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# The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations

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Brief Analysis

## As Turkey begins to realize the strategic potential of closer ties with Israel, it could rely on Azerbaijan to help facilitate a rapprochement.

Since the Mavi Marmara crisis in 2010, Turkish-Israeli relations have remained unstable at the diplomatic level. Of the issues that continue to strain their relationship, the most fundamental is the contradiction in their attitudes about Palestine, and especially Gaza. Currently, this tension stems from the failure to develop a two-state solution during the combined fifteen years of Benjamin Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister.

Nonetheless, beyond the issue of Gaza, there are a number of other ongoing regional issues on which Turkey and Israel could benefit from mutual coordination and support. In the case that the two countries choose to create such a relationship, Turkey may benefit from turning to its neighbor Azerbaijan as a mediator to help restart necessary diplomatic conversations.

### Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the initial successes of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, where they

built governments ideologically close to the current political leadership in Turkey, led Ankara to view the emerging Sunni post-Arab Spring generation as a geopolitical opportunity to expand its influence. As a result, Ankara chose to shift its geopolitical center of focus from Europe to the Middle East. In turn, whereas pragmatism and interests dominated Turkish foreign policy, including its approach to Israel, from 2002 to 2011, the main determinants in Turkish foreign policy after 2011 were nationalist-conservative sentiments, identity transformation, change of the geopolitical center to the Middle East, and the personalization of diplomatic relations.

Thus, as Turkey began to stress elements of religion, tradition, and history in its public discourse, Ankara naturally designated itself as the patron of the Palestinian issue in its relations with Israel. For AKP political elites and intellectuals aligned with the government, Palestine is accepted as a lost place of the Islamic faith and the glorious Ottoman-Turkish past. As such, politics of emotion are now the dominant approach, with a focus on reigning in Israel and protecting Palestine.

Moreover, while Turkey's foreign policy has been readjusted by the politicians and decision-makers of a conservative and nationalist party for over 18 years, many politicians on both the Left and the Right in Turkey have negative views of Israel. According to an April 2021 study conducted by Metropoll, one of Turkey's leading survey companies, the rate of those who do not approve of establishing relations with Israel is 44.9% among the voters of the ruling party AKP, and 45.1% the voters of the main opposition party, CHP. This common approach has an exerted effect on foreign policy.

The related deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations has been visible in a series of crises and disputes that has helped shape the tense bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel in the last 10 years. These include Operation Cast Lead (Gaza War) between 2008-2009, the Davos Crisis in 2009, the Low Seat Crisis in January 2010, Mavi Marmara in June 2010, the Arab Spring in 2011, the Netanyahu-Erdoğan phone call and the former's apology in 2013, ambassadorial appointments in 2016, and the recalling of those appointments following the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2018. The articulation of these crises has accelerated the collapse of the secular nation-state eco-system in the Middle East. While the traditional military and strongman leaderships have collapsed after the the Arab Spring, they created a tectonic activity for the construction of identities, which went beyond the borders of the states. The discourses of the strong Islamic movements facilitated this process. However, this situation disturbed both the Gulf monarchies and Israel. The discomfort of the Gulf monarchies was due to the political threat posed by the religious leadership and the social groups articulated with them. As for Israel, this new policy uncompromisingly encoded Israel as the big Other. If this circle of crises between Israel and Turkey did not overlap with the Arab Spring period, it could have remained a cyclical series of problems between the two countries.

### **The Actual Geopolitics of the Palestine Problem and Israeli-Turkish Relations**

Despite this trend of deteriorating relations between the two countries, however, changing political realities in the region could lead to a shift in Turkey's nationalist antagonism against Israel. When it appeared to Ankara that the Arab states with traditional influence—Egypt and Jordan—were losing influence in Palestine, Turkey wanted to create opportunity for itself to expand influence in Palestinian affairs. However, the readjustment in the region after 2013, and especially the involvement of the UAE and Bahrain with the Abraham Accords in 2020 has now likely obliterated all possible opportunities. Qatar, on the other hand, came into conflict with other Gulf states in 2017, and this situation transformed into a diplomatic crisis that lasted for about 4 years. Qatar's diplomatic exclusion pushed it to seek alternative partners. At this point, the usual diplomatic relations between Turkey and Qatar evolved into an *ad hoc* geopolitical bloc. This bloc tended to mediate between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas for a while. However, the depth of the fragmented structure of Palestinian politics and Egypt's return to

regional politics removed this engagement from the agenda. With the summit held in Al-'Ula, Saudi Arabia in 2021, the agreement between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ended the crisis. Thus, a distinctive political alternative to Palestine offered by Qatar ceased to exist. These recent developments force Turkey to strengthen ties with the conventional actors, such as Egypt and Jordan, concerning the Palestinian issue again.

In this sense, the Abraham Accords have had a direct impact on the status quo, demonstrating that the establishment of an open, transparent, institutional, and strategic relationship with Israel has become a standard acceptable in the region and shattering the expectation that antagonism between Israel and the Arab states would continue unabated. Moreover, the Abraham Accords indicated that the Palestinian issue has diminished as a determining parameter in the establishment of relations with Israel, likewise reducing the number of countries willing to mobilize for the Palestinian issue over other foreign policy considerations.

Turkey now lacks alliances that boost its geopolitical gains in the Eastern Mediterranean and Northern Syria, and it is losing the support of the Pro-Israel lobbies vis-à-vis Armenian lobbies in the United States. Furthermore, while Ankara has been alienated even by its NATO allies, Israel has been able to forge positive relations between many of Turkey's historic rivals in the region, such as Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. Turkey has therefore become aware of the importance of Israel to its strategic interests in the Middle East

As part of this change in attitude towards Israel, the precedence of prioritizing national interests over the supranational identity and its associated narratives has begun to change the outlooks of Turkish political elites. Therefore, the ruling political institutions are now more determined to readjust relations with Israel with more strategic considerations in mind. This certainly is a situation developed in parallel with the discourse of the government. Lately, the implicit emphasis of President Erdoğan on the very existence of many areas of cooperation with Israel could be given as an example.

Even more notably, the improvement of relations of the Palestinian National Authority with Cyprus and Greece has led Turkey to question its Israel policy, raising questions on the popular level. At this point, the presumption of the Turkish public is that Palestinian actors cannot follow a foreign policy strategy other than in Turkey's imagination. However, as the events proving the contrary occur, the gap between emotional reactions at the societal level and the realpolitik among decision makers in Turkey widens. Turkish bureaucrats and diplomats maintained the negotiations with Israel for a short while, despite the rapid and massive social mobilization in Turkey after the conflicts in the region.

In the conflicts between Gaza and Israel, despite the rapid and massive social mobilization in Turkey, Turkish decision makers continued to negotiate with Israel after a short while.

Finally, the reestablishment of the relations with Israel would provide Turkey with a stronger relationship with the Biden administration. Normalization could also be treated as a part of Ankara's effort to dilute the generally anti-Turkish attitude that has developed among the political and bureaucratic elites in Washington.

### **The Potential Role of Azerbaijan**

However, even were Ankara to pursue them, re-establishing Israeli-Turkish relations seems difficult at the current moment. As the center of gravity in regional geopolitics shifts to the Gulf, the quality and depth of Israeli-Turkish relations now depend largely on Turkish relations with Gulf states, and except for its alliance with Qatar, those relations are similarly strained and tense at the moment.

Yet Turkey does have a unique, albeit indirect, connection upon which to draw. Since its independence, Azerbaijan has maintained close ties with Turkey, sloganized in the motto, "One nation, two states." And as this common

identity and partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey has come to the fore since the Second Karabakh War, the common strategic areas shared between Azerbaijan and Israel have seen a simultaneous rise in importance. As a result, Turkey's rising partner in defense, trade, education, and industry, Azerbaijan, may play a key role in the readjustment of Ankara's relations with Israel.

Such a mediator role would capitalize on the common goals and positive relations Azerbaijan shares with Israel. Unlike Ankara and other Muslim states, Baku remained silent during the recent crisis in East Jerusalem and Gaza in May 2021. This silence is consistent with the Azerbaijan's self-isolation from the Ikhwan tradition in neighboring countries and its adoption of publicly promoted multiculturalism and secularism.

In addition, Azerbaijan shares several strategic, economic, and social ties with Israel. Regarding national security, both countries see Iran as a significant threat. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran, which is home to a population of Azerbaijani Turks estimated to be three times the size of Azerbaijan's population, has seen Azerbaijan as a fief where it could export the Islamic Revolution and where its economic interests have been in conflict. Azerbaijan, like Israel, therefore views Iran with suspicion and concern, and shared cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan is mutually valuable on that front.

On the economic and social levels, Azerbaijan provides 40% of Israel's oil imports, while Israeli technology—used in Karabakh against Armenia—is transferred to Azerbaijan in exchange. Azerbaijan is likewise becoming an increasingly attractive tourist destination for Israelis, and Azerbaijan is also home to the last Jewish community of the Caucasus.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan could also be important to normalization between Turkey and Israel because of its geographic location. If Turkey were to accept Israel as a partner in its efforts to expand its influence into Eurasia, Israel could offer an opportunity to balance against Chinese infrastructure and technological expansion there, while also offering geopolitical opportunities to limit Iran. Of course, given Azerbaijan's geographic location, which connects the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, it is poised to play a central role in any such effort.

Accordingly, if Ankara hopes to normalize its relationship with Israel, mediation from Baku may be the most likely route forward, and, in fact, Azerbaijani leadership has already indicated its willingness to mobilize its resources in an effort to normalize relations between the two countries. In December 2020, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov said that Baku could mediate between Israel and Turkey. In addition, later, in April 2021, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev stated that they could host a tripartite negotiation.

However, as Azerbaijan observes the Bennett administration's stance towards Turkey, Baku would want to oppose Israel for Ankara. Should Israel's new acting government avoid of a rapprochement with Turkey, Baku would refrain from playing a shuttle diplomacy role. If Israel gives a green light to normalization with Turkey, Baku could be the mediator.

Everyone is wondering whether the Lapid-Bennett Government in Israel will change the course of the relations with Turkey. In the event that the two countries do try to make direct contact, Ankara has three diplomatic channels for communicating with the new Israeli government. First, Defense Minister Benny Gantz and his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar could contact each other easily. The fact that they both come from similar professions could facilitate this process by creating the atmosphere of trust in the negotiation process between the two countries.

Second, Avigdor Liberman, the Soviet-born politician, who is one of the leading figures of the Azerbaijan lobby in Israel, would be open to the mediation of the Azerbaijanis in the resumption of Turkey-Israel relations, and could help initiate that process.

Finally, the last option is Mansur Abbas. As an actor representing the political culture of the Muslim Brotherhood in Israel, Mansur Abbas could act as a bridge between decision makers in Israel and Turkey, and he could serve as a

negotiator to balance the two countries' differing views.

At this point, if Turkish or Israeli leadership makes any kind of effort to normalize relations, through any one of these avenues, or others, it will initiate a long and exhaustive process for the two countries. In that case, Azerbaijan could be the mediator needed to instill trust and good will in the process. ❖



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