

Turkish–Israeli Relations at a Dangerous Turning Point

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Following the local elections in Turkey at the end of March, which saw President Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party defeated in major cities, Turkey has implemented a series of harsh measures against Israel in response to the war in the Gaza Strip. Some of these measures deviate from Ankara's previous policies, which had also led to a deterioration in relations between the countries during previous Israeli operations in Gaza. This deviation from past policies necessitates reexamining the bilateral ties and for Israel to prepare for the possibility of extreme scenarios between Turkey and Israel. This change also raises questions about Turkey's place in the global and regional balance of power. Turkey's current stance has also caused friction with the United States at a time when Ankara–Washington relations seem to be improving. Additionally, Turkey's support for Hamas and its growing closeness with Iran could jeopardize the normalization of relations between Turkey and moderate Arab states.

Since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, Turkey's hawkish rhetoric toward Israel has stood out, but for months it was similar to what had been witnessed in previous rounds of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Ankara did take several practical steps, such as canceling joint events and recalling the ambassador for consultations, yet these measures were moderate and at a level that Israel could manage. However, since April, Turkey has made a number of moves, indicating a fundamental shift in the relations between the two countries. Most significant has been the decision in early May to completely cease trade with Israel. This decision follows Turkey's ban in April on exporting 54 categories of products to Israel. The decision to completely cease trade, which went into effect immediately, is also unusual when compared to other conflicts worldwide, let alone compared to Turkey's conduct toward other players.

To date, both the governments of Turkey and Israel had succeeded in separating their political crises from their trade ties. In the second decade of the 21st century, although considered a "lost decade" in Turkish–Israeli relations, trade between the two countries steadily increased, even during times of crises, such as after the Mavi Marmara incident or following the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital by US President Donald Trump. Although the volume of bilateral trade between the countries dropped to \$5.7 billion in 2023 from a record \$8 billion in 2022, the trade volume is significant, with Turkey being among the five largest exporters to Israel.

Therefore, Turkey's policy will have an impact on many businesses and will most likely lead to price increases in Israel.

Turkey's close relationship with Hamas has also been a contentious issue between Israel and Turkey for many years. The fact that Hamas leaders have been revered in Turkey since October 7th and act as if it is their new base of operations, coupled with the growing pressure on Qatar to expel the Hamas leadership from its territory, complicates the situation. Turkey, however, does not appear to be reassessing its relations with Hamas in the wake of the war. On the contrary, statements and actions suggest that Turkey will find it difficult to accept a scenario in which the end of the war is linked to the complete defeat of Hamas. While many countries in Europe and the Middle East differentiate between the Palestinian issue and the fate of Hamas, promoting policies that combine fostering Palestinian interests with efforts to disband Hamas, Turkey depicts the organization as a natural partner for any future plan. This stance has created friction between the Turkish government and other governments in both the region and the West, which position Turkey as having problematic extremist views.

Other Turkish measures against Israel include Turkey joining South Africa's lawsuit against Israel at the International Court of Justice, accusing Israel of genocide. Until now, Turkey has been involved in aspects of lawfare against Israel, but not in such a blatant manner. In April, Turkey also officially released a documentary, "The Evidence," which allegedly documents Israel's war crimes in Gaza. Additionally, Ankara refused to condemn the Iranian attacks against Israel on April 13–14, instead issuing a statement that emphasized Israel's responsibility for the escalation.

The Turkish government has also effectively allowed the preparations to continue for a new planned flotilla to set sail to the coast of Gaza. Although the flotilla was already scheduled to leave port in late April, US diplomatic efforts led Guinea-Bissau to refuse to allow two of the flotilla ships (including a cargo ship) to sail under its flag. Concurrently, a Turkish citizen—an imam (and thus a civil servant) who was in Jerusalem as part of a pilgrimage organized by the Turkish Religious Affairs Authority—stabbed a Border Police officer in the Old City of Jerusalem on April 30. This was the first attack in Israel by a Turkish citizen, although it was carried out independently. The attack underlines the level of incitement against Israel in Turkey, which warrants reexamining the policy of approving tourist visas for Turkish citizens.

The Turkish decision to halt trade can partly be explained by domestic pressures. The Turkish public is overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian and hostile toward Israel, with repeated calls to end trade. Public figures and media close to the opposition highlighted the hypocrisy of the Turkish government, which used harsh rhetoric against Israel while continuing to trade with it. The results of the local elections on March 31,

where trade with Israel was a prominent issue, along with the rise and success of the New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah Partisi, YRP)—an Islamist party that appealed to voters disappointed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's hypocrisy—demonstrated the political cost of these inconsistencies. Some of Erdoğan's traditional support base punished his party for continuing trade with Israel, causing a split in Turkey's conservative camp and enabling the opposition to win. Therefore, the government's hardened position aims to silence some of the criticism and regain voter support for Erdoğan's ongoing tenure in the medium term.

The radicalization of Turkey's approach is also part of Ankara's efforts to influence the course of the war in the Gaza Strip. Since the beginning of the war, the Turkish government, which has been trying to establish itself as a central regional power in recent years, has worked hard to play a significant role in the war. Turkey offered itself as a mediator, which also served as a way to justify its silence regarding Hamas's and Iran's actions. Moreover, Turkey has also provided substantial humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. At the start of the war, Turkey even proposed a guarantorship model for Palestinian security with its active involvement. However, the relevant parties did not respond positively to the Turkish proposals; therefore, Ankara did not have the influence it expected. Consequently, Turkey's tougher stance against Israel and its unequivocal support for Hamas are attempts by Turkey to redefine its role as a key supporter of Hamas and gain the influence that it has been unable to achieve so far. In addition, Turkish decision-makers perceive Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as currently weak and expect him not to complete his term. This perception has encouraged them to take risks in their policy toward Israel.

However, these explanations do not account for the extent of the change in Turkey's policy vis-à-vis Israel and the risks Ankara has taken. Turkey's decision to stop trade with Israel, in particular, and its position on the war in general do not serve the interests of *realpolitik*. With the cessation of trade, the Turkish economy loses a significant source of foreign currency. Unilaterally violating the free trade agreement with Israel exposes Turkey to Israeli prosecution in international organizations and undermines its credibility among its trade partners.

The Turkish president's visit to Washington, scheduled for May, was postponed and perhaps even canceled before the public decision to halt trade with Israel. Canceling the visit appears to be a preemptive move by Turkey, preparing an escalation with Israel and fearing criticism from Washington. This is further evidence of Turkey's departure from *realpolitik*, as the visit was important for Erdoğan. Some interpreted Turkey's agreement to Sweden's entry into NATO in January of this year as partly motivated by a desire to advance the sale of F-16 fighter jets and F-16 upgrade kits between the United States and Turkey, and the visit was planned to symbolize the new

positive spirit of Turkish–US relations. Because of Turkey’s actions against Israel, it may now again face opposition in the United States when putting the deal into action.

The dilemma Israel faces is not an easy one. During a press conference, Erdoğan claimed that severing trade relations with Israel was a way to force Israel to agree to a ceasefire in the war in Gaza, leaving the possibility of renewing economic relations when the war ends. However, the current Turkish policy is too extreme for Israel to agree to immediately reestablish the economic relationship as it was before Ankara’s decision, even if the present step is temporary. Moreover, if there has indeed been a strategic shift in Turkey’s attitude toward Israel, it could now be seen that Turkey is closer to a dangerous enemy state rather than just a rival country with which Israel is engaged mostly in rhetorical battles. Such a change will have implications beyond the economic aspect. Other countries, including the United States, the Sunni Gulf states, and states in the European Union, especially the southern ones, should also be concerned about Turkey’s actions. Turkey’s willingness to take risks with such measures against Israel indicates a high probability that its provocative policy will once again return to the forefront. As seen in 2019–2020, the strengthening of Turkish ideological and domestic considerations in shaping Turkish foreign policy comes at the expense of realpolitik considerations. An essential question that arises in this context, for which there is no clear answer at this stage, is whether this phenomenon is limited to Turkish–Israeli relations, connected to events in the Israeli–Palestinian arena and its unique characteristics, or whether it represents a major shift in Turkish foreign policy.

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