

# TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

*Final analysis and policy proposals*

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# TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION. IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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*In the regional normalization processes initiated by Türkiye in the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf and Caucasus there is a general trend towards accomplishment. Dialogue, cooperation and distinctive policies have been driving forces in the relations with regional actors, marking a clear turning point in Ankara's regional approach, aiming at arising Türkiye as a key player and promoter of stability. Moreover, the evolution of domestic, regional and international dynamics has contributed to enforcing cooperative zeal by playing as pushing factors.*

*However, critical issues remain, mainly due to the ongoing disputes in the area and to the persistent war between Israel and Palestine. Given the still existing potential of friction but also the expansion of cooperative margins, this analysis aims at providing Italy ad hoc policy proposals with specific and distinct regional focus related to main areas of interest. The proposals are submitted as well in the light of the already existing synergies linking Italy and Türkiye, whose strategic partnership entangles bilateral, regional, and international levels.*

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*The first report covered developments in Türkiye's regional normalisation between September 2023 and January 2024. The document is available at:*

*[https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/turkiye\\_and\\_normalization\\_in\\_the\\_region\\_1st\\_monitor\\_cespi\\_0.pdf](https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/turkiye_and_normalization_in_the_region_1st_monitor_cespi_0.pdf).*

*The second report monitored the main developments between January-April 2024, and is available at:*

*[https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/turkiye\\_and\\_normalization\\_in\\_the\\_region\\_2st\\_monitor\\_cespi.pdf](https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/turkiye_and_normalization_in_the_region_2st_monitor_cespi.pdf).*

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## Mediterranean Region

### Greece

Türkiye's less assertive policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean, Erdoğan and Mitsotakis's re-election, the 2023 disaster diplomacy following the devastating February earthquakes and the train accident/fires in Greece, have furthered Türkiye-Greece rapprochement. The Parties have managed to set 'productive normality'<sup>1</sup> by working on three levels: political dialogue, positive agenda and confidence-building measures. Since September 2023 Erdoğan and Mitsotakis met twice reaffirming the commitment for implementing the Positive Agenda between the two countries. Last December they confirmed their willingness to focus on areas where they can find common ground such as, among the others, trade, energy, tourism, education and culture.

Indeed, since the time of Erdoğan's visit to Athens in December 2023, the former regional rivals have maintained high-level contacts to promote dialogue and confidence building measures, translating the rapprochement in concrete steps. Visa exemption for Turkish citizens to visit 10 Greek islands, the organization of the Türkiye-Greece Business Forum in Istanbul by Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) are among the main initiatives in this sense.<sup>2</sup> During the meeting, visions were exchanged on energy, agriculture, transportation, industry, customs, tourism and social security.<sup>3</sup> An attitude that has been reaffirmed by Mitsotakis's visit to Ankara in May, when the two reiterated mutual commitment to intensify bilateral contacts and cooperation.

The process of rapprochement can be defined accomplished if we consider the aspects of trade, economy, tourism as well as political dialogue, but pending issues remain. In the first half of 2024 tensions arose over Greece military exercise around some Aegean Island and they were followed by mutual accusations of "politicizing" environmental issues over Greece's announcement to create two new marine parks in the Ionian and Aegean. Also, regarding Cyprus, positions have not changed despite the efforts of the newly appointed UN envoy Cuellar to organize a trilateral meeting to revive dialogue.<sup>4</sup> As underlined by recent declarations of EU Commission's lead spokesperson for foreign affairs and security, Cyprus issue remains a major hurdle to the improvement of EU-Türkiye relations.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, until today Türkiye and Greece have been managing to put aside problems, "agreeing to disagree" over certain issues and focusing on 'sectorial' partnerships, instead.

Here some things are worth noting. The setting of a Positive Agenda and the reiterated commitment to implement it are, with no doubt, among the main goals already reached in the rapprochement process between Ankara and Athens. However, within this frame, visa exemption for tourism in certain Greek Island is landmark measure. First, as the initiative was pledged by Mitsotakis himself when commenting last May meeting in Ankara, by underling the importance of the measure not only in economic terms but also for mutual communication. Secondly, as the issue of visa liberalization for Turkish citizen to the EU has been, since the EU-Türkiye Joint agreement (2016), a matter of extreme disappointment at the eyes of Ankara. Trying to broaden this measure also at the European level, even with openings for tourism and for short-term periods, could help re-building mutual understanding and trust between Ankara and Brussels. Exchanges also in terms of higher education,

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<sup>1</sup> See Mitsotakis' statements after his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2024/05/13/34218>

<sup>2</sup> TRT 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>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See [https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch?utm\\_campaign=cw\\_menu\\_link](https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch?utm_campaign=cw_menu_link)

<sup>5</sup> S. V. Rasquinho and A. U. Seker, *Türkiye, EU need each other, says EU Commission spokesperson*, Anadolu Agency, June 2024

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkiye-eu-need-each-other-says-eu-commission-spokesperson/3245879>

that are among the soft power measures taken by Türkiye to expand its influence internationally, can also be boosted to that end. It is no coincidence that two countries that are still at odds over many issues are strengthening dialogue with *win-win* measures such as trade and tourism.

Those initiatives should also be considered by Italy that can play a crucial role in mediating between the EU, other member states and Türkiye, benefitting its already positive relationship with Ankara, that also counts on a widespread presence of Italian businesses in Türkiye, continuity in investments, and exchanges in trade.

With a look into the Aegean Sea, the persisting disagreements over maritime borders/militarization of Aegean Island, and the Cyprus issue, despite being set aside at the current stage, could affect the sustainability of full, long-term normalization or create obstacles along the path. Although Mediterranean countries are somehow dealing with changing dynamics and many *former-at-odds* countries are trying to avoid further confrontation, it is to be underlined that Türkiye and Greece disagree over security and borders. Something that cannot be swept under the rug if the two want to explore the full potential of their bilateral normalization. Solving Aegean problems can indeed benefit the Mediterranean countries in terms of energy supply and the overall security of seas. Hence, multilateral efforts need to be put in place to facilitate the process. Timing could be right in this sense since of Türkiye and Greece gradual rapprochement, but Eastern Mediterranean issues need the USA, UE and member States to be involved for their solution. Member States such as Italy, thanks to its privileged partnership with both Greece and Türkiye, but also to the common membership within NATO, can play a crucial role in this mediation, pushing for the process to materialize. Beyond complementarities in trade and security, Italy shares with both potential for renewable energy investment and cooperation, but also urgency in terms of migration management. This move, together with its own economic benefit, could further strengthen Italy's role both within the EU and abroad.

### ***Egypt, Libya***

The new path of normalization between Türkiye and Egypt is the result of a broader reshape in relations within the entire Mediterranean region. This track of new diplomatic relations started with the end of political, economic and ideological polarization among Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE.

The main reasons behind the normalization are, without doubts, the multilevel crisis opened with Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The crisis pushed for a broader regional cooperation, developing new networks of solidarity in the pandemic period and providing new diplomatic channels with Russia and Ukraine due to the deep dependence from the shortage of grain and crops of some countries in the region, namely Tunisia and Egypt. The mediation of Türkiye with Russia and Ukraine and the economic support of some Gulf countries to manage the effects of the economic crisis have been the main tools for furthering major cooperation.

Furthermore, this normalization was also alimented by the need of energy supplies by Western countries after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Qatar as well as Egypt, Algeria and Libya have been the main LNG (Liquid Natural Gas) suppliers for Europe. This trend witnessed a great protagonism of Italy and its capacity to develop new accords to guarantee new supplies of this vital resource, due to its good relations with those countries.

In this broader scenario, Türkiye attempted -until now successfully- to regain diplomatic relations with Egypt. Ideological and geopolitical tensions between the two countries were due to the support of the former and the hostility of the latter towards political Islam affiliated groups, in this case the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye's hosting political figures of the islamist movement and Ankara's support to some figures affiliated to them in Libya (notably in the international recognized government of Tripoli) provoked tensions between the two countries. The effects were the deep polarization that has been translated in an open confrontation in Libya wherein the two actors found themselves in opposite sides: Egypt supporting, along with Saudi Arabia and UAE, the Eastern government and General Khalifa Haftar, and Türkiye backing the Western one. The failed Haftar's

offensive in Tripoli in 2019-2020 re-opened a new path of diplomatic ties. Although it is still an ongoing process, this new course has been influenced by the broader regional normalization as well by the Libyan scenario<sup>6</sup>.

In 2020, rapprochement between Egypt and Türkiye started with timid diplomatic ties and continued along official events such as the hand shaking between Erdoğan and al-Sisi during the Football World Cup in 2022 in Qatar and in the 2023 India G20. The final rapprochement happened in September 2023 when Egypt and Türkiye pushed forward the reconciliation by dispatching, in July 2023, ambassadors for the first time in years<sup>7</sup>.

Cooperation projects, in terms of energy, infrastructure and more importantly in defense, has been the main pillars of this new diplomatic path. In addition, the two countries have been involved directly in the Gaza crisis, emerging as mediators and opening new channels of collaboration. But also, since Egypt and Türkiye have been in opposite side in the Libyan civil war, this regional and bilateral normalization could be the core for a new path towards a political solution to curb with the instability in the country. In this sense, the two countries are playing a central role (demonstrated by the recurrent visits of the Libyan officials in Türkiye and Egypt) in mediating among the different actors on the ground. Libya is still embedded within an internal polarization and political clash that could lead to new tensions and shaping new alliances even at the international level<sup>8</sup>.

In this context, Türkiye -Egypt renewed relations influenced the international scenario and has effects on Italy and Europe.

Indeed, the normalization of the diplomatic relations between the abovementioned countries could represent a great opportunity to develop a major cooperation in stabilizing the region. In this sense, Libya is one of the most important dossiers. Here, Egyptian and Turkish interests do not necessarily clash with those of Italy. Türkiye and Egypt are indeed trying to develop an intra-Libyan dialogue in order guarantee a political solution for the Libyan crisis; this is what Italy has been doing since, at least, 2019 by supporting all the international initiatives and promoting a comprehensive dialogue with all parties.

This would ease also some other issues that could jeopardize the political dialogue such as the Russian presence in the Eastern part of Libya. Türkiye, with its military presence in the country, seems to represent a deterrence force in counterbalancing that of Russia's Wagner. Russia, today, represents the main threat for the stability in Libya, hence a major cooperation between Italy, EU and Türkiye, also within NATO framework, could represent a starting point to implement the political process and limit the Russia influence. This cooperation is also useful in order to manage the security and irregular migration. In this sense, Italy and Türkiye are great partners and both are part of NATO. This is crucial in order to further enhance cooperation notably in terms of security and limiting the Russian presence in Libya as a destabilizing actor.

In this sense, Italy should act, along with EU institutions, in implementing the ongoing intra-Libyan dialogue. If Türkiye is supplying defensive tools, Italy and EU should provide the political tools for the electoral process and reinforcing their relations in terms of economic resilience. In this way, Italy has further margins in increasing the effectiveness of the so called "Mattei's plan for Africa" aiming at better implementing political and economic tools to trigger sustainable development in Libya and the continent.

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<sup>6</sup> Mada Masr, what comes after the collapse of Haftar's western campaign? June 2020. See: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/08/feature/politics/what-comes-after-the-collapse-of-haftars-westerncampaign/>

<sup>7</sup> Reuters, Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's Sisi discuss energy cooperation at G20 Summit, September 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-egypts-sisi-discuss-energy-cooperation-g20-summit-turkish-2023-09-10/>

<sup>8</sup> Abdul kader Assad, UN commends Italy's Mattei Plan in support of African countries, including Libya, Libyan Observer, 13/06/2024, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/un-commends-italys-mattei-plan-support-african-countries-including-libya>

In addition, the normalization process between Egypt and Türkiye could help facilitating cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean region. By pivoting on its own role, Italy is in the position to reinforce and promote regional cooperation in terms of energy and guarantee a more inclusive approach. However, this is not achievable without a process of de-escalation of the conflicts among some regional stakeholders (Greece/Greek Cypriots and Türkiye) and the ongoing tensions between Israel and Palestine.



## Gulf countries

During the last year, Türkiye and Gulf Countries have managed to maintain their normalization process on track, further strengthening diplomatic, security and economic ties. After more than a ten-year phase of polarization in the regional landscape, the paradigm has switched from confrontation to cooperation, with persisting ideological differences not preventing space for joint commitments. Boosting the process, a variety of reasons, starting from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the resolution of the Gulf crisis, Türkiye's financial necessities, Saudi Arabia and the UAE know how needs, especially in terms of defense industry. An approach that has not been affected by the outbreak of the war in Gaza nor by its spill overs, as Israel-Iran near-war or the tensions at the Red Sea and Lebanon.

After a gradual rapprochement made by high level bilateral visits, relations were institutionalized with a variety of agreements encompassing economy and defense both with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The Comprehensive economic partnership between UAE and Türkiye that entered into force in September 2023, and the 28 memoranda of understanding signed with Saudi Arabia during the Turkish-Saudi Investment and Business Forum of mid-February, are just some examples of consolidated common ground. The size of projects that the Turkish companies have undertaken in Saudi Arabia reached \$3 billion as of the end of 2023, a volume that totals about \$74 billion when it comes to the GCC countries.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in terms of defense industry, frameworks agreements were signed to booster cooperation of direct trade investments and co-production with the UAE<sup>10</sup> and joint military exercises took place, the most recent in Izmir in May, seeing the participation of the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces.<sup>11</sup>

The bilateral rapprochement has later been complemented by the broader agreement, with Türkiye consolidating ties with the Gulf neighbors as a regional bloc. 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.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of June, Sixth Ministerial Meeting of Türkiye-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) High Level Strategic Dialogue was held in Doha, serving as an indication of the strength of the strategic and deep partnership between the GCC countries and Türkiye.<sup>13</sup> The meeting extended the GCC-Turkey Joint Action Plan until 2029<sup>14</sup> *de facto* providing a longer perspective to the normalization and its sustainability.

With due consideration to the developments in Gaza, as well as between Israel, Iran and proxies, the EU and its Member States should look favorably to the rapprochement between Türkiye and the Gulf as a first step for stability in the region. It is indeed the first time in years that, although with due differences in terms of 'exposure', the Islamic world has stood more united than in the past towards the war in Gaza. The cooperative approach has been shown by the meetings of the Arab-Islamic summit in November and the Gaza Contact Group in April, as well as the Türkiye-GCC High Level

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<sup>9</sup> Daily Sabah, *Türkiye foresees 'golden year' in relations with Saudi Arabia*, March 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiye-foresees-golden-year-in-relations-with-saudi-arabia>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2023/10/13/turkey-uae-strengthen-defense-industry-ties-with-dozens-of-deals/>

<sup>11</sup> Arab News, *Saudi Armed Forces participate in military exercise in Türkiye*, May 2024 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2507026/saudi-arabia>

<sup>12</sup> 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>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/MediaCenter/NewsCooperation/News/Pages/news2024-6-9-8.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> A News, *Gulf Cooperation Council, Türkiye extend joint action plan to 2029*, June 2024 <https://www.aneews.com.tr/economy/2024/06/10/gulf-cooperation-council-turkiye-extend-joint-action-plan-to-2029>

Strategic Dialogue, in which the situation in Gaza was also addressed. In this framework, the EU and its member States should further engage in strategic and political dialogue with the actors already moving towards de-escalation, to regain credibility and centrality in mediation efforts towards regional conflicts, including Sudan and Yemen.

Stability in relations will also benefit trade and investments and could enhance already existing partnership between Gulf, Türkiye and the EU. Indeed, while insisting on diverse trans-border projects between Asia and Europe, the EU and Italy should support initiatives that strengthen cooperation between Gulf and Türkiye, as the Development Road Project. Although considering the potential challenges to its effective realization, the DRP could enhance connectivity between the Gulf and Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, but also helping stabilizing Iraq both politically and economically, which is priority to the EU and Member States also in terms of migration management and development cooperation.

In addition, the rapprochement between Türkiye and Gulf countries could also benefit Italy and the EU by opening new spaces for cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, even considering that the war in Gaza has strained the relationships between Israel and Türkiye.

Already in the past years Gulf monarchies have shown interests in the Mediterranean shores by engaging in initiatives as the Philia Forum, aimed at “building friendship, peace and prosperity from the Mediterranean to the Gulf” by strengthening the role of Greece as connector between West Asia, North Africa and Europe, but without including Türkiye. Nowadays, Greece and Türkiye rapprochement, together with Ankara strengthening ties with Egypt’s and the Gulf could help, if not solving Aegean disputes, materializing initiatives of regional cooperation serving as a framework for discussing energy and economic security, connectivity, digital and green transition. To this end, Italy could lead intra-EU dialogue to facilitate issue-based cooperation in the basin, including with Türkiye and the Gulf, by supporting mechanisms for joint use of resources and revenue sharing.

## The Middle East

### *Syria*

The complex nature of political and security situations in and around Syria pushed Türkiye to act proactively to comply with the prerequisites of the challenging regional developments. In this sense, the *de facto* divided Syria is the primary ‘situation’ for Türkiye’s foreign policy, especially regarding the risk of radicalization and terrorism coming from its borders.

In the relations between Türkiye and the European Union (EU), Syria is a matter of concern primarily perceived in the context of migration. The flow of migration from Syria to neighboring countries has been a societal security issue whilst Europe is the latest destination. As migration is a crucial dossier, the EU has been already engaged in financially transferring resources to Syrians, mostly living in Türkiye. As agreed in 2016 along the so called ‘refugees deal’, the financial support has been part of EU crisis management efforts; however, a review of the strategy is much warned. Indeed, despite EU short and medium-term vision pivoting mainly on funds assistance, migration issue implies to further address social cohesion and integration measures in the long term.

Nevertheless, Syria is not a frozen conflict but continues through soft threats and low-profile tactics. In this regard, EU and Italy should encourage the external and local actors to comply with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in the frame of a political initiative. Thus, as Türkiye and EU (including Italy) perceive the Syria case as a matter of concern when it comes to terrorism and illegal/irregular migration, EU and Türkiye may expand the scope of joint cooperation in handling Syria-based concerns. In this sense, a permanent high-level coordination mechanism may be on the agenda of both entities. Worth mentioning that for the essential resolution of the Syrian case, the efforts should be political. Indeed, Bashar al-Assad Regime is not consistent with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and relevant initiatives for a political transition. Hence, a Comprehensive Syria Policy as a referent document is much needed.

### *Israel/Palestine*

The normalization process between Türkiye and Israel has matured through talks between intelligence services and track-II diplomacy efforts of civil society organizations. Within this framework, the parties held direct talks at the level of the President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Ministers, resulting in the appointment of Ambassadors to the Capitals.<sup>15</sup> In 2023, Erdoğan talked about joint energy projects following the meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu in New York, which signaled a new phase of normalization. Turkish leadership was expecting Netanyahu to sign an agreement if the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack would not change the course of normalization.

While the problems and attempts to repair the process were successful, the attacks by Hamas and Israel's ground operation against Gaza had a negative impact on Türkiye-Israel relations. Türkiye first emphasized regional stability with balanced statements; it increased its criticism towards Israel as civilian casualties increased. However, President Erdoğan circulated statements against Netanyahu, but he refrained from insulting President Herzog or the Israeli public. Stating that the background of the issue should be examined correctly, Turkish leadership increased their efforts to seek a permanent solution to the Palestinian problem. As the Palestinian civilian casualties increased, Türkiye solidified a firm stance against the Netanyahu-led ultra-conservative government, not only through narratives but also sanctions.

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<sup>15</sup> Gülru Gezer, “Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerine bakış”, Independent Türkçe, 31 October 2022, <https://www.indytrk.com/node/570471/türkiyeden-sesler/türkiye-israil-ilişkilerine-bakış>, accessed on 16 December 2023.

There is no doubt that Palestinians and Israelis deserve a peaceful and stable life in their own lands. The problem is the maximized securitization and de-securitization efforts due to lacking trust, blurring lines and zero-sum calculation. In this frame, the EU should be direct in charge of pushing the parties to come together and draw clear lines not to escalate. Technically, EUSR for the Middle East Process should be more active in coordination with the U.S. correspondence. On the other hand, Türkiye's soft power and influence on the Palestinians may be a tool to start a facilitation and mediation process. The EU may contribute to such an initiative through building a permanent mechanism. In this sense, Türkiye and the EU should complement each other's efforts by the joint efforts of Turkish Foreign Ministry and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs. A framework on a joint Turkish-EU policy may be drafted to build referencing principals.

## ***Iraq***

Iraq and Türkiye are two neighboring countries that share the same history, are intertwined culturally and have security concerns indexed to each other. In the economic context, Iraq is Türkiye's largest export destination with 12 billion 786 million dollars. Türkiye's share in Iraq's import portfolio is around 5 percent while Türkiye's imports from Iraq are around 11 billion US dollars. In other words, Türkiye and Iraq have the potential to move their economic relations forward.

With the Red Sea no longer a maritime trade route after the Israeli intervention in Gaza, the Development Road project reminded the importance of the cooperation of these two countries. This project, which claims to connect Europe with the Gulf countries, which have a market worth approximately of 800 billion dollars, has strengthened Iraq and Türkiye's will to become welfare states by benefitting the regional trade and connectivity opportunities. In this frame, Iraq, with its vast energy resources, may satisfy the energy needs of Europe. The joint energy projects of the EU and Türkiye may ease the stress of lacking energy inflow from Russia and risks at the other supplying countries. Italy and Türkiye may start joint consortiums to link Iraqi energy to Turkish and European energy grids. Furthermore, from development and connectivity perspective, the involvement of Italy in the Development Road Project throughout the already confirmed participation of an Italian company is quite relevant. As this project intends to link the Gulf region to Europe through Türkiye, the EU and Italy should promote the project and invest in infrastructure.

The second issue for Iraq is internal security. After the fight against DAESH, there is still a marginalized DAESH profile underground. Social cohesion is the second link in the internal security chain. There is still no promising success story in this regard. However, the Development Road project is seen as a starting point for social reconciliation. The essential risk is due to the competing Kurdish wings at the north and PKK. The priority for Türkiye is the PKK's presence in Iraq and so Ankara seems determined to fight against PKK together with Iraq after the intensified visits of policy and decision makers. In this framework, the EU may observe the activities of PKK to evaluate if it breaches the values, security and stability of the EU. The cases such as drug and human trafficking, forced child conscription, or organized criminal activities of PKK usually finds its root in Iraq, and Syria as well. A monitoring process and intelligence sharing also supported by the EU, would promote easing concerns over border security, due to the very complicated border line between Türkiye and Iraq, which makes it vulnerable to infiltrations and illegal trespassing.

## Caucasus

Caucasia has historically been a locus of ethnic conflicts, serving as a battleground for regional and global economic interests and a transit route for goods and people traveling between the East and West. Türkiye places importance on regional cooperation and development projects in this region, especially in the South Caucasus. The Caucasus faces intertwined challenges, including climate change impacts, food insecurity, and the economic effects of geopolitical conflicts.<sup>16</sup> Türkiye emphasizes the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia in advocating for a peaceful resolution to current conflicts in the South Caucasus. The Black Sea-Caucasus region is poised to remain a critical focus of international challenges, including frozen conflicts, Russian-Western relations, East-West energy flow, and proximity to the Middle East and the Caspian Sea.<sup>17</sup>

In recent 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. Therefore, a reevaluation of Türkiye and Italy's policies is imperative to address emerging challenges in the Black Sea and neighboring areas. In this context, the following subheadings examine the reflection of relations between Türkiye and the three countries in the South Caucasus region.

### *Armenia*

Türkiye's emphasis on a gradual, confidence-building approach underscores its strategic commitment to long-term stability and cooperation in the region. Recently, the political contacts between the parties have been positive: in June, Türkiye President Erdoğan and Armenia Prime Minister Pashinyan in a phone call discussed bilateral and regional matters and their political will to fully normalize their relations. As immediate outcome of the call, to be seen as a clear sign of constructive dialogue, is the Armenian recognition of Palestine as independent state. Moreover, regarding the closed border between Türkiye and Armenia, Armenia has to be motivated to withdraw its military forces from all occupied Nagorno-Karabakh lands and the return of territories to Azerbaijan in line with the international agreements. This situation has contributed to fostering a positive climate for the potential reopening of the border. However, some issues are still pending and require joint efforts to accomplish a full normalization. In this regard, a peace agreement which holds the promise of not only reopening the Türkiye-Armenia land borders but also facilitating the establishment of the Zangezur corridor has to be supported for sustainable security in the region. Signing of a peace agreement to definitively address the problem, facilitated by impartial mediators can be proposed as a model instead of the unsuccessful activities of Minsk Group countries. Initiatives in this direction, particularly through the collaboration of Türkiye and Italy, hold the potential to expedite the process toward a conceivable peace agreement.

Furthermore, within the frame of United Nations General Assembly declaration on April 4, 2024, as of the "International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action" to draw attention to the dangers of mines and unexploded ordnance, Türkiye and Italy can collaborate with the regional countries for clearance and neutralization of the land mines in the region.

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<sup>16</sup> Sabyrova, Lyaziza (2023). "Q&A: Addressing Intertwined Challenges in Central Asia and the Caucasus through Regional Cooperation". Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/news/features/qa-addressing-intertwined-challenges-central-asia-caucasus-through-regional-cooperation>

<sup>17</sup> MFA-Türkiye (2023). "Güney Kafkasya Ülkeleri", *ibid.*

In general, thus, the leaders of the regional countries have to be motivated to refrain from statements escalating the conflict in the region so that the security situation shall not deteriorate. It is evaluated that supporting such positive and constructive steps can accelerate the peace process.

### ***Georgia***

The relationship between Türkiye and Georgia has evolved into a strategic partnership marked by significant economic collaboration. The establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC – YDSK in Turkish) mechanism has further propelled the development of Türkiye-Georgia relations. Türkiye steadfastly supports Georgia's territorial integrity and rejects the purported independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this frame, the Kars-Tbilisi Railway and Rize-Poti Fiber Optic Cable Line projects represent long-standing collaborative efforts between Türkiye and Georgia. The Kars-Tbilisi Railway is expected to boost regional trade significantly. Given the closed Türkiye-Armenia border, Georgia has become the primary route for Turkish shipments to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Türkiye and Italy have to take part jointly in similar projects which increase the integration level of the region with Europe.

Possible military cooperation and training of Georgian military personnel is another potential collaboration area between Italy and Türkiye. Italy may take part in joint exercises like Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises conducted between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

When it comes to energy, joint efforts in transporting Caspian oil and natural gas, countering Russia's regional policies can provide another potential cooperation field between Türkiye and Italy which will also create alternative solutions for other EU countries. For riparian countries with abundant oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea, a key challenge is the lack of direct access to international markets. The former Soviet Republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are seeking alternative routes to reduce their dependence on Russia and Iran. By utilizing Caspian resources, Italy-Türkiye cooperation can help meet the fossil resource needs of Türkiye and EU countries, offering an alternative route that bypasses Russia. Collaborative efforts in energy infrastructure, such as pipelines and trade routes, can enhance the region's energy security and contribute to the diversification of energy sources.

### ***Azerbaijan***

The multidimensional and strategic nature of Türkiye's relations with Azerbaijan is evident in intensive mutual high-level visits, symbolizing a longstanding tradition of prioritizing such engagements following significant developments or changes in office. In this environment, Italy and Türkiye could collaborate to support peace-building efforts and promote peaceful conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. This could involve diplomatic initiatives aimed at de-escalating tensions, supporting dialogue between conflicting parties, and facilitating negotiations. Both Türkiye's and Italy's experience in diplomatic mediation and conflict resolution could complement the ongoing diplomatic efforts in the region. As matter of facts, Türkiye and Italy have significant cooperation opportunities that can actively contribute to addressing the challenges and opportunities especially in energy sector. The focus on energy lines and trade routes presents a strategic alternative, particularly concerning energy security. This could include investing in the expansion of existing infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC), Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Natural Gas Pipeline (BTE), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line (BTK).

Moreover, possible bilateral collaboration between Türkiye and Italy regarding the security issues in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus would expedite the peace efforts and the possible peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Conducting joint exercises, jointly training security forces can be a potential collaboration field. Hence, Italy and Türkiye could promote cultural and educational exchange programs to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the South Caucasus region. This could involve facilitating student exchanges, military

personnel education, academic collaborations, and cultural events to promote dialogue and foster intercultural communication.