



**TURKEYSCOPE**  
INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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

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**Examining U.S.-Turkish Relations post October 7th**

**Joseph Epstein**

More than a year after the Hamas-led October 7th massacre targeting Israeli civilians and the subsequent wars in Gaza and Lebanon, Israeli-Turkish relations have hit their lowest point since the 2010 Marmara incident, when Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish citizens attempting to breach the naval blockade on Gaza. After initially seeking a role as a mediator in the conflict,<sup>1</sup> President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan soon changed course by repeatedly comparing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Adolf Hitler<sup>2</sup> and then cutting off almost all trade with the Jewish state.<sup>3</sup> More recently, he has called for an Islamic alliance against Israel,<sup>4</sup> threatened to block NATO cooperation with the Jewish State,<sup>5</sup> and threatened Jerusalem with military action.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, he has voiced support for Hamas<sup>7</sup> and continues to provide a safe haven for the terrorist group's members on Turkish soil.<sup>8</sup>

While this isn't the first time Erdoğan has broken with Israel, the current escalation has become much worse than the usual seesawing in Israeli-Turkish relations.<sup>9</sup> Erdoğan has tried to position Turkey at the spearhead in the international political fight against the Jewish State.

But how has the nadir in ties between Ankara and Jerusalem affected Turkey's relations with Israel's closest ally and benefactor – the United States?

## **The Biden Administration**

For around a decade, U.S.-Turkish ties have been slowly deteriorating. Once a critical regional partner for Washington, diverging interests have turned Ankara into a competitor over such issues such as: Turkish objections to U.S. support for Syrian Kurds and Israel, as well as U.S. criticism of Turkey's human rights record, democratic decline, and burgeoning relations with Russia.

Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, the administration of President Joe Biden has had multiple disagreements with Turkey – mostly over Turkish-Russian relations. Washington and Ankara have continued to bicker over the latter's 2019 acquisition of the Russian S-400 Triumf air defense system.<sup>10</sup> In January, Turkey relented to Western pressure—and possibly the incentive of being allowed to buy F-16 fighter jets—and approved Sweden's bid for NATO membership.<sup>11</sup> In October, Washington forced Turkey to cease being Moscow's "lifeline from Western sanctions" by ending the export of U.S. military-linked goods to Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Following the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre by Hamas and the outbreak of war in Gaza, Erdoğan briefly sought to position himself as an intermediary considering his then-mediocre relations with Israel and good relations with Hamas.<sup>13</sup> However, as exiled Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel wrote in the German Newspaper Die Welt, "neither the Israelis nor Hamas seem to trust the Turkish intermediary services; for years, both sides have preferred to keep their channels of negotiation with Qatar and Egypt."<sup>14</sup> The Biden administration also did not seem to take Erdoğan's bid to become a mediator seriously.

Erdoğan's policy quickly changed. He began escalating his rhetoric and taking clear steps against Israel by cutting trade. But his criticism of Israel's war in Gaza extended to the Biden administration, as well. In July, Erdoğan called the U.S. "complicit" in what he described as Israeli "massacres."<sup>15</sup>

Biden has hardly acknowledged Turkish hostility towards Israel and US support for Israel, but he has taken some small actions. Since October 7, the U.S. Department of Treasury has sanctioned several Turkey-based Hamas financiers and organizations supporting Hamas.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Biden has warned Turkey not to host members of the political leadership of Hamas that have been kicked out of Qatar.<sup>17</sup>

The overall lack of action or condemnation of Turkey's anti-Israel stance may be ascribed to the Biden administrations frustrations with Jerusalem. Since the start of the war, Biden has repeatedly tried to prevent regional war by restraining Israel's military response with varying degrees of success. In conversations with advisors, Biden allegedly called Netanyahu a "liar" and a "bad man."<sup>18</sup> Netanyahu has not only crossed Washington "red lines,"<sup>19</sup> but has even publicly exposed rifts with the administration.<sup>20</sup>

### **At the Congressional Level**

While Congress does not have the same mobility as the administration to dictate foreign policy, it still can pass laws, implement restrictions and pressure the administration or other actors with letters and resolutions.

To date, Congress has not passed any laws regarding Turkey's post October 7<sup>th</sup> stance but it has sent critical letters. Ten days after October 7, 113 bipartisan members of Congress led by Republicans Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), Jared Moskowitz (D-FL), Don Bacon (R-NE) and Claudi Tenney (R-NY), wrote a letter to the Biden administration asking for more pressure on Turkey and Qatar for supporting Hamas.<sup>21</sup> On October 25, 2023, Senator Rick Scott (R-FL), a staunch Trump ally and supporter of Israel, publicly contemplated revoking Turkey's NATO membership over Ankara's support for Hamas.<sup>22</sup> In July, 28 bipartisan members of Congress led by Reps. Gottheimer and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) wrote a bipartisan letter to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken urging the State Department to address Erdoğan's hostility to Israel and support for Hamas.<sup>23</sup>

Considering a possible move by the Hamas leadership from Qatar to Turkey, 37 bipartisan members of Congress led by Gottheimer (D-NJ), Dan Goldman (D-NY), Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) and Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY) called on the Biden administration to offer a classified briefing to Congress on Turkey's support for Hamas.<sup>24</sup>

Given that the Republicans will control both the House and Senate in the incoming Congress, the legislative branch can be expected to largely follow the lead of the administration on foreign policy issues. However, it is worth noting that during Trump's first term, the Republican-led Congress was much more critical of Turkey than he was.<sup>25</sup>

## **An Old-New Administration**

Erdoğan seems to be pleased with the election of Trump, immediately inviting him to Turkey in hopes of resetting relations with Washington.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Trump's ardent support for Israel, Erdoğan has expressed hope that Trump would pressure Israel into ending the war as promised during his campaign.<sup>27</sup> But considering Trump's pro-Israel past and many pro-Israel appointments, it is unlikely he would do so at the expense of Israeli interests.

In the past, Trump has wavered between threatening Erdoğan and making deals with him. During Trump's previous term, U.S.-Turkish relations were sometimes turbulent, but the two leaders were often able to negotiate a deal. This may be partially explained by the friendly personal relations between Trump and Erdoğan.<sup>28</sup>

On the personal level, both Trump and Erdoğan seem to admire each other. In 2019, Trump proclaimed himself a "huge fan" of the Turkish strongman.<sup>29</sup> Following the first assassination attempt against then-candidate Trump in July, Erdoğan was one of the only foreign leaders to call him and then praise his bravery.<sup>30</sup> After he was elected, Erdoğan was one of the first to congratulate him.<sup>31</sup>

In response to Turkey's 2016 arrest of pastor Andrew Brunson, a U.S. citizen, Trump applied trade tariffs and sanctions, leading to a 40 percent drop in the value of the Turkish Lira and an economic crisis.<sup>32</sup> During negotiations over Brunson's release, Trump vowed that he would not grant Turkey any concessions.<sup>33</sup> In October 2018, Erdoğan released Brunson in the hopes of improving relations.<sup>34</sup> The same month, Trump reportedly told Erdoğan that he would work on extraditing the then-US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, who Ankara accused of plotting the 2016 failed coup attempt.<sup>35</sup> The next month, Trump said he was not considering the extradition.<sup>36</sup> Gülen died earlier this year at age 83 in self-exile in the United States.

In 2018, Erdoğan briefly convinced Trump to withdraw U.S. troops from some areas occupied by the Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Forces (SDF), a decision that some sources claim triggered the resignation of U.S. Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis.<sup>37</sup>

The withdrawal led to a major Turkish offensive against the SDF that displaced hundreds of thousands of Syrians, mainly Kurds.<sup>38</sup> In October 2019, Trump sanctioned Turkey for the

offensive.<sup>39</sup> A few days later, Trump threatened to “destroy the Turkish economy” and warned Erdoğan to stop being a “tough guy.”<sup>40</sup> A month later, Trump hosted Erdoğan at the White House and spoke positively about the Turkish operation.<sup>41</sup>

In July 2019, Trump kicked Turkey out of the F-35 program over Ankara’s purchase of the Russian S-400 system. He did so reluctantly however and under pressure from his advisors, blaming former President Barack Obama for “forcing” Erdoğan into a “very tough situation.”<sup>42</sup>

During Trump’s first term, Turkey was highly critical of his policy towards Israel. Turkey was one of the biggest critics of the Abraham Accords, even threatening to suspend ties with the United Arab Emirates over the deal.<sup>43</sup> When Trump planned to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, Erdoğan warned him of crossing a “red line.”<sup>44</sup> Those threats did not draw a response from the administration, but did contribute to Turkey’s regional isolation.

### **A New Trump Era**

While Trump is not afraid to break from his advisors, much of his foreign policy depends on those around him. This should worry Turkey considering three of his recent foreign policy cabinet picks who are unabashedly supportive of Israel and have criticized Turkey.

Trump’s pick for Secretary of State Marco Rubio has criticized Turkey’s human rights record and treatment of Kurds.<sup>45</sup> He was a key architect of the East Mediterranean Security and Partnership Act, a bill approved in 2019 strengthening U.S. relations with Greece and Cyprus.<sup>46</sup> Trump’s national security advisor pick Mike Waltz has been a vocal supporter of the Kurds.<sup>47</sup> Even Trump’s pick for Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard has been extremely critical of Turkey, accusing Ankara of “denying genocide” and working against U.S. allies in the region such as the Kurds, Israel and Greece.<sup>48 49</sup>

Additionally, Trump will have more leverage over Turkey than he had during his first term. The Turkish economy is a shadow of itself and the lira has been dealing with hyperinflation since 2018 (the current rate to date is 48.58 percent).<sup>50 51</sup> In fact, the lira has depreciated so much that ATMs are breaking under the weight of increasingly worthless banknotes.<sup>52</sup> Regional isolation leading to economic collapse is what spurred Erdoğan’s charm offensive in 2021 and 2022, when he tried to repair relations with Israel and the Gulf States.<sup>53</sup>

Considering Trump's use of economic punishments in the past, there is no reason to think he would not resort to similar tactics in his second term. Sinan Ciddi, a Turkey expert at the Washington, DC-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies noted, "There is no reason for Trump to compromise with Erdoğan. [He] has a weak hand and he knows it."<sup>54</sup> However whether Trump will pressure Turkey over Israel is not necessarily clear. Nor is it clear whether Turkey will play a role in stopping Iranian proxy forces in Syria following the fall of dictator Bashar al-Assad to rebels who have received arms from Turkey in the past.

But if Turkey crosses red lines that seriously impact the Jewish state such as preventing the flow of Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the Trump administration could react with sanctions, tariffs or other economic sticks. And if Erdoğan is overly critical of Trump for his pro-Israel stance, it could lead to a strain in their personal relations.

Given Trump's strong relationship with Netanyahu, if the Israeli prime minister was to ask for a tougher position against Turkey, it could also lead to pressure from the administration. Given the leverage Trump has over Turkey, he could easily force Erdoğan to the table and make significant demands in terms of his support for Hamas.

Yet if Turkey shows a willingness to compromise on Israel, it could lead to U.S. concessions over such regional issues as relations with Russia or U.S. support for the Kurds. Given Trump's transactional approach, a deal in these spheres is possible. There are also signs that Russian President Vladimir Putin may seek better relations with Israel for U.S. concessions over a ceasefire deal in Ukraine.<sup>55</sup> The fall of the Assad regime to Turkish-supported rebels has shifted these conversations somewhat. Though it remains to be seen how much of a role Ankara will play in state building.

However given Ankara's weak negotiating position, Trump doesn't need to offer any incentives.

*Joseph Epstein is a Washington-D.C.-based analyst specializing in Eurasia and the Middle East and the Director of Legislative Affairs for the Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET). He is a research fellow at the Yorktown Institute and the Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University. Additionally, he serves on the advisory board of the Alekain Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to providing accredited education to women and girls in Afghanistan. A veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces, Joseph speaks fluent Russian and Hebrew.*

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