

The image shows the national flags of Turkey and Israel waving against a cloudy sky. The Turkish flag is on the left, and the Israeli flag is on the right.

Incessant Tension:

Uncovering the Turkish attempt to bust an Israeli spy ring

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On October 21, Daily Sabah announced that an Israeli spy ring, consisting of 15 agents, was arrested in Turkey early in October. The Turkish newspaper affiliated with the Turkish government and JDP said that the spy ring targeted Israel's opponents in Turkey. A day later, the newspaper affirmed that one of the arrested agents collected information about Palestinians residing in Turkey, and about Turkish military industries. However, Ankara did not officially announce the news, while Israel denied the accusation.

A few weeks earlier, the pro-Hamas Shehab News agency announced that seven Palestinian PNA and Mossad agents were arrested in Turkey allegedly for spying on certain Palestinian residents in Turkey.

Tensed Relations

Turkish-Israeli relations are experiencing tension nowadays, namely:

1- Accusation of terrorism from both sides: In May 2021, Erdogan described Israel as a terror state, after Israeli police shot rubber bullets and threw stun grenades at Palestinian youth at the Aqsa Mosque. In a similar vein, Israel is accusing Ankara of supporting Hamas, which Israel considers a terrorist organization.

On October 23, Turkey fiercely criticized plans by the Israeli Higher Planning Council to build new housing units in several Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Turkish officials also attacked Israel for designating six Palestinian human rights groups as terrorist organizations, describing this as an attempt to undermine human rights activities in Palestine, which is considered a violation of international law.

2- Attempts to resolve tension were a failure:

On July 12, Erdogan called the new Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, to congratulate him on his inauguration. Herzog's spokesperson said that the two Presidents discussed methods of strengthening the relationship between their countries by enhancing

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cooperation in several areas, including energy, tourism and technology. In addition, last year, Head of Turkish Intelligence held secret talks with Israeli officials, in an attempt to overcome the rift between the two countries. However, it seems that these reconciliatory efforts simply went down the drain.

3- Turkey was excluded from Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum: Turkey was excluded from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum which witnessed cooperation between Egypt and Israel. An agreement has been reached whereby Israel exports gas to Egypt where it would be liquefied and then exported again. These new arrangements do away with Turkey, to which Israel formerly used to export its gas. Expectedly, Turkey is anything but satisfied, as it has always wanted to control the pipelines used in exporting energy from the Middle East and Central Asia to EU countries.

4- Economic relations have not been affected, though: Trade exchange between Ankara and Tel Aviv has not been affected by the aforementioned political tension. Turkey and Israel both believe that economy and politics should remain independent of each other. In 2020, Israel ranked ninth on the list of importers from Turkey (with a total of 4.7 billion-dollar imports). In the first four months of 2021 it even ranked eighth on the list, as Israeli imports from Turkey increased by 35% in comparison to the first four months of 2020, reaching 1.9 billion dollars. In the aforementioned phone call, the Turkish and Israeli Presidents stressed the importance of enhancing trade and economic relations between their countries, despite the Coronavirus crisis.

Israeli Rejection

Israel did not officially react to the Turkish accusations; rather,

1- It denied the accusation, unofficially: Former Mossad Deputy Director and Chair of Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Ram Ben-Barak denied that any of the fifteen arrestees was a Mossad agent. He said that Turkish Intelligence probably desires to

project an image of itself as a great success, and so it makes such claims, and, from time to time, spreads 'false information'. In fact, Israel is unintimidated by the accusations simply because the fifteen arrestees have Arab nationalities.

2- Bilateral relations are still tense: A report on the website of the Israeli TV channel Kan warned that the Turkish accusation marks the end of the 'cease-fire' stage in the relationship between Ankara and Tel Aviv; according to the report, stability has given way to tension once Turkish media revealed the news of the arrest of the spy ring. References made in the report suggest that Turkey may have really arrested a Mossad-affiliated spy ring.

It is noteworthy that early in 2012, Turkish Intelligence revealed to Iran the names of 10 Iranians who met Israeli spies in Turkey to discuss destructive plans against Tehran. In fact, Israel was aware that Turkish authorities well knew about the anti-Iran activities it was planning on Turkish territories, but Tel Aviv never expected that Ankara would simply betray it and renounce years of cooperation on security issues between the two countries. This Turkish 'betrayal' dealt a severe blow to anti-Iran Israeli operations. Washington expressed concern as Head of Turkish Intelligence Hakan Fidan exchanged sensitive information with Iran.

3- Tel Aviv tried to stop anti-Israel activities headquartered in Turkey: Hamas is remarkably active in Turkey. Israel has reason to believe that many Hamas operations are actually conducted from Turkey, as Israeli sources stress that Hamas runs a secret facility in Turkey, used to launch cyber-attacks and to conduct counter-espionage operations against Israel. Turkey also granted Turkish citizenship to many Hamas members involved in operations against Israel.

Significance and Implications of the Current Situation:

The arrest of the Israeli spies in Turkey can help us anticipate two main trends which will most probably



characterize Turkey's regional moves in the near future, which can be summed up as follows:

1- Turkey will continue to escalate the situation:

The fact that Turkey has announced (though not through official organs) the arrest of the Israeli spy ring shows that Turkey's approach to dealing with its regional opponents will depend on escalation. It is true that Turkish officials tend to make statements aimed to appease, but this policy is never supported by actual steps that would pacify its opponents. This cannot be useful for its regional relations.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey sought to restore friendly relations with Israel, which agreed, provided that Turkey should stop supporting Hamas. Ankara,

in turn, refused to do so, and Erdogan returned to escalation.

2- Erdogan will continue to hold fast to his ideological dogmatism:

Erdogan's beliefs are similar to those of the Muslim Brotherhood. When Erdogan joined hands with the Movement following the Arab Spring, he was not solely acting out of a pragmatic desire to enhance Turkey's regional hegemony; he was actually reaching out to a like-minded ally. This was manifest when Erdogan refused to give up supporting the Muslim Brothers; we already mentioned that the Turkish president's refusal to give up Hamas, which is a Muslim-Brother wing, was a main reason behind the worsening situation.


In conclusion, Turkey's policy towards Israel generally shows that Turkish- Israeli relations are more than likely to deteriorate even more. This can be a major setback for any future cooperation between the two countries in the areas of politics and security, the reason being that Turkey refuses to make the concessions necessary for naturalizing its relations with Israel.

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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