

# Israel and Turkey Approaching Reconciliation Amid Policy Challenges

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Brief Analysis

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**Normalization negotiations seem closer than ever to conclusion and should be encouraged, but significant differences remain, especially on Gaza, Hamas, and Egypt, and they will likely prevent a return to past bilateral intimacy.**

Israel and Turkey's efforts to mend their strained bilateral relations are making progress. Two weeks ago, following another round of talks, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced that a deal on restoring full diplomatic relations with Jerusalem should be expected soon. Previously, their energy ministers met away from the public eye during the recent Nuclear Security Summit in Washington -- the first ministerial-level contact since 2010, when a flotilla of Turkish-sponsored ships tried to break Israel's maritime restrictions on Hamas-ruled Gaza, leading to a violent confrontation.

As reconciliation talks have advanced in recent months, the atmosphere between the two governments has noticeably improved. Following the March 19 Islamic State terrorist attack in Istanbul, which claimed the lives of three Israeli tourists, among others, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu sent letters of condolence, and Israeli president Reuven Rivlin called Erdogan -- the first presidential-level phone conversation between the two countries in six years. Jerusalem also publicly praised Ankara for the way it handled evacuation of the Israeli victims. Even so, the challenges to a lasting deal go beyond the realm of promising diplomatic gestures.

# AWAKENED INTEREST IN RECONCILIATION

Until recently, reconciliation efforts had been puttering along for several years with ups and downs. The parties were close to a normalization deal in 2011 and 2013, but neither felt compelled to take the extra step to finalize it. Turkish interest in restoring ties has surged over the past few months, however, while Israel has come to better appreciate the benefits of mending fences with an important regional actor in a turbulent environment.

Erdogan has conveyed his renewed interest in normalization through numerous channels, including Vice President Joe Biden, who visited Ankara on January 21 and Jerusalem on March 8. In addition, the heads of major American Jewish organizations have been granted two closed-door meetings with Erdogan: in Ankara on February 9 and in Washington on March 30. He also convened his cabinet on February 22 to discuss the reconciliation process, with Turkish daily *Hurriyet* reporting that the meeting's tone was positive and optimistic. More recently, during a March 31 speech at the Brookings Institution in Washington, he spent more time discussing reconciliation with Israel than any other regional topic and speculated that the negotiations are on their way to a successful conclusion.

Turkey's interest in rapprochement grew as its regional policies crumbled under the pressure of ongoing turmoil, especially in Syria, where Ankara has failed in its goal of ousting the Assad regime. Another dominant factor was the erupting crisis in relations with Russia, after Moscow deployed forces to bolster Assad in September and Turkey downed a Russian plane in its airspace two months later. Faced with these challenges and the growing Islamic State threat, Ankara has come to realize what it stands to gain from improving relations with a stable regional actor like Israel, which shares its resentment toward the pro-Assad axis.

Notwithstanding their policy differences over the Palestinian issue, Israel also holds the key to Turkey's role in Gaza, which is meaningful to Erdogan's government for reasons discussed at length below. Shared energy interests are likely driving the normalization effort as well. Israel wants to reap the economic and political benefits of exporting natural gas from its offshore fields to Turkey. Any such deal would give Ankara a cheap supply of gas, the opportunity to re-export some of it to Europe, and a means of diversifying its energy imports away from Russia, which currently supplies about 55 percent of Turkey's gas. It should be noted that the political crisis between Turkey and Israel did not undermine their civilian commercial ties, which have continued to develop; the Free Trade Agreement they signed in the 1990s also remains in place.

## CHALLENGES TO A DEAL

Israel and Turkey agreed on essential terms for normalizing relations in 2011, but some of these terms still await resolution despite the recent progress. In March 2013, through President Obama's mediation, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu called Erdogan to apologize for Israeli "operational mistakes" that resulted in the loss of Turkish lives aboard the ship leading the 2010 flotilla (though Israel refuses to apologize for the act of stopping the ship, which it regards as a legitimate act of self-defense). Next, Israel agreed to pay compensation to the families of the Turkish victims once a final deal is reached, via a special international fund reportedly totaling around \$20 million.

In return, Turkey agreed to withdraw or block all indictments or other actions, public or private, against Israelis involved in the incident. Erdogan publicly acknowledged that this issue is "more or less settled."

Yet one major stumbling block is Turkey's continued demand that the deal include the removal of Israel's "blockade" or "embargo" on Gaza. Here the major policy differences between the parties -- which were the source of the flotilla incident in the first place -- come into play.

Israel has disputed the "embargo" claim, pointing out that hundreds of trucks cross daily from Israel to Gaza carrying food, medicine, and reconstruction materials. Negotiators have therefore focused on Turkey's demand for

unimpeded access in order to implement housing and infrastructure reconstruction projects. Ankara has also asked to anchor a power-generating vessel offshore to help resolve the territory's acute electricity shortage.

For Israel, these demands are highly sensitive from a political and security standpoint. Turkey is a staunch supporter of regional movements aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and openly seeks to empower the group's Gaza affiliate Hamas, which is officially sworn to Israel's destruction. Over the past eight years, Israel has been drawn into three rounds of fighting with Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza following constant rocket fire and other provocations. Today, Israel has a clear interest in the territory's reconstruction and is actively facilitating such efforts, believing they could diminish the risk of another violent eruption. Yet it is also mindful of Hamas's relentless efforts to rearm, including through the diversion of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, Israel insists that all external assistance to Gaza be enveloped within solid security arrangements -- if possible in the context of a long-term ceasefire with Hamas, brokered with the Palestinian Authority's involvement.

A no less formidable obstacle to normalization is Erdogan's deeply hostile relationship with Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Ankara tried to take Sisi's government to the UN Security Council for sanctions after it ousted the Turkish-supported MB government of Mohamed Morsi in 2013. In return, Egypt has played the Cyprus card, building intimate ties with the Greek Cypriots and conducting joint military exercises with them, Greece, and Israel in 2015. Meanwhile, Egyptian-Israeli ties are at their best in decades (albeit mostly below the radar), and Sisi has made clear to Jerusalem that its normalization efforts with Ankara should not take place at the expense of Cairo's interests.

In addition, Egypt has serious reservations about Turkey's ambitions in neighboring Gaza. Like Israel, Cairo regards Hamas as an enemy because of its affiliation with the MB and its cooperation with Islamic State elements in the Sinai Peninsula. Sisi's government has even officially accused Hamas and an Egyptian MB activist in Turkey of involvement in the assassination of Prosecutor-General Hisham Barakat in Cairo last year. Notwithstanding its recently launched reconciliation talks with the group, Egypt has no desire to see Hamas empowered, nor does it want Turkey to assume a lead role in Gaza. Israel attaches high importance to Cairo's views on both matters.

Taken together, these considerations have made Israel very unenthusiastic about Turkey's bigger ambitions in Gaza. To be sure, it is willing to let Ankara expand its considerable investments in the territory's housing, infrastructure, health, and education -- just a few weeks ago, for example, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) announced plans to build 320 housing units there. Yet Israel will not risk any concessions that threaten its security or its relations with Egypt, nor will it grant Turkey a preferential role in Gaza. It remains to be seen how Ankara will reconcile this position with its own demand that Israel "lift the Gaza siege," as repeated on April 11 by a presidential spokesman.

For its part, Jerusalem is demanding that Turkey shut down Hamas's headquarters in Istanbul, which Israeli intelligence contends has been guiding violent plots in the West Bank in recent years. Last year, Turkey asked Saleh al-Aruri -- the office's director and a senior figure in Hamas's military wing -- to leave its soil, yet he has revisited the country since departing, and the office continues to function. It is difficult to see Israel accepting reconciliation without the prohibition of such activities; at the bare minimum, it will insist on the permanent expulsion of Hamas leadership from Turkey.

## **THE ENERGY DIMENSION**

**W**ashington supports the export of Israeli gas to and through Turkey, both for its own sake and as a potential catalyst of normalization. During a recent visit to Israel, U.S. energy secretary Ernest Moniz highlighted how such a deal could help diversify European gas supplies away from Russia. This option is not without its challenges, however.

Unsure about its ties with Turkey, Israel has intensified its relations with Greek-dominated Cyprus and Greece in recent years, including through nascent energy cooperation. On January 28, the leaders of the three countries met in Nicosia and announced the formation of a trilateral committee to explore the possibility of laying a gas pipeline (the "EastMed") connecting Israeli and Cypriot fields through Greece to Europe. In practical terms, this option is unrealistic due to topographical difficulties. Yet even a pipeline to Turkey would have to cross Cypriot waters, requiring agreement between the two countries as well as unification of Cyprus, probably assisted by U.S. mediation; currently, Ankara has no diplomatic ties with the island's Greek government. In the meantime, Israel's gas potential is held up by domestic regulatory challenges. Jerusalem would also have to carefully weigh Russia's potential sensitivities to Israeli gas exports through Turkey to Europe, even in modest quantities.

## CONCLUSION

**A**lthough normalization negotiations appear to be serious and closer than ever to conclusion, significant challenges and policy differences persist, creating the impression in Ankara that Israel is less eager for a deal. Therefore, even if an agreement materializes, it is unlikely to lead to the bilateral intimacy seen in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, any U.S. efforts to encourage even the modest outcome of normalization would help bring two of America's most important allies in the Middle East closer together. This in turn would broaden U.S. policy options in a turbulent region for the next administration.

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