



Limited Rapprochement: Prospects for Turkish-Israeli Convergence of Interests

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Turkey's endeavor to improve its relations with Israel were evidenced in its recent official contacts with Israel. Most recently, on July 12, 2021, Israeli President Issac Herzog and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a phone call, followed by official contacts between ministers and officials from both countries. The contacts are perceived as a Turkish attempt to overcome years of strained relations between the two countries.

Fruitful collaboration

Ankara seeks to build on its strong economic and military relations with Israel that were not affected by the severed relations between the two countries. This is evidenced in the following.

1- Close military cooperation: Turkey is the second largest host of Israeli defense factories after the United States. Starting in late 1970's, the two countries signed a military agreement worth USD 900 to modernize Turkey's F-4 Phantoms and F-5 aircraft and another worth USD 687 million to upgrade 170 of Turkey's M60A1 tanks. Another agreement was signed between the two countries to exchange military pilots eight times a year.

2- Growing economic ties: Official data released by the Turkish Statistical Institute, the Turkish Exporters' Assembly and the Central Bank show that economic relations and trade between Turkey and Israel are

growing stronger, backed by increasing mutual direct investments from both countries.

In 2020, Turkey's exports to Israel reached USD 4.7 billion, making Israel the ninth largest importers of Turkish products. In the first four months of 2021, Turkey's exports to Israel went up to USD 1.851 billion, an increase of 35 per cent compared to the same period last year. Israel became the eighth largest importer of Turkish products.

Motives for the rapprochement

Ankara's motives of having rapprochement with Tel Aviv at this time can be outlined as follows:

1- Influencing Israel's stand on the Eastern Mediterranean: Erdogan recognizes the need to break Turkey's isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially after the country's failure to reach agreement with Cyprus and Greece. Additionally, other involved stakeholders, including Egypt, the United

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States and the European Union, are not showing any leniency towards Turkey's demands in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although Ankara realizes that its demands are hard to accept in the Eastern Mediterranean, it seeks to have a share in the natural gas projects in this region, and continues to bet on Israel to collaborate with it in this regard. Back in 2016, Turkey developed a plan to build an undersea gas pipeline to Israel to import gas from Israel to its territory and further to Europe.

However, Israel gave up the plan after it adopted the EastMed project, a pipeline aimed at carrying natural gas supplies to Europe via mainland Crete and Greece. This angered Ankara, which considers its own project as a better and cheaper alternative than EastMed. As the EastMed project has not been carried out yet, Ankara seeks to influence Israel to give it up and go back to the Turkish pipeline.

2- Attempts to drive a wedge between East Mediterranean Gas Forum members:

The international forum was jointly formed by Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine to establish a regional gas market in the Eastern Mediterranean. The forum aims to preclude Turkey from carrying out illegal exploration of energy resources in the economic waters of the member states, in addition to keeping Turkey away from projects planned for the East Mediterranean.

Through bolstering its political relations with Israel, Turkey seeks to raise doubts of other members of the forum about Israel's commitment to this alliance, thus eventually serving Turkey's own interests.

3- Seeking to alleviate regional tensions: The Turkish president seeks to reconsider his relations, and ease tensions with major regional powers, even if the efforts do not result in making a breakthrough in the issue, as is the case currently with Egypt.

Spokesperson for the Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), Omer Celik, on July 15, commented on the call between Erdogan and Herzog stating that: "A framework emerged after this call under which advances should be made on several issues where improvements can be made, and where steps towards solving problematic areas should be

taken". Celik also said that the Palestinian issue and areas such as bilateral trade and tourism and trade that should be a "win-win" for both nations, will be discussed by the two sides.

4- Departure of Netanyahu's government: Turkey wants to reiterate that it is not an enemy to Israel and that relations between the two countries were strained because of the policies pursued by former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who took extreme stands even towards Jordan. Additionally, there is a personal feud between Erdogan and Netanyahu.

Erdogan believes that a new Israeli government headed by Naftali Bennett will contribute towards strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries.

Israel's viewpoint

Israel realizes that Ankara seeks to make gains out of rapprochement with Tel Aviv. That is why Israel sought to present Ankara with clear demands that it should meet in order to overcome their political disagreement. These demands can be outlined as follows:

1- Exploring the limits of Turkey's openness: The new Israeli government seeks to explore Turkey's intentions and the extent of its seriousness about restoring relations with Israel. Moreover, Erdogan's efforts to improve relations with Israel will eventually serve Israel's interests, even if they do not reach any real solid rapprochement. The reason is that Erdogan kept attacking states that signed peace agreements with Israel and introduced himself as a defender of the Palestinian issue. However, his current endeavor to rekindle relations with Israel will expose his propagandist politics and their difference from his active politics.

2- Israel's demands for Turkey to shut down Hamas' offices: Tel Aviv demands that Ankara shut down the offices and headquarters of Hamas, as well as the training camps. The Israeli government further demanded to put an end to official media campaigns inciting enmity to Israeli politics towards the Palestinian issue.

It is worth noting that the Turkish government recently started to tighten the noose on operations run by the Palestinian movements whose members are



no longer granted citizenship or long-term visas. Additionally, Turkey recently arrested and deported a member of Hamas at Istanbul Airport.

3- Benefiting from Turkey's relations with the Palestinian Authority: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas recently visited Turkey. Now Tel Aviv considers ways to benefit from the Palestinian National Authority's openness to Turkey, as part of its efforts to resume relations with the PNA as well as its vexatious policy against Hamas, which is still reluctant to carry out the prisoner exchange deal, and continues to harden its positions on refusing to sign a long-term truce. This would push the Israeli government to close in on Hamas through states such as Egypt, Turkey and Jordan.

Some hurdles

Turkey's attempts to improve its relationship with Israel face diverse hurdles that can be outlined as follows.

1- Lack of trust in Erdogan and his ties with the Muslim Brotherhood: Influential leaders of the Israeli right-wing believe that the Turkish president is not a trustworthy person, and that he will continue to confront Israel and keep pitting others against its pol-

icies. It is also widely believed in Israel that Erdogan is ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and that he is not willing to give up his alliance with them.

2- Continuous Israeli-Cypriot alliance. At a meeting on July 25, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and his Cypriot counterpart shared deep concerns over Turkey's provocative actions in Cyprus, according to a statement released by Lapid's office at the conclusion of the meeting.


The statement noted that the two ministers also discussed the necessary steps that can be taken on the matter. It was referring to Turkey's reopening a part of Varosha and handing it over to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not internationally recognized.

3- Israel's view of Turkey as a threat. For the first time in the history of relations between the two countries, Israel's Military Intelligence added Turkey to its list of "challenges" in 2020. Although the intelligence assessment then did not see a direct confrontation with Turkey in the offing, it says that "Turkey's increasingly bellicose actions in the region have made it one of the top dangers to watch for 2021."


To conclude, Israel will not open up to, and restore political relations with Turkey, unless Ankara shows solid shifts in its attitude to Hamas. Even if a shift did occur, the continuous relations between Israel and Cyprus impose an additional restriction for any Israeli-Turkish rapprochement.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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