

# Israel's Calculus for Reconciliation With Turkey

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Brief Analysis

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**While the agreement is unlikely to reset relations between two leaders who have profoundly different worldviews, it may catalyze economic and security initiatives that benefit mutual Israeli, Turkish, Palestinian, and U.S. interests.**

**O**n June 29, the Israeli security cabinet approved a long-overdue deal restoring full diplomatic ties with Turkey by a vote of seven to three. The agreement effectively ends the *Mavi Marmara* saga that began in 2010, when a flotilla of ships led by a Turkish NGO sought to break Israel's maritime restrictions on Hamas-ruled Gaza. In the narrow sense, the negotiators focused on providing \$20 million in compensation to the families of the nine Turks who were killed when Israeli forces raided the flotilla. Yet the deal, whose text has not been publicly released, will likely have much broader implications. Although no one anticipates that it will catapult the countries back to the golden age of their relations in the 1990s, an array of mutual interests make it a sine qua non to achieving other tantalizing political, security, and economic benefits in a volcanic Middle East.

## MOUNTING SECURITY CONCERNS

**T**he June 28 Istanbul airport attack was a reminder that Turkey faces many radical enemies. Ankara has alleged that members of the Islamic State perpetrated the attack in response to the brewing Israel-Turkey deal. In addition to needing more allies to combat the group's infiltration and other forms of violent radicalism, the Turks have bitterly opposed the rule of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, bringing them into conflict with his various Shiite allies (for more on Ankara's calculus, see PolicyWatch 2638, "[Turkey's Regional Charm Offensive: Motives and Prospects \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-regional-charm-offensive-motives-and-prospects\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-regional-charm-offensive-motives-and-prospects)").

For its part, Israel has come to believe that it needs as many friends as possible to deal with the region's turmoil.

Thus when Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated the need for closer relations with Jerusalem earlier this

year, his comments received wide attention in Israeli media and policy circles. Previously, both Erdogan and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu had avoided concluding the reconciliation negotiations because other concerns and suspicions outweighed their need for regional allies. For example, Netanyahu feared that an agreement would only reinforce Erdogan's tendency to vociferously criticize Israel and support its sworn enemy, Hamas.

## PREVENTING ANOTHER GAZA FLARE-UP?

One of the deal's most important implications is that it could prevent another round of fighting in Gaza, mainly by alleviating the territory's worsening humanitarian conditions. The Israeli military believes that improving quality of life in Gaza is the best hope for avoiding future wars against Hamas, and the deal with Ankara will facilitate such efforts.

Specifically, Turkey will now be permitted to build a power plant in Gaza, which in turn will enable construction of a desalination plant to deal with the territory's water problems. To be sure, other restrictions will remain in place. For one, Israel will not allow Turkey to build a Gaza port or anchor a power-generating vessel offshore. Erdogan also realized that Israel would not end its economic restrictions on the territory, so he retracted his prior (and very public) insistence on that point -- a major change. Instead, the Turks agreed that all trade with Gaza would go through the Israeli port of Ashdod. Jerusalem has long insisted on such control due to security concerns about Hamas smuggling efforts. Interestingly, while Hamas routinely denounces any countries that improve their ties with Israel, the group did not criticize the Turkey deal, since it cannot afford to lose Erdogan's support.

The agreement also indicates that Israelis are coming to terms with the Palestinian Authority's apparent lack of interest in resuming control over Gaza. Israel therefore felt compelled to make a deal with Turkey even if it allows Hamas to claim credit for any improvement in Gaza. Previously, Israel had insisted that the PA receive credit for improvements in Gaza. Although Palestinian discourse often nurtures conspiracy theories about Israel supposedly wanting Hamas to prevail against the PA, such thinking makes little sense in light of Gaza's current situation.

Netanyahu has also been careful about avoiding any accommodation with Ankara that might anger Egypt. Hamas has long viewed itself as the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Cairo's bitter enemy, so President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi does not want to boost Turkey's influence in Gaza if it will help Hamas. Egypt is also furious at Ankara for not recognizing Sisi's government. While Netanyahu did not synchronize his position with Sisi in advance of the Turkey deal, he likely made sure that the agreement's terms contained no surprises for Cairo. Israel had no intention of institutionalizing a Turkish role in Gaza at Egypt's expense, and Cairo has developed a comfort level with Jerusalem given the extensive scope of their security relationship. Moreover, the deal comes at a time when Egyptians are preoccupied with more pressing economic matters at home.

Another Palestinian dimension to the deal is that Ankara will no longer permit Hamas military operatives to use Turkey as an operational base for attacks in the West Bank, even if the organization can retain an office there for other purposes. In Israel's view, Hamas operative Saleh al-Aruri was a key figure in the West Bank violence that led up to the 2014 war in Gaza, yet he was based in Turkey up until 2015 and was permitted to visit the country on more than one occasion over the past year. This issue was apparently one of the last sticking points in the negotiations.

## ECONOMIC TIES

Netanyahu has devoted considerable effort to improving ties with Greece and Cyprus in the past few years, largely to ensure an optimal environment for Israel's natural gas development in the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, the deal with Ankara should facilitate serious talks about exporting Israeli gas to Turkey. In addition to potentially serving as Israel's gateway to European gas markets, Turkey would welcome an inexpensive supplier to alleviate its own energy dependence on Russia -- particularly given the sharp tensions with Moscow that emerged last November after it shot down a Russian military jet. (One should not rule out the possibility that Netanyahu discussed the Turkey

deal with Vladimir Putin during his June visit to Moscow; the timing of this week's Turkish "apology" for the shutdown is notable as well.)

Israeli energy minister Yuval Steinitz, who met with Erdogan on the margins of the multilateral nuclear summit in Washington this March, has said that gas is an important bilateral opportunity, and that pipeline deals with Turkey would enable Israel to develop its offshore resources even more. Moreover, ongoing speculation about a potential peace deal in Cyprus this year will only heighten hopes for economic growth in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Such growth is already evident -- Israel's trade with Turkey has more than doubled over the past several years and exceeded \$5 billion in 2015. Over 13,000 trucks reportedly carried food, steel, machinery, medicine, and other items from Turkey to Israel last year, arriving at Haifa port and then moving on to Jordan via the Sheikh Hussein Bridge. These deliveries supplanted trucks that used to transit through Syria during more tranquil times.

Yet the economic gains do not erase the downturn in bilateral ties, which began before *Mavi Marmara* and accelerated afterward. On several occasions over the past few years, Erdogan has made vitriolic statements against Israel, even accusing it of "war crimes." And the relationship remained frosty despite the fact some elements of this week's deal were already more or less settled long ago. For example, in a phone conversation orchestrated by President Obama in March 2013, Netanyahu met one of Turkey's key demands by apologizing for any "operational mistakes" in the maritime incident. And Jerusalem has insisted for years that Turkey neither press nor support criminal charges against Israeli security officials for the flotilla raid -- a demand that was not formally accepted by Turkey until this week. Earlier today, Israel's chief negotiator for the talks told *Yediot Aharonot* that the \$20 million in victim compensation would not be forthcoming until the Turkish parliament passed a law against such charges.

In addition, three Israeli cabinet ministers voted against the deal, including newly appointed defense minister Avigdor Liberman. Education Minister Naftali Bennett also dissented, arguing that the principle of giving a compensation package to the Turkish flotilla victims sets a bad precedent on the Palestinian issue. While some ministers were upset that the deal was not linked to the return of two Israeli soldiers whose bodies are still in Gaza, Jerusalem apparently decided that any such linkage would give Hamas an effective veto over Israeli-Turkish relations.

## THE U.S. DIMENSION

**W**ashington has long been calling for such a deal between its allies in order to get a better handle on the region's growing turbulence. In addition to the Obama phone call in 2013, Vice President Joe Biden visited both countries this year (Ankara on January 21 and Israel on March 8), where he is believed to have discussed the need for rapprochement. In recent years, Turkey has used its membership in NATO to block different forms of outreach to Israel, so the new agreement should allow the organization to expand cooperation with Jerusalem.

The chances of Israeli-Turkish cooperation against jihadist groups are less certain, though recent statements offer some potential for movement in that regard. According to a May 9 report in *Hurriyet Daily News*, Israel's consul-general in Istanbul, Shai Cohen, noted, "Ultimately, we see eye to eye with Turkey on eliminating jihadist extremist organizations, particularly in Syria, but [also] in the region in general. There is a lot to cooperate on that." It remains to be seen whether Turkey's presumably intensified conflict with the Islamic State will lead to closer sharing of information with Israel, at least on discrete subjects. The Israeli media is rife with speculation that pre-2010 bilateral arms sales will be renewed in some reduced form, but this cannot be confirmed.

## CONCLUSION

**T**he Israel-Turkey agreement is unlikely to mean a "reset" between leaders who have profoundly different worldviews on political Islam and other issues. Yet by ending years of political deterioration and vociferous recrimination between the two governments, the deal could be the catalyst that enables them to seize bilateral and

regional opportunities when their strategic interests converge.

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