



كلية الآداب والعلوم
College of Arts and Sciences
QATAR UNIVERSITY جامعة قطر

مركز دراسات الخليج
Gulf Studies Center

**AI-Ula Declaration: A Window of Opportunity
for Wider Regional Reconciliation?
Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu**

**Gulf Insights Series
N° 50 – November 2021**

Al-Ula Declaration: A Window of Opportunity for Wider Regional Reconciliation? Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu

Introduction

The rapprochement between Turkey and the UAE, who located themselves at the opposite sides in regional conflicts since Arab Uprisings, marked one of the most significant developments signaling a reconciliation atmosphere in the region following the Al-Ula Declaration. After years of tense relations, [in late August 2021, Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the UAE's national security advisor, met in Turkey with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.](#) Later that month, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan exchanged a phone call, marking a new stage in bilateral relations. Anwar Gargash, UAE presidential diplomatic advisor and former Foreign Minister until February this year labelled the call "[very positive and friendly.](#)" Following in September 2021, media reports circulated news that Emirati wealth funds, including Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and ADQ, an Abu Dhabi-based investment company, have eyes on [Turkish investment worth billions of dollars.](#) Al-Nahyan's next visit was to Qatar where he met with the state's Emir during what was the first high-level visit in [four years after the deal brokered earlier this year among GCC members.](#) The Emirati official's visit to Doha and Ankara can be seen as a "[newly-crafted Emirati approach](#)" that focuses less on confrontational relations and more on economic development.

Al-Ula as a Turning Point in the Regional Rapprochement

Al-Ula was the first concrete and the most important step for reconciliation in the Gulf region. On January 5, 2021, the GCC states signed [Al-Ula statement](#) aka the 'solidarity and stability agreement', ending the boycott on Qatar imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt in 2017. A blockade was implemented after the four states accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and meddling in other Arab states' internal affairs. The diplomatic efforts to mend the fences did not stop after Al-Ula summit. Gulf politics experts were surprised when a picture of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and UAE's National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, [smiling and relaxed at a Red Sea Resort, was posted](#) online and broadly circulated through social networks.

Arguably, the agreement also played an enabling role in the wider Middle East accord. Al-Ula Agreement has been both a result and a facilitator of de-escalation trends in the region. It did not only end the physical blockade on Qatar but has also lifted a psychological barrier after a period of a high antagonism of identities in the region. It can be argued that the Qatar crisis was not solely about Qatar, it was a consequence of numerous constellations of factors globally, regionally and domestically. The national turn in global politics and the declining trends in regionalism;

inherited diplomatic anxieties and power hierarchies in the Middle East; and heightened domestic security concerns and securitized identities in the Gulf States, had contributed to the escalation of the crisis in 2017. Therefore [the end of the rift also had wider repercussions for regional de-escalation, in which Qatar plays a mediating role between Turkey and Saudi-Emirati bloc](#), is a supporter and enthusiastic broker of [Iran-Saudi talks](#) as well as promotes normalization with Egypt and Turkey.

Indeed, the region has witnessed a series of reconciliation moves among bitter enemies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey-Egypt and Turkey-the UAE. [The second round of talks between Turkey and Egypt took place on 8 September 2021 in Istanbul](#) and both parties pledge to continue working to melt frosty relations since 2013. Furthermore, earlier this year, Turkey and Saudi Arabia attempted to facilitate their strained ties. These developments cannot solely be attributed to Turkey's push, Gulf monarchies also have incentives to mend their fences regionally beyond rapprochement with Turkey especially, [Saudi Arabia and Iran who engage in a similar reconciliatory approach](#). Iraq brokered tension-easing talks between two countries since early April and continued with [a new round of talks in Baghdad in late September](#). On the intra-GCC front, in early November 2021, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have agreed on [border demarcation as a part of a trust-building move](#) after Al-Ula agreement.

Those developments are swift in their pace but hardly surprising, given the fact that a conducive environment for such developments has recently

emerged. A number of factors can be highlighted here. On an international and regional arena, Biden administration's further retrenchment from the region is a factor that pushes Gulf monarchies to seek alternative arrangements. The full withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan fueled Iran, Turkey and the Gulf states' shared concerns over further regional instability. While any move towards the US retreatment from the region is welcomed by Iran, [Tehran shares a concern with other regional states about the possibility of further refugee influx from Afghanistan](#).

Given their almost exclusive reliance on the US military power, the Gulf States are aware that the US security blanket, a security commitment to defend Gulf allies in time of need, is not guaranteed. The attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 and heightened tensions in the Gulf waters have [tested the US's defense guarantee](#) in the Gulf. Trump administration's inaction in face of the attacks claimed by the Houthis in Yemen contributed to that awareness from the Gulf monarchies' side. Recently, Gargash's statement on October 3 reflected the anxiety about the US departure from Afghanistan and its impact on the Gulf monarchies: ["We will see in the coming period really what is going on with regards to America's footprint in the region. I don't think we know yet, but Afghanistan is definitely a test and to be honest it is a very worrying test"](#).

Apart from the US retreat from the region and power vacuum in Afghanistan, post-Covid economic recovery plans top the agenda for regional reconciliation. All of the engaging parties, namely Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and the

UAE, have economic hardships at varying degrees. This is particularly apparent in Turkey's re-engagement with the UAE. President Erdogan's first remarks after meeting with the UAE security advisor al-Nahyan was on [Abu Dhabi's 'serious investments' in Turkey](#).

Conclusion

After Al-Ula, a regionally shared understanding has emerged that the zero-sum security mentality does not benefit the parties anymore. The tilt towards a 'security through diplomacy and accommodation' approach appears to define regional politics in the near future. Progress in Turkish-Emirati and Saudi-Iranian rapprochements are the most prominent examples of this willingness for region-wide reconciliation.

Yet, Gulf experts have long learnt to blow on cold water when it comes to make future predictions on regional politics in an ever-shifting material and ideational environment. Recent diplomatic spat between some [Gulf States and Lebanon](#) over Lebanese official's remarks on the Yemen war is just yet another reminder that confrontation will coexist with reconciliation in the region. While Saudi Arabia has been joined by Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE in pulling ambassadors from Beirut, Qatar and Oman called for easing the tensions. Here lies the narrowness of the window of opportunity emerged after Al-Ula summit. The summit has not created a unified Arab Gulf block towards regional security issues, especially in GCC-Iran relations, and repercussions of the tension between some GCC states and Iran would be felt in

Lebanon, Yemen and Syria with devastating consequences.

While the material and security considerations appear as the primary driver of the current reconciliation, the memories of the past decade can haunt the current blooming environment. In any case, the future of stability will be dependent on regional states' willingness and ability to facilitate bargains among themselves.

About the author

Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu is a PhD Candidate at the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, Turkey, and a Research Assistant in the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. Battaloglu obtained an MA Degree in Gulf Studies at Qatar University with a thesis on Turkey and Iran's soft power in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Her research interests are international relations of the Gulf monarchies, Turkey-GCC relations and identity and foreign policy nexus in the Gulf.

About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

All articles published under "Gulf Insight" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.