

# Will Turkey Cut Ties with Israel?

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Brief Analysis

**Although the latest rift is more than rhetorical, Ankara is unlikely to sever ties completely—unless Israel blocks it from participating in Gaza’s reconstruction.**

**O**n May 2, Turkey banned all import/export activity with Israel, [announcing \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-israel-trade-halted-until-permanent-gaza-ceasefire-2024-05-03/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-israel-trade-halted-until-permanent-gaza-ceasefire-2024-05-03/) that the boycott would persist until a “permanent ceasefire and humanitarian aid are secured in Gaza.” The move follows a suite of [targeted trade restrictions \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/opening-trade-war-turkey-imposes-restrictions-on-israel-until-gaza-ceasefire/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/opening-trade-war-turkey-imposes-restrictions-on-israel-until-gaza-ceasefire/) issued on April 9. If these decisions are enforced, they could have much more significant practical effects than Ankara’s previous wartime posture toward Israel—trade between the two countries [stood at \\$7 billion \(https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=dis-ticaret-104&dil=1\)](https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=dis-ticaret-104&dil=1) in 2023, and Turkey is Israel’s fifth-largest exporter. Previously, Turkish leaders walked a fine line in their approach to Israel’s military campaign against Hamas, harshly criticizing Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s government while generally shying away from concrete retaliatory steps that might damage the bilateral relationship anew. The trade boycott suggests a hardening of this policy, but why now? And will Ankara take further steps against Israel?

## Months of Message Discipline

**T**urkish-Israeli ties are complicated, particularly with respect to the Palestinian conflict, and the latest rift reflects these complexities. The relationship fully ruptured in 2010 when Ankara sponsored a maritime flotilla to break Israel’s blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza, resulting in a controversial military raid and international diplomatic crisis. Soon thereafter, Turkey began openly providing substantial diplomatic support and shelter to Hamas.

Relations did not fully reset until more than a decade later, when Israel and Turkey reinstated their ambassadors in December 2022. By then, Ankara’s role in Israeli-Palestinian affairs had diminished significantly, and Turkish officials realized that they needed to keep diplomatic channels with Israel open in order to maintain influence on this crucial regional issue—hence their months of caution about rupturing ties again after the Gaza war broke out in

October. They are especially keen on positioning Turkey as a player in any postwar Gaza scenarios.

This is not to say they have stayed quiet about the conflict—Ankara has issued many strident criticisms at different stages of the war, especially at the outset of the crisis. Prior to this week, however, it finely worded most of these statements to blame and shame Netanyahu personally rather than Israel as a whole. For instance, on November 15, the Turkish Foreign Ministry [accused him \(https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no-295-israil-basbakani-ve-israil-disisleri-bakaninin-iftiralari-hk.tr.mfa\)](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no-295-israil-basbakani-ve-israil-disisleri-bakaninin-iftiralari-hk.tr.mfa) of “entering the dark pages of history with the oppression and massacres committed against the Palestinian people.” President Recep Tayyip Erdogan mostly followed this line, such as when he [called Netanyahu \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231129-turkey-s-erdogan-calls-netanyahu-butcher-of-gaza\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231129-turkey-s-erdogan-calls-netanyahu-butcher-of-gaza) the “butcher of Gaza” on November 29. In adopting this approach, Ankara seemed to believe that Netanyahu would eventually be voted out of office, enabling Erdogan to safely work with his successor while waving away the harsh wartime criticism as a product of Netanyahu’s policies alone.

Erdogan’s domestic calculations likewise made him cautious about alienating a key regional actor, U.S. ally, and economic player. Turkey’s economy has suffered from high inflation in recent years, peeling away the president’s supporters. As a resource-poor country, Turkey relies on international investment flows for economic stability, spurring Erdogan to launch a charm offensive aimed at drawing in global markets. This included currying favor with President Biden and key regional leaders such as Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman.

These efforts yielded results. In April 2022, Turkish courts transferred a case targeting Prince Muhammad over his role in the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi to a Saudi court. Partly in response to this move, Saudi authorities transferred \$5 billion to Turkey’s Central Bank in March 2023, providing economic relief just ahead of the country’s parliamentary and presidential elections. Erdogan also realized that a full rupture with Israel would upset Prince Muhammad, who has not abandoned his goal of [normalizing diplomatic ties \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-israel-should-declare-unilateral-cease-fire-gaza\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-israel-should-declare-unilateral-cease-fire-gaza) with Jerusalem despite the Gaza war.

In addition, Erdogan sought to change the status quo with Israel’s main ally Washington for a host of reasons related to national security, regional influence, and domestic politics. Most notably, when Sweden applied to join NATO in May 2022, Ankara initially blocked the bid. Erdogan did not acquiesce to Swedish accession until President Biden tentatively invited him to Washington and advanced Turkey’s stalled request to purchase F-16 fighter jets through Congress.

## Why the Script Change?

**F**our new developments put an abrupt halt to Erdogan’s charm offensive in recent weeks. First, the Biden administration recently balked at setting a timeframe for the White House visit due to disagreements over the summit’s deliverables, including potential trade deals and an elevated public welcome for Erdogan in Washington. Second, Ankara previously believed that the Gaza conflict would be ending within months; it now seems to think the crisis is on the verge of becoming an open-ended conflict. Third, Ankara is worried that Netanyahu may stay on the scene longer than anticipated—even if he is [voted out \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imminent-avoidable-us-israel-rift-over-gaza\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/imminent-avoidable-us-israel-rift-over-gaza) in early elections, Turkish leaders believe he may stage a comeback in subsequent snap elections. Fourth, Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered resounding defeats in local elections on March 31.

The latter development is significant in [general political terms \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/istanbul-election-will-shape-erdogans-policy-trajectory\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/istanbul-election-will-shape-erdogans-policy-trajectory) because AKP candidates lost mayoral races in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, booting the party down to second place in the national polls for the first time in two decades. Even more worrisome for Erdogan—and for Turkey’s relations with Israel—is the

breakthrough of the far-right New Welfare Party (YRP), which has gained nearly 7 percent in national polls, wooed away many supporters on Erdogan's vulnerable right flank, and taken some key cities from the AKP. In addition to holding various misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and anti-LGBTQ positions, the YRP is virulently anti-Israel.

The Turkish public has overwhelmingly sided with the Palestinians and is eager for political actors who will demand tougher policies toward Israel. After all, they have watched the Gaza crisis almost exclusively through the prism of Israel's military operations— Hamas violence has been largely absent from Turkish television screens, and many citizens are unaware that the group still **holds** (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/artc-who-are-the-hostages-still-in-the-hands-of-hamas>) nearly 120 Israeli hostages. Enter the YRP, which has branded itself as a “fresher and genuinely political Islamist” version of Erdogan's AKP and is ready to double down against Israel. Given the economic stagnation and Erdogan's lack of substantive action on Gaza, more of his voters are looking for a “new AKP” and seem likely to migrate to the YRP.

Ahead of the March 31 vote, a Turkish journalist **tweeted** (<https://twitter.com/metcihan/status/1723678801622605888/photo/1>) evidence that bilateral trade with Israel had continued despite the hardening of Ankara's rhetoric, stating, “We support Palestine in words, but Israel in reality.” The YRP quickly seized on this dichotomy, depicting the AKP's Israel policy and Erdogan himself as two-faced—a characterization that keeps gaining traction among many right-wing voters.

## What Lies Ahead?

**T**o prevent more voters from migrating to the YRP, Erdogan has been hardening Turkey's policy against Israel since early April, and he will likely feel little pressure to alter this course given the end of his short-lived diplomatic romance with Biden and the growing Turkish perception that Netanyahu is here to stay. In practical terms, this means Ankara will no longer feel the need to tailor its criticisms of the Gaza war; in fact, it may consider further actions beyond rhetoric. On May 1, soon after news broke that Erdogan's Washington visit had been scrubbed, Turkey **announced** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-01/turkey-wants-to-join-south-africa-s-un-court-case-against-israel>) that it would join South Africa's bid to take Israel to the International Criminal Court “for committing genocide.”

In the meantime, the trade ban alone could affect Israel's economy. For instance, cement and other construction materials **are key Turkish exports** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkeys-trade-ban-importers-seek-indirect-routes-to-bring-goods-to-israel/>) to Israel, so their price may increase now that Israel must seek alternative suppliers. The same goes for goods such as steel, iron, and motor vehicles, whose shipping costs will climb if they have to be procured from more-distant markets.

Yet one important dynamic remains unchanged and may limit retaliatory steps against Israel—namely, Erdogan's desire to play a role in Gaza “the day after.” In line with Turkey's vision of being a regional power, Ankara is eager to participate in reconstructing the Strip, sorting out Palestinian politics, and mediating a long-term solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This suggests that it will shy away from another full 2010-style rupture. Even the trade boycott may prove porous—news reports **indicate** (<https://www.intellinews.com/turkey-reportedly-still-loading-azerbaijani-oil-for-israel-despite-total-trade-ban-323947/>) that Turkey is still providing Israel with Azerbaijani oil, sent by pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan and from there to Israel. Yet a full rupture could unfold quickly if Israel vetoes a Turkish role in Gaza, or if Israeli-Saudi talks implode.

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