

While Diplomats Talk...

How Diplomacy is Reshaping the Middle East and its Implications for Azerbaijan

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Unpredictability is one of the hallmarks of the Middle East. States that yesterday were on the verge of war are nowadays moving towards reconciliation. The tendency for rapprochement that has emerged in recent years between several countries, primarily between Israel and the Arab world, is becoming even more apparent today. This is especially true against the backdrop of a thaw in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Syrian breakthrough after years of isolation, and Türkiye's foreign policy achievements. At the same time, hot spots in the Middle East, starting with the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli issue, periodically remind us of themselves. In addition, due to the huge number of internal contradictions and the socio-political and economic crisis, the regional situation remains quite explosive, as, for example, recent events in Sudan have shown.

The U-turn in the Middle East

The signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, brokered by the United States, was a real U-turn in the Middle East. The documents proclaiming the establishment of diplomatic relations rejuvenated the Arab-Israeli rapprochement. Prior to this, among all of the Arab countries, only Egypt and Jordan recognized the Jewish state.

Later, Sudan (in October 2020) and Morocco (in December 2020) took a similar approach to that taken by the UAE and Bahrain. In a broad sense, all of these agreements

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give impetus to increasing interaction between Israelis and Arabs in economic, humanitarian, and other fields.

This process was slightly shaken by a new escalation between Israel and Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, in May 2021. Despite the large number of victims, especially among Palestinians (more than 200 were reported killed under shelling), in general, the Israelis and Arabs managed to overcome this crisis and continue the trend toward normalization.

In parallel, in January 2021, at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, diplomatic relations were restored between Qatar and four Arab countries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain—after three years of dormancy. Prior to this summit, Doha was previously, among other things, accused of supporting terrorism and harboring the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It is noteworthy that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman presented the restoration of relations with Qatar as a need to be united against “the threats posed by the Iranian regime’s nuclear and ballistic missile program and its plans for sabotage and destruction.”

However, it is important to emphasize that some Arab monarchies, such as the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, have traditionally maintained close contact with Iran. Additionally, in April 2021, consultations between Tehran and Riyadh began in Baghdad, mediated by Iraq, whose authorities have consistently pointed out that they do not want their country to become “a territory for settling scores among other states.” As a result, in two years, at least five rounds of negotiations were held on the Baghdad platform. Although these talks were not successful, they were helpful in securing the agreement that was mediated by China.

Türkiye has also made relatively active diplomatic efforts in the region recently. Thus, in March 2021, after almost 10 years, contact between Ankara and Cairo resumed at the diplomatic level. Numerous Turkish-Egyptian consultations, particularly concerning disputes over Libya and the division of spheres of influence in the Mediterranean, paved the way for the historic meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in November 2022, during the World Cup in Qatar. The two sides issued a joint declaration that stated, “a new stage begins in the relations between Ankara and Cairo.”

At the same time, Türkiye managed to mend fences with the UAE, relations with which were also spoiled after 2011 against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. The controversy was mainly due to Ankara’s close alliance with Doha and the situation in Libya, where Türkiye supported the internationally recognized authorities in Tripoli, and the UAE (along with Egypt) sympathized with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who controlled the

east of the country. In addition, the Turkish side had repeatedly accused the UAE of supporting the 2016 Turkish coup attempt.

Nevertheless, through diplomatic efforts, Turkish-UAE relations began to improve gradually. Thus, in November 2021, then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed made an official visit to Ankara. Concurrently, it became known that the UAE allocated \$10 billion for investment in Türkiye—a much-needed cash injection to prop up a struggling economy. In February 2022, Erdoğan made his first official visit to the UAE in 10 years, after which the parties signed currency swap and trade agreements.

A significant achievement for the region was the establishment of relations in recent years between the two largest (besides Iran) non-Arab players in the region: Israel and Türkiye. In November 2021, a telephone call was held between Erdoğan and an Israeli prime minister (Naftali Bennett) for the first time in eight years. Erdoğan noted that normalizing relations with Israel “is useful for peace in the region.”

The rapid intensification of Israeli-Turkish contacts contributed to the March 2022 visit of the President of Israel Isaac Herzog to Ankara, where, as he admitted, he had a “good, open, and honest conversation” with Erdoğan. Then, in May 2022, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Israel, becoming the first Turkish official to visit the country in 15 years. And by the end of 2022, the two countries exchanged new ambassadors after almost 5 years.

It is worth mentioning that the normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations, among other things, was extremely important for Baku, which maintains close ties with both sides. It has been reported that Azerbaijan helped to broker the rapprochement.

“Earthquake Diplomacy”

The most devastating earthquake since 1939 rocked Türkiye and Syria in February 2023, killing nearly 60,000 people in both countries. In addition, the natural disaster led to tectonic shifts in the region’s diplomacy.

First, the unconditional willingness of Western countries to help the Turkish people in this trouble has led to a significant easing in relations between Ankara and its NATO partners. Suffice it to recall that a few days before the earthquake, the Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned the ambassadors of nine Western states whose consulates had suspended work in Istanbul due to “security concerns.” After the natural disaster, contact began to improve gradually, eventually leading to the Turkish parliament approving Finland’s entry into NATO at the end of March (the approval of Sweden is expected to take place after the Turkish elections, irrespective of who wins).

In addition, the Turkish side mended fences with Greece, which also immediately sent rescue teams to Türkiye. This is to be contrasted to the situation several months earlier, when rumors abounded of a possible armed conflict between Ankara and Athens over islands in the Aegean Sea.

Similarly, “earthquake diplomacy” affected Türkiye’s relations with Armenia. Thus, for the first time since 1988, the land border was opened between the two countries, enabling the transport of Armenian humanitarian assistance to the affected Turkish regions.

However, while Türkiye accepted rescuers and humanitarian aid from almost 100 countries, the situation in Syria is much more complicated. The government of President Bashar al-Assad has been in international isolation and under Western and Arab League sanctions for many years.

Moreover, part of the northern Syrian territories affected by the natural disaster is not even controlled by Damascus. And the main border crossing, called Bab al-Hawa, through which humanitarian aid has delivered to these zones (in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions), was badly damaged.

Nevertheless, several Arab countries, which had previously boycotted any contact with the Assad government, immediately extended a helping hand to Syria. In particular, for many, the call of Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to his Syrian counterpart (the two leaders had never called each other) with a proposal of support was unexpected.

Algeria, Iran, and Jordan also actively supported Syria, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent special planes with humanitarian aid.

At the end of February 2023, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri visited Syria and Türkiye for the first time in more than 10 years. *Çavuşoğlu* paid a return visit to Cairo in March, and in April to the head of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Faisal Mikdad. In addition, in late February, Assad visited Oman for the first time since the start of the Syrian civil war and the UAE in March (for the second time in the last year).

The intensification of contact between Damascus and several Arab capitals resulted in the reinstatement of Syria to the Arab League in early May 2023, from which it had been excluded in November 2011. It is no coincidence that in April Mikdad visited Jeddah for the first time in more than 10 years, where, among other things, he took part in a meeting of the foreign ministers of the GCC countries, which also included colleagues from Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq.

Moreover, Assad is expected to participate in the Arab League summit, which will be held on 19 May 2023 in Riyadh. This issue was apparently discussed during the first visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud to Damascus in 12 years.

Also, on 18 April 2023, Tunisia formally re-established diplomatic relations with Syria, naming an ambassador to Damascus, and on 9 May, Saudi Arabia decided to resume its diplomatic mission's operations in Syria. In the years prior, only Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE had reopened embassies in Damascus.

At the same time, countries such as Kuwait, Morocco, and Qatar have not normalized relations with Damascus, or approve of its full return to the Arab fold at the moment, as they believe that the Assad government should radically change its behavior and be held responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians in Syria, as well as release many political prisoners from detention. But the early May decision to reinstate Syria to the Arab League does mean that no member state actively opposes the reinstatement step, which is enough.

Still, not everything is yet smooth sailing for Assad. Another irritant for the region's countries was the clandestine production of the potent drug Captagon in Syrian territory, which flooded the Arab countries, especially GCC states. The Syrian authorities have promised to fight this scourge, notwithstanding the fact that its production has raised up to \$3.4 billion for Syria (for comparison, olive oil exports bring only about \$122 million).

Also, common misfortune brought the positions of Ankara and Damascus closer, which have recently been actively demonstrating their readiness to make contact after more than 10 years of freezing relations. So far, everything rests on Assad's uncompromising position, who insists on the withdrawal of all Turkish troops from sovereign Syrian territory before a meeting with Erdoğan can be held. However, Türkiye argues assets that its security belt in northern Syria ensures peace in the region and facilitates the unhindered return of Syrian refugees to their homes.

A shift in Turkish-Syrian relations might occur after the meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria, and Türkiye, which is scheduled to be held in Moscow in early May. In some ways, it can be considered a follow up to intra-Arab talks held in Jordan last week, which included envoys from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. They agreed on a framework, dubbed the "Jordanian initiative," that would gradually bring Damascus back into the Arab fold.

China as an Alternative Mediator in the Middle East

On 10 March 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia, after 7 years of bitter confrontation, unexpectedly signed an agreement to resume diplomatic relations and reopen embassies. No less surprising was the fact that Beijing had acted as the intermediary between Tehran and Riyadh, since China had hitherto played no significant role in the Middle East's diplomacy.

In practice, the basis for the Iran-Saudi agreement was laid in consultations brokered by Iraq (see above) and partly by Oman over the past two years. China played a significant role in the final stage, providing a platform for Iranian and Saudi envoys.

To a large extent, the agreement reached is more likely to be called a diplomatic victory for Tehran, since the Saudis have not managed to overthrow Assad or defeat the Houthi rebel groups in Yemen, which Iran reportedly supports. At the same time, if this is an agreement and a success for the Iranian side, then it represents a Pyrrhic victory, given the level of instability and tension within Iran itself.

One way or another, the agreement between Tehran and Riyadh allowed the two staunch opponents to avoid what could have developed into a hot war (rumors of a possible Iranian-Saudi military confrontation were actively spread back in the fall of 2022) and reduce tensions to about the level that existed before 2016, when bilateral relations were severed.

However, hotbeds of tension and potential conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia are still very high. The precarious situations in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, where both sides have interests (Iran even has proxies there, to boot), can at any moment lead to a new conflict in which both Riyadh and Tehran would be unlikely to find a quick and easy solution. In addition, the Saudis will still worry about Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Iran, for its part, will continue to suspect Saudi Arabia of plotting domestic unrest within the Islamic Republic.

But so far, reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh has expedited the bridge-building process between Iran and other Arab states (or at least other GCC states). Thus, in early April 2023, Iran appointed an ambassador to the UAE for the first time in 8 years (in September 2022, the UAE took a similar step). In addition, Tehran announced the normalization of relations with Bahrain and the start of consultations with Kuwait to determine a joint maritime border.

These recent events testify to the strengthening of the position of Beijing, which has managed to transform its economic successes in the Arab world into political and diplomatic ones. Thus, China has been the main foreign trade partner of both Iran and Saudi Arabia for many years in a row. The agreement reached between Tehran and Riyadh will simplify the heretofore 'between two fires' position of Beijing.

On the other hand, given the unresolved aspects of the overall Iranian-Saudi conflict, the Chinese side still needs to be alert. As Fuad Shahbazov noted in his IDD Analytical Policy Brief in December 2022, "China should be able to continue to delicately balance between Tehran and its neighbors across the Gulf."

In parallel, in April 2022, China's foreign minister Qin Gang told his Israeli and Palestinian counterparts that his country is ready to help facilitate peace talks. This should be understood against the background of the collapse of the so-called Middle East Quartet (the UN, the U.S., the EU, and Russia) and Brussels, Moscow, and Washington's total involvement in the conflict in Ukraine.

Thus, the Middle East could potentially become another fault line in the U.S.-China confrontation. "Until the United States defines its interests in the region, it will remain in a limbo of disillusioned involvement, reduced to trying—and increasingly failing, as China's recent diplomatic triumph suggests—to thwart others," notes Lisa Anderson in the May/June 2023 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

The Hotbeds of Tension are Still on the Agenda

Diplomacy continues its victorious march in the region between previously rival countries. Hence, in April 2023, Qatar and Bahrain announced the restoration of diplomatic relations. Moreover, Qatar and the UAE are also on the path to rebuilding relations and reopening embassies.

At the same time, the hotbeds of tension in the region are not going anywhere either. "Will these settlements and reconciliations abolish the past, and forget its complex, intertwined, and deep conflicts? Absolutely not, for that will not be erased from memory and will not be abolished from history," claimed Abdullah bin Bijad Al Otaibi in the pages of the *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper.

And the longest and most intricate Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains at the top of the agenda. This confrontation became even more acute after the December 2022 election of a new and presumably the most far-right government in Israel's history. Thus, in early January 2023, the new Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, who had previously stated that "the Palestinians can go to [...] Saudi Arabia or other places, like Iraq or Iran," visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which caused criticism amongst Palestinians and across the Arab and Muslim worlds. Because of this incident, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had to postpone his visit to the UAE.

At the end of January 2023, Israeli security forces carried out heavy-handed raids in the West Bank in which 11 Palestinians were killed. In response, Palestinian radicals carried out a terrorist attack in Jerusalem—at least 7 people were killed, and it was the largest attack in the city since 2008.

In February, talks between Israeli and Palestinian emissaries were held in Aqaba, Jordan, mediated by the United States and Egypt. As a result of the consultations, the parties agreed to avoid tension and adhere to all previously reached agreements.

However, the calm in the region was short-lived. By early April, Israel was subjected to rocket fire originating in Lebanon and Gaza. Israel's armed forces struck back at the attackers. The added poignancy of this escalation was that it took place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish holiday of Passover, which coincided this year.

One of the reasons for a possible aggravation is the desire of Hezbollah (based in Lebanon) and Hamas (based in Gaza)—both are thought to be the conductors of Iranian interests in the region—to take advantage of Israel's internal instability, where mass anti-government demonstrations have continued since January in response to Netanyahu's plans to carry out judicial reforms.

In addition, the Palestinian Administration seems to have lost control of security in the West Bank's main cities, such as Jenin and Nablus, where armed groups have emerged, such as the "Lions' Den," which are not subordinate to the local authorities.

In the absence of thorough mediation efforts, whether on the part of regional players (Egypt), international (the U.S., Russia, the EU) or new ones (China), the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation could escalate in the time to come.

In parallel, a difficult situation persists in Yemen, which has been engulfed for almost ten years by the civil war. According to the UN, the country is facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, as 80 percent of the country's 30 million people rely solely on foreign aid.

A little hope appeared after reaching an Iranian-Saudi agreement to restore relations. On 16 April 2023, with the assistance of the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 887 people were released in a prisoner swap between the Houthis, who control much of Yemen, and the Saudi-led coalition that has been fighting them for eight years. Nevertheless, without a full-fledged ceasefire agreement, the conflict is far from resolved.

"The war in Yemen 'almost' ended, and another one flared up in Sudan immediately," points out Abdel Bari Atwan, the editor-in-chief of the London-based pan-Arab newspaper *Rai Al Youm*. Indeed, the aggravation of inter-elite confrontation in Sudan came as a surprise to many. However, the political crisis in Sudan has been developing since 2019, when President Omar al-Bashir, who ruled the country for 30 years, was removed from power.

Armed attacks broke out on 15 April over disagreements between General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, Sudan's de facto leader, and Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (better known as Hemetti), the leader of a paramilitary force attached loosely associated with the regular army. All in all, it showed the fragility of the situation in this East African

country. Attempts to reach a lasting truce have so far failed, and the civilian death toll likely numbers in the thousands at this point. Thus, the democratic transition that began four years ago has reached a standoff, and Sudan has found itself on the brink of civil war.

And then there is the fact that several Middle Eastern countries that have not resolved internal contradictions and not overcome economic problems are also at risk of galvanization.

Lebanon is a good example. Torn apart by interfaith conflicts, a most severe economic, financial, and energy crisis continues, which worsened after a deadly explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020—the perpetrators have not yet been brought to justice.

In October 2022, a year after parliamentary elections, a new government was finally formed in Iraq. One of the main challenges is large-scale corruption and the lack of control over armed pro-Iranian formations, who became a factor in domestic politics after the defeat of the Islamic State terrorist group.

In Libya, where general elections were to be held in December 2021, a dual power was established. In February 2022, a new government was formed in the city of Tobruk (in the east of the country), headed by former Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga. For now, it operates in parallel with the Government of National Unity of Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, which is based in Tripoli. The main bone of contention between the two sides is the issue of control over oil fields, which can escalate into a large-scale armed confrontation at any moment. Various countries from the region and the West back these two power centers as noted briefly above.

In addition, numerous contradictions persist between some Arab countries. Without a doubt, the most striking example of this is Algeria and Morocco, which broke off bilateral diplomatic relations in August 2021. The reasons for the derailment of relations are different positions on the political status of Morocco's Western Sahara and the open rapprochement of the Moroccan kingdom with Israel. This conflict generally looks peripheral to the rest of the Arab world and seems more to worry the EU and some of its member states. One of the results of the break in diplomatic relations between Algiers and Rabat is the cessation of gas supplies from Algeria to Spain through the territory of Morocco via the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline.

In a broad sense, Afghanistan, as part of the Greater Middle East, also impacts upon the overall situation in the region. Since September 2021, the entire territory of the country has again come under the control of the Taliban. Until today, the Taliban have not yet been able to cope with the terrorist threat and the growth of drug trafficking, which remains the primary source of income for people in the war-torn country.

Azerbaijan and the New Alignment of Forces in the Middle East

As noted above, the normalization of relations between close Azerbaijani partners like Türkiye and Israel is quite beneficial for Baku.

The thaw in relations between Iran and several Arab countries also generally reduces the degree of tension in the neighborhood, which may indirectly affect relations between Baku and Tehran.

But so far, the anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric of the Iranian side and the lack of clear results from the investigation into the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Iran in January 2023 have not contributed to the overall normalization of relations between the two countries.

In this regard, Baku has taken several unambiguous countermeasures, such as disclosing a pro-Iranian spy network of 39 people in March and declaring *persona non grata* four Iranian diplomats in early April. Other steps along these lines have been taken since, including Azerbaijan's response to an attempted assassination of a member of parliament known as an outspoken critic of Iran policies towards the country. Iran has made some reciprocal moves.

The opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Israel at the end of March should be considered a fundamental step on the part of Baku. At the same time, as emphasized by Azerbaijan's ambassador to Israel, Mukhtar Mammadov, the deepening of relations between the two states "are not directed against third countries."

It is also important to remember that Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov also visited the Palestinian lands during his trip to Israel. "Establishing a representative office of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the State of Palestine will give impetus to the further development of cooperation," the country's chief diplomat stressed while in Ramallah.

The absence of any sharp reaction by Iran to the opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Israel indicates Tehran's acceptance of the prevailing realities in the region, possible immersion in internal problems and, in the end, an unwillingness to go into open conflict with Israel. This is confirmed by Tehran's restraint on the issue of opening the Israeli embassy in Turkmenistan on 20 April 2023.

A recent statement from the Iranian Foreign Ministry emphasized that Tehran is not abandoning its attempts to "overcome tensions [with Baku] through diplomatic initiatives." There have been several high-level phone calls between the two sides, and the situation may soon move in a direction of de-escalation.

But, as President Ilham Aliyev said on 3 May 2023 in Shusha during conference organized by ADA University, despite periods in which "our relations [with Iran] were very solid, [...] unfortunately, after the Second Karabakh War there have been several

steps, which led to this escalation [in tensions with Iran]. And of course, if you look at the chronology of these steps, you will see that Azerbaijan was not the initiator.”

After providing this chronology, which goes up to the latest incidents, Aliyev concluded with an overall assessment: “So, you can imagine that now relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are on the lowest ever level. It is very difficult to predict whether they will remain on that level, whether they will go down or they will go up. It’s very difficult to predict. So, we got some communications from Iranian officials, some phone calls and other communications, proposals to normalize relations, but definitely, as I said, our demands are absolutely legitimate and justified. If these demands are met, then we can talk about normalization. If not, then not. So, again, it was not our choice. But everybody in Iran—all segments of the establishment—should finally understand that the language of threats and terror will not work with Azerbaijan. The soon[er] they understand, the better we can see signs of normalization.”

Thus, on the one hand, some of the broader region’s latest developments confirm the Iranian side’s favorable mood; on the other hand, the bilateral relationship between Baku and Tehran cannot yet be said to be on the way to repair. Thus, Azerbaijan’s heightened vigilance should not cease. In fact, it should always be on alert, because as the foregoing has shown, unpredictability remains a hallmark of the Middle East, and, by implication in this context, in the Silk Road region. The reason is simple: as Svante Cornell wrote in the Fall 2020 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, “nearing the beginning of the fourth decade of its independence, Azerbaijan is more closely connected to Middle Eastern dynamics than it has been in two centuries. This process, moreover, is likely to continue to bring Azerbaijan in ever greater proximity to dynamics of the Middle East. This, in turn, requires Baku to spend greater energy in understanding the rapidly developing logic of the region’s geopolitics.”