

TURKISH – ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE POST-NETANYAHU ERA

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For years, Turkey's relations with Israel have been stalled. During Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's last 12 years in power (2009-2021), the relationship has continued to hit lower and lower points, with few moments to celebrate. In fact, the deterioration of relations has correlated with numerous public spats between Netanyahu and Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, many analysts have overlooked the fact that a status quo was reached that enabled economic ties to thrive despite frequent crises and outbursts by the leaders. With Netanyahu now out of power, the question is whether this status quo can hold considering the anti-Erdoğan stance held by key members of the new government.

When Benjamin Netanyahu first served as Israel's prime minister in 1996, Israel-Turkey relations were in their heyday, with the military establishments in both countries staunchly aligned and Turkish politics still largely dictated by the country's generals. Then, Israel misread Turkish politics by placing all its faith in the military tutelage of the state. This did not change even after the "post-modern coup" of 1997, which emerged as a challenge to the Turkish military's ties with Israel and led to a ban on Islamists in politics.¹ It was this ban that led to the 1999 imprisonment of Erdoğan, who was then serving as the popular mayor of Istanbul. Just as Erdoğan was serving time in jail, Netanyahu lost to Ehud Barak in Israel's elections. Neither Erdoğan nor Netanyahu could have imagined that a decade later, they would both be serving as prime ministers.

The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose premiership started shortly after the AKP party was elected in 2002, began what many deemed as a new era in Turkey. The country's turn toward civil politics free from military intervention, along with numerous reforms implemented, transformed Turkey into a serious candidate for the European Union while also ushering in years of strong economic growth. Despite the AKP's pro-Palestinian agenda and animus toward the military and its ties to Israel, the government maintained relations with the Jewish state. In fact, Erdoğan's 2005 state visit to Israel took place during the premiership of perhaps the most hated Israeli figure for Palestinians, Ariel Sharon.² Arguably, the highest point until now in relations between Israel and Turkey during the Erdoğan years was in 2008 when Prime Minister Ehud Olmert included Turkey as an

intermediary in peace talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad, during which Erdoğan himself played a major role.³

Netanyahu and Erdoğan: It is Personal.

However, peace with both Syria and the Palestinians (Olmert was pursuing both simultaneously) was dashed with Israel's 2008 onslaught on Gaza which coincided with the fall of the Olmert government on corruption charges and the return of Benjamin Netanyahu to power following the February 2009 elections. The falling-out between Turkey and Israel occurred just days before the election itself during the now infamous "One Minute" crisis, when Erdoğan lashed out at Israel's President Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum. Erdoğan emerged from the incident with a new level of fame, discovering that public jabs at Israel could not only bolster his popularity at home, but also within the Arab world. With two polarizing figures now serving as premiers following Netanyahu's victory, it was inevitable that the leaders would go head-to-head, even if Israeli and Turkish foreign departments continued to see maintaining good ties as serving in the interests of both states.

Netanyahu was in office for only a little over a year when Turkey-Israel relations hit rock bottom. In June 2010, a Turkish contingent of the Gaza Flotilla called the Mavi Marmara sought to challenge the Israeli military's blockade on Gaza. Israel responded with a military attack on the ship, killing eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish-American. It would take almost three years for Netanyahu to apologize for the

incident in a sign that, at last, relations might return to normal. But by then, the political landscape of the Middle East was quite different. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, a strong ally of Erdoğan, was now in power in Egypt, and the civil war in Syria was raging. Certainly, with Netanyahu's apology, it seemed that Erdoğan's steadfastness of waiting for Netanyahu to first make an apology had paid off and that Turkey had emerged on top. Yet Erdoğan could not have foreseen what awaited him just around the corner: a stronger Netanyahu.

Erdoğan out Netanyahu in

Following Netanyahu's 2013 apology to Erdoğan, a new regional picture emerged. The Turkish leader was quickly losing status both domestically and regionally. Just months after the apology, he faced the Gezi Park protests when hundreds of thousands of Turkish citizens marched on the streets calling for his resignation. By the end of the year, his government was also embroiled in a corruption scandal on an unprecedented scale. Outside Turkey, Egypt's Morsi, whom Erdoğan had personally supported and showcased at his AKP congress, was ousted following the 2013 coup d'état by General, later President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In Syria, Turkey had severely miscalculated in predicting Assad's rule to be on the verge of collapse, and the rise of ISIS proved another challenge to Turkey's international image. For once, it seemed like Turkey desperately needed Israel.

It was in the post-2013 era that a new dynamic emerged. Erdoğan realized that, in order to

maintain some regional clout, it would be necessary to work with Israel while remaining one of the (few) strongest supporters of Palestine. Ironically, this only increased Erdoğan's dependence on Israel over the years, with the latter closely monitoring Turkey's every move in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. This formula did not change even during the 2014 Gaza War when anti-Semitism spread like wildfire in Turkey and Israel sent the families of its diplomats home for fear of attacks.

The dynamic strengthening economic ties between the two countries despite tense political relations led to Turkey's flagship airline, Turkish Airlines, making Tel Aviv one of its most popular destinations, with Israelis and tourists using Istanbul as their stopover to travel to Israel and places around the world. It also included the passage of Turkish goods to Jordan and the Gulf through the port of Haifa⁴, as well as shipments of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan via Turkey to Israeli ports.⁵ For Netanyahu, the new dynamic between the countries helped him maintain focus on keeping the Israeli economy strong. For Erdoğan, any opportunity to increase trade was crucial, as the once-strong Turkish economy began (and continues) to nosedive in 2013.

When the two countries reconciled in 2016, it was Netanyahu's steadfastness this time that led Turkey to court Israel and agree to a deal much more favorable to the Israelis: the Turkish government finally dropped its demand that Israel lift its blockade on Gaza. In return, Turkey would be permitted to supply humanitarian aid to Gaza and pursue plans to supply

electricity to the Strip—plans that were never realized. More importantly, Israel received guarantees that court cases against the Israeli military personnel who took part in the Mavi Marmara incident would come to an end. In short, Netanyahu held strong for six years and the script for the countries' relations was written by him and him alone.

Since 2016, this status quo has remained intact, with Israel becoming less and less interested in maintaining warm relations with Ankara. It was during these years that Netanyahu and Erdoğan often went head-to-head in Twitter wars. Then, following violence that erupted after United States President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in 2018, Turkey once again downgraded relations with Israel. However, relations with Turkey were on the back-burner for Israel. By then, it was developing ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This was in addition to Israel's growing ties with Greece and Cyprus as it emerges as a major energy broker in the Eastern Mediterranean with its natural gas production. Moreover, with Turkey embroiled in domestic turmoil since 2016, characterized not only by continued political instability but also by a failed coup attempt in the same year, Israel had already started to question the value of developing a long-term strategy for its relationship with Turkey.

In late 2020, Turkey had again been signaling interest in upgrading ties with Israel. However, this was quickly abandoned following the recent breakout of violence in Jerusalem and the subsequent war with Hamas, in which its

government instead reverted to strengthening the Palestinian position. However, while Turkey's media outlets played an important role producing cutting-edge coverage showing the Palestinian side, the government was not able to produce any tangible diplomatic victories. In fact, the last round of fighting proved that Turkey faces limitations on how much it can affect a positive outcome for Palestinians. Thus, Netanyahu—at least on the Turkish front—leaves his tenure with a sense that he kept Erdoğan in his place while securing economic benefits that contributed to Israel's growing economy.

Post-Netanyahu era

After four elections, Netanyahu has finally been outsmarted by a patchwork of anti-Netanyahu right-wing, center-left, and left-wing parties, including, for the first time in Israel's history, an Arab-Israeli party, giving the Palestinian citizens of the state a voice in government. On the surface, this change may seem like a golden moment for Turkey to turn over a new leaf and work on upgrading ties with Israel, beginning with an exchange of ambassadors. The timing of this shift in Israel coincides with Turkey's attempts to improve its relations with Egypt in order to strengthen its presence in the eastern Mediterranean. However, Ankara may soon find itself missing Netanyahu, the man it learned to despise, when it discovers that working with Israel's new government might not be as easy as it looks.

First and foremost, like Erdoğan, Netanyahu became the sole decision-maker in his gov-

ernment, and, oddly enough, could even be described as occasionally protecting Turkey-Israel relations from his more outspoken coalition government partners, including some who are key players in the new government. In fact, when one looks at the views of Naftali Bennett, the new prime minister, or those of Yair Lapid, the alternate prime minister, current foreign affairs minister, and the force behind building the government, it is possible to see that they both have a deep loathing for Erdoğan. It is true that this animus could change with the *realpolitik* of the new government. But for now, it continues. One could also add to the list of Turkey's foes Israel's current finance minister, Avigdor Lieberman, who has been one of the most outspoken politicians against Erdoğan historically. And, then there is the Meretz Party that has spent decades advocating for Israel to recognize the Armenian genocide. Thus, what lies ahead could be a recipe for continued instability in Turkey-Israel relations.

With the longevity of the new Israeli government unclear, it will be Turkey that needs to make the first overtures, something that should be done sooner rather than later. This can only really begin with Turkey's first reassessing allowing Hamas' military wing free movement within its borders.⁶ It also should be clear by now that the Israeli government will not be so quick to accept the status quo, meaning that, if the Turkish government does appoint a new ambassador, it needs to opt for a career diplomat that will foster ties between the two governments while Turkey continues its humanitarian work in the West Bank, Ga-

za, and Jerusalem. In fact, it is striking this balance that could reposition Turkey once again in a more important regional role as it strives to better the lives of Palestinians. For now, without serious Turkish overtures, the

new Israeli government will be much more focused on repairing its relations with Egypt and Jordan while strengthening its ties with the UAE. The ball is in Turkey's court.

NOTES

1. "Certainly the Turkish military had reasons other than the Israeli issue to intervene in the government; however, the forced resignation [of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan]...[also] followed [a controversy over] a protest in the district of Ankara, when on 31 December 1996, the mayor of Sincan organized the "Quds Night" (Jerusalem Night), which was a massive protest held against Israel, and was attended by the ambassador of Iran." See: Fishman, Louis. "Turkish-Israeli Relations in a post-Arab Spring: A Historical Perspective." *Ortadoğu Analiz* 5.50 (2013): 33-40.
2. Myre, Greg. "Turkish Leader visit Israel Restoring Friendly Ties", *New York Times*, 2 May 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/02/world/middleeast/turkish-leader-visits-israel-restoring-friendly-ties.html>.
3. "Olmert Turkey talks tackle Syria", *BBC News*, 23 December 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7796936.stm.
4. "Israel promotes trade route between Turkey and Middle East", *Financial Times*, 27 August 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/11183018-0f22-11e3-ae66-00144feabdc0>; Rabinovitch, Ari and Cohen, Tova. "Truck by truck, Israel builds trade gateway to Arab world", *Reuters*, 1 July 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-trade-insight-idUSKBN0F63DF20140701>.
5. Payne, Julia. "Israel accepts first delivery of disputed Kurdish pipeline oil", *Reuters*, 20 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iraq-idUSKBN0EV0X620140620>; Atkins, Jacob. "Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan: the oil connection", *i24*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/157303-171009-israel-and-iraqi-kurdistan-the-oil-connection>.
6. "Turkey's ties to Hamas risk hindering normalization with Israel," *Arab News*, 19 January 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1795236/middle-east>.



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