

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker

Vol. 4, No. 7, September - October 2020

How the Abraham Accords affected the Turkish Foreign Policy?

Dr. Zoltán Egeresi

Recent weeks have brought a number of historical breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli relations. The existing ties among Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were cemented with the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement, that was signed in Washington on August 13.¹ This normalization deal demonstrates the changing perception of Arab (Gulf) countries concerning the Palestinian issue. In addition, the new political, economic and even military cooperation between Israel and the UAE raises concerns among several regional actors, and Turkey in particular.

The landmark deal was received as an overwhelmingly negative step and was harshly criticized in Ankara. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had already condemned the initial statement on August 14 and expressed his support for the Palestinians. In August, he also announced that the government was considering suspending its diplomatic ties with the UAE or withdrawing its ambassador as an act of retaliation.² Indeed, following this statement Turkish Airlines suspended its Istanbul-Dubai flights until further notice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs went on and blamed the UAE for betraying the Palestinian cause.³ (Bahrain was also condemned in Mid-September). Fahrettin Altun, the director of the president's office of communications, said that Turkey will never leave Palestine behind and will continue to support a just and lasting peace.⁴

Pro-government media also pointed out that the agreement formalizing the two countries' relations gave the opportunity for Israel to find new partners in the Gulf region and paved the way for several other prospective normalization agreements which would ultimately diminish the international interest in the Palestinian issue. Thus, Israel signed the deal without any concessions, apart from delaying the implementation of the West Bank settlements annexation plan – which goes against the 1979 and 1994

accords.⁵ The normalization process also enabled the UAE to gain foothold in the Mediterranean, which could be used to increase its presence in the region. The Israeli-Emirati rapprochement was thus evaluated as an emerging alliance aimed at weakening Turkey rather than Iran, as the UAE would continue to be important trading partner for Tehran.⁶

Turkish-Israeli relations and the Palestinian issue

On August 22, a couple of days after the Israel-UAE agreement, Erdoğan hosted two Hamas leaders, Ismail Haniyeh and his deputy, Saleh al-Arouri in Istanbul at the Vahdettin Mansion. Erdoğan was accompanied by Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MİT), İbrahim Kalın, the presidential spokesperson, and Fahrettin Altun.⁷ This move was slammed by the United States, which has listed al-Arouri as a terrorist and set a bounty of USD five million for his arrest. Turkey rejected the US statement and reminded Washington how the US has been openly supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê - PKK) and how they have been sheltering Fethullah Gülen despite several extradition requests from Ankara.⁸

This meeting which demonstrated the persistence of ties between Turkey and Hamas was not unique, as Hamas leaders had visited Istanbul at the beginning of the year as well. Their relations have become more cordial in recent years, and Israel has accused Turkey of hosting several senior Hamas members, who were actively plotting against it. Soon after the late August visit, Israeli diplomats accused Ankara of granting citizenship to 12 senior figures, which was perceived as an unfriendly move.⁹

Israel's lasting concern about Hamas using Istanbul as a stronghold is one of the major problems in bilateral issues. Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel in 1948, and established productive military collaboration, however, the political changes of the last twenty years have transformed the relations from friendly to increasingly antagonistic.

Ankara's rapprochement (although only via NGO's and not state-level contact) with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Hamas in 2007 was a bothersome act for Jerusalem, but at that time Turkey also made efforts to mediate between Syria and Israel.¹⁰ As a NATO-member and historically friendly country, it seemed to be a convincing partner for this role. However, after the Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in December 2008, the relations became increasingly tense. Erdoğan's famous "one minute speech" at the Davos conference in 2009 and the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident contributed to an unprecedented deterioration in bilateral relations.

In 2016, thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the Obama administration, the two countries have once again "normalized" their bilateral relations.¹¹ However, the Palestinian issue did not ultimately play an essential role in these bilateral relations, despite the fact that various incidents provoked Turkey to send strongly worded messages to Israel. The

Turkish government firmly denounced Donald Trump's decision to relocate the US embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. Despite its diplomatic efforts, Turkey could not hinder the move. Meanwhile, protests and clashes in Gaza at the time, which led to a high death toll, prompted the government to recall its ambassador from Israel and the US, to ask the Israeli ambassador to leave the country, and to order a three-day-long period of mourning over the Palestinian deaths. Erdoğan even convened an extraordinary meeting as the then Rotating Chairman of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).¹² As Turkey's ambassador did not return to Tel-Aviv, Israel decided not to appoint a new one to Ankara. A couple of months later, Erdoğan condemned the declaration of Trump to recognize the Golan Heights as Israeli territory in May 2019.

Although the Palestinian issue and cooperation with Hamas plays an important role in Turkey's foreign policy agenda and often dominates bilateral relations, Israel's other actions have raised concerns in Ankara, too. Jerusalem's support for Kurdish independence in the 2017 Iraqi Kurdistan referendum¹³ and its growing cooperation with other coastal states in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Cyprus, Greece and Egypt, primarily on energy, and increasingly also in the political and military spheres, set off alarm bells in Ankara.

The antagonistic rhetoric appears set to continue, despite strong economic relations. Although diplomatic ties were downgraded; the bilateral relationship was not destroyed. Evidence of this, notably, could be seen when Turkey sold medical supplies (PPE) to Israel as part of its 'mask diplomacy' following the outbreak of COVID-19 this past spring.¹⁴

The Israel-UAE accord, which infuriated Ankara, has also provided an impetus for a rapprochement between rival Palestinian groups: the PLO/Fatah and Turkey-supported Hamas. President Mahmoud Abbas convened an intra-Palestinian reconciliation conference with the participation of various factions at the beginning of September. This conference was welcomed by Ankara.¹⁵

Turkey has become a mediator in solving the conflict between the two groups. Mahmoud Abbas had a phone call with Erdoğan in which he asked him to help the ongoing talks.¹⁶ The Fatah and Hamas representatives met in Turkey for a two-day conference and they managed to reach a compromise on September 24: agreeing to hold legislative, presidential and National Council elections for the first time in nearly 15 years.¹⁷ Although in May preliminary talks between Hamas and Fatah¹⁸ had started at a virtual conference in Beirut and in Ramallah, Turkey's efforts and credibility helped the two factions mend fences. Soon, the negotiations will continue in close cooperation with Ankara, which is committed to keep the reconciliation process alive.

Turkey's position in the Eastern Mediterranean and the UAE

In the last ten years, the Eastern Mediterranean has become an increasingly important region for Turkey. The gradual gas field discoveries have transformed the coastal states' energy policies: the huge reserves gave them the prospects to become independent from gas import and even to grant them export capacities. The growing energy cooperation between Cyprus, Egypt and Israel led to the establishment of several mechanisms, such as, the Cyprus-Greece-Israel trilateral summits and the East-Med Gas Forum launched at the beginning of 2019.¹⁹ Such changes, occurring in close proximity to Anatolia compelled Turkey to intervene, as it considered the Cyprus-related drilling and discoveries as developments harming the interests of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Thus Turkey, a country of modest oil and gas reserves, has demonstrated several times that it should have not been left out of the multi-lateral energy negotiations.

In 2016, the concept of 'Mavi Vatan' or Blue Homeland²⁰ was coined to summarize Turkish ambitions aimed at enlarging the Turkish exclusive economic zone thus break out the geographical contiguity between Cyprus and Greece. In Libya, the agreement reached between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Turkish government in November 2019, which is recognized by the UN,²¹ was a game changer in this respect: it gave common maritime borders for the two partners and a legal framework for the Turkish military's involvement in the Libyan conflict to support its new ally. This bilateral agreement enlarged the maritime area in the Eastern Mediterranean vindicated by Ankara from 41 thousand square km to nearly 190 thousand square km.²² This new zone engendering loud criticism from Athens and Nicosia, both of which declared that the deal was invalid and illegal.

Ankara's intervention in the Libyan conflict on the GNA's side challenged the interests of several regional actors, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and even France and Russia who have been supporting the Libyan National Army's (LNA) leader General Khalifa Haftar who controls the Eastern part of the county. Subsequently, along with the Mediterranean maritime and energy disputes, Ankara has used Libya to cement its regional leverage and to demonstrate its growing hard power.

Turkish support was crucial in the survival of the al-Sarraj-government. It helped consolidate the government's control in the surroundings of Tripoli as well as to recapture several strategic locations in the first half of 2020, and even to approach Sirte.²³ Ankara's intervention irked the above-mentioned countries. Egyptian parliament approved troop deployment in Libya.²⁴ France accused Turkey of targeting its warship and suspended its participation in Operation Sea Guardian²⁵ and launched a diplomatic battle against Ankara. This development pushed Turkey to seek new regional allies; negotiations were launched with the small Mediterranean island and EU-member, Malta, which will hardly lead to any power shift in the region despite the rapprochement.²⁶

Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy compelled countries that were individually against Turkey to boost their cooperation. Ankara denounced a new Egyptian-Greek maritime delimitation agreement, signed in early August,²⁷ which overlapped with the Turkish-Libyan deal. This pushed Turkey to send drilling ships to the contested Greek maritime area with strong military support to show its commitment to securing its national interests.

In short, the political developments in the region were less favorable to Turkey which has become increasingly isolated. The peace agreement between Israel and the UAE also solidified the Gulf country's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the practical outcome of the landmark deal will be seen in the years to come, the UAE's growing foreign policy ambitions are alarming for Ankara. In recent years, its relationship with the UAE has become increasingly strained due to their colliding spheres of influence and diverging interests.

Because of the UAE's active support to General Haftar, the two countries are at odds over Libya, and allegedly the Gulf country's air force is taking part in bombarding bases Turkey had used, for instance, the attack at the beginning of July against the Al-Watiya air base which had been occupied by Turkey a few months prior.²⁸ Along with the military conflict, a diplomatic clash emerged between the two countries in this summer. The Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, called on Turkey to "stop intervening in Arab affairs" in early August.²⁹

Ankara also condemned the Gulf country for its anti-Turkey political campaign in the Middle East and in the West.³⁰ Furthermore, accusations emerged about Abu Dhabi's close relations with the Gülen movement,³¹ which began in the form of financial support before the 2016 *coup d'État* attempt and is ongoing.³² Ankara also raised concerns about the UAE's financial³³ and educational³⁴ support of PKK and PKK-related groups in Syria and Iraq.

Abu Dhabi showed its readiness to enter in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute by sending four F-16 fighters to participate in a joint drill with the Hellenic Air Force in late August.³⁵ The planes arrived when the Greek-Turkish border dispute was escalating. While the UAE is a minor participant in the emerging anti-Turkey bloc in the region, it can hinder Turkish ambitions.

Conclusion

The compromise between Jerusalem and Abu Dhabi has already triggered several developments concerning Turkish foreign policy. It shows that Arab countries' considerations (or at least some of them) are changing – here the question is whether Saudi Arabia will follow the path of UAE and Bahrain or not. It led to the revitalization of relations between Fatah and Hamas, which helped Turkey present itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause. Its efforts to mediate between the two factions have

been fruitful, after the shock of the Israeli-Emirati deal for Palestinians. The deal agreed on by the two groups in Istanbul in late September indicate a rapprochement and Ankara will closely follow the development of this process and try to cement the reconciliation.

The Israeli-Emirati deal also gives the perception of diminishing Turkish room for maneuver in the Eastern Mediterranean. American military technology and Israeli support for Abu Dhabi's possible interventions in the region is against Turkey's interests. Until now, Ankara has not been able to break from isolation and its actions triggered more cooperation between the coastal states not just on the political level, but more alarmingly for Ankara, also on a military basis.

To counter the major powers uniting against its interests, Turkey can only rely on weaker partners. The internationally recognized GNA, which controls the western part of Libya, is strongly linked to Turkish support. Turkey's ally Malta did not actually enter into a coalition with it while strong EU states, such as France are sending warships to Greece in order to deter Turkey's activities. The ongoing Turkish-sponsored Fatah-Hamas compromise may strengthen Turkey's position in the Palestinian Authority, but it could also lead to new clashes with Israel.

Dr. Zoltán Egeresi is a research fellow at the Hungarian Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies at the National University of Public Service and an external fellow at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Budapest. His main research fields are the Balkans and Turkey. He completed his PhD at Corvinus University of Budapest.

All rights reserved to the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University. Materials may be republished for non-commercial use only, with attribution to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

Notes:

¹ “İsrail ile anlaşma Türkiye ve İran’ı neden geriyor?” *Gazeteduvar*, August 17, 2020.

² “Turkey may suspend ties with UAE over Israel deal, Erdogan says” *Reuters*, August 14, 2020.

³ “No: 173, 14 August 2020. Press Release Regarding the Joint Statement by the United States, Israel and the United Arab Emirates” *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2020.

⁴ Altun: “Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri’nin İsrail’le yaptığı sözde anlaşma, Türkiye için yok hükmündedir” *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İletişim Başkanlığı*, August 14, 2020.

⁵ “Yıkıcı İttifakın Yeni Adımı: BAE-İsrail Anlaşması” *Sabah*, August 15, 2020.

⁶ “Turkey is the actual target of the Israel-UAE deal” *Daily Sabah*, August 22, 2020.

⁷ “Erdogan meets with Hamas leaders, including Saleh al-Arouri, in Istanbul” *Duvar English*, August 23, 2020.

-
- ⁸ [“No: 181, 25 August 2020, Press Release Regarding the Statement by the Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State About the Meeting of President Erdoğan with the Representatives of Hamas”](#) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 25, 2020.
- ⁹ [“İsrail Türkiye'nin Hamas üyelerine pasaport verdiğini iddia etti”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, August 26, 2020.
- ¹⁰ [Turkey offers to resume Israel-Syria mediation](#), *Reuters*, January 29, 2010.
- ¹¹ [“Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile İsrail Devleti Arasında Tazminata İlişkin Usul Anlaşması”](#) *Resmi Gazete*, September 9, 2020.
- ¹² [“Turkey recalls US, Israel envoys, summons ambassador, declares 3 days of mourning over Palestinian deaths,”](#) *Daily Sabah*, May 14, 2018.
- ¹³ [“Israel endorses independent Kurdish state”](#) *Reuters*, September 13, 2017.
- ¹⁴ [“Turkey turns to medical diplomacy to heal damaged relations”](#) *Reuters*, May 11, 2020.
- ¹⁵ [“No: 196, 4 September 2020, Press Release Regarding the Intra-Palestinian Reconciliation Conference”](#) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 4, 2020.
- ¹⁶ [“ Hamas, Fatah meet in Turkey for reconciliation talks”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, September 22, 2020.
- ¹⁷ [“Fatah, Hamas agree to hold Palestinian elections soon,”](#) *Anadolu Agency*, September 24, 2020.
- ¹⁸ [“In Turkey, Palestinian leaders announce breakthrough on unity, elections”](#), *Al-Monitor*, September 25, 2020.
- ¹⁹ [“Eastern Mediterranean countries to form regional gas market”](#), *Reuters*, January 14, 2019.
- ²⁰ [“Mavi Vatan nasıl doğdu? Doktrinin mimarları Cem Gürdeniz ve Cihat Yayıcı anlatıyor”](#), *BBC*, September 10, 2020.
- ²¹ [“Turkey signs maritime boundaries deal with Libya amid exploration row”](#) *Reuters*, November 28, 2019.
- ²² [“Mavi Vatan'ı savunmak”](#) *Anadolu Ajansı*, 26 November, 2019
- ²³ [“Son dakika... Libya'da kritik gelişme! Abluka altına alıyorlar...”](#) *Hürriyet*, July 6, 2020.
- ²⁴ [“Egypt's parliament approves troop deployment in Libya”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, July 20, 2020.
- ²⁵ [“France Pulls Out Of NATO Operation Sea Guardian Amid Tensions With Turkey”](#) *Navalnews*, July 3, 2020.
- ²⁶ [“Turkey, Libya, Malta 'agree on joint cooperation'”](#) *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 7, 2020.
- ²⁷ [“Greece-Egypt Maritime Deal Aimed at Stemming Turkish Designs in Eastern Mediterranean”](#) *Voanews*, August 7, 2020.
- ²⁸ [“Libya is turning into a battle lab for air warfare”](#) *Defencenews*, August 6, 2020.
- ²⁹ [“UAE official tells Turkey to stop meddling in Arab affairs over Libya”](#) *Arabnews*, August 2, 2020.
- ³⁰ [“Yeni Aktörlük Bilinci ve BAE'ye Uyarı”](#) *Sabah*, August 04, 2020.
- ³¹ Turkish government tag the Gülen Movement as "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ).
- ³² [“FETÖ ve BAE'nin Dış Politikasında Terör Örgütleri”](#) *Kriter*, July 1, 2020.
- ³³ [“İKBY'de BAE'den terör örgütü PKK'ya para transferi iddiası”](#) *Anadolu Ajansı*, June 14, 2020.
- ³⁴ [“BAE'den YPG/PKK'ya istihbarat desteği”](#) *Anadolu Ajansı*, August 29, 2020.
- ³⁵ [“UAE Sends Four F-16 Jets To Support Greece Against Turkey”](#) *Eurasiantimes*, August 26, 2020.