

Lingering suspicions: From the Treaty of Sèvres to Turkey's reaction to the war in Gaza

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The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920 between the Ottoman Empire and the triumphant allies of WWI, is perceived in the Turkish public consciousness as a deep humiliation, and has had a lasting impact on Turkey's foreign policy. Although the "Sèvres disgrace" was eliminated following the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, which amended and replaced the Treaty of Sèvres, Turkey still suffers from what is known by researchers as the "*Sèvres syndrome*" which pertains to the Turkish fear of foreign forces' intention to harm it, among other things by exploiting factions within the country and the region. The Sèvres syndrome is just one of numerous factors driving Turkey's foreign policy, but it is at the root of a continuous suspicion of the West, and due to its anti-Semitic overtones, it continues to influence Turkey's attitude towards Israel. Even in the context of the current conflict in the Gaza Strip, the Turkish President's severe criticism of Israel can be understood as incorporating elements of the syndrome.

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The roots of the "Sèvres syndrome"

The Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed in 1920 between the Ottoman Empire and the triumphant allies of WWI, was a severe blow to the Turks. Although the Turkish National Movement succeeded in revoking it less than three years after its signing, through victories on the ground and the signing of a new agreement, the [negative impact of the Treaty of Sèvres on the Turkish mentality](#) throughout the 20th century and to this day is significant. The Sèvres syndrome has many

consequences; in Turkish domestic policy, in Ankara's foreign policy as well as in Turkey's attitude towards Israel.

One of the central factors leading to the Treaty of Sèvres was the [decision by the Ottomans in 1914 to fight alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary](#). During the course of the war, the Ottoman military successfully resisted the British and French forces in the Dardanelles while capitalizing on the developments of the Bolshevik revolution in the Caucasus. But in other arenas it suffered severe defeats, especially in the Middle East, which caused the collapse of the military and political apparatuses of the empire. The armistice accord inked in 1918 between the empire's representatives and the victorious powers articulated this situation and the repercussions of the empire's choice to form an alliance with the defeated side of the conflict. Among other things, it created the conditions for the conquest of parts of the Ottoman Empire by the British, French and Greeks.

The Treaty of Sèvres also reflected the negative balance of power in terms of the Ottomans. Its terms were harsh on the Empire; Britain and France received the Arab provinces that were a part of it. The agreement envisaged the establishment of a large Armenian state and an autonomous Kurdish region in eastern Anatolia. In the West, Greece received territories in the European part of Turkey and on its West Coast, around the city of Smyrna, known today as Izmir. Even in the rest of the territory, where a limited version of the Ottoman Empire was meant to exist, Ottoman rule was limited. For example, the straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean were to be demilitarized and internationalized and France, Britain and Italy received vast zones of influence in Anatolia.

[The Sèvres Treaty had minimal influence on the actual situation on the ground.](#)

On the one hand, the occupation of parts of Turkey by foreign forces began immediately following the ceasefire and the Treaty of Sèvres only confirmed the facts on ground by means of an international document. On the other hand, the Ottoman government that was a signatory to the said agreement had limited authority. A Turkish Nationalist Movement arose following the invasion of Ottoman land by foreign armies, led by Mustafa Kemal. The National Movement presented itself as the exclusive Turkish political force and refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Treaty of Sèvres. Following a series of victories against the occupying armies in Turkey, the Turkish National Government revoked the Treaty of Sèvres on the ground and in 1923 succeeded in bringing about the signing of

the Treaty of Lausanne¹ which amended and replaced Sèvres and defined what are to this day Turkey's borders.

Already in the early years of the Turkish Republic, under the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Treaty of Sèvres symbolically underscored in the official Turkish narrative, the weakened state of the Ottoman Empire and the necessity for a resilient Turkish stance against imperialistic intentions aimed at it. Over the years, the so-called “Sèvres syndrome” has crystallized with more precise characteristics. It remains a key concern in the Turkish leadership and political arena, that Western powers² will cooperate with regional leaders, inside and outside of Turkey, to destroy the Turkish state.

The Cold War and the 1990s

In Turkish domestic policy, connecting domestic and foreign issues through the Sèvres syndrome, radicalized the position of the Turkish elite towards internal rivals, including political Islam or ethnic [minorities](#) who were presented as collaborators with foreign forces seeking to harm Turkey. In Turkish foreign policy, the Sèvres syndrome was [expressed in relation to various issues after World War II](#).

The conflict in Cyprus between the Greek majority and the Turkish minority, which became the most important and emotionally charged issue in Turkish foreign policy, was interpreted as an illustration of the existence of alliances against Ankara. American activity only served to sharpen these traditional Turkish concerns. In 1964, when the Turkish minority suffered attacks from the Greek community on the island and Ankara considered invading Cyprus, US President Lyndon Johnson sent a threatening letter to the Turkish Prime Minister to block the Turkish plans. A decade later, when Turkey invaded Northern Cyprus, in what it called a “Peace Operation,” Washington imposed an arms embargo on Ankara. The American conduct on the Cyprus issue has convinced Turkish public opinion that the American administration supports Turkey's enemies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Both [the Imia/Kardak crisis in the Aegean](#) Sea in 1996 and the

¹Following the Treaty of Lausanne, only two changes occurred in the legal framework determining Turkey's sovereignty. In 1936, the Montreux Convention was signed, regulating the issue of straits which remained open in the Lausanne Agreement. In 1939, following a diplomatic campaign with France that then controlled Syria, Turkey added the Hatay Province (or Iskandron) to its territory, which was the last border change in Turkey's history to date.

²There is some debate in the research literature regarding the applicability of “Sèvres syndrome” to Russia. Historically, the Turkish accusations within the framework of the syndrome were mainly directed at Western countries, also due to the fact that Russia was not part of the original signatories of the Treaty of Sèvres and the Soviet Union even helped the Turkish nationalist movement in its early years. Others argue that the Soviet Union was added into the Sèvres syndrome during the Cold War, in combination with the historical competition between Russians and Turks.

Turkish opposition to the acquisition of the S-300 defense system from Russia by Cyprus [in the 1997-1998 crisis](#) made it clear to Ankara that relations with Greece and with the Greeks Cypriot not only remain tense, but may also be abused by foreign powers against Turkey.

The Sèvres syndrome has influenced Turkey's response to the Western stance on [Armenian terrorism](#) and, more importantly, on [Kurdish terrorism](#). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Armenian terrorist organizations hit Turkish targets and even Turkish diplomats around the world, demanding that Ankara recognize the Armenian Genocide and as an act of reprisal The Turkish government and Turkish public opinion, feeling under attack, reacted very negatively to the fact that in conjunction with said attacks, various Western governments decided to recognize the Armenian Genocide. This timing proved to many Turkish political actors the direct connection between terrorist movements and foreign governments aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the Turkish state.

Similarly, the support received by the Kurdish underground, the PKK, both by the Assad regime in the 1990s which allowed the Kurdish terrorists to operate from Syria and by many political movements in Europe which saw the PKK as a liberation movement, was seen in Turkey as proof of the existence of a dangerous collaboration between all of Turkey's enemies, at a time when the conflict with Kurdish terror was taking a heavy toll on Turkish society. Moreover, the fact that the leader of the PKK [hid](#), among other places, in the Greek ambassador's residence in Kenya prior to his capture by the Turkish security services. For the Turks, this was another indication of an attempt to infringe on Turkey's territorial integrity. These cases also served as ammunition for opponents to Turkey's accession to the European Union, which was a central topic in the political discourse in the 1990s. These opponents, who could be found at both ends of the political spectrum in Ankara, deemed a Turkish joining of the Union as part of a general plan to weaken it.

Both the first and second Gulf Wars were perceived as considerably detrimental to Turkey, with Ankara also expressing dissatisfaction over the responses of its NATO allies. Both conflicts resulted in economic losses for Turkey and laid the groundwork for Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq. Although over the years, Turkey has developed close working relations with the Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq, and specifically with the [Kurdish Democratic Party](#) (KDP), apprehension remains regarding the aspirations for independence of this entity, posing a potential threat to Turkey.

In all of these issues, the Sèvres syndrome was a formative factor in the Turkish response. Turkish leaders have mentioned the Treaty of Sèvres over the years seeking to condemn countries or organizations that seek to harm Turkey's interests and to attack internal rivals. This has also served as a way to mobilize support of Turkish public opinion, keeping the memory of Sèvres alive. In the Kurdish and Armenian case, many Turkish commentators drew a direct connection between the situation in the 1980s and 1990s and the plans in the original Sèvres Treaty, accusing the West of trying to promote a "new Sèvres".

Erdoğan era

After Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took office as Prime Minister in 2003, there was certain change, which can be interpreted as part of Erdoğan's desire to position himself against the traditional Kemalist elite, including the military, in which the "Sèvres syndrome" was a very influential factor. Turkey carried out a series of liberal reforms in an effort to be accepted as a member of the European Union, and Erdoğan began a peace process with the Kurds inside Turkey and even with the Armenians.

However, this effort endured severe blows even in its early stages: The 'hood incident' in which American soldiers captured Turkish soldiers on a special mission in Northern Iraq in July 2003 and covered their heads with hoods, was registered in the Turkish public consciousness as a humiliation [and was subsequently expressed](#) in popular culture. Another significant blow was the non-ratification of the Annan plan for the reunification of Cyprus in 2004 in a referendum on the Greek Cypriot side (as opposed to the Turkish Cypriot side that voted in favor) and the acceptance of the Republic of Cyprus as a member of the European Union, despite the dispute over the fate of the island not being resolved. Beyond the issue of Cyprus, the European Union strongly opposed accepting Turkey into the ranks of the organization. Prominent leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, were in support of a ["privileged partnership"](#) between Turkey and the European Union but one that does not constitute full membership. The war in Iraq and the Arab upheaval that began in 2011 added stressors to relations between Turkey and the United States, and the reconciliation efforts that Erdoğan led against the Kurds reached a dead end.

The continuity of the "Sèvres syndrome" during Erdoğan's era became more pronounced in the later years of his reign, especially after he formed an alliance with the Nationalist Party in Turkey, in which the nationalist heritage in its traditional sense is strong. In 2021, at the 98th anniversary celebrations of the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, Erdoğan [stated](#) that when Turkey celebrates 100

years in 2023 it “will be a stronger, more independent and more prosperous country economically, militarily, politically and diplomatically,” “that we continue to thwart the treacherous ambitions against our country’s unity and integrity” and that “critical successes” in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean are a clear example of the need to defend the rights and interests of Turkey.

With regards to the Kurdish aspect, as in earlier periods, the Turkish government's perception is that there are external factors encouraging the assertive intentions of the Kurds in the region, [endangering](#) Turkey. This approach was reflected in the Turkish opposition to the referendum of independence of the Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq that was held in 2017, as well as its continuing rage over Western support, especially American support, of the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground, the YPG, which maintains ties with the Kurdish underground, the PKK, operating in Turkey. Those who are deemed in the West as the most effective ground forces in the war against ISIS, especially since 2014, are perceived in Turkey as militants belonging to a terrorist organization that will one day direct its actions from Syria against Turkey, as it did in the 1990s. The establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, which included Arab elements alongside the YPG forces, was also perceived as a Western fraudulent attempt and not as a sincere attempt to deal with Turkey's security concerns.

Internally, the framing of the “Service” movement of the religious preacher Fethullah Gülen, which has become a [bitter rival](#) of Erdoğan since 2011, as a terror organization, the fact that Gülen himself has been in voluntary exile in the United States since 1999, along with the failed military coup attempt in July 2016 attributed to Gülen, has led [supporters of Erdoğan](#) to perceive Western elements, particularly the United States, as the orchestrators behind the coup attempt. During the period of tensions between Turkey and the UAE, Erdoğan also accused it of funding the coup attempt. Additionally, Erdoğan's accusations with anti-Semitic overtones regarding the existence of a “[Mastermind](#)” acting against Turkey and the existence of an “[interest lobby](#)”, that took note of Turkey's excessive strengthening under Erdoğan and is thus acting to weaken it has led the Turkish president, among other factors, to resist raising interest rates in Turkey in the face of rising inflation, ultimately triggering a deep economic crisis.

In addition, during the Erdoğan period, the expansion of the “Sèvres syndrome” also manifested in the maritime domain in the form of the ‘Blue Homeland’ doctrine. According to the doctrine, maritime borders are no less important than land borders. At the base of the doctrine is a perception that Turkey must show determination in the maritime arena, lest it incurs a [maritime Sèvres agreement](#). In this context, the signing of maritime delineation agreements between countries

that Turkey views as hostile on the basis of a legal interpretation that is contrary to that of Ankara, and the creation of an East Mediterranean Gas Forum, that in practice excludes Turkey illustrated to the Turks the existing maritime danger. Following the adoption of this doctrine, Turkey took a number of controversial measures in the Eastern Mediterranean, the [most prominent of which](#) was the agreement to demarcate the maritime borders between Turkey and the Government of National Accord in Libya, in a manner that ignores, among other things, the existence of the island of Crete with regards to demarcation of Greece's economic waters.

Finally, in recent years a claim has arisen that Erdoğan represents a new syndrome in Turkish foreign policy namely the [Lausanne syndrome](#). Essentially an updated version of the "Sèvres syndrome", it is based on Erdoğan's ambitions: his personal ones- to be a successor of Atatürk and even better, someone who is able to achieve more for Turkey than it received under the Treaty of Lausanne; and nationalist ambitions- to establish Turkey's status as a regional power and even beyond. In other words, also the "Lausanne syndrome" relates to perceived malicious intentions of the foreign forces, placing an even greater emphasis on "neo-Ottoman" aspects.

It is sometimes difficult to discern whether "Sèvres syndrome" is a motivating factor in Turkish behavior, or a narrative used to justify a decision made for other reasons. Erdoğan, as Turkish leaders before him, has demonstrated an ability to adopt a flexible perception of the regional situation and adapt it to the pragmatic needs of the Turkish government. While the "Sèvres syndrome" remains a notable aspect of Turkey's approach to Greece, there are instances where Ankara demonstrates the capacity to overcome its concerns and engage in constructive dialogues with Athens. For example, the tension between Turkey and Greece reached a boiling point when in May 2022 Erdoğan declared that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [does not exist as far as he's concerned](#) (a similar statement was made by Erdoğan regarding Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, [against the backdrop of the war in the Gaza Strip](#)), [following Mitsotakis' speech to the two houses of the US Congress in which he hinted his opposition to the sale of F-16 jets to Turkey](#). In September 2022, Erdoğan even threatened that Turkish military forces may appear [one night and](#) invade Greece, and then repeated this threat with further statements. A similar threat was voiced by Erdoğan in the context of the war in Gaza, with Turkey claiming they "[may knock on Israel's door one night](#)"). The picture was almost reversed in 2023, when following the two devastating earthquakes in February of that year, Greek aid was sent to Turkey and a thawing in relations between the parties began, leading to a rare visit by the Turkish president to Athens in December 2023 and the

announcement of a [new era in relations](#). Similar phenomenon has also been observed in Turkey's relationships with other countries. Efforts at normalization between Turkey and countries in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have greatly influenced the presentation of the said countries and their leaders in Turkish public discourse. Such dynamism also hints at the instrumental aspect of the Sèvres syndrome in advancing Ankara's interests.

Israel and the Sèvres Syndrome

In light of its position in the Middle East, its strong ties with the United States as well as the conspiracy theories, surrounding the “secret influence” of the Jews, that have echoed in Turkey, the chances of adapting the “Sèvres syndrome” to Turkey's attitude to the State of Israel have always been high. Therefore, a strategic challenge for Jerusalem was to avoid being included in the group of leaders towards which the Turkish paranoia is directed. Throughout the history of Turkish-Israeli relations, Israel has tried to present itself as the region's friendliest country towards Turkey thereby leveraging the "Sèvres Syndrome" in its favor. Thus, Israel helped promote the interests of the Turks in Cyprus in the 1960s, in the face of a Greek-Arab alliance and Western indifference. In the 1970s and 1980s, Israeli diplomacy intervened in favor of Turkey in Washington to persuade Congress to moderate the arms embargo against Ankara as well as prevent American recognition [of the Armenian Genocide](#). In the 1990s, Turkish loneliness further served as a window of opportunity for Israel. While Ankara saw itself surrounded by [hostile actors](#), especially on the Kurdish issue, and lacking Western support in part because of the United States' refusal to upgrade the Turkish air force, Jerusalem offered its help on these two issues, creating the infrastructure for the best decade in relations between the two countries.

However, the Sèvres syndrome incorporates additional factors that adversely affect Turkish-Israeli relations and this effect has been felt especially in the past two decades. Turkish dissatisfaction with the agreements at the end of World War I has occasional antisemitic overtones, with Israel often presented as the successor of those who at the time wanted to dismantle the Ottoman Empire. In addition, at both ends of the Turkish political spectrum Israel tended to be perceived as part of an anti-Turkish alliance, either for imperialistic reasons or as part of a war against Islam.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the narratives against Israel bearing the “Sèvres syndrome” strengthened for a number of reasons. First, President Erdoğan's position towards Israel and his ability to dictate public discourse in his

country provided legitimization for the voicing of the most extreme claims against Israel. In addition, regional changes over the past decade have been interpreted in Ankara as a manifestation of Turkish concerns. With the rapprochement between Israel and the Republic of Cyprus and Greece, the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and the signing of the Abraham Accords (initiatives that received support from the United States and the European Union), Israel found itself part of axes perceived in Ankara as hostile to Turkey, and the Turkish government's response was affected and exacerbated by the "Sèvres syndrome", and saw in the said developments "proof".

During the Iron Swords war, among other criticisms, Erdoğan spoke out regarding Israel's conduct in the war and about Israel's [expansionist intentions](#). Other Turkish officials even claimed that Israel aspires to conquer parts of Turkey. This criticism can be understood, among other things, against the backdrop of the "Sèvres syndrome". Thus, events in the region are not perceived as random but also as directed against Turkey. Even the provision of American support to Israel and the deployment of aircraft carriers to the region during the war [are not perceived](#) as serving a deterrent purpose. Instead, they are viewed as potentially fueling provocations against Russia and Iran, posing risks to Turkey, and granting Israel a freer hand in its actions in Gaza. Moreover, Turkey does not express enthusiasm for the international coalition led by the United States to counter the Houthi threat and ensure unimpeded passage in the Red Sea, although ships [leaving Turkey](#) or with [Turkish crew members](#) were also affected by the Houthi threat.

Incidents in Northern Iraq in which Turkish soldiers fell in battles with the Kurdish underground, the PKK, as well as their timing, during the war in Gaza, further provided opportunities for accusations against Israel regarding its support of Kurdish terrorism. Insofar as ties have been established over the years between the Kurds in Northern Iraq and Israel, it is important to note that there is no connection between these elements, which are also Turkey's partners, and the PKK. Conversely, the Kurdish underground in Turkey has engaged in extensive collaboration with Fatah and other Palestinian movements. Despite these facts, there are often accusations in Turkish public discourse that Israel and the Kurds plan to establish a "Greater Israel" and a "Greater Kurdistan" in the Middle East together at the expense of Turkey, supported by the West, and conspiracy theories on the CIA-Mossad-PKK axis. In January 2024, these accusations surfaced and the PKK's attacks against the Turkish army were presented as an Israeli-American attempt to retaliate against Turkey for its support of Hamas. This narrative further increased hostility towards Israel in Turkish society.

Summary

While Turkey has several concrete security concerns, the "Sèvres syndrome" and the ongoing fear that foreign forces are about to destroy it, has heightened Turkish suspicion of international actors and hardened Ankara's position on critical issues in Turkish foreign policy, in what has been described as ["paranoia" at the heart of the Turkish international perception](#).

The "Sèvres syndrome" and its impact on the Turkish political system and its use within it constitutes a complex challenge for Israel. In line with the sentiment in Ankara, there is a possibility that Israel could be added to Turkey's list of adversaries and face criticism stemming from the "Sèvres syndrome." Even if the syndrome did not prevent rapprochement between the two governments when they had interest in such, its impact on a large part of the Turkish public is an obstacle to rapprochement between the two societies. Moreover, even when the Turkish government adopts a more moderate line towards Israel, the consequences of the Sèvres syndrome, combined occasionally with factors such as anti-imperialism or political Islam, continue to influence part of public opinion and put pressure on the government. Erdoğan is currently being [criticized by the Turkish opposition](#) for not acting decisively enough against Israel, despite his strong statements regarding the war in Gaza. During crises, the concepts based on the "Sèvres syndrome" have exaggerated the hostility toward Israel in Turkish public opinion. There are limited options to address this phenomenon. Since this is a syndrome based on emotions and conspiracy theories, it is very difficult to contradict it, even when, as in the Kurdish issue, the facts are clear and refute the Turkish claims.

The "Sèvres syndrome" serves as a predominantly negative factor in relations between Turkey and Israel. Attempts by Jerusalem to exploit it for its benefit have often turned out to be short-lived, and its use against Israel has been made, at least in some Turkish media outlets and other manifestations of Turkish public opinion, continuously, so that over the years this syndrome has played a negative rather than positive role in Turkish-Israeli relations.

Regarding the war in Gaza and the Turkish response to the war, it would be a mistake to ignore the sincere empathy the Turks feel for the Palestinians' peril as well as the religious dimension behind the widespread support for the Palestinians in Turkey, and by Erdoğan in particular. In addition to this, the longstanding Turkish skepticism towards the West, along with factors tied to the strained relations between the United States and Turkey in recent years, is

noteworthy and must be added to the analysis of the Turkish response to the war and in particular the opposition to the American moves and Washington's support for Israel. All these cannot be understood without the historical analysis of the "Sèvres syndrome".

However, it would be a mistake to dismiss all of Turkey's security concerns as stemming solely from the "Sèvres syndrome" and as irrational. This view does not align with the reality of Turkey sharing borders with unstable regions and grappling with diverse terrorist threats over the years. At the same time, the dimension of the Sèvres syndrome, along with its expansion to the Lausanne syndrome, shapes Turkish perspectives and is utilized for internal political objectives. The ability of the West, or Israel, to completely refute Turkish suspicions towards them is impossible, but there have been Western actions that have not given enough weight to the Turkish needs and therefore aggravated anti-Western sentiments, and especially anti-American sentiments, in Turkey. A potential solution could entail remaining cognizant of Turkey's interests and guiding both Western and Israeli policies to take note of the Turkish perspective, even if a decision favoring another interest is eventually reached.