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The Seesaw Relationship between Turkey and Israel

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Despite the past ups and downs, Turkish-Israeli relations have been enjoying a relative calm in recent years. However, since the start of Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza bilateral relations have once again slipped into a downward spiral. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's initially measured response swiftly transformed into a vehement condemnation of Israel, accompanied by vocal and unflinching support for Hamas. Despite this escalation, both countries recalled their diplomats without downgrading diplomatic ties, echoing a familiar pattern reminiscent of the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara flotilla affair in 2010, organized by the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) to break the Israeli siege of Gaza. During that period, while Turkey has criticized Israel rhetorically, Ankara refrained from taking actions that would sever bilateral relations, maintaining cooperation in areas such as trade and intelligence sharing.

Recent developments, such as the cancellation of Turkish aviation companies' flights to Israel – including Turkish Airlines – until 2025 and the Turkish government's decision to halt trade with Israel, signal a departure from the post-Mavi Marmara *status quo* toward an ideology-driven foreign policy. By hardening its stance toward Israel, Ankara is hoping to kill several birds with one stone: shore up domestic support in the wake of sharp setbacks suffered in local elections,¹ rally the international community around the Palestinian issue, and strike a chord with the global south over their shared criticism of the international system, which could eventually position Turkey as a mediator between Hamas and Israel.

However, embracing an increasingly anti-Israel/pro-Hamas stance might not provide the outcome Ankara seeks. Turkey's endorsement of Hamas starkly contrasts with the emerging international consensus on the necessity of revitalizing the Palestinian Authority as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians for post-war governance in Gaza. In the wake of the US President Joe Biden's announcement of a three-phase ceasefire plan, Turkey's pro-Hamas stance would not only isolate the country on the international stage but also limit its potential role in resolving the Palestinian conflict, relegating it to merely providing shelter for Hamas, even if it serves to undermine Iran's influence over the movement.

Casualty of the Gaza War: The Turkish-Israeli Normalization

Hamas's brutal attacks on October 7, which resulted in over 1200 deaths and the capture of over 200 hostages, upended the fragile order in the Middle East and put the Palestinian issue back on the agenda of the international community. Israeli strikes in Gaza, on the other hand, have killed over 35,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health. International public opinion has turned against Israel, undermining its foreign policy accomplishments of the last ten years, including the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement of 2022. In the backdrop of rising global discontent over the Western countries' perceived complacency for siding with Israel and their apathy towards the Palestinians' suffering, Turkey sought to build a regional diplomatic front against Israel and endorse Hamas as a legitimate political entity.

In this context, Turkey offered its diplomatic services to address the conflict and joined the contact group² formed at the joint summit of the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Riyadh in November 2023, visited the UN Security Council's five permanent members and other countries to press for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Ankara has also shown steadfast support for South Africa's appeal to the International Court of Justice, accusing Israel of violating the 1948 Genocide Convention in Gaza. However, these efforts have not yielded any concrete results.

Turkey's initial attempts to mediate a ceasefire and facilitate hostage release at the onset of the conflict were turned down. It was mainly Egypt and Qatar that mediated the negotiations and received credit for their efforts. Turkey's proposal for a guarantor formula in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not met with enthusiasm, either. When Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant unveiled his post-war Gaza plans in March, which included the establishment of a multinational military

force similar to that of Ankara's proposal, Turkey was notably omitted from the list of participating countries.³

Behind the Turkish government's hardening stance towards Israel lies a mounting frustration over being sidelined from regional diplomatic initiatives. However, Ankara overlooks the very fact that its increasingly pro-Hamas stance in the Palestinian conflict is what limits its area of maneuver in foreign policy, undermining its credibility as a neutral mediator in Israel's eyes. This approach fails to grasp the incentives behind the rapprochement between the Gulf countries and Israel, which culminated in the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, and disregards the lesson supposedly learned from the Arab protests of 2010, where overplaying the ideology card backfired.⁴

Retrospectively, Arab countries not only rejected Turkey's attempts to assume a leadership role but also sought to counterbalance Turkey and Qatar's ambitious strategy to lead a coalition of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated regimes across the Middle East due to the perceived threat posed by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Overlooking this reality, Turkey became embroiled in regional conflicts by abandoning its neutral stance, and worse, the AKP government's reluctance to readjust its foreign policy led to Turkey's further isolation in the region. Indeed, it was Ankara's acknowledgment of this regional isolation along with the need for foreign investment that drove it to sign the reconciliation deal with Israel both in 2016 and 2021 as part of a wider foreign policy reset, even though diverging interests prevented a genuine normalization from flourishing between the two countries.

Ankara's ideological alignment with Hamas continues to obscure its vision, preventing it from recognizing that the Gulf countries support Israel's efforts to curb Hamas' influence—viewing Hamas as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—even though they criticize the Netanyahu government's handling of the war. More importantly, endorsing Hamas is perceived as an indirect support to the Iran-led axis of resistance, especially in the post-October 7 political context. Iran's unprecedented assault on Israel with a barrage of drones and missiles on the night of April 13-14, which was countered with support from a group of countries including Jordan and Saudi Arabia, revealed once again that containing Iran is a greater concern for the Arab countries. Hence, the rationale behind the Abraham Accords remains intact despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, contrary to Ankara's expectations. Indeed, several Abraham Accords members, such as Morocco and the UAE, have been at the forefront in delivering aid to Gaza.⁵

With its geographical proximity, identity, and military power, Turkey has the potential to play a substantive role in assisting the security and reconstruction of Gaza. It could have contributed more had it adopted an even-handed position and channeled its efforts into reconciling rival Palestinian factions. Indeed, it was during the AKP's governance that Turkey hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas in the Turkish Parliament back in 2007. In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, the key to a lasting peace lies in the implementation of a two-state solution, which requires revitalizing and strengthening the Palestinian Authority. Even former Israeli officials acknowledge that the longstanding Israeli policy of negotiating funds for Hamas through Qatar, aimed at “buying quiet” in Gaza, was a strategic error that sought to undermine the Palestinian Authority and the prospects for a two-state solution.⁶

Instead, Ankara is working to build a moderate image for Hamas in order to integrate it into post-war governance in Gaza. Destroying Hamas militarily might be an unrealistic goal because it is embedded in the Palestinian social fabric. However, Israel, at this stage, is unlikely to agree to a post-war plan that involves Hamas, whether it is moderate or not. At a time when the International Criminal Court's ICC prosecutor requested arrest warrants for senior Israeli officials and Hamas leaders -including Ismail Haniyeh-over alleged war crimes, and even Qatar is considering expelling Hamas members from the country due to international pressure, it is hard to understand Ankara's rationale behind associating itself so closely with Hamas. This position clearly hinders Turkey's inclusion in the post-war reconstruction efforts.

The cost of escalation

Interestingly, parallel to Turkey's isolation, Ankara's rhetorical support for Hamas is escalating, along with the political costs. President Erdoğan, who recently likened Hamas to the Kuvay-ı Milliye – the national militia forces that fought against occupying powers during Turkey's War of Independence – asserted that Hamas was not only fighting for the independence of its own land but also defending Anatolia against Israel.⁷ Erdoğan's statements mark a dramatic shift in tone, considering that Turkey and Israel have never engaged in direct military confrontation in the history of bilateral relations except for the Mavi Marmara incident. Additionally, the Palestinian issue has always been the main bone of contention between these two countries.

In the meantime, Turkey's growing support for Hamas appears to be jeopardizing its fragile relations with the US, which have only recently started to improve. While the true reason behind

President Erdoğan's cancellation/postponement of his long-sought visit to the White House in April remains unknown, it's plausible that Erdoğan's hosting of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh at the Presidential Palace prior to his visit may have caused unease within the Biden administration, particularly during the election season.

On the other hand, some ambiguity surrounds Turkey's trade restriction on Israel, as it is unclear whether it has been enforced or not. This suggests that there are limits to Ankara's straining ties with Israel at a time when it is working to improve relations with Washington and manage an economic crisis at home. Regardless, Turkey's decision to impose a trade ban on Israel, with which Turkey has enjoyed a trade surplus,⁸ is likely to lead Israelis to diversify their trade in the long run, resulting in economic losses for Turkey and opening strategic opportunities for its regional competitors. Israel's limiting trade between Turkey and the Palestinian Authority as a retaliatory measure, on the other hand, further diminishes Turkey's ability to provide assistance to Palestinians. The extent to which all these steps serve the resolution of the Palestinian issue or Turkey's interests is therefore debatable. Yet, they can be taken as an indication that Turkish policymakers have never truly relinquished their regional ambitions or ideological perspectives as they pursue the prized goal of “autonomy” in foreign policy.

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Notes

¹ *Al Monitor*, “Turkey's Erdogan handed historic setback in local elections,” April 1, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/turkeys-erdogan-handed-historic-setback-local-elections> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

² *Reuters*, “Muslim country group to push for Gaza truce -Turkish source,” November 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/group-muslim-countries-push-gaza-ceasefire-turkish-source-2023-11-21/> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

³ *The Jerusalem Post*, “Gallant calls on the USA to establish a military force of Arab countries in the Gaza Strip,” March 29, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-794382> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

⁴ *Politico*, “‘The dawn of a new Middle East’: Trump celebrates Abraham Accords with White House signing ceremony,” September 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/15/trump-abraham-accords-palestinians-peace-deal-415083> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

⁵ *The Middle East Monitor*, “Morocco joins US, Egypt, Jordan, France and UAE to airdrop aid into Gaza,” March 12, 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240312-morocco-joins-us-egypt-jordan-france-and-uae-to-airdrop-aid-into-gaza/>.

⁶ *The Jerusalem Post*, “Former Mossad Chief admits to government funding for Hamas via Qatar, calls policy a mistake,” May 4, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-799792> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

⁷ *Times of Israel*, “Erdogan claims Israel will come for Turkey if it defeats Hamas,” May 15, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-claims-israel-will-come-for-turkey-if-it-defeats-hamas/> [Accessed: May 28, 2024].

⁸ *CBS*, “Foreign trade 2023,” https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/mediarelease/DocLib/2024/026/16_24_026maz_usd.pdf [Accessed: May 28, 2024].