



Turkey mends fences with Israel

Upheaval in the Middle East has led Turkey to turn its attention back towards Israel. *Soner Çagaptay* examines Ankara's motivations for normalising relations with its southern neighbour.

Key Points

- Turkey was under little apparent pressure to accept the apology offered by Israel for the 2009 Mavi Marmara incident during which Israeli naval commandos killed nine Turkish civilians on a ship attempting to break Israel's economic blockade of the Gaza Strip.
- However, regional political and security concerns and more nuanced Turkish foreign policy objectives have combined to compel Ankara to embrace a normalisation of relations with Israel.
- These Turkish concerns include the fallout from the conflict in Syria, competition with Iran, influence over the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and oil and gas exploitation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey's decision to normalise ties with Israel has been shaped by a number of factors, ranging from Ankara's desire to become a regional player (which requires maintaining and maximising relations with all states in the region) to its ambition to partner Israel to exploit natural gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, it is the Arab Spring that has provided perhaps the strongest incentive for Turkish-Israeli reconciliation. Middle East unrest has challenged Turkey's "zero problems with neighbours" policy, casting Turkey and Syria as adversaries and aligning Turkey in opposition to Iran, Syria's key regional backer.

Syrian motivations

Turkey has made it clear that it believes Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has to go, but Ankara has shied away from deeper engagement against the Assad regime. Turkey fears that it might be left isolated if it adopts a more active posture, for instance by setting up safe havens on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border. In this respect, the United States' cautious Syria policy is partly responsible for Ankara's reticence. As such, Turkey will only intervene in Syria if others participate in such an endeavour.

To this end, a Turkish-Israeli dialogue on Syria could engender greater Israeli interest in regime change, and enlist Israel to encourage Washington's support. A normalised Turkish-Israeli relationship would also create opportunities for co-operation against the Assad government, with the Turks taking the political and regional lead and the Israelis providing intelligence, technological, and additional practical assets that are missing from the Turkish arsenal. Turkey believes, just as Israel does, that the parties could also address shared concerns over the fate of the suspected stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria. As a precursor to normalisation, it is not surprising that Turkish and Israeli officials held secret talks in 2012 to discuss the security of Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles.

Soured relations

The Arab Spring has also raised Turkish concerns about Iran's influence in the region, because Turkey views Iran as the main threat in Syria. In fact, Iran and Turkey are locked in a proxy war in Syria, with one supporting the regime and the other backing the rebels. Meanwhile, relations between Ankara and Baghdad have soured, particularly over Ankara's oil and gas relations with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq. Turkey's leaders, especially Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, also have a low opinion of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom they suspect of being overly influenced by Iran.

However, Ankara will not confront Tehran publicly on these issues. After all, it depends on Iran for approximately a quarter of its oil and natural gas imports to keep its economy turning over. Still, together with the Syrian civil war and the push-back strategy against Maliki,





Iran looms large in Ankara's regional threat perceptions. This has made normalisation with Israel more palatable from the Turkish perspective.

Palestinian reverberations

These dynamics have also had reverberations for Palestinian politics, creating further incentives for Ankara to re-establish a relationship with Israel. With Hamas having lost its long time patron in Syria, Turkey now believes it can influence Hamas to renounce violence and join the 'big tent of peace'.

Since the rise of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP) to power in 2002, Turkey has steadily built ties with Hamas and the group is at a crossroads. Hamas is looking for new sponsors and from Ankara's perspective the currently Islamist group faces the choice between continuing to espouse violence or embracing peaceful politics. As Turkey strives to become a regional actor, Ankara appears convinced that it can persuade Hamas to renounce violence. Such an accomplishment would prove Ankara's credentials as a successful moderate role model on radical movements in the Middle East, earning the Turks accolades across the world, especially in Washington.

Turkish soft power

Ankara has already built soft power across the region, energetically deploying its diplomats to mediate in regional conflicts, albeit with limited success. Meanwhile, Turkey's visibility has risen thanks to Turkish businesses and television programmes on Middle East networks that portray Turkey as a cosmopolitan and wealthy role model for the region. Moreover, Turks have built state-of-the-art schools in the region to train future elites. Turkey has also flooded Middle Eastern supermarkets with quality goods that have earned it prestige in the same way that Japanese goods earned that country prestige in the West in the 1970s and 1980s. Still, Ankara's ambition to become a regional soft power will come to full fruition only if Erdogan can influence actors both in Hamas and Israel.

Bringing Hamas around to a pro-peace agenda could therefore be a major boost for Israeli-Turkish ties, despite the problem of overcoming Israel's distrust of the group's motivations and commitment to such a policy. Nevertheless, if successful, Ankara could brandish its credentials as a true regional soft power. However, even if Turkish efforts do not succeed, Ankara would still be lauded, casting it as a key Middle East actor seeking to bring peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, no matter the outcome, Turkish efforts to persuade Hamas to renounce violence could still help build confidence between Turkey and Israel.

Energy politics

Another motivating factor for Turkish-Israeli rapprochement is energy politics in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel is already exploiting newly discovered gas finds in its offshore Tamar gas field, and plans to bring online the larger Leviathan field in 2017. Together these fields hold around 850 billion m³ and the Israelis are actively looking for ways to export this gas to European markets.

Talks between Israelis and the Greek Cypriots to jointly exploit Israeli and adjacent Cypriot fields have not reached a conclusion for various reasons, among them Israel's strategic decision not to give up on normalisation with Turkey. As the Israelis viewed it, a decision to establish a partnership with Greek Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean would have torpedoed any hope of rapprochement with Turkey.

From Ankara's perspective, working with Israel to build a pipeline from the Israeli gas fields into Turkey is an opportunity Turkey cannot miss. In the past decade, Ankara has strived, with some success, to become an energy hub, building pipelines from the Caspian Basin and the Middle East through Turkey to Europe. According to Ankara, an Israeli pipeline into Turkey adds to Turkey's value as an energy hub, providing natural gas to Europe.

US nudging





The relationship between US president Barack Obama and Erdogan also helps explain Turkey's decision to normalise ties with Israel. In June 2010, when Turkey voted at the United Nations Security Council against a proposal for US-sponsored sanctions against Iran, US-Turkish ties deteriorated badly and were only repaired after a candid conversation between Obama and Erdogan on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Toronto in July that year. According to media reports, Obama told Erdogan how upsetting Turkey's UN vote had been to him personally. His candour apparently helped clear the air between the pair, building a personal rapport that has grown stronger since. For instance, Turkish media outlets reported that after Erdogan's mother died in October 2011, Obama called him and the two spoke for 45 minutes.

This personal relationship has helped bring about the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. During his visit to Israel in March over kebabs with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Obama called Erdogan to seal the deal.

Conclusion

Israel is under no illusions that Turkey's increasing diplomatic confidence, coupled with Erdogan's desire to be seen as a major regional leader and the events of the Arab Spring, mean that relations with Ankara can return to their heyday of the 1980s and 1990s. Turkey and Erdogan will continue to criticise Israeli policy towards the Palestinians where they see fit, while Israel will continue to view Erdogan as a political opportunist prone to grandstanding.

Both sides will be glad to have put this incident behind them and will be hoping that, even if things cannot get back to the way they were before, they can focus on the things they agree on rather than those they do not. If this is the basis of the bilateral relationship going forward, both countries will be happy.

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