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Turkey and Israel – Cooperation through Gritted Teeth

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In a rare diplomatic thaw, Turkey and Israel agreed to establish a hotline to prevent military flare-ups in Syria – a move brokered last month by Azerbaijan after weeks of quiet negotiations in the capital, Baku.¹ This tentative thaw came before escalating regional tensions, particularly following Israel’s unprecedented military campaign inside Iran—Operation Rising Lion—which struck deep into Iranian territory and targeted military and nuclear assets.

Any agreement between Ankara and Jerusalem has been a rare event since Israeli-Turkish relations hit historic lows following the October 7th Hamas-led massacre and ensuing war in Gaza. Ties have not been so low since the 2010 Mavi Marmara Flotilla incident, when Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish activists who attacked them while trying to break Israel’s naval blockade of Gaza.

Since the breakout of war in Gaza, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has likened Israel to the Nazi Third Reich and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Adolf Hitler. He has also threatened to invade Israel and decried Israeli actions in Gaza as “genocide.”² Furthermore, he halted all trade with Israel last year,³ hosted Hamas delegations,⁴ and led international diplomatic efforts to isolate Israel.⁵

In response, Israeli officials, such as Defense Minister Israel Katz have called Erdoğan an “antisemitic dictator” and “[want-to-be] sultan.”⁶ Following Turkey’s halt of trade with Israel,

Jerusalem announced that it would restrict Turkish exports to the Palestinian authority and seek sanctions against Turkey in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development over breaches of trade agreements.⁷

Since the launch of Operation Rising Lion, Erdoğan has both offered to mediate the conflict and tried to convince Muslim leaders to denounce Israel's strikes.⁸ Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Gideon Sa'ar has responded by condemning Erdoğan's "imperial ambitions" in Syria and Northern Cyprus.⁹ According to Axios, US President Donald Trump tried to arrange a meeting between US and Iranian officials in Istanbul through Erdoğan to strike a nuclear deal and avoid military intervention in Iran.¹⁰

No Appetite for Escalation

Yet, despite the harsh rhetoric and deteriorating ties, neither Turkey nor Israel is interested in further escalation. At this point, a worsening of relations and the potential for military flare-ups would directly threaten both nations' national interests.

Leading up to the talks in Baku, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Turkey has "no intention" of clashing with Israel in Syria after the Israeli air force struck military bases where Ankara had reportedly planned to deploy troops and military hardware.¹¹

Turkey is trying to accomplish several objectives that could be threatened by a worsening of relations with Israel. Ankara seeks to improve relations with US President Donald Trump, create a stable Syria capable of returning the three million Syrian refugees in Turkey who fled the civil war in the 2010's, erode the influence of the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) in the Northeast of Syria and keep its ally Azerbaijan protected from Iranian influence.

While Ankara has been extremely critical of Israeli actions in Gaza, it has only issued cautious criticism of the Trump administration's support for Israel or "anti-Palestinian" actions. Although Erdoğan originally condemned Trump's plan to relocate the Gazan population, he has not been particularly outspoken on the issue. In fact, two staunchly pro-government journalists proposed encouraging the migration of Gazans to ease their suffering in what some analysts saw as an attempt to gauge the public's reaction.¹² Erdoğan also did not protest after the Trump administration detained and revoked the visa of Rümeyşa Öztürk, a Turkish doctoral student at Tufts University who wrote an op-ed in support of the Palestinian cause.¹³

To date, relations between Turkey and the new US administration have been warm, with both Trump and Erdoğan often praising each other.¹⁴ Erdoğan also recognizes that maintaining friendly relations with Trump are crucial to achieving its goals in Syria as well as receiving American F-35 fighter jets.¹⁵ Özgür Özel, the opposition leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) – the party of the founder of the Modern Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – criticized Erdoğan for his inability to challenge Trump, accusing him of “surrender.”¹⁶

Meanwhile the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Asad in Syria and the rise of the Turkish-backed rebels ushers in the chance for Turkey to face two critical foreign and domestic challenges – addressing the threat of Kurdish separatism and returning the Syrian refugees.¹⁷ To accomplish both goals, Ankara needs Syria to be stable and unified. If Turkey takes an increasingly aggressive stance against Israel, then Jerusalem may step up efforts to create autonomous zones in Syria to keep the threat of Turkey away from its borders.

Also, despite Erdoğan's criticism of Operation Rising Lion, it is likely that the Turkish leadership is happy to see Iran weakened. Turkey and Iran consider each other adversaries and have directly opposed each other in Syria and the South Caucasus region. As the fall of Asad showed in Syria, a weakened Iran presents opportunities for Ankara. However, as pointed out by Hudson Institute Director Mike Doran, Turkey may secretly want Iran to attain nuclear weapons to give it an excuse to proliferate itself.¹⁸

Lastly, Turkey recognizes the importance of the Israeli relationship with its mutual ally Azerbaijan. It was largely thanks to Israeli and Turkish military support that Baku was able to retake the Armenian separatist Karabakh region in 2020 and 2023. Now, the largest threat to Azerbaijan comes from Iran, which has sought to subvert Baku through various means—and cooperation with Israel has proven crucial in deterring the Islamic Republic.¹⁹ Moreover, Israel is currently trying to mend ties between Washington and Baku, which could lead to a trilateral cooperation.²⁰

One overlooked aspect of the Iranian-Israeli conflict has been unsubstantiated Iranian accusations against Baku, for instance that Azerbaijan has helped Israel recruit ethnic Azerbaijani agents against Iran, that Israel has launched drones from Azerbaijani territory, and that Israeli Air Force fighter jets have refueled over Azerbaijani territory.²¹ Should Iran take action against Baku, Israel and Turkey will once again find their interests aligned in defending their ally.

For Israel, the last thing it needs is more foreign policy challenges – especially from the only other serious Middle Eastern military outside of Iran and possibly Egypt. With a new offensive in Gaza, periodic rocket attacks from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, trying to maintain Trump’s support while preparing for striking Iranian nuclear facilities should talks with the US fall apart, Israel has enough on its plate.

Meanwhile, following the fall of the Asad regime, Jerusalem has devoted significant resources to Syria. For Israel, the fall of Asad was both a welcomed development as well as a new challenge. The formation of a new Syrian government under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al-Sharaa means that Tehran has lost a crucial ally in its “axis of resistance” and can no longer use Syria as a land corridor to the Mediterranean Sea, crucial for arming Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

At the same time, Israel has been nervous about al-Sharaa’s past jihadi affiliations. While Israel has hinted at supporting autonomous zones in Syria, the Trump administration and Gulf states have clearly backed building up Syria as a stable country by ending economic sanctions and opening the door to new foreign investment. Going against that strategy could be seen as an affront to these parties and further isolate Israel.

To make sure Damascus cannot pose a threat, Jerusalem has led a campaign of destroying military hardware and bases that could potentially be used against it since the fall of the Asad regime last December. For Israel, its main goals are preventing a reemergence of Iranian influence, keeping a military buffer zone on its borders and preventing attacks against Syrian minorities, particularly the Druze population.

Cue in Azerbaijan

The recent breakthrough in talks between Turkey and Israel is not the first mediated by Azerbaijan. Baku played a large role in Turkish-Israeli negotiations for normalizing the relations in 2016, 2018 and 2021.²² Azerbaijan also played an important role in facilitating meetings between Israeli and Gulf Arab officials before the signing of the Abraham Accords.²³

For Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, managing tensions between its closest allies is crucial. Its relationships with both Israel and Turkey have been vital for its military and economy. Aliyev also recognizes that its stability and success is key to both Israeli and Turkish foreign policy objectives.

Both need a stable ally in the South Caucasus that can serve as a buffer to Iranian influence while giving them access to Central Asia.

Turkey recognizes that Israel plays a large part in supporting Azerbaijan. While Ankara has pushed for global and especially Islamic isolation of Israel, it has allowed for large amounts of Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani oil to cross its territory to be transported to Jerusalem.

Lastly, despite the animosity between Turkey and Israel, both parties recognize the need to have a backchannel through Azerbaijan.

Next Steps

Despite alarmist concerns that Turkey could use Syria as a proxy against Israel, Jerusalem likely realizes that Turkey has more to lose than gain through such a strategy.²⁴

Turkey has prioritized gaining strong support from the Gulf Arab countries, the European Union and United States in rebuilding Syria. In part thanks to Turkish advocacy, the United States declared it would remove all sanctions currently in place on Damascus. If Turkey was to use Syria as a staging ground for attacks on Israel, it would hurt Ankara much more than Israel.

Using Syria as a proxy to attack Israel would threaten the country's stability. In such a case, Syrian refugees would not return home. Since absorbing millions of Syrian refugees, Erdoğan has received pushback from Turkish society that has accused his Justice and Development Party (AKP) of giving too much to Syrians to the detriment of average Turks. Syrian refugees have faced xenophobia from Turkish society and as recently as July, major riots broke out across Turkey as Turkish nationalist mobs attacked Syrians and other Arab nationals.²⁵ While Erdoğan condemned these attacks, he recognizes that if the refugee issue remains unsolved, it could further harm his popularity and lead to more unrest in the future.

Additionally, Erdoğan needs a stable Syria to prevent the threat of Kurdish separatism from spreading to Turkey. While the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) inside Turkey has agreed to disarm and disband, the PKK-affiliated YPG, which makes up a large part of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) has not made similar promises. The SDF has however agreed to integrate with Syrian government forces. It is a fragile agreement, which could end if the Syrian government collapses or gets bogged down by conflict.²⁶

Israel has two choices in Syria – either promote keeping the country as a failed state or try to work with the al-Sharaa government. While Israel is rightly suspicious of the regimes in Turkey and Syria, it has recognized that both the regional and international communities back a united and stable Syrian state, leaving Israel with little choice but to follow suit. However, as some Israeli analysts have pointed out, this also could lead to better relations with Turkey in the future.²⁷

One interesting proposal that came out during the talks between Turkey and Azerbaijan is the inclusion of Syria into the Abraham Accords. Al-Sharaa shared the idea with US Republican Party Congressman Martin Stutzman when he visited Damascus in late April.²⁸ It is highly unlikely that al-Sharaa would be able to make such a proposal without Turkey's approval.

Since then, both Trump²⁹ and his special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, have invited Syria to join the Abraham Accords.³⁰

To join the Abraham Accords, al-Sharaa asked for Israeli “encroachment” in the Golan Heights to “be addressed” and for the Israel Defense Forces to end the bombing campaigns in Syria. However, his main concern was keeping Syria as a unified state. Later announcements followed that Syrian officials were holding talks with their Israeli counterparts in Azerbaijan with mediation by Emirati and possibly Qatari officials.³¹ Additionally, the Syrian government has been one of the only regional actors to stay completely silent on Operation Rising Lion, even though the IAF flew over Syrian airspace to attack Iran.³² That al-Sharaa was one of the leaders Erdoğan called while attempting to rally Muslim leaders against Israel shows that these actions may have been done for show.

Turkey recognizes that support from Congress will be crucial in permanently dropping all sanctions on Syria. Should Israel feel threatened by Damascus, pro-Israel legislators as well as the pro-Israel lobby will be against such a move. Without congressional approval, only some of the sanctions currently in place could be lifted by executive order every 180 days. Such a scenario would attract fewer investors and would make Syria dependent on the good will of President Trump.

In an analysis for *Hurriyet*, a Turkish pro-government publication, Hande Fırat, a journalist close to Erdoğan, wrote that in order to get Congress's approval, the “Jewish lobby” would need to be persuaded.³³

Chances for Future Cooperation?

It is highly unlikely that a Turkish-Israeli *détente* will take place as long as the war in Gaza continues. However, cooperation in Syria could help dispel some of the tensions between the two countries.

While Erdoğan's ardent support of the Palestinian cause is often chalked up to ideological fanaticism and antisemitism, it is important to note that it also serves practical purposes – namely, maintaining Turkey's position as a leader in the Muslim world and satisfying a domestic audience. It is no surprise that the decision to halt all trade with Israel did not come after a large step taken by the IDF in Gaza, but rather following large municipal election losses to the opposition in Istanbul, Ankara and other cities throughout Turkey.³⁴ And even after the announcement, there has been evidence that Erdoğan's government has turned a blind eye as Turkish companies have continued to trade with Israel through third countries.³⁵

Likewise, while Erdoğan has been a large vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, he has refused to seriously protest Trump's deportation plans in Gaza or halt Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani oil transfers to Israel through Turkey. In other words, Erdoğan is willing to sacrifice the Palestinian cause for Turkish national interests.

Erdoğan's latest condemnation of Israel's attack on Iran seems like more of the same. He is putting on a show for the international community to retain his position at the spearhead in the global information war against Israel while simultaneously benefiting from Iran's weakening. As was the case with Syria, Israeli and Turkish interests once again seem to align in Iran.

That doesn't mean that Erdoğan's rhetoric is solely for show. After more than two decades in power, he has led a campaign to Islamize various aspects of life in Turkey whether by discouraging drinking through heavy taxes, removing the ban on headscarves in public institutions, or by converting the Hagia Sofia museum into a mosque. When it comes to foreign policy, he has supported the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Middle East whether in Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria or even Yemen.³⁶

While Turkey and Israel may reach a common understanding with respect to matters of regional security – and may even achieve a *détente* once the war in Gaza concludes – it is unlikely that relations will ever become stable while Erdoğan remains president.

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