

# Israeli-Turkish Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

**Eugene Kogan**

Even though Israel and Turkey normalised relations in June 2016 following the May 2010 Mavi Marmara Flotilla incident when Israeli soldiers killed ten people on board a Turkish vessel and the subsequent diplomatic rupture, Ankara's support of the Hamas movement situated in the Gaza Strip continues to undermine bilateral relations.

The establishment of an official office in Istanbul in 2012 and its members are perceived as a thorn in the eye by the Israeli Government. Tel Aviv would like Erdoğan to close the Hamas office and expel its members from Turkey; however, this Israeli wish is not going to be granted any time soon since Erdoğan's words do not translate into deeds.

The signature of the Abraham Accords highlighted two divergent trends in the region: Turkey's continued isolation and Israel's strengthened position. This resulted in Erdoğan's intention to improve relations with Israel; however, Israeli officials are not in a hurry for any rapprochement with Turkish officials because Erdoğan and his administration are not sincere in what they do. In addition, the Israeli Government learned its lessons that listening to the siren's wailing can be dangerous and harmful. Therefore, a real breakthrough in bilateral relations is unlikely to happen in the short-term.

## The 'Earthquake' and Repercussions for Turkey

After the Israeli-UAE-Bahraini normalisation agreement, also known as the Abraham Accords, was signed in August 2020, President Erdoğan began to send cautious signals of rapprochement to Israel. Erdoğan has realised that both Israeli-Greek-Cypriot diplomatic, economic and military ties that have grown steadily since 2012 and the Abraham Accords of 2020 have ultimately strengthened the Israeli position and made it a key partner in the areas of economy, energy, diplomacy and military issues ver-

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**In December 2010, the Turkish ship MAVI MARMARA made a harbour tour on the occasion of its return to Istanbul, displaying posters of the victims killed by Israeli soldiers on board the ship in May 2010.**

sus Turkey that during the same period has become isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf regions. Moreover, strained ties with the United States are driving a bid by Ankara to normalise relations with Israel that have remained tense and hostile for the last decade or so.

## Energy Connections

The other important aspect of Israel's strengths is related to energy connections. Turkey has been excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF, informally established in 2019) but officially established in September 2020 in which Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are closely coordinating energy policies and would certainly want to be included in the forum in the future. The Greek Ambassador to Israel, Panagiotis Sarris, said in July 2020: "We want Turkey to be part of the East-Med and other projects in the Mediterranean [including the EMGF], but we have to make it clear, we want to be equal partners. They cannot be neighbourhood bullies taking advantage of their growth.

They must respect international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."

In addition to the recently proposed East-Med gas pipeline, the idea of an Israeli-Turkish gas pipeline was conceived years ago. However, in March 2022, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said: "A potential gas pipeline project between Turkey and Israel is not possible in the short-term and constructing an alternative system to cut dependence on Russia will not happen quickly." The problem, an unnamed Israeli official said in March 2022, is that "there were already two proposed routes for extra supplies from Leviathan, Israel's largest gas field via existing liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants in Egypt or a planned floating LNG (FLNG) facility. If Turkey responds quickly, then it may be a third alternative."

According to opposition lawmaker, Yuval Steinitz, who was Israel's Energy Minister until June 2021, "a pipeline to Turkey would cost US\$1.5Bn and take two to three years to build. The pipeline would run between 500 and 550 km making it more manageable financially than the €6Bn East-Med pipeline proposed to connect Israel with

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**Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Turkish President Erdogan at a joint press conference during Herzog's state visit to Turkey on 9 March 2022.**

Cyprus, Greece and Italy." However, there is one serious obstacle for the pipeline from Israel to Turkey. Any subsea line would need to cross the water of either Cyprus, which Ankara does not recognise, or Syria, with which Ankara has no diplomatic relations and has supported rebels fighting the Bashar al-Assad government in Damascus. Therefore, diplomatic and military obstacles are likely to prevent the construction of the Israeli-Turkish pipeline. According to Gokhan Yardim, a Turkish gas industry consultant who worked on the assessment of the possible pipeline over two decades: "The lack of diplomatic relations could complicate construction and financing if Turkey had a direct stake in the pipeline." Besides, so far Turkey failed to receive or allocate financial support for the construction of the pipeline. Therefore, construction of the Israeli-Turkish pipeline remains a pipe dream for the time being.

In other words, the Egyptian option is currently the most viable. Since Egypt imports gas from Israeli reservoirs and produces LNG from it, Israel could shortly find itself supplying Europe. Therefore, the quickest way to boost gas supplies to Europe is to ship them via Egypt's existing FLNG terminals if Egypt and Israel expand production. Currently, the two countries' energy ministers are discussing such a possibility.

### **New Israeli Government: A New Wind?**

The emergence of a new Israeli Government in June 2021 under Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, augured a potential new beginning for Israeli-Turkish relations. That is at least how Erdoğan interpreted

the new development. However, Bennett and his government have other priorities and Erdoğan's Turkey is not one of them. It should be stressed that the normalised relations in June 2016 have not brought the two countries closer to each other. This is partly because Israeli officials distrust Erdoğan and his administration and partly because of difficult personal relations between President Erdoğan and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, after the latter's departure means that relations will have to work through official state channels, something that Erdoğan does not like and is not interested in.

An additional aspect where the two countries' interests diverge is the Palestinian issue. Erdoğan plays the card of a staunch supporter of the Palestinians in the West Bank, in general, and in the Gaza Strip, in particular. Despite visibly toning down its criticism of Israel in advance of Israeli President, Isaac Herzog's, visit to Turkey, Ankara has ruled out abandoning its commitment to supporting Palestinian statehood. For instance, in February 2022, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu was quick to reiterate that "any steps we take with Israel regarding our relations, any normalisation, will not be at the expense of the Palestinian cause, like some other countries...we will never turn back on our core principles." As a result, Israel should not expect any change in Turkey's pro-Palestinian strategy, even in the post-Erdoğan era. And the opposition parties may also pursue the same pro-Palestinian strategy. As a result, there is very little ground for a genuine rapprochement between the two countries.

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, Isaac Herzog visited Ankara in March 2022.

It was the first official visit by an Israeli president to Turkey since 2007 when the late Shimon Peres as the first Israeli president, addressed the Turkish parliament. In order not to endanger Israeli relations with Greece and Cyprus that Israel has forged over the last decade, Herzog paid a visit to both countries before flying to Ankara. This was presented as a clear sign of reassurance that the normalisation of relations with Turkey will not be at their expense. Despite Erdoğan's praise: "I am very pleased to host the Honourable President Herzog here at our residence in Ankara. I believe that this historic visit will be a turning point in relations between Turkey and Israel," the gulf between the countries remains wide. And even flourishing trade relations that were not affected by the political crisis between the countries failed to impact diplomatic and political bilateral relations.

Although the Israeli president's post is largely ceremonial and any concrete steps toward rapprochement require the approval of the prime minister, Herzog's visit marks a first step on the long road to potential reconciliation. It needs to be stressed that although Prime Minister Bennett has been quiet over the Turkish charm offensive, leaving President Herzog to handle the direct dialogue channel with Erdoğan, Bennett gave tacit approval for Herzog's visit. Still, Bennett might take his time agreeing to travel to Ankara despite Erdoğan's requests.

On the other hand, the visit of Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu to Israel in May 2022 might invigorate the normalisation process since Çavuşoğlu will use the trip to discuss the return of ambassadors to Turkey and Israel who were expelled in 2018. Çavuşoğlu will be accompanied by Energy Minister Fatih Donmez. Whether or not energy issues will be discussed between Donmez and his Israeli counterpart, Karine Elharrar, is currently unknown. What is known, however, is that Elharrar said in April 2022: "While Turkey really wants to cooperate, I do not have a meeting planned with the Turkish energy minister or a working plan. That is something that has to be decided as government policy. We have to examine the pros and cons and then decide."

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, visits and Erdoğan's promises alone will not reinvigorate Israeli-Turkish relations from their deep alienation over the last decade. The closure of the Hamas office in Istanbul and the expulsion of its members would be a clear sign that things are moving in the right direction. Until then, Israeli officials will remain

sceptical of a genuine policy pursued by Erdoğan. In addition, the Palestinian issue championed by Erdoğan remains a serious stumbling block in bilateral relations. I do not foresee Erdoğan and his government abandoning its commitment to the Palestinian issue.

Besides, Israeli officials will be very sceptical in their treatment of any concessions made by Erdoğan due to Turkey's dire economic straits. Furthermore, due to the parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey in June 2023, the normalisation of bilateral relations may well proceed at a snail's pace. Another important factor is that even if Israel decided to normalise relations with Turkey, there are no guarantees when it comes to Turkey's hot-headed president, who can blow up the normalisation process at any moment. In other words, there are more challenges than opportunities ahead of the Israeli-Turkish normalisation process. As a result, Prime Minister Bennett is pursuing a policy of restraint towards Turkey.

Although Erdoğan is concerned with the development of rapid economic, political, and military relations between Israel, UAE



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**The EastMed pipeline countries. Turkey has been excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.**

and Bahrain, he cannot intervene and is forced to accept the developments of these relations with good grace.

As for the energy ties between the two countries, Israel can deliver gas to its neighbour, Egypt, and then the LNG will be delivered to the European Union from

Egypt. This route is less complicated and less expensive than the construction of a gas pipeline from Israel to Turkey and then gas delivery from there to the European Union. As a result, Turkey finds itself ousted despite its wish to join the other countries. ■

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