Has the “Cold War” between Turkey and the UAE Ended?

An Ankara-initiated phone call on August 31 between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Crown Prince of Abu Dabi Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan drew the attention of the broad political establishment and raised questions about its possible implications for many countries in the Arab-Muslim world. First of all, does it signal an end to the Cold War affecting Turkey-UAE bilateral ties and Middle East politics for years? And also, what could be the consequences of further possible strengthening of cooperation between the two states?

The “cold war” between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates has been going on for years. Ankara has regarded Abu Dhabi as an enemy state for the past few years, with the Turkish president promising to recall the Ambassador from the Emirates as recently as a year ago.

With Justice and Development Party (AKP.), with its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, coming to power in 2002, Ankara has defined two main directions of its foreign policy relations with the Arab world: neo-Ottomanism and political Islam/ikhwanism (the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Russia). In doing so, the AKP actively sought to revive a reverent attitude in the Arab countries towards the past authority of the Ottoman Empire, with the Muslim Brotherhood followers dominating today.

The UAE, for its part, was sharply opposed to political Islam and the ideology of the banned Muslim Brotherhood movement, which led the two countries to disagreements and clashes early in this century, not only on the ideological front but also in the hybrid wars in the Middle East. These clashes were particularly evident in Libya, where Ankara supported the Government of National Accord (GNA) along with the Muslim Brotherhood and Abu
Dhabi supported the anti-GNA Libyan National Army (LNA).

In February 2020, an LNA attack on warehouses in the port of Tripoli killed one Turkish soldier and two National Intelligence Organization (MIT) officers, while five other Turks were wounded, according to Yenicag. They were on a Turkish vessel moored in the harbor, illegally transporting weapons and ammunition for GNA fighters to circumvent the UN embargo. The pro-government Turkish media accused the Arab Emirates of being the ones who paid for this attack on the port where the Turkish ship with soldiers on board was.

Ankara also blamed Abu Dhabi for the bombing of the Al-Watiya Air Bombingase, where the Turkish air force was stationed, in the Libyan events. While it has not been conclusively established that the UAE was involved in the attack, there have been suggestions that it could have been a French or Egyptian strike. Anadolu Agency did publish a story a few days after the attack accusing the UAE of participating in the attack.

On May 19 this year, Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, speaking on state-run TV channel TRT Haber, said that although the attempt by a group of Turkish Armed Forces soldiers to seize power in the country on July 15, 2016, was directly blamed on the US-based Muslim leader Fethullah Gulen and his organization FETO, the action was also organized and financed by the UAE. The role of Emirates in one of the most important tragic events that shook Turkey has been mentioned before, but this is the first time it has come from a serving official.

In addition to Libya, the UAE and Turkey were clearly in a conflict in Syria. Abu Dhabi has been suspicious of Ankara’s growing influence by supporting extremist groups in northern Syria and has allegedly even decided to help President Bashar al-Assad restore territories under his control. Turkey also did not like the UAE’s support for Kurdish YPG fighters in Syria.

The UAE’s performance on the side of a coalition of Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, Israel and France in a dispute with the Turks over gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean by conducting field training exercises with these countries should not be forgotten.

However, recent changes in the world political landscape have forced both Ankara and Abu Dhabi to adjust and diversify their regional contacts.

First, Abu Dhabi is clearly being pushed to do so by the change in administration in the White House, which has all but stripped the Emirates of its previous patronage. Biden’s desire to renew the nuclear deal with Iran, the UAE’s adversary, further weakens Abu Dhabi’s position. There have been problems with F-35 deliveries to the UAE, which has increased Emirati concerns about national security guarantees, including the Iran factor. There is a chill in Abu Dhabi’s relations with Saudi Arabia, both on the Yemen dossier and on several other topics. Besides, such reasons should certainly include normalization of relations between Turkey and Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, making it unprofitable for the UAE to confront Turkey alone in the future. Possible US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq is also significantly changing the regional power balance and was undoubtedly another impetus to the search for a compromise between the UAE and Turkey.

As for Ankara, the undoubtedly important reason for ending the disagreement was the deep and structural economic crisis in which Turkey has been in for a long time. And the clear evidence of this was the meeting of Turkish President Erdoğan on August 18 in Ankara with the delegation from the Emirates, headed by the National Security Adviser Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the words of the Turkish president to the press during it: “I believe the UAE will make serious investments in our country in the near future.” Turkey clearly recognizes that renewed dialogue and economic ties with the UAE could benefit financially unstable Turkey and the wealthy Emirati sheikhs seeking additional economic and, thus, political leverage in the region.

That Abu Dhabi could make peace with Ankara became clear from the January statements of former UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash, who indicated that the Emirates see no reason for confrontation with Turkey beyond the fact that the republic’s leader supports the Muslim Brotherhood. After a while, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also said Ankara was ready to establish relations with Abu Dhabi.

However, the thaw in bilateral relations between the regional rivals has been also possible thanks to the active mediation activities of the head of the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq, Nechirvan Barzani, who maintains relations with both leaders, but especially with Erdoğan. Let us not forget that the 2010 oil deal allows Erbil to export oil produced in the region to Western markets, bypassing Baghdad. Ankara has become an economic “lifeline” for the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. As “payback,” official Erbil has long been a trusted partner of Ankara, the Turkish army’s expanding operations against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party. For its part, the
UAE financially supports refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan.

As for Barzani himself, regardless of the eventual outcome, he hopes that the mediation effort will strengthen his independent role in the regional diplomatic arena while helping Iraqi Kurds build relationships with key regional players. And this, in particular, is confirmed by the Kurdish leader's trip to Abu Dhabi in June at the invitation of Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan where they discussed “further strengthening of bilateral ties and cooperation, regional peace and other issues of mutual interest”. And not coincidentally, one of such issues was the discussion of relations with Turkey and the fate of Turkish fugitive gangster Sedat Peker, who has taken shelter in the UAE, making scandalous revelations of the Turkish authorities.

The consequences of ending the Cold War between Abu Dhabi and Ankara can undoubtedly be very significant not only for the countries themselves but also for the further regrouping of both regional and external forces cooperating with Turkey and the UAE However, it will become more apparent in the near future.

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