

TURKEY AND ITS APPROACH TO SAUDI–ISRAELI NORMALIZATION

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Turkey, which was in fact the first Muslim country to normalize relations with Israel back in 1949, is likely to view a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia with skepticism and even disapproval. Its opposition to the Abraham Accords in 2020—and its threat to recall its ambassador from the UAE following their signing—set a precedent in this regard. While relations between Turkey and the Gulf states have improved significantly since then (after years of tension driven by Ankara’s support for Qatar during the blockade, and the fallout from the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul), Turkey is still unlikely to look favorably on a Saudi–Israeli normalization deal. Even if such a normalization is accompanied by progress in Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, Ankara is expected to perceive it as coming at the Palestinians’ expense—particularly due to Saudi Arabia’s weight in the Muslim world. Normalization would also enhance the power of Gulf states within the Sunni world and increase Saudi influence in East Jerusalem, potentially threatening Turkey’s self-image as a leading Muslim nation with strong support among Palestinians, especially in East Jerusalem.

Moreover, the Swords of Iron war and its aftermath have negatively affected Israel–Turkey relations, to the extent that Turkey is now seen as being closer to the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance” than to the countries that have normalized relations with Israel. Particularly notable was Turkey’s May 2024 decision to impose a complete trade ban on Israel—despite the existence of a free trade agreement between the two countries and their membership in both the

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World Trade Organization and the OECD. It is unclear whether this reversal can be undone to the point that Turkey could be expected to support initiatives that clearly serve Israel's security, even if they also contribute to Palestinian welfare. This is because Turkey's trade ban on Israel was prompted in part by intense public and political pressure to impose practical sanctions on Israel, rather than offering mere rhetorical condemnation.

In addition, Turkey plays a significant role in promoting anti-Israel narratives through its media outlets, some of which broadcast in Arabic. These channels, along with public statements from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other senior officials, contribute to inflaming hostility toward Israel—hostility that has sharply increased since the war. At times, Ankara's rhetoric has even challenged Israel's very legitimacy. If Turkish-Israeli diplomatic ties are eventually severed altogether, it could trigger a domino effect, encouraging other Arab and Muslim-majority countries with diplomatic ties to Israel to follow suit.

Moreover, Turkey will not relinquish its close ties with Hamas and will continue to allow the organization to operate on its territory with varying degrees of freedom. This is rooted in the ideological affinity between President Erdoğan's party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, of which Hamas is a part. Given the concerns among pragmatic Sunni states about the Muslim Brotherhood—mainly for domestic political reasons—Ankara's staunch support for Hamas is problematic. From Israel's perspective, especially after the events of October 7, Turkey's ongoing support for Hamas makes Jerusalem unwilling to see Turkey take a practical role in the "day after" scenario in Gaza. Thus, even if the idea of a multinational force to assist in postwar governance in Gaza is raised, Israel is unlikely to agree to Turkey's participation—despite the fact that, in the past, Israel allowed Turkey to take part in the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) following the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre. Turkey, for its part, is likely to view negatively any attempts to exclude it from Gaza's

reconstruction plans—initiatives that carry not only political influence but also economic potential, especially for Turkish construction firms.

Turkey was not included in the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative announced by President Joe Biden during the G20 summit in September 2023. That project, which implies normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, channels goods to Europe via Greece, bypassing Turkey. IMEC is also emblematic of the growing ties between Cyprus, Greece, and the Gulf states—relationships that Ankara perceives as coming at its expense. In response, Erdoğan [declared](#) that “without Turkey, there is no corridor.” Turkey is actively promoting a rival project—the [Iraq Development Road](#)—which would transfer goods from the al-Faw port in Iraq’s Basra province to Turkey and from there to Europe. Turkey has managed to [enlist the UAE and Qatar](#) to support this project. Given the US interest in promoting IMEC as a counterweight to Chinese influence under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this issue has broader implications beyond the Middle East.

Although Turkish vessels have also been affected by Houthi activity and the disruptions to Red Sea shipping, Turkey—like many Arab and Muslim countries—is not participating in the international coalition against Houthi aggression. Unlike the tacit support offered by some Arab states, Ankara [explicitly accused](#) the US and the UK of turning the Red Sea into a “bloodbath.” Turkey’s unwillingness to support—rhetorically or otherwise—the coalition fighting the Houthis suggests that domestic considerations weigh heavily on its foreign policy, particularly as Turkish public opinion views the Houthis as aiding the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

Nevertheless, some factors may moderate Turkey’s opposition to Israeli–Saudi normalization. Since the early 2010s, Turkey has significantly improved its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE and has an increasing need for [investment](#) from Gulf states to help it recover from its economic crisis. The growing strength of Turkey’s defense industry has also drawn interest from Gulf countries and Egypt—especially in acquiring [UAVs](#)—thus warming

relations further. Therefore, while Turkey may initially object to normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, it is likely, as with the Abraham Accords, to ultimately come to terms with it.

In fact, despite Turkey's opposition to the Abraham Accords, Israel's strengthened regional position and its deepening cooperation with the UAE enabled it to enter the 2022 normalization process with Turkey from a position of strength, unlike in past instances. Amid the crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations, normalization with Saudi Arabia would further reduce Erdoğan's ability to harm Israel. Overland and air connections between Israel and the East via the Gulf states have also helped offset some effects of Turkey's boycott. For example, while Turkish Airlines halted flights to Israel and plans to resume them only later in 2025, Emirati carriers were among the first to resume service to Israel. Still, today's hostility between Israel and Turkey is significantly more severe than it was on the eve of their 2022 normalization, making it unclear whether that precedent can be applied to what may come following Saudi-Israeli normalization.