



Arabs, Turks, and Iranians: Prospects for Cooperation and Prevention of Conflict

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Bio:

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Abstract

After the second World War, the Middle East has experienced more conflict and war than any other region in the world. In this essay I ask whether the three dominant tribes that make up the Middle East -Arabs, Turks, and Iranians- have the capacity to reduce their tensions and move toward regional cooperation. These tensions and conflicts have deep historical and cultural roots that need to be addressed. Furthermore, Arabs, Turks and Iranians can learn from the experience of other regions of the world such as Europe and South America, which have managed to overcome conflict and develop strong regional bonds. I argue that the first step in this direction is to transition from the current state of cold war and proxy wars to cold peace, which can be followed by a warm peace. As a practical first step I recommend the creation of regionalist advocacy groups in Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries.

Keywords:

Conflict, Cooperation, Middle East, Islamic Civilization, Iran, Turkey, Arab Countries

1) Introduction:

This research project deals with potential for cooperation and reduction of hostilities in the Middle East. Instead of the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, this project focuses on the interactions

among Arabs, Turks and Iranians (ATI). Arabs, Turks, and Iranians are the largest ethnic/linguistic groups in the Middle East and together they account for more than 90% of the region's population. While the Arab world is fragmented into more than 20 countries which share the Arab/Islamic culture, Iran and Turkey are the sole political and national representations of the Iranians and Turks respectively. Together they account for 30% of the total population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)².

Looking back at the history of the MENA region, we observe that the interactions of Arabs, Turks and Iranians have been dominated by animosity and conflict in most periods. Islam has served as a common cultural force that has linked these three civilizations, but it has not prevented rivalry and conflict. The intra-ATI rivalries have periodically resulted in costly wars. The most recent episode was the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), in which both countries suffered very large human casualties. It also imposed a heavy financial toll on both countries, as well as the wealthy oil exporting countries, which financed a large share of Iraq's military expenses. Iran was also involved in a proxy war with Saudi Arabia for more than four decades (until the recent 2023 rapprochement). This proxy war destabilized many smaller Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Turkey's relations with Iran and Arab countries have enjoyed sharp improvement in recent years under Erdogan's leadership, but they remain vulnerable to sudden and sporadic setbacks. The relations with several Arab countries deteriorated after the Arab Spring Uprisings (2010-2011) because of Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for democratic reforms. The Turkish-Iranian relations have not resulted in a direct conflict, but bilateral relations have been

² Author's calculation based on 2022 World Bank data. The total population of MENA was reported at 578.2 million which included Israel, Djibouti and Malta.

very volatile. They frequently oscillate between good relations and geopolitical tensions as both countries compete for influence in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and are also on opposite sides in the Azerbaijan-Armenia confrontations.

The objective of this research project is to address four questions about the state of engagement among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. First, what are the core causes of bilateral and multilateral tensions and differences among them? Second, what lessons can Middle Eastern nations learn from the experience of other regions with long histories of conflict and rivalry such as Europe? Third, what are the potential gains from reducing the animosities or transforming them into constructive competition? And finally, what are some strategies and policies that can reduce the tensions and encourage positive engagement among the governments and citizens of Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran.

The Middle East has witnessed several shifts in civilizational dominance among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. Before the rise of Islam and the arrival of Turks from Central Asia, Iran was the dominant civilization in the region, while the Arabs were generally marginalized in the rivalry between the Iranian (Sassanids) and Byzantines empires. The rise of Islam shifted the balance of power to Arabs, which defeated the Iranians and spread Islam to the east, into India and Central Asia. The Arabic speaking world, in turn, came under the control of the Ottoman (Turks) empire, and remained under absolute Ottoman domination for three centuries (1500-1800), before it fell under the colonial domination of the rising European powers. The Ottoman Empire continued to control large parts of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, including Jerusalem and the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah till the end of the First World War.

While some Arab leaders and intellectuals were dreaming of a united “state of Arabia” after the Ottoman defeat, Western domination, and localized nationalist tendencies of the early 20th century (Egyptian nationalism, Syrian nationalism, etc.) resulted in the creation of 20 Arab countries. Not only political unification of the Arab world seems like a distant dream, but even the level of political and economic coordination among the Arab countries is very limited despite their common Arab and Islamic heritage. As a result, engagement of Arab countries with Iran and Turkey varies from country to country. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) for example, Syria sided with Iran while Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported Iraq (Nonneman, 2004).

Iran and Turkey had normal and peaceful relations before the 1979 Islamic revolution as both countries played important roles as the cold war allies of the United States. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the relations between the two countries became more competitive as the Islamic regime of Iran pursued an ideological and anti-western foreign policy toward its neighbors. The nature of Iran-Turkey relations evolved further after the victory of the liberal Islamic party of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2002. The bilateral relations between Iran and Turkey have frequently oscillated between economic cooperation and geopolitical competition ever since.

Overall, the current state of engagements among Arabs, Turks and Iranians is a combination of selective cooperation and rivalry, which has multiple dimensions. Here I identify four different types of engagement and pose a few questions as to how the level of each type of engagement can be measured.

A) Economic engagement: What is the volume of trade and cross-border investment among countries of a region relative to the total volume of trade and investment of the region with the entire world?

B) People-to-people travel and tourism. How many tourists from each region visit the other two regions each year and what is the relative significance of this tourism volume for each ATI node?

C) Cultural engagement: How aware and informed are people of each node about the other two? How much coverage does the media in each ATI node provide on news and important developments in the other nodes?

D) Diplomatic engagement: What is the state of bilateral diplomatic relationships among the ATI nations? How many treaties for military, economic, diplomatic cooperation are in effect between each ATI pair? What are the frequencies of pairwise wars and proxy wars among ATI nodes?

2. Historical Background

When we look at the history of interactions and engagements among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians over a long period of time, three important facts stand out:

2.1) The Engagement-Animosity Equilibrium: Before succumbing to Western colonial and cultural influence by the second half of 19th century, Arabs, Turks, and Iranians had strong cultural exchanges while they engaged in frequent wars as geopolitical and sectarian rivals.

These engagements included, trade, travel, and conflict induced relocations of ethnic and sectarian groups, which contributed to cultural exchanges. Furthermore, these engagements took place in parallel to animosities and occasional wars.

We can refer to this situation as an **engagement-animosity equilibrium**. This equilibrium arises among a collection of countries that belong to a “culture area” but at the same time engage in rivalry and war as they compete for resources and power. A culture area is defined as a geographic region (consisting of several countries) that shares some cultural norms, religious beliefs, or common ideologies³. Europe, for example, can be defined as a culture area, which shares a common European and Christian culture. Based on this definition the Arabs, Turks and Iranians constitute a *culture area*.

I argue that before the mid-19th century the ATI nations were interacting with one another in an Engagement-Rivalry Equilibrium. With the advent of Western colonialism and rising influence of the western culture (since mid-19th century), the rivalries continued (and in some cases intensified because of the rise of nationalist tendencies), but the cross-cultural influence and cultural blending among ATI diminished. As a result, the MENA region transitioned from an Engagement-Rivalry Equilibrium to an Ignorance-Rivalry Equilibrium, in which Arabs, Turks and Iranians lost their interest and cultural curiosity toward each other as their economic and cultural elite were either forced or enticed to engage with the West.

During 16th and 17th centuries, while the Ottoman and Safavid empires were frequently at war they were also engaged in trade and cross-border population movements, which contributed to cultural blending⁴ and cross-cultural influences. Since they were not dominated by external powers, they accepted each other as rival enemies of equal status and members of a common *culture area*. Their relations with one another were similar to the relations among European

³ Gregg, Gary S. *The Middle East: a cultural psychology*. Oxford University Press, 2005 (page 4)

⁴ Perry, John R. "Cultural currents in the Turco-Persian world of Safavid and post-Safavid times." In *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran*, pp. 84-96. Routledge, 2011.

countries since the 17th century (when they reversed the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and Europe (as a region) achieved military supremacy over the rest of the world.)

2.2) The rivalry in the past did not take the form of cultural animosity and resentment toward each other's traditions. Islam as the shared religion and Arabic as the language of Quran, served as a common bond that promoted cross-cultural exchanges. During the four centuries that Ottomans ruled the Arab world, the Arabs and Turks had positive attitudes toward each other as the Ottoman rulers viewed the Arabs as fellow Muslims and did not impose any bans on Arabic language and culture. Similarly, before the rise of Turkish nationalism by Young Turks, the Arabs viewed the Ottoman rulers not as foreign occupiers and colonizers; rather as the defenders and guardians of the Islamic empire that had restored the golden age of Abbasid empire for all Muslims (Ekinci 2015). In this positive environment there was a large number of cultural exchanges and intermarriages and cross migrations among Turks and Arabs (Masters 2013).

There were cross-cultural exchanges among Turks and Iranians as well. The Persian literature was popular and well respected in Ottoman cultural circles and among the Ottoman elite, despite repeated Ottoman wars with Iran during the 16th and 17th centuries. Even when animosity was high there was respect for the enemy as equal. The kings and rulers fought each other for territory and domination but artists and scientists were well respected. While sectarian (Sunni-Shia) intolerance was prevalent, scientists and artists of various ethnic groups were welcomed in the courts of Abbasid Khalifs, Ottoman sultans and Safavid Shahs.

2.3) After World War II, distrust and negative bias among the ATI countries continued at the state-to-state level throughout the 20th century, partly because of the lack of cultural and

educational engagement. This engagement deficit contributed to the geopolitical tensions among the ATI, which in turn, further strengthened these mutual negative biases. The opportunities for trade and security alliances with the outside world also reduced the incentives for ATI cooperation as Iran and oil-rich Arab countries expanded their trade with the Western countries. The trade, investment and tourism relations among ATI have improved in the past 25 years, but the progress has been inconsistent and volatile, as will be discussed in the next section.

The engagement of Arabs and Turks and Iranians with each other has been influenced by the frequent interventions of major external powers since the second world war. While this is also true of the European countries, the response of the ATI countries to this external domination has been different from the Europe. While domination of Europe by the U.S. and the former USSR (after 1945) brought the war-torn Western European countries closer to each other, the superpower rivalries in the Middle East, pulled the ATI apart from each other. High level of distrust among ATI has compelled many smaller Arab countries (such as the GCC block) to seek protection through security arrangements with the U.S. (and the U.K.) Many ATI countries rely on external countries rather than intra-regional security arrangements, for their security and economic relations.

3) Current State of Intra-ATI relations:

The historical developments that were described in section 2 have resulted in several factors that perpetuate the rivalries and conflicts among ATI to the present. The most important factors are

geopolitical competition, ideological differences and sectarian divides. We will discuss these issues in this section.

3.1) Geopolitics: At the diplomatic level the relations among ATI countries have been, and remain vulnerable to interference, distrust, opportunism, and betrayal (cooperation with external powers against each other). While these conditions might exist among member nations of other regions, they are more prevalent and more intense among the Middle Eastern countries.

Furthermore, the past occurrences of these hostile postures are also part of the historical memory of the three ATI nodes and affect their perceptions about each other. Before the 1979 revolution, Iran had moderate relations with Turkey and pro-American Arab countries. At the same time the Shah of Iran relied on its U.S. backed military advantage to ignore or occasionally bully its Arab neighbors.

3.2) Ideological and Sectarian Divides The 1979 revolution resulted in a major shift in Iran's regional policy as the Islamic regime adopted a radical foreign policy based on support for Shia populations, the export of Islamic revolution to the entire Middle East, and hostility toward the regional allies of the United States. As a result the geopolitical tensions took a sectarian Sunni-Shia dimension. Not surprisingly however, there was a push back by Arab countries and Turkey, which deteriorated their relations with Iran and eventually resulted in the Iran-Iraq war.

These factors have affected Arab-Turkish relations as well. The secular (and periodically military) governments that ruled Turkey after WWII viewed the Arab world as a low priority region. In the late 1980s under the leadership of Turgut Ozel, Turkey tried to improve its relations with the Arab countries. Turkey's interest in the Middle East increased after 2002 with the rise of Recep Tayeb Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It also took an ideological direction as Erdogan expressed support for moderate Islamic groups such as the

Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. Ever since 2002 Turkey's interference in the domestic politics of some Arab countries has intensified. These interventions and Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq have led to periodic tensions with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Overall, the level of diplomatic tensions and distrust among ATI has been volatile in the 21st century. While the ATI have avoided major wars, tensions remain under the surface and erupt periodically. Fortunately, the trend has been positive since 2023, as Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and the Iran-Saudi relations have improved. Before these recent rapprochements however, the tensions were high in both fronts. The Saudi government, for example, openly supported hostile U.S. policies toward the Islamic republic of Iran. In return the Islamic government of Iran actively interfered in internal affairs of several Arab countries.

3.3) Economic Relation:

Despite geopolitical and ideological tensions, economic relations among some ATI countries are significant, although they remain below full potential. Economic relations between Iran and Arab countries are vulnerable to diplomatic tensions and external interventions. Iran developed strong economic relations with the UAE in the 1990s and early 2000s. These relations, however, were adversely affected by the hostilities between Iran and the United States. The U.S. economic sanctions against Iran forced the UAE to scale back its economic relations with Iran and many Iranian businesses that were operating in Dubai, to bypass the U.S. sanctions, were forced to move their activities to other countries such as Turkey or Malaysia.

Turkey was successful in expanding its economic relations with all Arab countries after President Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2003. The Turkish intervention in Arab affairs after the 2011 Arab Spring; and its active military involvement in Syria, have had an adverse effect on its trade and investment relations with large Arab economies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. In general, Turkey has been more pragmatic in its relations with the Arab world, in comparison to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Whenever there is a setback in diplomatic and economic relations, the Turkish government makes an effort to mend the relations after a few years. This is best demonstrated by the restoration of Egypt-Turkey relations after 12 years, in September 2024. It is also noticeable that Turkey's private sector has maintained strong relations with Arab partners even during periods of high diplomatic tension⁵.

In the past three decades intra-ATI tourism has also increased but it has been mostly one-sided. Turkey is popular with Iranian and Arab tourists and Dubai is a popular tourist destination for Iranians but only a small number of Turks or Arabs visit Iran. The only exception is religious (Shia) tourists from Lebanon and Iraq that visit the Shia holy shrines inside Iran and in some cases their travel expenses are subsidized by the government of Iran. The Iranian government also supports and subsidizes religious tourism of Iranians to Shia holy shrines in Iraq and Syria.

3.4) Media and cultural exchange: Another important dimension of intra-regional interactions is the media coverage and cultural attention of regional neighbors toward each other. Cultural activities under consideration are music, cinema, literature, and visual arts. All three countries produce large amounts of cultural products, and they also consume large volumes of cultural products of other countries. Yet, as a legacy of their attraction to the Western culture, most of the

⁵ While Turkey-Egypt diplomatic relations suffered a severe setback after General El-Sisi's military takeover in Egypt, the bilateral economic relations- mostly Turkish investments in Egypt- remained strong.

imported cultural products and services into ATI come from the West. The amount of intra-ATI cultural exchanges is limited as are the intra-ATI news coverage.

How much of the news about neighboring countries is covered by the domestic media in each country? How are artistic and athletic activities of neighboring countries covered in each country's media? The answer to both questions is "less than desirable and less than the level of cultural exchanges in other comparable regions of the world. If you scan the media in any ATI country the coverage of external news is primarily focused on Western nations. The external entertainment programs are also primarily the cultural products of Western countries (or in some cases India).

At the same time the intra-ATI cultural exchanges are asymmetrical. Turkey has had more success in exporting its movies and television drama serials to Iran and Arab countries. Iran's TV products have not had any success in attracting an audience in Turkey and Arab countries but some Iranian movies that have won international awards, have also received attention in the MENA region. In the world of music some Arab singers have enjoyed recognition and popularity in Iran through internet and satellite TV, even though they are banned in official media of the Islamic Republic. Yet due to language barriers, cross-consumption of musical products has been more limited than Television series. A noticeable cross-cultural influence in music is the reproduction of some songs in other ATI languages⁶.

4) The costs of intra-ATI animosity

⁶ For samples of Arabic versions of Turkish Songs and vice versa see: <https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-examples-of-Arabic-versions-of-Turkish-origin-songs> . For a Turkish version of a popular Persian song see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvE496TLW8k> , and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDNDVtoJhik> .

Animosity and conflict have imposed heavy costs on ATI countries which, broadly speaking, fall into three categories: a) The costs of direct conflict and warfare among two neighboring countries, b) The costs of betrayal of one country, that conflicts with a third party, by a regional neighbor, and c) the costs of missed opportunities for regional cooperation and coordination. In the case of intra-ATI relations. When we look at the historical records of intra-ATI interactions and dynamics, we can identify many examples of these three types of costs.

4.1) The costs of direct confrontation: The costs of intra-ATI animosity in modern times were clearly brought to light by the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), which was one of the longest conventional wars in the twentieth century. This bloody eight-year war caused heavy human casualties on both sides in multiple battlefields on Iran and Iraq's common border, the inland cities, and the waters of the Persian Gulf. It also caused considerable damage to the urban and industrial infrastructure of both countries. Furthermore, the attitudes of external powers toward Iran and Iraq led to its continuation as the United States prevented either side from winning the war (Riedel 2013); and many nations profited from arms sales to both countries (Brzoska 1987). This international posture denied either side a military victory for several years until a ceasefire was finally achieved in 1988.

The vulnerability of the region to the eruption of similar full-scale wars among the three players has diminished, but it is still a very costly risk factor. The proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia came close to escalation into direct conflicts on several occasions before the 2023 reproachment. Similarly, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia increased the risk of confrontation between Iran and Turkey in 2022 but it has subsided since.

4.2) The costs of Intra-ATI betrayal: The animosities and jealousies among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians have frequently resulted in betrayal of one nation in conflicts with outside powers. The historical cases include the cooperation of Safavid Iran with Western powers against the Ottoman empire. Similarly, Turks view the Arab cooperation with the British and French empires during World War One as an act of grand betrayal, which contributed to the defeat and, ultimately, the collapse of the Ottoman empire. Arab countries in turn have memories of more recent betrayals by Iran and Turkey in their struggle against Israel.

Before 2003 victory of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, the secular Turkish government maintained normal relations with Israel, and it actively engaged in military and strategic cooperation with the United States (and Israel) as a NATO member⁷; and in this capacity facilitated U.S. support for Israel. More recently, the Turkish media have revealed that despite President Erdogan's declaration of trade sanctions against Israel after the 2023 Gaza War, Turkish exports to Israel have continued⁸. These acts of intra-ATI betrayal impose substantial costs on the betrayed country by influencing the course of important geopolitical events in the region. They also perpetuate the distrust and negative sentiments in the historical memory of each nation and, eventually, lead to acts of revenge at some time in the future.

⁷ Turkey's Western-oriented political elite since the establishment of the republic in 1923, showed little interest in development of diplomatic and economic relations with the Arab world and viewed the region from a security prism until Turgot Ozel became prime minister in 1980s.

⁸ "Figures indicate Erdogan gov't turns a blind eye to violation of Turkey's trade restrictions on Israel", Nordic Monitor, November 5, 2024, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/11/32374/>, (Cited online December 5, 2024).

4.3) Missed opportunities for regional cooperation and coordination. In the competitive modern global economy, nations try to improve their global competitiveness by regional economic cooperation. The economic integration of Europe is the best example of how regional cooperation can benefit the member states. We find similar examples of successful regional cooperation in Asia and Latin America. In the Middle East region, on the other hand, there has been little progress toward regional cooperation. The lack of trust and goodwill among Arabs, Turks and Iranians has prevented successful cooperation at regional level although there has been some progress among Arab sub-regions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The Intra-ATI animosity has also prevented the development of regional transportation infrastructure such as cross-country highways and railroads. Iran and Arab countries can both benefit from development of railroads that connect Central Asia to Iraq and the GCC region by going through Iran. Yet the ongoing tensions of the GCC countries with Iran have prevented the development of a regional railroad and highway system. This failure has resulted in significant loss of opportunities for regional trade and cooperation.

The low levels of economic integration and cross-border transportation infrastructure in the MENA region, not only has many opportunity costs but it has also resulted in low cost of future intra-ATI conflicts. When neighboring countries increase their economic interdependence, they are more hesitant to adopt confrontational and opportunistic foreign policies toward each other. In some regions with a long history of intra-regional war and conflict, such as Europe, economic integration was deliberately promoted to reduce the risks and incentives for future conflicts. In the Middle East the opposite is the case. Iran and Saudi Arabia have very low levels of bilateral trade and investment. As a result, they have no economic incentives to prevent or contain the proxy war that has dominated their bilateral relations.

5) What can ATI learn from the historical experience of Europe

Tension, conflict of interest and war among neighbors has been a common pattern in most regions of the world with varying degrees, throughout history. While the Middle East has experienced the largest number of wars and conflicts since the second world war, Europe experienced more intra-regional conflicts than most other regions, for several centuries before World War II. After 1945 a handful of nations in Western Europe initiated the process of economic cooperation and within a short period of time many other countries joined and created the modern-day European Union. The ability of Western European nations to achieve remarkable peace and cooperation after World War II, and their successful integration of many Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, offers some useful lessons for the ATI. In this analysis we will focus primarily on the interactions of three leading European powers, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Before 1945, the frequency of inter-state warfare in Europe was larger than any other region in the World. Since 1495 there have been 125 major wars among European countries. France participated in 40 of these wars. Before the 1871 German Unification, various German states participated in 30 wars against other European states during 1495-1871⁹. After unification, the German Empire fought two costly World Wars. Finally, ever since the establishment of the United Kingdom in 1707, Great Britain has been involved in at least 30 wars against at least one European state¹⁰.

⁹ "List of Wars", Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-wars-2031197#ref328528>, (Online citation on December 5, 2024).

¹⁰ Ibid.

After experiencing the devastating destruction of two World Wars in the first half of 20th century, the Europeans were, finally, able to overcome their deep animosities and develop close ties with one another. While after the second world war, Eastern European nations remained under the iron fist of the former Soviet Union, a combination of internal incentives and external forces brought the countries of Western Europe closer to each other (under the U.S. security umbrella).

Surrounded by two superpowers and having suffered economic devastation as a result of the war, the Western European countries realized that cooperation was the only way that they could remain relevant and competitive in world affairs as a continent. The cooperation among Western European nations received support from the United States, which offered economic assistance for economic recovery of Western Europe through the Marshall Plan and provided it with a security umbrella by maintaining several military bases in the region. The U.S. also used its diplomatic and economic leverage to (re)-imposed democratic political institutions on the defeated nations such as Germany and Italy. As a result, all Western European countries adopted similar parliamentary democracies, and this institutional harmonization further paved the way for regional cooperation.

Europe has enjoyed a remarkable and unprecedented level of peace and cooperation after WWII. European states have managed to create the European Union through a gradual process of economic integration. In parallel they have succeeded in promoting a pan-European cultural identity (as a complement to each state's national identity) among a large segment of each member-nation's citizens¹¹. The French, the Germans and the British still feel very competitive

¹¹ "How to Measure European Identity: Report on the Construction of CIEI Indicator", Working Paper 2018-04, PERCEIVE, 2018, https://www.perceiveproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/How-to-measure-European-Identity_.pdf

toward each other but they have successfully channeled these competitive emotions into athletic, cultural, scientific, and technological competition.

5.1) Europe's Violent Past

The historical grievances and cultural hatreds among European states prior to World War II, were as strong, and in some historical moments even stronger than the negative perceptions among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. When the United Kingdom was more advanced than Germany in the early 19th century, the British had very negative and demeaning attitudes toward Germans. The British traveler John Russell who visited Germany several times in this era, made negative comments about the character of the Germans in his travel book¹²:

*".....nded, **plodding**, easily contented people. Like all their brethren of the north of Germany, without possessing less kindness of heart, they have much less joviality, less of the good fellow, than the Austrians, and are not so genial and extravagant, even in their amusements, as the Bavarian or Wirtem..."* (Russel, Page 228)

In the late 19th century, the British developed a more positive perception of Germany as they took notice of its *Kultur* and bureaucratic efficiency. This admiration, however, was often accompanied with suspicion as the German/Prussian military grew stronger and posed a threat to the British Empire. The initial positive perception gradually gave way to fear and suspicion.

¹² Russell, John (Advocate). A Tour In Germany, And Some of the Southern Provinces of the Austrian Empire: In the Years 1820, 1821, 1822. Boston: Wells & Lilly, 1825.

These negative perceptions intensified in early 20th century, particularly during World War One¹³.

Similarly, the German perceptions of Great Britain have oscillated between positive and negative extremes. Initially Germans had positive perceptions and admiration for the British in the 18th and early 19th centuries. They saw England as a role model of cultural enlightenment and industrial progress. These perceptions turned negative in the late 19th and early 20th century as the British Kingdom [in alliance with other powers] engaged in multiple wars to contain the rise of Germany.¹⁴ The animosity and hatred among European nations reached a climax in the first half of the 20th century and resulted in two World Wars. After the second world war, however, the European democracies took major steps toward economic and diplomatic cooperation in the 1950s and 1960s.

5.2) People-to-People connections among European Countries

In most modern countries there are several subcultures. The most common lifestyle subcultures in ATI are a) religious/traditional and b) secular/liberal lifestyles. Similarly, in the domain of political economy you find a right (capitalist) and left (labor) divide. When we look at the contemporary relations between France and England what we observe is that people in these countries connect with one another based on their shared sub-cultures. For example, the environmental movement in France and the UK (and other European countries) cooperate with one another. The conservative advocates of free enterprise cooperate with each other to influence

¹³ Bauerkämper, Arnd, and Christiane Eisenberg. "Introduction: Perceptions of Britain in Germany." Chapter in: Arnd Bauerkämper/Christiane Eisenberg (Hg.), *Britain as a Model of Modern Society? German Views*, Augsburg: Wißner-Verlag, 2006. Page 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Page 7.

economic policy in both countries. In other words, interdependence among European countries is reinforced by democratic institutions that allow individuals and organizations with common goals to freely cooperate across member states of the EU and support each other. An even stronger bonding factor is the cross-border investments of European multinational corporations, which have created strong economic integration.

Unfortunately, these types of people-to-people and institution-to-institution connectivity are very limited and underdeveloped among the ATI for two reasons. First, weak, and unfriendly diplomatic relations prevent easy communication and travel among ATI countries, that is possible among European states. Diplomatic tensions and mutual suspicion among governments also reduce the capacities of NGOs to cooperate with their counterparts in other ATI nations. Second, even though NGOs in the MENA region show a strong desire for international cooperation, the prevailing orientation toward the West has minimized the interest of these NGOs to engage with each other. Instead, they all have a preference for engagement with the American and European (and more recently Asian) counterparts. The non-government organizations in ATI states often have stronger bonds with their Western counterparts than similar NGOs in other ATI states.

The environmental NGOs in Turkey, for example, are more interested in connecting with environmental groups in Europe and earning recognition among Western nations than cooperating with Arab and Iranian environmental movements. The same is true for the environmental movement in the Arab world and Iran. We observe a similar lack of connection among political organizations, which share a common ideology (perhaps, except for Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the Arab MB leaders enjoy some support in Turkey and have been hosted by the AKP government.) Similarly, the labor movements or the labor right activists in Iran and

Turkey have little interaction or exchange of ideas- unlike the strong cross-border connectivity of pro-labor parties and labor movement organizations in the European Union.

The only exception to this pervasive mutual neglect in recent years are the Islamic and humanitarian NGOs, based in Turkey. With the encouragement and support of the AKP government, these NGOs made some progress in opening chapters and conducting humanitarian activities in several Arab countries¹⁵. Even the activities of these NGOs, however, suffered a setback after the Arab Spring because of the deterioration of Turkey's diplomatic relations with the Arab World over its support of the Muslim Brotherhood organizations.

5.3) Art, Culture, and Literature

Europe can serve as a role model for the ATI on many types of arts and cultural connectivity. In the educational system of most European countries the coverage of the shared European culture and literature is substantial. There is also a very strong cross-country interest among European countries in arts and literature. This pan-European cultural interest is much older than the recent political and economic integration after WWII. In literature and philosophy, the linkages are centuries old and reflect the shared influence of the classic pre-Christianity Greek culture, and the enlightenment. Its roots in music go back to the late 18th century in what William Weber has described as the "rise of mass culture in European musical life"¹⁶. Several classical musicians

¹⁵ Nihat Çelik & Emre İşeri (2016) Islamically oriented humanitarian NGOs in Turkey: AKP foreign policy parallelism, *Turkish Studies*, 17:3, 429-448, DOI: [10.1080/14683849.2016.1204917](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2016.1204917)
Also see: Soy, Nesibe Hicret. "A comparison of Turkey and Iran's Soft Power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries." PhD diss., Qatar University (Qatar), 2016.

¹⁶ Weber, William. "Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770-1870." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* (1994): 175-190.

such as Beethoven, Bach and Mozart have enjoyed universal popularity in all European countries ever since, regardless of their national identity, and this popularity has transcended multiple periods of war and rivalries in the continent. The same is true for icons of literature, and visual arts such as Charles Dickens, Honoré DE Balzac, Claude Monet and Leonardo da Vinci.

In contrast, the Arabs, Turks and Iranians remain highly ignorant of each other’s art and literature. How many Turks and Arabs are familiar with the Iranian painter Kamal-ol-Molk? How many Turks and Iranians are familiar with prominent Arab Artists such as Ibn Arabi and Khalil Gibran? How many Iranians and Arabs are familiar with prominent Turkish Ottoman artists such as Osman Hamdi Bey or Abdulcelil Levni? Unfortunately, the answer to these three questions is: “only very few”.

Do you recognize any of these poets?					
	<u>William Shakespeare</u>	<u>Yunus Emre</u>	<u>Ahmed Shawqi</u>	<u>Ferdowsi</u>	How do you say "Shame on us" ?
Turk	X	X			Bize yazıklar olsun
Arab	X		X		عار علينا
Iranian	X			X	شرم بر ما

Figure 1

There is indeed very little mutual interest among these national cultures across the Middle Eastern countries. Even for some citizens that are not influenced by feelings of admiration for the west, the negative perceptions and lack of interest among ATI is so strong that the three ATI cultures do not connect with each other based on their shared cultural norms and icons. As another example, the three ATI cultures all have rich literary histories in both prose and poetry, yet they remain ignorant of each other's literary icons. Neither the educational system nor the cultural elite of ATI nations promote mutual admiration for each other's literature and culture. This mutual ignorance in the field of literature is demonstrated in figure 1.

5.4) Three Contributing Factors

Three factors that have contributed to Europe's 'cooperation successes' deserve a mention. First, despite continuous warfare and tension among European states, there has been a long history of marriage among the monarchies and royal families¹⁷. These "dynastic marriages" not only contributed to occasional diplomatic alliances, but they also facilitated cultural exchanges among European nations¹⁸. There is evidence that the expansion of marriage networks among European royal families contributed to a reduction in frequency of inter-European wars¹⁹.

The second factor is the common educational experience of Europe's political elite who created the early vision of the European Community. Many of these pioneers and founders had studied in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s; and shared an awareness of how the federal

¹⁷ Radziwill, Princess Catherine. *The royal marriage market of Europe*. Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1915.

¹⁸ Mitchell, Silvia Z. "Early Modern Dynastic Marriages and Cultural Transfer. Joan-Luís Palos and Magdalena S. Sánchez, eds. *Transculturalisms, 1400–1700*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016. xv+ 276 pp. \$149.95." *Renaissance Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2018): 1096-1097.

¹⁹ Benzell, Seth G., and Kevin Cooke. "A network of thrones: Kinship and conflict in Europe, 1495–1918." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 13, no. 3 (2021): 102-133.

government functioned in the United States. This shared experience contributed to their success in political innovations that shaped the relations between the collective European institutions and the national governments. Since many academic, business, and political elite in MENA countries have studied in Europe and North America, perhaps their shared cultural experience can play a similar positive role in promotion of regional cooperation among the ATI.

Third, European countries have developed a mechanism to promote student mobility and student exchange at university level. While several programs toward this goal have been introduced since the 1980s, the most popular and successful one is the ERASMUS program (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). Introduced in 1987, this program allows the university students in a member state to spend a period of three months to one year in a university in another member state. In recent years larger European universities have hosted an average of thirty to forty thousand guest students annually through ERASMUS. In 2022 the program was supported by a four-billion-euro budget and 1.2 million students were enrolled²⁰. A similar arrangement among ATI universities can increase cultural tolerance and grass-root connectivity among ATI societies.

5.5) Limits and Reservations

There is, however, a limit to how much Europe can serve as a role model for regional integration among ATI. While advocates of ATI cooperation will be envious of what the European nations have achieved, some of the unique conditions that contributed to the European Union project are not available in the Middle East. First, the United States served as a

²⁰ See: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets>, (online citation, May, 2024).

geopolitical big brother that actively promoted the economic and political integration of Western Europe after World War Two. Neither the U.S. nor any other global power has played a similar role in the Middle East²¹. Second, when the European nations initiated the European Union integration process, their political systems were similar (liberal democracies) and they faced a common external adversary, the former Soviet Union. Both factors played a positive role in the creation of the EU.

Third, the political systems of ATI countries are more diverse, and they are vulnerable to sudden revolutionary change, as was the case with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt. The advocates of ATI cooperation must adapt to the existing political systems in the region and find pragmatic strategies to win support from the political leadership of each country in accordance with its own political institutions and power structure.

Fourth, the region so far lacks any shared perception of a common external threat that can bring the ATI nations closer together. To the contrary, Turkey, Iran and major Arab countries are locked in a rivalry and geopolitical competition among themselves, which has forced some of them to seek external allies and protectors. It is possible, however, that as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, a shared sympathy for Palestinians might result in some political and cultural cooperation among the ATI.

Despite all these differences, Europe can still offer many lessons to advocates of ATI cooperation. Overall, the most valuable lesson that the deep cooperation among Europeans can offer to Arabs, Turks and Iranians is that it is possible for a region that was overwhelmed by

²¹ In the context of the cold war, the U.S. created a military alliance among the UK, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan called the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955. This treaty did not result in any deep economic and political cooperation, and it was dissolved in 1979, after the Islamic Revolution removed the Shah's regime in Iran.

pervasive and historical animosities in the past, to transform itself and achieve a high level of harmony and cooperation.

6) ATI transition toward engagement and productive competition? Practical first steps and challenges

Not everyone in ATI countries is interested in promoting regional cooperation and friendship. I anticipate, however, that there are many people in each country that are passively interested, and at least a small group of individuals and institutions in each country might be passionately interested in this initiative. There are several practical steps that the passionate advocates of ATI cooperation can take to promote this cause.

A) ATI Incubators: They need to find each other and create a multi-country civil society for ATI cooperation (which we can call *ATI Incubator for convenience*). The internet and social media can facilitate this process. Once a small group of ten or fifteen interested individuals find each other, they can start by creating a website and an association. As the news about this idea spreads it will attract more supporters and some high-income individuals that support regional cooperation, might also provide financing.

B) Once the ATI advocates (the advocates for regional cooperation among ATI) find each other and create an association or an NGO, they can launch many programs to promote their agenda. Some obvious examples include a) social media outreach, b) organizing events, c) publishing educational/advocacy articles and videos, ...

C) Promoting ATI cooperation under diverse political institutions: Most governments in the Middle East are either authoritarian or semi-democratic. Promotion of regional cooperation might be more challenging in an authoritarian environment, but it is not impossible. The ATI advocates in the Middle East will face significant resistance from the political elite if they combine their core objective with promotion of democracy. It is better to focus on the positive win-win consequences of ATI cooperation for both the people and the existing ruling elites in the ATI countries.

D) Winning hearts and minds, hoping for policy congruence: The ATI governments and ruling elites will be the main actors in any significant steps toward promotion of peace and regional cooperation. The ATI advocates must focus on direct communication with the ruling elite, and indirectly, by influencing the public opinion.

When we look at the regional policy of the political leaders in Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia we find regionalist leaders (advocates of regional cooperation) in all three. These include: Turgut Ozel (1989-1993) in Turkey (Munassar, 2021, page 69)²², Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) in Iran (Munassar, 2021, pp 141-2), and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (2005-2015) in Saudi Arabia (Munassar, 2021, pp 193-95). Congruence of three regionalist leaders in three ATI nodes can create a unique window of opportunity for genuine progress toward ATI integration. The ATI advocacy activities can increase the likelihood of such a congruence. This type of congruence can also arise from the ashes of a catastrophic event with significant emotional charge for all three. The October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's response in Gaza, which has resulted in a high number of

²² Munassar, Omar. "National role conceptions and orientations of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as competing regional powers in the Middle East: 1979-2020." PhD diss., Bursa Uludag University (Turkey), 2021.

casualties and suffering among the Palestinians, is an example of such an event, which might bring the ATI leaders closer together.

7) So Many Alternatives; Who Needs an ATI initiative? The advocates of ATI integration are likely to face pushback from regionalists in their respective countries who are interested in alliance with a different group of neighbors. The Arab elite might argue that *'we have 20 Arab countries with a vast land area and a population of 450 million. Instead of focusing on regional integration with Turkey and Iran, we can work toward Arab regional integration with emphasis on Arab nationalism and a shared Arab culture'*. This Pan-Arab regionalism enjoys strong support among the academic and political elite in many Arab countries and it can reduce the appeal of ATI cooperation for some of them.

There are two strong regionalist tendencies in Turkey. The Pan-Turkism camp calls for regional cooperation with the Turkic speaking countries of Central Asia (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan). There is also a popular track that still dreams of Turkey's full integration in the European Union, despite strong resistance from several European nations. Similarly, there is a Shia-centered regionalist tendency in Iran. The ruling Islamic regime prefers economic and diplomatic coordination with Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (the Shia crescent). There has also been a Pan-Iranist movement in Iran for more than seven decades, which aspires for regional cooperation among Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan (where variations of Persian are spoken). Iran's Islamic ruling elite also has its own regionalist aspirations, which focus on supporting the Shia populations throughout the Middle East.

These alternative regionalist visions already have strong constituencies in the Middle East and any attempt to present the ATI cooperation initiative as a replacement for them is likely to face

strong resistance. Instead, the ATI advocates must present the concept of ATI cooperation as a complement to these nationalist visions. The primary objective of ATI advocacy, which is to bring about a transition from *cold/proxy war* to *cold peace* among Arabs, Turks, and Iranians, does not contradict each ATI node's membership in other multinational economic and geopolitical agreements.

Final Words

The Middle East has suffered more wars and civil wars than most other regions of the world after the second world war, primarily due to major power interventions; but also due to geopolitical, sectarian and ideological rivalries among the member countries. The three major civilizations of the region, Arabs, Turks, and Iranians must be mindful of the persistent rivalries and tensions among them. These tensions have led to repeated war and destruction in the past and they are likely to cause new conflicts in the future. It is up to the people and governments of these nations to work toward reduction of hostilities and promotion of regional cooperation. Other regions such as Europe have successfully increased their cooperation and interdependencies after many centuries of conflict. The Middle East cannot achieve peace and prosperity unless the Arabs, Turks, and Iranians find a way to manage their rivalries and move toward political and economic cooperation.

There is no doubt that deep economic and political integration will face many obstacles, but less ambitious goals such as increased economic and cultural exchanges are feasible and can gradually pave the way for more intensive cooperation. Fortunately, the ATI political leaders have shown a capacity to address the periodic tensions and move toward better relations with



each other. The recent reproachment between Turkey and Saudi Arabia; as well as the reduction of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 2023 are both fragile but can lead the region toward a more peaceful and cooperative equilibrium.

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