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Delegitimization in Action: Turkey's Diplomatic, Judicial and Public Diplomacy Campaign Against Israel

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On 7 October, following Hamas's large-scale terrorist assault on Israel, one of the most immediate and consequential developments stemming from Israel's subsequent war of self-defense was the marked deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations.

One month prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were posing before cameras alongside their senior advisers, standing before the flags of both nations at the Turkish House in New York.¹ Yet barely two years after that photograph was taken, on 7 November, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office issued arrest warrants against 37 senior Israeli officials involved in the conduct of the war against Hamas - including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yisrael Katz, and the Chief of General Staff Eyal Zamir.²

The announcement of this decision extinguished the nascent hopes that the tension between Israel and Turkey might be gradually de-escalated following the fragile Gaza ceasefire brokered through the initiative of U.S. President Donald Trump. Through such a politically motivated decision, Ankara has signaled that it has no intention of returning to normalized relations with Jerusalem despite the ceasefire. On the contrary, the Erdoğan administration has been pursuing a policy of delegitimization against Israel since the outbreak of the war, one that has long since transcended the boundaries of criticism.

This policy of delegitimization commenced officially on 25 October 2023, when Erdoğan began legitimizing the Hamas terrorist organization by declaring it to be an organization composed of ‘freedom fighters’.³ Following Erdoğan’s statements, the pro-government Turkish press crafted its news narrative to align with the president’s stance, carefully reflecting his sensitivities on the issue. Moreover, it is significant to note that this news production narrative was not confined solely to pro-Erdoğan media but also began to emerge in outlets that identify themselves as secular or oppositional leftist.

The emerging social discourse within Turkish society began to downplay Turkey’s 1949 decision to recognize Israel, to overlook Israel’s historical heritage in its ancestral homeland, and to portray the Jewish state as a rootless Western project. Erdoğan’s statement during the mass rally he held at Atatürk Airport on 28 October 2023, declaring that “Israel is merely a pawn in the region, to be sacrificed when the time comes,” undoubtedly contributed to this shift. Yet Erdoğan did not stop there. Addressing the large crowd gathered at the rally, he asked, “Who stands behind the PKK, YPG and FETÖ?” When the participants responded, “America,” he added, “Israel as well. Whether it is money or weapons, they provide them. We know this, but my nation must also know it well,” thereby openly designating Israel as a national security threat to Turkey.⁴

Within this framework, following both the questioning of Israel’s legitimacy and its portrayal as a threat to Turkish national security, societal attitudes toward Israel hardened further. Both conservative and self-identified liberal press outlets launched a delegitimization campaign against the Jewish state.



This image shows Turks carrying a combined Turkish-Palestinian Flag. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), Gaza.overser, Gaza News, 2009.

Turkish decision-makers and the press continued the campaign to delegitimize Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the legitimacy of the State of Israel by employing epithets such as “gangster”⁵ “massacre network,”⁶ “rogue state,”⁷ “terrorist state,”⁸ “virus,”⁹ “murderer,”¹⁰ “occupier,”¹¹ “genocidal,”¹² and even “ZioNazi.”¹³ Undoubtedly, this terminology is largely intended to banalize the Holocaust. The six million Jews who were murdered between 1939 and 1945 solely because they were Jewish possessed neither weapons, nor tunnels, nor long-range rockets. Despite these evident facts, this campaign persisted in demonizing Israel by equating it with Nazi Germany. President Erdoğan branded the Israeli prime minister as an illegitimate leader threatening world peace by stating that “Netanyahu has surpassed Hitler.”¹⁴ He even declared that “Netanyahu's end will be like Hitler's.”¹⁵

Apart from the personal verbal attacks, historic terms and place names that are used within the Holocaust context, such as “concentration camp” or “Auschwitz,” were distorted and employed in the specific context of Gaza as “ZioNazi camp”¹⁶ or “Gzaschwitz,”¹⁷ thereby trampling upon the memory of Holocaust victims.

The political and societal discourse became so derailed that during the 2024 local election campaign, the Islamist political parties - which sought to differentiate themselves from Erdoğan on their “Israel policy” - had severely criticized the Turkish president for maintaining commercial relations with Israel at that time. This critical attitude caused the president to lose ground in this crucial test in various Islamist strongholds such as Şanlıurfa and Yozgat.¹⁸ Following the elections, Erdoğan, in evaluating the results and seeking to neutralize this trump card from the hands of these small parties challenging him, partially suspended trade with Israel for the first time in April 2024.¹⁹ Approximately one month after this decision, in May, he took another significant step by completely halting bilateral trade.²⁰ It must be emphasized that this decision represented not only an impact on commerce but also a step taken against the legitimacy of the State of Israel. With this decision, a trade volume of 9.5 billion dollars, with an export-import balance favorable to Turkey, was sacrificed at a financial loss.²¹

Following reports that some business actors were creatively circumventing the restrictions by continuing to trade through the Palestinian Authority and other third countries,²² a reciprocal sanction was imposed on August 21, 2025, banning Israeli and Turkish vessels from conducting port visits.²³ During the announcement of this sanction, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan stated in a parliamentary address that the measures would also encompass Turkish airspace; however, it later became evident that the airspace policy had been quietly reversed.²⁴ This political discourse consistently served to undermine Israel's legitimacy within the Turkish public sphere.

The commercial sanctions announced against Israel created such a tense atmosphere that on 30 June 2024, Turkish authorities even refused to refuel an El Al Israel Airlines aircraft that made an emergency landing in Antalya. The aircraft was compelled to fly to Rhodes for refueling before proceeding to Israel.²⁵ While the Israeli media characterized this situation as an unprecedented escalation, things would continue to get worse.

Following Israel's assassination of Hamas terrorist Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on 31 July, Erdoğan characterized the Israeli operation as “Zionist barbarism,”²⁶ thereby employing the term ‘Zionism’ for the first time in a derogatory manner, distorting it from its original meaning for purposes of delegitimization. Erdoğan did not stop there. He issued an instruction for Turkish flags to be lowered to half-mast at all Turkish missions in Turkey and throughout the world in honor of Haniyeh. The Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv also complied with the directive by lowering its flag to half-mast.²⁷ This was undoubtedly an unacceptable step for Israel.

Although August had only just commenced, it was indicative of more significant developments. On August 7, 2024, Turkey formally became a party to the case filed by South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²⁸ This action constitutes the most critical component of the delegitimization campaign directed against Israel. Through this decision, Turkey officially declared its commitment to undermining Israel's legitimacy vis-à-vis the global community. Furthermore, Turkey contributed to South Africa's arguments by submitting photographs and footage captured by legal experts²⁹ and reporters affiliated with the state owned Anadolu Agency.³⁰ Indeed, on April 30, 2025, the Turkish delegation even delivered a presentation at the ICJ specifically entitled, “War Crimes Committed by Israel.”³¹

By September, President Erdoğan, this time targeting Israel from the United Nations podium, called for the implementation of the “Uniting for Peace” resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1950.³² The “Uniting for Peace” resolution is a decision of the United Nations General Assembly that allows the Assembly to convene in an emergency session and adopt recommendatory measures aimed at preserving international peace and security when the Security Council is unable to act because one or more of its five permanent members has exercised the veto.³³ In other words, Erdoğan indirectly portrayed Israel as an illegitimate entity similar to Nazi Germany that warranted military intervention by the international community.

In October, Erdoğan had escalated his rhetoric against Jerusalem by claiming that Israel allegedly harbored ambitions over Turkish territory and asserted that Israel should now be regarded as a national security threat to Turkey.³⁴ He implicitly accused the Israeli government of pursuing a “messianic foreign policy,” arguing that Israel had devised a plan called the “Promised Lands,” which allegedly envisioned the occupation of the territories of regional states, including Turkey.³⁵ Following these statements, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey held a closed session on Israel on 6 October. This political discourse undoubtedly further damaged Israel’s image in the eyes of the Turkish public.³⁶

Turkey's posture aimed at delegitimizing Israel reached a new peak on 17 November 2024. President Isaac Herzog, who bore no connection to the war in Gaza and held no political responsibility, was denied permission to use Turkish airspace for his aircraft to fly to Azerbaijan.³⁷ It is essential to underscore that President Herzog was the architect of the normalization between the two countries with President Erdoğan in March 2022, and that photographs exist of him shaking hands with Erdoğan.³⁸

Turkey's airspace policy remained unchanged in 2025. As recalled, in the aftermath of Syrian dictator Assad's fall in December 2024, Turkey and Israel entered a new phase of rivalry in Syria. Due to the dangerous escalation between the two sides, Azerbaijan - a trusted ally of both Israel and Turkey - intervened and hosted de-escalation talks between them. Despite this positive step, which should have helped ease tensions, on April 11 Turkey chose to close its airspace to the plane carrying the Israeli delegation, which was supposed to fly over Turkish territory. In other words, Ankara conveyed an implicit message to the Israeli side that tensions would not be reduced outside the Syrian arena. The Israeli delegation reached Baku by flying over Greece, Bulgaria, and the Black Sea.³⁹

By 2025, the Turkish government further strengthened its relations with Hamas, presenting its meetings with organizational officials to public as if they were visits by a national delegation, thereby garnering legitimacy for Hamas through the Turkish press.

In addition, under the pretext of playing a facilitating role in "Israeli-hostage - Palestinian-terrorist prisoner exchange" arrangements, Ankara authorized the transfer of the released Hamas members to Turkey. Through this policy, Turkey sought to evade accusations of "hosting Hamas" by advancing the argument that it was "making sacrifices to implement the agreement and achieve a ceasefire." In doing so, Ankara also neutralized potential pressure from the United States to deport Hamas operatives. Consequently, Hamas members with blood on their hands who were released in exchange for innocent Israeli hostages are welcomed in Turkey.⁴⁰

Within the framework of this implemented policy, efforts were also made to legitimize Hamas members. In this context, photographs taken of President Erdoğan, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, and National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Director İbrahim Kalın together with Hamas Shura Council members were disseminated to the press.⁴¹

The most significant role in this public diplomacy was executed by the Directorate of Communications, which is subordinate to the Presidential Office. While presenting the key messages to be conveyed to Turkish and international public opinion, the Directorate both garnered legitimacy for Hamas and systematically operationalized the policy of delegitimization against Israel. Within this framework, Israel's delegitimization was supported by the state through publications issued by the Directorate entitled "Murdering the Truth – Israel's Campaign Against Journalism," "Our Palestinian Cause," and "The Frontline of Truth

in the Palestinian Cause.” In these publications, the Directorate of Communications characterized Zionism as “a racist secular ideology” while baselessly accusing Israel of being an “apartheid regime.” Moreover, the Directorate of Communications also claimed in its publications that Israel allegedly benefits from the global rise of Islamophobia and exploits it for its own purposes. If that were not enough, the publication even portrayed the growing antisemitism worldwide as a tool and a shield used by Israel.⁴²

Turkey did not stop there. It institutionalized Israel's delegitimization by mobilizing social media tools as well. In addition to Turkish and various other foreign languages, this delegitimization policy was advanced to a further stage by launching a website⁴³ and X social media⁴⁴ account in Hebrew under the name ‘TRT Hebrew’. Although the quality of the news produced was at an amateurish, cheap propaganda level that elicited smiles from average Israelis, it reveals Ankara's intention to influence the Israeli discourse.

Another significant issue is Turkey’s “Jerusalem policy.” By stating, “Jerusalem is our city; it is a city of ours,”⁴⁵ Erdoğan has asserted a historical claim over Israel’s capital and declared Jerusalem a “red line” for Turkey.⁴⁶ Along the same lines, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has consistently issued systematic condemnations that signal, almost in a ‘watchdog’ capacity, that it monitors every step Israel takes in Jerusalem. Although these statements often reference the city’s historical status quo, the routine visits by Jews to the Temple Mount, conducted within that same status quo, are labelled as ‘raids’, thereby framed as illegitimate.⁴⁷ This practice amounts to nothing more than an attempt, through Turkey’s intervention, to reshape the existing status quo to Israel’s disadvantage.

The trajectory of Israeli-Turkish relations since the Hamas attack of 7 October illustrates a profound and deliberate political rupture driven by Ankara’s escalating delegitimization strategy. What began as rhetorical support for Hamas quickly evolved into a comprehensive policy framework aimed at undermining Israel’s moral, political, and even historical legitimacy. Through inflammatory discourse, systematic media narratives, suspension of trade, symbolic diplomatic sanctions, and active participation in international legal initiatives, the Turkish leadership signaled that it no longer seeks a functional normalization with Israel - even after the cessation of hostilities in Gaza. Instead, Ankara has recast Jerusalem not only as an adversary in the regional arena, but as a civilizational threat to Turkey’s security identity, thereby embedding anti-Israel sentiment deeply within both state institutions and public consciousness. This broader delegitimization framework is further reinforced by Ankara’s

assertive “Jerusalem policy,” through which Erdoğan claims historical entitlements over Jerusalem and systematically contests Israel’s sovereignty in the city.

Ultimately, these policies have transformed the bilateral relationship from a pragmatic partnership into one of ideological confrontation. By equating Israel with Nazism, weaponizing the memory of the Holocaust, blocking naval and diplomatic airspace access, as well as cultivating Hamas as a legitimate political actor, Turkey positioned itself as one of the leading global actors challenging Israel’s legitimacy. This shift carries long-term implications: it narrows the diplomatic space for reconciliation, reshapes regional alignments, and erodes trust between the two nations at a structural level. Unless Ankara fundamentally reconsiders this delegitimization paradigm, Israeli-Turkish relations will remain locked in a cycle of estrangement, driven less by geopolitical necessity than by domestic political calculus and identity-based narratives.

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Notes

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- ⁶ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Netanyahu ve katliam şebekesi için çember giderek daralmaktadır,” *AA*, November 25, 2024, [Accessed: November 30, 2025].
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- ⁴⁷ “[Dışişleri Bakanlığı, İsrailli bakanların Mescid-i Aksa'ya düzenlediği baskını kınadığını açıkladı](#),” *AA*, August 3, 2025, [Accessed: November 30, 2025] Note that Turkish attacks on Jewish visits to the Temple Mount are not linked to the act of prayer - which many have defined as outside the accepted status-quo framework - but rather focus on the Jewish demonstration of presence at the site. For more on the status-quo: Shmuel Berkowitz, “[The Risk of Changing the Status Quo on the Temple Mount](#),” *INSS*, February 2025. [Accessed: December 9, 2025]