

The Release of the Israeli Tourists: Erdogan Opened a Window, Jerusalem Remains Uncertain

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Paradoxically, the arrest of an Israeli couple vacationing in Turkey and their release nine days later presents a new opportunity in relations between Jerusalem and Ankara. During and following the incident, conversations were held between Israeli and Turkish leaders in a fashion unprecedented in recent years. Over the past year, Turkey has tried to break out of its regional isolation, and Israel is one of the countries marked by Ankara as a target for improving relations. Despite the booming trade between the two countries, however, there are many obstacles to a major improvement in ties. The Turkish government is very sensitive to the Palestinian issue, as illustrated, for example, by Erdogan's behavior during Operation Guardian of the Walls. For its part, Israel takes a negative view of Turkish involvement in East Jerusalem and Hamas activity in Turkey. The Abraham Accords and the cordial relations between Jerusalem, Greece, and Cyprus have also made good relations with Turkey less of a priority for Israel. Jerusalem should nevertheless take advantage of the opportunity that has emerged recently in order to attempt, carefully and without excessive expectations, to improve its relations with Turkey.

The interrogation and arrest in Turkey on November 9, 2021 of Natalie and Mordi Oknin, Israeli tourists vacationing in Turkey, on charges of espionage was covered widely by the Israeli media and addressed through several political and diplomatic channels, including direct involvement by Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. In order to ensure the couple's release, Israel acted on a number of levels – between the Mossad and its Turkish counterpart, and through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Israel's diplomatic representatives in Turkey with officials closely associated with Erdogan. Another route was communication between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog. Ankara regards Herzog as someone with whom it can cooperate, and who has developed good personal ties with the Turkish leadership circle. In June 2021, Erdogan congratulated Herzog in a 40-minute phone call upon the latter's taking office. A channel for discussion via a third country (the UK or Azerbaijan) was apparently considered,

although it was ultimately not selected. Following the couple's release and their arrival in Israel on November 18, Herzog and Erdogan held another phone conversation, and for the first time, Bennett and Erdogan spoke by telephone, for 15 minutes. The Israeli leaders thanked Erdogan for his action in the Oknins' release. In the conversation with Herzog, the Turkish president said, "Relations between Turkey and Israel are important for the security and stability of the Middle East...Differences of opinion can be reduced if we act with mutual understanding on bilateral and regional issues," and that among Ankara's priorities, a "renewal of the peace process" between the Israelis and the Palestinians is important.

Since 2018, there has been no high-level diplomatic representation in the two countries, after Turkey decided (in response to the United States decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and incidents between Gaza Strip residents and Israeli security forces along the border fence) to recall its ambassador to Israel and to order the Israeli ambassador in Ankara to return to Israel for consultations. The Israeli consul in Istanbul and the Turkish consul in Jerusalem also returned to their respective countries. However, over the past year, Turkey has signaled to Israel in a number of ways that it sought to improve relations. In late December 2020, Erdogan said that he was interested in improving relations with Israel, but qualified his remarks by saying that Turkey had a problem with those at Israel's top level, and that the Palestinian issue was a red line for Turkey. At the same time, it was reported that a specific appointment of a Turkish ambassador to Israel was already under consideration. During Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, however, Erdogan attacked Israel fiercely, and Turkish media outlets were among those that disseminated anti-Israeli messages. The first conversation between Erdogan and Herzog took place in June 2021; it stood out for its length and occurrence at an ordinary time, rather than during a crisis. Turkey also dispatched a cultural attaché to Israel for the first time in a decade. Israel's response to these signals from the Turkish side was hesitant, in part because it was unclear to what extent Turkey was sincere in its desire to restart relations, and whether it was not merely an attempt to disrupt the close relations between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus.

Turkey's efforts to achieve a thaw with Israel should be viewed in the broader context of Ankara's desire to escape its regional isolation and warm relations with other actors in the Middle East. Two rounds of negotiations, held in May and September 2021 between Turkey and Egypt, also aimed at creating conditions toward the return of the countries' respective ambassadors to Ankara and Cairo. In order to improve relations with Cairo, Ankara restricted the freedom of action of Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile who have found asylum in Turkish territory. Another effort at reconciliation was with the United Arab Emirates. While Ankara regards the UAE as one of the parties behind the unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, and consequently the two countries regarded each other with much hostility, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed visited Ankara on November 24 for the first time in a decade. The change in direction toward the UAE can also be attributed to Turkey's need for foreign investments (during the visit, UAE announced, inter alia, the establishment of a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey). Furthermore, Ankara appreciated actions taken by the authorities in the UAE to halt the flow of politically embarrassing videos broadcast on YouTube by a member of the Turkish mafia who allegedly found asylum in Dubai. Turkey also tried to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia, with Erdogan and Saudi King Salman conducting telephone conversations over the past year.

The state of relations between Ankara and Jerusalem is complex. One positive aspect is the trade between the two countries. Despite the deterioration in diplomatic and political relations between Turkey and Israel, bilateral trade has continued to grow in recent years. Turkey has a positive balance of trade with Israel; two thirds of bilateral trade consists of Turkish exports to Israel. In tourism, half a million Israeli tourists visited Turkey in 2019, the same number as before the *Mavi Marmara* incident (although this figure also reflects a large increase in the number of Israeli Arab citizens visiting Turkey, in comparison with the preceding period). In contrast, the number of Turkish tourists visiting Israel is very low. At a time of economic crisis in Turkey, marked by a steep decline in the value of the

Turkish lira and a shortage of foreign currency, these economic ties have become more valuable and important for the Turks. Certainly they have been a significant element in preventing a total estrangement between Ankara and Jerusalem during the years of crisis, and can serve as a basis for improvement of ties between them.

Another theater in which Israel and Turkey have aligned interests is Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is Turkey's closest partner, and the two peoples like to refer to themselves as "one nation, two states." For Israel, Azerbaijan is a strategic ally in Israel's conflict with Iran, and also an important energy supplier. Based on these interests, Baku has managed to develop excellent ties with both Ankara and Jerusalem. In the fall of 2020, when Azerbaijan used both Israeli and Turkish-made weapons to defeat Armenia, Baku became a place where Israel and Turkey cooperated indirectly, despite the fact that continued development of the Turkish defense industry might lead to a future situation in which the two countries compete against each other to supply weapons to Azerbaijan's military.

Along with these positive aspects are many points of friction between Ankara and Jerusalem. Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, especially Hamas, is problematic for Israel. Given the ideological closeness between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Turkish government, and following the agreement to release kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit in which Turkey agreed to host freed terrorists in its territory, Istanbul became one of the most important centers of activity in the world for Hamas. Israel accuses Ankara of allowing Hamas members too much freedom of action in Turkish territory. In November, for example, large scale organization by Hamas for terrorist attacks in the West Bank was exposed. This activity was directed by Hamas members in other countries, some of whom operate from Turkey. Another locus of friction between the two countries is Turkish activity in East Jerusalem. The Turkish government has invested in a number of projects in the eastern part of the city, among them the renovation of historic sites and the opening of cultural institutions that are also suspected of political activity as part of a broader Turkish effort to influence Arab public opinion. The Israeli government looks askance at this

Turkish involvement, which adds to tension in the city and is perceived as hostile to Israel. In tandem, Ankara has objected to Israel's regional policy in recent years. The developing alliance between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, and the growing support that the latter two countries receive from Israel particularly angers Turkey, which regards the Eastern Mediterranean and the issue of Cyprus as essential security interests.

The contacts for the release of the Oknins have opened a window of opportunity that could be positive, but the chances of its success should not be exaggerated. Although the return of the ambassadors to Ankara and Tel Aviv is a realistic possibility, there are many obstacles to a real improvement in relations between Turkey and Israel. The sharp change in Erdogan's tone from December 2020, when he expressed willingness to improve relations with Israel, to May 2021, when he sharply attacked Israel during Operation Guardian of the Walls, should serve as a reminder of the fragility of Turkish openness to Israel. At every possible opportunity, Erdogan reiterates the importance of the Palestinian issue. In this context, escalation in the Palestinian theater could well ruin any progress in the contacts between Ankara and Jerusalem. The domestic Turkish base for good relations with Israel is also more limited than in previous periods. The consensus in the Turkish political theater is against Israel, in part due to the weaker status of the Turkish army, formerly a significant pro-Israel element. From Israel's perspective, changes in the regional balance of power, and Israel's position within it, have impacted negatively on the relative weight of the relationship with Turkey as perceived by Israeli decision makers, and have increased their hesitation in responding to the positive signals coming from Ankara. Jerusalem is less willing to make concessions to Turkey, in part in order to avoid jeopardizing the relations that Israel has developed with other countries.

Nevertheless, the Israeli government would do well to attempt to utilize the new situation created between Turkey and Israel and resulting from other Turkish moves as well, among them Turkish reconciliation with the UAE. There is an opportunity to elevate relations from the low point in which they have been mired for over two years, and perhaps generate processes likely

to consolidate more positive trends between the two countries in the medium-long term that should not be missed.

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