 2024.

⁶⁵ Nır Banu Aras and Şahin Şen, “İşte Irak’ta PKK’yı bitirme stratejisi”, 6 March 2024, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/iste-irakta-pkkyi-bitirme-stratejisi-4606887>, accessed on 6 March, 2024.

3.3.1 Sustainability of bilateral relations

The Turkish attempts to consolidate the relations with Iraq can be based on three categories of mutual concerns. The first category is security and stability on both sides of the shared border due to PKK's presence. PKK has become a threat, not only to Türkiye but also to Iraq. PKK is active in both Iraq and Syria. Hence, PKK is perceived as a challenging actor by Iraqi and KRG authorities except for Bafel Talabani due to his long-lasting competition with the Barzani family. Talabani cooperates with PKK to dominate the north of Iraq by benefitting from PKK's presence, Iran's influence, and interestingly American support. Due to the lack of military capacity of the Iraqi central government and KRG, Türkiye appears to be the actor providing military support against PKK. Meanwhile, Türkiye will have the exemption of implementing active measures in coordination with Iraqi authorities.

The second category is economy and trade between the two countries. Iraq is the fifth country in Turkish exports whilst Türkiye shares only 5% of the Iraqi imports. Hence, there exists a great potential that could promote the economic expectations of both countries once a balanced resonance is set. The Development Road will pave a prosperity avenue for the micro, mezzo, and macro spectrum of both communities with a combination of land, rail, and energy transportation. The resentments of 2022 in Basra and Baghdad indicate that a live economy and trade will stabilize Iraq. Nevertheless, both PKK and DAESH presence in Iraq challenge the realization of the Development Road project.

The third category is about the regional dynamics. The Gulf market, with a potential of 800 billion USD, should be integrated to Europe en route Iraq and Türkiye that makes this avenue a matter of competition. In this sense, the projects such as Chinese Road and Belt Initiative or India-Middle East-Europe Road will compete with the Development Road Project. Hence, Türkiye perceives the new resonance with Iraq as an opportunity to facilitate the easiest and fastest way of logistics as far as the security threats on the other projects are concerned. Moreover, Türkiye considers terrorist threat in Iraq not only a matter of national security, but also an impediment for the regional prosperity.

4. Gulf region

4.1 UAE – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

As major step in normalization between the countries, Erdoğan attended the World Governments Summit in Dubai as “guest of honor” in mid-February,⁶⁶ underlining that Türkiye’s trade volume with the UAE has surpassed the level of 20 billion dollars, but the aim is to increase it above the level of 50 billion dollars. During his stay in the UAE Erdoğan met Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss on action to achieve the goals of the comprehensive economic partnership between the two countries as well as regional developments, with a focus on the ongoing situation in the Gaza Strip, underlining the need of international action to secure a ceasefire and protection for civilians.⁶⁷

Bilateral exchanges continued later in the month and beyond. At the end of February Al Nahyan and Erdoğan spoke on the phone to enhancing cooperation and strengthening ties across various sectors, with a special emphasis on economic and developmental areas.⁶⁸ Also, at the beginning of Ramadan Erdoğan exchanged a call with Al Nahyan, and invited him to Türkiye for the first meeting of the High Level Strategic Council established between the two countries.⁶⁹ Türkiye also extended condolences for a flood disaster that took place in the UAE in mid-April.⁷⁰

However, alignment was also reported over the regional trade sphere: Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the UAE signed a preliminary deal to cooperate on the Development Road project⁷¹ that is expected to stimulate economic growth and promote economic integration and sustainability between East and West.⁷²

4.2 Qatar – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

At the beginning of February, Istanbul hosted the Qatar-Türkiye Business Forum. The meeting touched on trade and economic co-operation between the two countries, reviewed the investment climate and the incentives and opportunities available to strengthen economic relations.⁷³ Few weeks later, a meeting between Qatar Chamber First Vice-Chairman Mohamed bin Twar Al Kuwari and the Chairman of Kalkavan Global Group Faruk Kalkavan was held in Doha,⁷⁴ reflecting the strong economic ties and mutual investment interests between the two countries.

⁶⁶ Gulf News, *Turkish President Erdogan at World Governments Summit in Dubai calls for global unity as crises loom*, February 2024. <https://gulfnnews.com/uae/turkish-president-erdogan-at-world-governments-summit-in-dubai-calls-for-global-unity-as-crises-loom-1.101029619>

⁶⁷ K. Al Amir, *WGS 2024: UAE and Turkish Presidents discuss enhancing bilateral relations*, Gulf News, February 2024. <https://gulfnnews.com/uae/government/wgs-2024-uae-and-turkish-presidents-discuss-enhancing-bilateral-relations-1.101025628>

⁶⁸ See <https://www.mohamedbinzayed.ae/en/news-and-media/2024/02/UAE-and-Turkiye-Presidents-discuss-bilateral-relations-and-regional-developments>

⁶⁹ G. Bayar, *Turkish president speaks with UAE counterpart over phone*, Anadolu Agency, March 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-speaks-with-uae-counterpart-over-phone/3161855>

⁷⁰ F. Zorlu, *Turkish President conveys condolences to UAE counterpart for flood disaster*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-conveys-condolences-to-uae-counterpart-for-flood-disaster/3194453>

⁷¹ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, UAE sign deal on Development Road project*, April 2024; <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-iraq-qatar-uae-sign-deal-on-development-road-project>

⁷² See section related to Türkiye-Iraq.

⁷³ Gulf Times, *Turkiye is an ‘important’ destination for Qatari investments: Sheikh Khalifa*, February 2024. <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/677021/business/turkiye-is-an-important-destination-for-qatari-investments-sheikh-khalifa>

⁷⁴ Qatar Tribune, *Qatar-Turkish business meet explores new commercial partnerships*, February 2024. <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/109044/business/qatar-turkish-business-meet-explores-new-commercial-partnerships>

However, bilateral cooperation continues to encompass many sectors. Hulusi Akar, the Chairman of the Committee on National Defense of the Turkish National Assembly, met in Ankara with the head of the Qatar-Türkiye Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group, Ahmed bin Hitmi Al Hitmi in mid-February. During the visit, the parties emphasized both the efforts in defense and security relations, as well as those in economy, education, health and tourism.⁷⁵

In the context of the Gaza war, Qatar and Türkiye have also kept on with their humanitarian and diplomatic efforts towards Palestinians. At the end of March, Qatar has announced its collaboration with Türkiye in reuniting wounded Palestinians from the Gaza Strip receiving treatment in Türkiye with their relative's undergoing treatment in Qatar.⁷⁶

In mid-April, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met Al-Thani in Doha, to discuss the situation in Palestine as well as the regional developments.⁷⁷ Türkiye's MFA trip included talks with Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas political bureau, to discuss the latest on Gaza conflict, humanitarian assistance to the Strip, cease-fire, as well as hostages.⁷⁸

4.3 Saudi Arabia – Türkiye: meaningful bilateral developments

Economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries continued to strengthen over the last few months. In mid-February, Istanbul hosted the Turkish-Saudi Investment and Business Forum in which 28 memoranda of understanding were signed both at governmental and private sector level, covering the fields of human capital, innovation, tourism, construction, real estate, manufacturing, industry, hospitality, vocational training, games, financial services, logistics, and information and communication technology, among the others.⁷⁹

Along the line of trade and economic relations, Riyadh hosted the 27th IBF Türkiye-Saudi Arabia business forum and Turkish export products fair at the beginning March 2024, in partnership with the Riyadh chamber of commerce, MUSIAD and IBF.⁸⁰

Later in March bilateral relations as well as regional developments were discussed by phone between Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan. During the call, the parties touched also the latest on Gaza.⁸¹

Within the framework of the joint efforts toward the end of hostilities, Turkish FM Fidan attended a meeting in Riyadh organized by the Gaza Contact Group in April, to discuss steps to boost recognition of a state of Palestine and increase pressure on Israel and its supporters.⁸²

⁷⁵ A. Ekiz, Turkish, *Qatari parliamentary officials discuss bilateral ties*, Anadolu Agency, February 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-qatari-parliamentary-officials-discuss-bilateral-ties/3139082>

⁷⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, *Qatar Announces Reunification of Wounded Palestinians in Doha in Cooperation with Türkiye*, March 2024. <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2024/03/20/qatar-announces-reunification-of-wounded-palestinians-in-doha-in-cooperation-with-turkiye>

⁷⁷ G.N. Cebi, *Turkish foreign minister to visit Qatar for bilateral talks*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-to-visit-qatar-for-bilateral-talks/3192799>

⁷⁸ G. N. Cebi, *Turkish foreign minister meets Hamas chief in Qatar*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-meets-hamas-chief-in-qatar/3194483>

⁷⁹ Saudi Agency Press, *Turkish-Saudi Investment, Business Forum Starts in Istanbul*, February 2024. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/zh/N2048793>

⁸⁰ See IBF-International Business forum <https://ibfturkiyesaudiarabia.ibforum.org/index.html#about>

⁸¹ C. Efesoy, *Turkish, Saudi foreign ministers discuss bilateral ties, Gaza*, Anadolu Agency, March 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkish-saudi-foreign-ministers-discuss-bilateral-ties-gaza/3180055>

⁸² E. Tekin, *Turkish foreign minister attends Contact Group meeting on Gaza in Saudi capital*, Anadolu Agency, April 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-attends-contact-group-meeting-on-gaza-in-saudi-capital/3205611>

4.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

In the reporting period, relations between Türkiye and the Gulf countries have continued following two main axes: economy and regional diplomacy, with the first emerging as the main driver for consolidating the normalization process.

The quartet shares the common goal of ending hostilities in Gaza, hence they all continued exchanges towards de-escalation both in bilateral talks and within the framework of the Gaza Contact Group with the “Islamic world standing more united and in solidarity unlike in previous crises”,⁸³ even if their relations with the Parties in conflict as well as their ways to react to the Israeli moves vary. Türkiye maintains strong relations with Hamas. During his visit to Doha as part of Türkiye’s effort to prevent war in Gaza from being overshadowed by the Israel-Iran tensions,⁸⁴ Türkiye’s MFA Hakan Fidan was reported to meet Hamas leaders based in the Qatari capital. Later in April, Erdoğan hosted Hamas’ chief Haniyeh in Istanbul, urging Palestinians to be united. Also, Türkiye went so far as to announcing the will of joining South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as well as to halting exports and imports to and from Israel.⁸⁵

From their part, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have underlined that the future of Gaza and its administration should stay under the control of the Palestinian people as well as the need for a two State solution. At the current stage, however, the UAE did not suspend ties with Israel⁸⁶ and Saudi Arabia, while not having normalized relations with Israel despite US led efforts, has moved as its “activism to end the war in Gaza will not overtake its domestic and foreign policy strategies to achieve Vision 2030 goals”.⁸⁷

Moreover, two things are worth noting here: even if the past rift between Türkiye/Qatar and the Saudi/UAE has been overcome, ideological differences between them still exist. However, the parties have buried the hatchet to the best interest of economy, trade and security. This attitude is likely to be maintained, considering the latest developments.

At the end of March, Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have signed a deal to launch negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the aim of liberalizing trade in goods and services, facilitate bilateral investments and trade with the region. The FTA would represent one of the world’s largest free trade areas between Türkiye and members of the GCC, with a total value of \$2.4 trillion.⁸⁸

And this, on the one hand is totally in line with the economic trends of last year: according to TİM data, in 2023 the UAE was Türkiye’s ninth largest trading partner: Turkish exports increased by 63.4 percent over 2022 to USD 8.58 billion compared to USD 5.25 billion in the previous year. Turkish exports with Saudi Arabia also increased in 2023 (the third largest market for Turkish goods by percentage increase compared to 2022); although these volumes were lower than trade with the

⁸³ See <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-intensifies-diplomatic-contacts-for-gaza>

⁸⁴ E. Akin, *Turkey’s FM to visit Qatar as regional diplomacy seeks to contain Iran-Israel tension*, Al-Monitor, April 2024.

⁸⁵ Al Jazeera, *Turkey says it halts trade with Israel over Gaza aid access*, May 2024; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/2/turkey-says-it-halts-trade-with-israel-over-gaza-aid-access>

⁸⁶ Reuters, *Fact Check: UAE did not suspend ties with Israel, diplomats say*, April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/uae-did-not-suspend-ties-with-israel-diplomats-say-2024-04-10/>

⁸⁷ M. Muasher, A. Hamzawy, R. ji, M. H. Ali, E. al-ketbi, Y. Farouk, *Governing Gaza After the War: The Regional Perspectives*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, February 2024 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/02/16/governing-gaza-after-war-regional-perspectives-pub-91663>

⁸⁸ Daily Sabah, *Türkiye, Gulf states to launch talks for free trade agreement*, March 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-gulf-states-to-launch-talks-for-free-trade-agreement>

UAE.⁸⁹ Also with Qatar, that has long lasting relations with Ankara, trade volume stood at approximately 1.2 billion USD in 2023.⁹⁰

On the other hand, FTA between Türkiye and the GCC would represent a step forward in the sustainability of normalization since it goes beyond the rapprochement at the bilateral level. To be noted that the resolution of the Gulf crisis paved the way for a resumption of GCC economic integration activities, which include a renewed effort to negotiate FTA agreements as a regional bloc.⁹¹ Simultaneously with the Türkiye discussions, the GCC is engaged in FTA negotiations with several other countries including the United Kingdom.⁹² Interestingly, in early March, also Türkiye and UK have announced the formal launch of negotiations on a new FTA with a view to including services as well as goods in a new deal.⁹³

In this framework, the rapprochement between Türkiye and GCC could also open new spaces for cooperation in the Middle East and enhance interconnectivity in the region. Türkiye, has indeed kept on in its support to the Iraqis Development Road project, by agreeing with Qatar, Iraq and the UAE to enhance cooperation over the project at the end of April.⁹⁴ Although considering the numerous challenges around the feasibility of the corridor, the Development Road, if realized, will have not only the potential to boost cross-border trade and connectivity among Iraq, Gulf countries and Türkiye but also among others in Asia, Europe, and Africa, fostering economic integration between East and West.

In the context of evolving Middle East dynamics, both Türkiye and the Gulf States seem to have resized their competition for regional 'primacy' in favor of a successful partnership based on economic and security grounds, at least for now. Türkiye remains indeed interested in maintaining warm relations with the Gulf due to its financial necessity and the GCC's remain committed in their strategy for diversifying their revenue sources and economies, to which Ankara can contribute.

If the EU can seize the opportunity, this détente could also benefit its role in the region, both in terms of improving neighborly relations, strengthening trust in business and trade, and perhaps regaining centrality in mediation efforts towards regional conflicts.

⁸⁹ I rapporti economico-commerciali tra Turchia, Emirati Arabi Uniti e Arabia Saudita nel 2023 fotografati dall'Assemblea degli Esportatori Turchi (TİM).

⁹⁰ Gulf times, *Qatar-Turkiye trade reaches QR4.4bn in 2023*, February 2024. <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/677665/business/qatar-turkiye-trade-reaches-qr44bn-in-2023>

⁹¹ N. Habibi, *Turkey-GCC Trade Talks Mark Another Step Toward Rapprochement with Arab World*, Stimson, April 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/turkey-gcc-trade-talks-mark-another-step-toward-rapprochement-with-arab-world/>

⁹² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/trade-update-uk-gulf-cooperation-council-fta-negotiations>

⁹³ Arab News, *UK and Turkiye launch talks on a new free trade deal*, March 2024. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2476691/business-economy>

⁹⁴ The Development Road is the name given by the Iraqi government to what was known as the dry canal that connects the Al-Faw Grand Port in southern Iraq with the Turkish territories through railway networks and roads. It will extend for 1,200 kilometers from Al-Faw port town in southern Iraq to Faysh Khabur town in the northern Iraqi governorate of Duhok. A. Salem, *Iraq, Turkey, UAE, Qatar to hold four-way summit on Development Road project*, Iraqi News, May 2024; <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq/iraq-turkey-uae-qatar-to-hold-four-way-summit-on-development-road-project/>

5. Caucasus

The South Caucasus region experienced a relatively calm period between January and April 2024, but it was quite active in terms of foreign affairs and bilateral diplomatic relations. During this period, apart from some exceptional negative statements, it was observed that the leaders of the countries in the region and official state representatives were using cautious language and trying to avoid provoking each other. If a similar approach continues to be adopted in the following period and if international third-party actors also support this positive atmosphere, normalization in the region could gain momentum. It seems possible that both economic and trade relations as well as political relations between the countries in the region could be shaped within the framework of mutual respect and the interests of all parties. In this context, the reflection of the relations between Türkiye and the three countries in the South Caucasus region during the January-April 2024 period has been examined under the following subheadings.

5.1 Meaningful bilateral developments between Armenia – Türkiye

During this period, the Republic of Türkiye has maintained its strong ties with Azerbaijan on one hand, while also making careful efforts to normalize relations with Armenia. Türkiye has been cautious not to use language that would provoke the parties involved and has particularly emphasized the importance of third parties such as the United States and the European Union adopting a neutral stance in resolving the issues in the region.

Within the period, the statements made by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on the "Security Environment" program of the State Radio on February 01, 2024, carry a self-critical nature concerning Armenia's contribution to solving the problems in the region. In his statement, Pashinyan expressed the need for a reassessment of the Armenian Constitution and Declaration of Independence, stating that peace could not be achieved if state policy was not conducted in line with the elements in the Declaration of Independence⁹⁵. Still, instead, war would erupt. Implicitly, Pashinyan's speech suggests that some articles in the DoI could be perceived as a threat by other countries in the region. The need for correction in this DoI is highlighted with the following statements: "We always look at the issues from Azerbaijan's perspective, but why don't we consider how our other neighbors perceive this? How do they perceive creating a state that will restore historical justice? What does restoring historical justice mean? For example, problems in Armenia are generally considered in terms of how Azerbaijan and Türkiye perceive them, but the question of how Georgia perceives them is never asked. Why does Georgia have deep defense relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye instead of Armenia? Could this be related to the messages we have laid down as a state?"⁹⁶

Naturally, Pashinyan's autocritique remarks were met with reactions and criticism from some circles within Armenia. In response to criticisms that the decision to reassess the constitution and declaration of independence was made in line with Azerbaijan's demands, Pashinyan stated that "there is a need to reassess the declaration, and that peace can never be established if state policy is pursued in the direction of reuniting Karabakh with Armenia, and this would lead to war."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ DoI of Armenia: DoI is the main document designating the frame of the establishment of the Independent State of Armenia and framing the assessments and objectives for the future. So, the issues carrying out hostility and/or offensive articles can potentially deteriorate the mutual relations with the neighboring countries.

⁹⁶ AA (2024), "Paşinyan'a göre Ermenistan'ın Bağımsızlık Bildirgesi'ndeki unsurlar barış getirmeyecek, aksine savaş çıkaracak", <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/pasinyana-gore-ermenistanin-bagimsizlik-bildirgesindeki-unsurlar-baris-getirmeyecek-aksine-savas-cikaracak/3125451>

⁹⁷ AA (2024), *ibid.*

Considering that Pashinyan's statements in this direction have the potential to contribute in bringing the sides closer, they are expected to be closely monitored by third-party countries and international organizations.

Another significant development during the period was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to the capitals of the three countries in the South Caucasus region. Within this frame, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus to affirm NATO's support to long-standing partners Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.⁹⁸ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg concluded his tour of the South Caucasus on Tuesday, 19 March 2024 in Yerevan, Armenia, where he met with President Vahagn Khachaturyan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. On stability in the South Caucasus, the Secretary-General urged Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach an agreement to pave the way for the normalization of relations and a sense of durable peace. "This matters for Euro-Atlantic security as we face a more dangerous world," he emphasized, reiterating that "NATO supports Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and your peaceful aspirations. During his visit, the Secretary-General discussed the progress in Armenia's domestic reforms. He highlighted Armenia's commitment to ensuring democratic control of its armed forces, including by participating in NATO's building integrity program."⁹⁹

Following this visit, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that "if no agreement could be reached with Baku on the return of some strategic territories, war could be on the agenda".¹⁰⁰ Pashinyan held a meeting with residents of border areas near some abandoned Azerbaijani villages in the Tavush region in northern Armenia, which has been under Yerevan's control since the early 1990s. In recent weeks, Pashinyan has signaled his willingness to return some villages to Azerbaijan because they control the main road to the Georgian border. In light of these statements, Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to have come a step closer in relations.

Another official call made by Türkiye to Armenia on April 4, 2024, has been recorded as an important step in the region's security efforts. In a written statement issued by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was reminded that the United Nations General Assembly declared April 4 as the "International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action" to draw attention to the dangers of mines and unexploded ordnance. The statement included the expression: "Türkiye is a country that provides concrete contributions to combating both land and sea mines worldwide and in the region." The statement emphasized the need to support the Ottawa Treaty, which bans the use, storage, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines, and supports international cooperation efforts in this regard. Armenia was invited to deliver its mine maps to Azerbaijan accurately, and it was stated that Türkiye's strong support to countries combating mine risks would continue both in the field and internationally.¹⁰¹

Another significant development in the last days of April was a phone call between Prime Minister Pashinyan and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. According to a statement from the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia, "On April 28, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had a phone conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Pashinyan expressed satisfaction with the bilateral relations with the United States and conveyed a positive view on the process initiated for the delineation and demarcation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border. It was noted that the mutual recognition of territorial integrity and sovereignty by both countries and the delineation and

⁹⁸NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peece>

⁹⁹ NATO (2024), *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Euronews (2024), "Ermenistan Başbakanı Nikol Paşinyan, bazı stratejik topraklarının iadesi konusunda Bakü ile uzlaşılmasını halinde savaşın gündeme gelebileceğini söyledi.", <https://tr.euronews.com/2024/03/19/pasinyan-daglik-karabagda-topraklarin-iadesi-konusu-yeni-savasa-neden-olabilir>

¹⁰¹ Aksam (2024), "Türkiye'den, Ermenistan'a çağrı: Azerbaycan'a haritaları teslim edin", <https://m.aksam.com.tr/guncel/turkiyeden-ermenistana-cagri-azerbaycana-haritalari-teslim-edin/haber-1463977>

demarcation of borders based on the same principles as the Alma-Ata Declaration process paved the way for the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement."¹⁰²

When Prime Minister Pashinyan's statements are considered alongside the recent remarks from Aliyev and Erdogan as mentioned in the Azerbaijan section below, it is observed that the process toward a lasting peace agreement is progressing. Both sides are endeavoring to take careful diplomatic steps, and there seems to be a positive atmosphere for a permanent solution.

5.1.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Some critical points for normalization emerged ahead of the Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting of April 5.

Ankara, indeed, rejected the meeting as a risk to fuel tensions instead of peace, since Azerbaijan was not included. In the statement of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated April 4, 2024, numbered 55, titled "Regarding the Trilateral Meeting in Brussels on April 5, 2024, between Armenia, the United States, and the European Union"¹⁰³ the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that:

“In such a critical period where the success of this historic opportunity is within reach, it has become even more crucial for third-party actors, especially those outside the region, to approach the process fairly and impartially, and to refrain meticulously from causing harm to the process. (3) In this context, Türkiye feels a responsibility to clearly state that the trilateral meeting planned between Armenia, the EU, and the US on April 5, 2024, will undermine the neutrality approach that should be the basis for resolving the complex issues in the region. (4) This initiative, which excludes Azerbaijan, will not serve peace but rather pave the way for the South Caucasus to become a geopolitical battleground. To establish long lasting peace in the region, Ankara reiterated a call to third countries “to approach the parties with equal distance” as well as its commitment to “encourage the utilization of the historic opportunity for lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia”¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, the trilateral meeting was held to incentivizing Armenia to maintain its westward geopolitical shift; hence the EU-US role in supporting the Country’s reform efforts and in enhancing further cooperation in the region on the scope of an “increasingly aligned” West-Armenia relations, counterbalancing the influence of the other regional actors.¹⁰⁵

Besides, some military tension between Baku and Yerevan were reported during this period, despite the efforts and developments put forward by the parties for peace. Such developments are among critical issues that negatively affect peace efforts in the region and require urgent resolution with the contribution of all parties.

5.2. Meaningful bilateral developments between Georgia - Türkiye

In the period between January and April 2024, Türkiye’s support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Georgia's aspirations to integrate with Euro-Atlantic institutions continued.

¹⁰² Ermenihaber (2024), “Paşinyan ve Blinken, Ermenistan-Azerbaycan ilişkilerini telefonda görüştü”, <https://www.ermenihaber.am/tr/news/2024/04/29/Ermenistan-Azerbaycan-ABD/273934>

¹⁰³ MFA of Türkiye (2024), “No: 55, 4 Nisan 2024, Ermenistan, ABD ve AB Arasında 5 Nisan 2024 Tarihinde Brüksel’de Düzenlenecek Üçlü Toplantı Hk.”, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_55_ermenistan--abd-ve-ab-arasinda-5-nisan-2024-tarihinde-bruksel-de-duzenlenecek-uclu-toplanti-hk.tr.mfa

¹⁰⁴ MFA of Türkiye (2024), *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ A. Avetisyan, *European Union, United States woo Armenia with economic assistance package*, Eurasianet, April 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/european-union-united-states-woo-armenia-with-economic-assistance-package>

During this period, one of the most significant developments regarding bilateral relations between Türkiye and Georgia was the approval of the Customs Facilitation Agreement signed between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in 2022. In summary, the decision to approve the "Agreement on Facilitation of Customs Transit Procedures for the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Project between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye, the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Government of Georgia"¹⁰⁶ signed on August 18, 2022, in Baku, was published in the Official Gazette on April 7, 2024, with the signature of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and it entered into force.

Another significant development regarding Georgia was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to the capital Tbilisi and the statements made there. Within this frame, "NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg continued his tour of the South Caucasus on 18th of March 2024, meeting with President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgia in Tbilisi"¹⁰⁷ During his visit, the Secretary-General discussed ways to further strengthen NATO's partnership with Georgia. NATO is stepping up its cooperation with Georgia in areas such as crisis management, cyber security, military engineering, and secure communications. Mr. Stoltenberg underlined NATO's commitment to support Georgia's path towards stronger democracy and full Euro-Atlantic integration, including the 2008 Bucharest decision that Georgia will become a member of NATO. At the same time NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's explanations as "Georgia is one of NATO's closest partners. We highly appreciate your substantial contributions to NATO missions and operations, and we fully support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia"¹⁰⁸ are in convenience with Türkiye's approach to Georgia and the South Caucasus region.

5.2.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The situation in Abkhazia and the continued Russian occupation of territories in South Ossetia maintain their status as the most critical and sensitive issues for Georgia's territorial integrity and regional security. The current situation not only threatens Georgia, but also endangers the security of vital transit routes such as trade routes extending from East to West and pipelines like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Consequently, the implementation of customs facilitation agreements and cooperation between Georgia, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, supported by European countries, and increasing functionality and partnerships will ensure European natural gas and fuel security and sustainable resource supply. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is of critical importance for both the integration of regional countries with the West and the safe and economic flow of goods exported from the West to the region. Therefore, the security of these trade routes and pipelines is not only crucial for regional countries but also holds critical importance for European countries in terms of connectivity towards the region.

5.3. Meaningful bilateral developments between Azerbaijan – Türkiye

Tripartite and quadrilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan and Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Iran platforms, continued to contribute significantly to regional stability, peace, and prosperity in the period between January to April 2024 as well.

¹⁰⁶ Haberturk (2024), "Türkiye, Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasındaki gümrük anlaşması Resmi Gazete'de", <https://www.haberturk.com/turkiye-azerbaycan-ve-gurcistan-arasindaki-gumruk-anlasmasi-resmi-gazete-de-3676010>

¹⁰⁷ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peec>

¹⁰⁸ NATO (2024), ibid.

Türkiye's stance in supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory also continued in a similar vein.

One of the significant activities in terms of Azerbaijan's foreign relations during the period of January-April 2024 was the visit of the NATO Secretary General to Baku. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg arrived in Baku on the 17th of March 2024, within the frame of a three-day, tri-nation tour of the South Caucasus. Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev, the Secretary-General welcomed Azerbaijan's long-standing collaboration with the Alliance, saying he looked forward to further strengthening the partnership. Mr. Stoltenberg welcomed the opportunity to discuss energy security, saying: "Energy matters for our security and I welcome that Azerbaijan is developing closer and closer ties with several NATO Allies."¹⁰⁹ He further pointed to a track record of work on issues of mutual concern and thanked Azerbaijan for its contributions to NATO-led operations and missions – including in Kosovo and Afghanistan – since Azerbaijan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994. Stoltenberg also asserted that "On the situation in the South Caucasus, the Secretary-General underlined that "peace and stability are not only important here but for security more broadly".¹¹⁰ He said: "Armenia and Azerbaijan now have an opportunity to achieve an enduring peace after years of conflict." He added: "I can just encourage you to seize this opportunity to reach a lasting peace agreement with Armenia". It can be evaluated that Secretary-General's discourse also presents a convenient approach with Türkiye's support for peace in the region.

One of the significant recent statements regarding the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan came from President Aliyev. President Aliyev of Azerbaijan made the following statements at an international forum he attended in Baku: "Aliyev, addressing the negotiations for a peace agreement to be signed with Armenia, said, "We are closer to signing a peace agreement than ever before. We were never this close during the occupation period. Back then, we couldn't even agree on basic principles. Now, we have a common understanding of what the peace agreement should be like. We just need to work out the details. But of course, both sides need time."¹¹¹

When analyzed alongside the positive evaluations made by Turkish President Erdoğan upon his return from Iraq regarding Pashinyan's statements, these statements, along with Aliyev's remarks, indicate that Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Armenia are all cautiously trying to facilitate positive progress in the process. Diplomatic efforts in the coming period could foster a positive atmosphere for a lasting peace agreement. However, in line with Aliyev's allegations, third-party countries need to refrain from activities that could potentially fuel conflicts.

5.3.1. Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

The challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement.

Although the Azerbaijani and Armenian administrations expressed willingness to sign a formal peace agreement regarding Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, negotiations have stalled due to a lack of full consensus on certain issues, particularly the demarcation of the 1000 km border. This situation not only poses the most critical obstacle to the signing of a permanent peace agreement but also delays the emergence of sustainable and lasting peace and economic potential in the South Caucasus region. Therefore, it would expedite the peace efforts for third-party countries to offer a neutral and fair approach within the framework of international law, to approach the parties with

¹⁰⁹ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peee>

¹¹⁰ NATO (2024), "Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited the South Caucasus", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/secretary-general-tours-south-caucasus-chair-nato-military-committee-8peee>

¹¹¹ AA (2024), "Aliyev: Üç ülke Ermenistan'ı bize karşı silahlandırıyor", <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/aliyev-uc-ulke-ermenistan-i-bize-karsi-silahlandiriyor-p41543>

equal distance, and to support the resolution efforts, including offering financial aid, credits, or rewards to countries for the post-resolution period.