

Türkiye-Israel Relations with the Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the Shadow of Hamas

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Abstract

Turkish-Israeli relations during the AKP era have been tumultuous, shaped by ideological disparities, internal politics, and regional shifts. Despite these hurdles, both nations have maintained pragmatic cooperation, notably in trade, energy, and security domains. This study delves into the evolution of Turkish-Israeli ties, analysing key factors influencing their dynamics. It explores how cooperation persists amid ideological rifts and assesses the impact of recent normalisation efforts and ongoing tensions. Employing a conceptual and chronological approach, the research unveils a pattern of alternating between strategic collaboration and strained relations. The Mavi Marmara raid, a significant event in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations, marked a point of severe strain. However, economic exchanges have thrived, and recent attempts at normalisation offer hope despite the challenges that remain, notably Türkiye's support for Hamas and divergent regional policies. Meanwhile, various factors have shaped the relationship between Türkiye and Hamas over the past two decades. Key influences include the Palestinian issue, ideological alignments and tensions, regional dynamics, and, notably, the significant impact of individual leaders, such as President Erdoğan. Türkiye's engagement with Hamas has evolved from facilitating dialogue to providing political and financial support, especially following Hamas's electoral victory in 2006. Despite occasional tensions, Türkiye sees Hamas as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and supports it as part of its broader strategy to challenge the status quo in the Middle East. However, Türkiye's support for Hamas has strained its relations with Israel and raised concerns among Western allies, highlighting the complexities of Türkiye's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This article will evaluate Turkish-Israel relations within the new approach toward the Hamas.

Keywords: *Hamas, Palestine, Türkiye's policy on Hamas, Turkish-Israeli relations, Türkiye.*

Abstrak

Hubungan Turkiye-Israel selama era Partai AKP telah bergemuruh, dibentuk oleh perbedaan ideologis, politik internal, dan pergeseran regional. Terlepas dari rintangan ini, kedua negara telah mempertahankan kerja sama pragmatis, terutama dalam bidang perdagangan, energi, dan keamanan. Studi ini menggali evolusi hubungan Turkiye-Israel, menganalisis faktor-faktor kunci yang mempengaruhi dinamika mereka. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kerja sama keduanya bertahan di tengah keretakan ideologis dan menilai dampak dari upaya normalisasi baru-baru ini dan ketegangan yang sedang berlangsung. Menggunakan pendekatan konseptual dan kronologis, penelitian ini mengungkap pola bergantian antara kolaborasi strategis dan hubungan yang tegang. Serangan Mavi Marmara yang signifikan membuat hubungan tegang, tetapi pertukaran ekonomi telah berkembang. Upaya normalisasi baru-baru ini menawarkan harapan, tetapi tantangan tetap ada, terutama dukungan Turkiye untuk Hamas dan kebijakan regional yang berbeda. Di saat yang sama, berbagai faktor telah membentuk hubungan antara Turkiye dan Hamas selama dua dekade terakhir. Penyebab utama adalah masalah Palestina, keberpihakan ideologis, dinamika regional, dan kecenderungan dari masing-masing pemimpin, terutama Presiden Erdogan. Keterlibatan Turkiye dengan Hamas telah berkembang dari memfasilitasi dialog menjadi memberikan dukungan politik dan keuangan, terutama setelah kemenangan pemilihan Hamas pada tahun 2006. Meskipun ada ketegangan sesekali, Turkiye melihat Hamas sebagai wakil sah rakyat Palestina dan mendukungnya sebagai bagian dari strategi yang lebih luas untuk menantang status quo di Timur Tengah. Namun, dukungan Turkiye untuk Hamas telah membuat tegang hubungannya dengan Israel dan menimbulkan kekhawatiran di antara sekutu Barat; hal ini menunjukkan kompleksitas peran Turkiye dalam konflik Palestina-Israel. Artikel ini akan mengevaluasi hubungan Turkiye-Israel dalam pendekatan baru terhadap Hamas.

Kata kunci: Hamas, hubungan Turkiye-Israel, kebijakan Turkiye atas Hamas, Palestina, Turkiye.

Introduction

Türkiye, aligned with the West, maintained close ties with Israel. At the same time, Hamas, designated as a terrorist organization by Israel and several Western countries, emerged as a prominent Palestinian resistance group. However, the situation began to shift in the late 20th century. Türkiye's growing interest in asserting itself as a regional power, coupled with its increasing identification with the Palestinian cause, led to a gradual distancing from Israel. This trend accelerated under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who came to power in 2002 with his Justice and Development Party (AKP). Domestic factors play a significant role in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy. Public opinion in Türkiye overwhelmingly sympathies with the Palestinians and views Israel's actions towards them with disapproval. This sentiment stems from historical, religious, and cultural factors. The AKP, seeking to consolidate its support base, has often tapped into this public sentiment by adopting a pro-Palestinian stance.

Broader regional dynamics also shape Türkiye's foreign policy towards Hamas and Israel. Türkiye seeks to assert itself as a leading player in the Middle East, often positioning itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause. This stance brings Türkiye into competition with other regional powers, such as Iran, which also supports Hamas. Additionally, Türkiye's relationship with the United States, a key ally of Israel, further complicates the situation.

President Erdoğan's personal beliefs and leadership approach have wielded significant influence over Türkiye's foreign policy concerning Hamas and Israel. While some critique his outspoken stance against Israel and his backing of the Palestinian cause, arguing it hampers the normalization efforts, others contend that Erdoğan's assertive tactics have elevated Türkiye's role in the region.

Türkiye seems to be a security provider yet not a game-changer middle power in the region. In the era of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the government aimed to elaborate on active foreign policy and improve its relations with the countries in the Middle East region. In this context, Türkiye was eager to play an intermediary role in solving the Israeli-Arab conflict using its soft power. (Davutoglu, 2013) After all, Ankara attempted to mediate between Israel and Syria. (Stratton, 2008) Nevertheless, in 2006, Ankara established good relations with Hamas, and recognized Hamas as a legitimate government in Gaza, paving the way for Ankara not to be a neutral and reliable mediator for Israel at all. (Al-jazeera, 2006)

Türkiye's foreign policy towards Palestine, Hamas, and Israel has been a complex and evolving dance for decades, marked by periods of cooperation, competition, and outright conflict. Understanding this intricate relationship requires examining the historical context, analysing domestic and regional pressures, and examining the impact of individual leaders' visions. This article sheds light on this multifaceted dynamic, exploring the key factors shaping Türkiye's approach to these two crucial actors, including Hamas in the Middle East.

The conceptual method involves analyzing the political, economic, and diplomatic interactions between Türkiye, Israel, and Hamas and the factors influencing their relationship. The chronological approach traces the key events and developments in Turkish-Israeli relations from 2002 to the present. These methods help provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Turkish-Israeli ties and the factors shaping their dynamics, especially with Hamas during the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

Türkiye-Israel Relations

Turkish-Israeli relations remain complex and susceptible to regional dynamics and shifts in domestic politics. While pragmatic cooperation in areas such as energy and security may persist, ideological differences and diverging regional strategies pose ongoing challenges. However, both countries have demonstrated a capacity for engagement and dialogue when mutual interests align, offering hope for potential reconciliation efforts in the future.

The relationship between Türkiye and Israel during the AKP period has been characterized by significant fluctuations, shifting from initial cooperation to deep estrangement and attempts at rapprochement. While recent normalization efforts offer a glimmer of hope, underlying tensions and unresolved issues continue to pose challenges for a sustained improvement in relations.

Several factors contributed to the complex dynamics of Turkish-Israeli relations during the AKP period. First, ideological differences: the AKP's emphasis on Islamic solidarity and its vocal criticism of Israeli policies towards Palestinians often clashed with Israel's security concerns and regional ambitions. Second, domestic politics: both leaderships often used strong rhetoric towards the other to cater to their respective domestic constituencies. Third, regional developments: divergent stances on issues like the Arab Spring uprisings further widened the gap between the two countries. Fourth, the AKP's evolving foreign policy: the party's vision, emphasizing a more assertive and independent role in the region, often clashed with Israeli interests.

Diplomatic Relations

During the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era, Turkish-Israeli relations have been subject to many influences, ranging from strategic cooperation to diplomatic tensions. Understanding the evolution of these relations requires an analysis of the nuanced dynamics that have shaped the interactions between the two nations since 2002.

In the early years of the AKP government, pragmatic cooperation across multiple sectors was a characteristic of Turkish-Israeli relations. Both countries recognized the strategic benefits of collaboration, particularly in military, economic, and intelligence cooperation. During this period, we witnessed a flourishing bilateral trade relationship, joint military exercises, and defense agreements to enhance regional security. Shared interests in counterterrorism and energy security were foundational elements in fostering this cooperation.

Initially, the AKP government maintained positive relations with Israel, continuing strategic cooperation and high-level visits. However, signs of divergence emerged, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The AKP openly criticized Israeli policies and increasingly positioned itself as an advocate for the Palestinian cause in the mid-2000s due to Hamas's influence in Palestine and its victory in the elections in 2006. Reacting to Türkiye's support for Hamas, Israel harshly criticized Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal's controversial and surprising visit to Türkiye in 2006. However, relations still needed to be fixed. While Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited Israel in 2005, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas spoke at the Turkish Grand National Assembly one day apart in 2007. (DW, 2007)

High-level visits from Israel continued afterwards, including the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on December 22, 2008, and the following events were critical for the rupture of relations. Türkiye's mediation between Israel and Syria during Olmert's visit created an environment with significant progress. Operation Cast Lead, which Olmert launched against Gaza immediately after he departed from Ankara, angered Erdogan very much. Regarding the operation in which nearly two thousand civilians died, Erdoğan said, "It was a crime against humanity; Israel committed state terrorism," and noted that Olmert betrayed him.

Erdoğan went to the Davos summit, held about a month later in January 2009, while the impact of this operation was still ongoing, and the event that went down in history as the "One Minute crisis" occurred. (Aktan, 2022) Erdogan and Israeli President

Shimon Peres in the panel titled "Gaza: Model for Peace in the Middle East" after Peres's speech, Erdogan opposed the moderator who was about to close the session by saying, "One minute" and said to Peres, "You know how to kill very well." While Erdoğan left the panel saying, "I will not come to Davos again", he said outside that his attitude was not towards Peres but the moderator. Following this incident, Türkiye cancelled the international part of the Anatolian Eagle exercise, in which Israel would also take part. (Sercani and Çelik, 2009)

About a year after the crisis in Davos, another significant development occurred regarding relations. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Danny Ayalon met with Turkish Ambassador Oğuz Çelikkol at the foreign ministry, but Çelikkol was seated in a low-level seat. During this meeting, Ayalon allegedly turned to his assistant and said, "As you can see, he is sitting downstairs, and we are sitting upstairs, and there is only one flag on the table, and we are not smiling." Footage of this meeting led to an even greater crisis in already tense relations. (NBC News, 2010)

The Mavi Marmara attack was the main event that worsened relations between the two countries. On May 31, 2010, Israeli forces raided the Mavi Marmara ship carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza in international waters. Nine Turkish citizens lost their lives during the incident. After a while, another injured Turkish citizen died in the hospital, and the number of deaths increased to 10. The attack had a significant impact on Türkiye, and the incident became critical in domestic politics as there was a live broadcast team on the ship at the time. Broadcast of this event was on tv. Following the ship attack, Türkiye had three demands: apology, compensation and lifting of the Gaza embargo to reduce and normalize tensions with Israel. In addition, Türkiye called an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council, condemned Israel's attack on the Mavi Marmara ship and ensured the publication of a declaration including the lifting of the blockade in Gaza. Another step of Ankara was to withdraw Tel Aviv Ambassador Oğuz Çelikkol. The Israeli Ambassador to Ankara at the time, Gabby Levy, also had to leave Türkiye.

While Israel initially claimed that it was acting in self-defense and said that it would not fulfil these three conditions, officials of the two countries met with the mediation of the USA in 2013. The expected apology from Israel came in March 2013. (Sidner, Atson and Sterling, 2013) While Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Erdoğan spoke by phone through US President Barack Obama, Netanyahu apologized and promised to pay compensation to the families of the dead.

After this apology and promise, negotiations regarding compensation lasted approximately three years. Türkiye and Israel signed a 6-article compensation agreement on June 28, 2016. While Israel promised to pay 20 million dollars to the relatives of the dead, the lawsuits filed against Israel in Türkiye dropped.

Recognizing the importance of cooperation amidst regional challenges such as the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS, both Türkiye and Israel embarked on efforts towards reconciliation in the mid-2010s. Back-channel negotiations, facilitated by the United States, played a crucial role in paving the way for a normalization agreement in 2016. Under this agreement, both countries agreed to restore full diplomatic relations, exchange ambassadors, and cooperate on various fronts. However, tensions persisted due to ongoing disagreements over the Palestinian issue and regional developments.

While the normalization agreement signaled a willingness to mend relations, it did not fully restore the previous closeness between Türkiye and Israel. Ideological differences and diverging regional interests continued to strain the relationship. Türkiye's support for Hamas and its criticism of Israeli policies in Gaza remained contentious issues, contributing to periodic fluctuations in diplomatic relations. Moreover, Israel's bolstered ties with Türkiye's regional rivals, including Greece and Cyprus, added complexity to the bilateral dynamic.

Following this agreement, the two countries mutually reappointed their ambassadors. Relations, which began to normalize at the end of 2016, became tense again in December 2017, when US President Donald Trump declared that he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Landler, 2017). Ankara rejected and condemned this decision immediately. (CNNTürk, 2018) The death of many civilians in the protests of Palestinians reacting to this development increased tension again in Tel Aviv and Ankara. On May 15, 2018, it summoned its Tel Aviv ambassador to Ankara for consultations. (MFA, 2022)

The cautious but visible steps were taken mutually in relations with the new Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, who took office on July 7, 2021 (Landler, 2017). Erdoğan called Herzog on July 12 and congratulated him on taking office. Herzog also gave a speech via video conference at an event of the Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv on July 24, 2021. While the two leaders' mutual moderate statements and telephone conversations continued, Herzog visited Türkiye on March 9-10. Herzog became the first Israeli leader to visit Türkiye since 2008. (Kirişçi and Arbell, 2022)

After this visit, Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, his country's foreign minister, visited Türkiye. During this visit, which took place at the foreign minister level for the first time after 16 years from Israel to Türkiye, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Lapid announced that they had initiated efforts to mutually raise the level of diplomatic representation to the ambassador level. Çavuşoğlu also visited Israel on May 25 and held a series of meetings.

The Israel-Hamas war occurred at a time when the Türkiye-Israel normalization process had particular importance. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Erdoğan met in New York in September and were planning to make his postponed visit to Türkiye in October or November. (Reuters, 2023). Before Netanyahu's visit, both sides agreed to hold ministerial-level contacts between Türkiye and Israel to discuss possibilities for cooperation, especially in energy.

On 7 October 2023, escalation in Gaza, following Hamas rocket attacks and Israeli airstrikes, once again strained the relationship, which highlights the fragility of the normalization process and the enduring challenges in achieving lasting peace between the two countries. However, The Israel-Hamas war, which started with a sudden raid that Hamas called the "Aqsa Flood", broke out at a time when Türkiye was waiting for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for an official visit.

Calling on the parties for moderation and starting diplomatic efforts to end the violence, Ankara aims to follow a balanced and active policy and use its regional influence. The first reaction from Ankara regarding the tension that caused the international community's attention to return to the Middle East came from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Speaking at the AKP Congress in Ankara, Erdogan said, "As Türkiye, we call on all parties to act with restraint in the light of the events that took place in Israel this morning and to stay away from impulsive steps that will further escalate tensions." Erdoğan's words later deepened with the statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs titled "About the latest developments in the Israel-Palestine context". Like Erdoğan, the word "parties" was used in the statement. A call for moderation was made and said, "We strongly condemn the loss of civilian lives." In addition, an indication regarding the policy that Türkiye will follow: "As Türkiye, we are always ready to contribute as much as we can to ensure that the developments in question can be taken under control before, they escalate further and spread to a wider area. In this regard, we continue our intensive contacts with relevant parties." (Türkçe 2023)

Israel's relentless military operations against the civilian population, including children and women, forced Türkiye to adopt a position against Israel diplomatically.

Ankara took place on the trial of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories in February 2024 in the Hague together with Spain, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the African Union made oral statements (van den Berg, 2024). Türkiye has asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to declare Israel's actions in the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem, to be contrary to international law (Hürriyet, 2024). It is assessed that Türkiye's assertive policy would cause wounds in Israel that might take a long time to repair, even in current economic relations.

Economic and Trade Relations

Despite the strained relations, Türkiye and Israel have attempted to normalize their ties over the years. These efforts, often driven by economic interests, have yielded limited success. Interestingly, despite the mutual withdrawal of ambassadors and termination of joint military exercises and intelligence sharing between Türkiye and Israel after the Mavi Marmara raid, civilian trade and tourism continued to progress regularly, albeit with some slight effects on their relations.

2002, when the AK Party came to power, Türkiye's exports to Israel were 861.4 million dollars; its imports from Israel were 544.5 million dollars. Türkiye-Israel trade volume has increased sixfold in the last 20 years. In 2022, exports rose to 6.74 billion dollars, while imports increased to 2.17 billion. Trade volume also reached 8.91 billion dollars from 1.41 billion dollars. Accordingly, trade volume increased by 532 per cent in the last 20 years.

In October, when Gaza operations started, exports increased by 29 per cent compared to last year's imports, which decreased by 59 per cent. The Türkiye-Israel trade volume decreased by 39 per cent compared to the previous month. The actual decrease occurred in imports. Considering the total of January-October, Türkiye's exports will increase by 20 per cent in 2023 compared to the same period in 2022; imports from this country decreased by 27 per cent.

According to TÜİK general trade system data, Türkiye's exports to Israel, which were 489 million dollars in October 2022, decreased to 348 million dollars in October 2023. Türkiye's imports from Israel decreased from 241 million dollars to 99 million dollars in the same period. The lowest import rate in the last 11 years was seen in 2023. However, such a situation is not the case in exports. The trade volume, 730 million dollars in October 2022, decreased to 447 million in 2023, which means a 39 per cent decrease.

In January-October, total exports decreased from 5.85 billion dollars to 4.68 billion dollars last year. Imports decreased from 1.93 billion dollars to 1.42 billion dollars in the same period. The trade volume, which was 7.78 billion dollars in January-October 2022, fell to 6.09 billion in 2023, indicating a 22 per cent decrease.

Between 2000 and 2022, the trade balance between the two countries was always in Türkiye's favor. Türkiye's exports have always been higher than imports. While the balance came closer in 2014, Türkiye's exports have risen sharply recently. Since imports remained more stable in the same period, the trade balance grew in favor of Türkiye. (Euronews, 2023b) Among the countries from which Türkiye imports the most, Israel ranks 29th.

Official data shows that the conflicts between the two countries occasionally do not negatively affect trade and commercial relations. During the AK Party rule, the Türkiye-Israel trade volume increased exponentially. Between 2000 and 2022, the trade balance between the two countries was always in Türkiye's favour. In other words, exports were consistently higher than imports. While the balance narrowed further in 2014, Türkiye's exports have risen sharply recently. Since imports remained more stable in the same period, the trade balance grew in favour of Türkiye.

Defence Industry and Military Relations

Bilateral relations eroded in 2008 with an Israel military intervention in Gaza. However, it dropped to the lowest level after the Mavi Marmara ship incident. In 2022, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited Ankara. In a press conference, Minister Gantz announced that new security cooperations with both countries usher in a new epoch frozen for a decade. (Al-jazeera, 2022). Nevertheless, this discourse and goodwill could not be turned into action since the Russian-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Hamas war, respectively, blocked it.

Relations on the Natural Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean

Although Türkiye has been involved in the determination of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean and natural gas/hydrocarbon exploration in these areas later than the countries in the region, Israel has already taken its place in the discussions of the exclusive economic zone, seismic surveys, and the potential of gas fields. In the report published by the U.S. Geological Survey (2010), which presents possible reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is known that the Leviathan field has

a powerful potential within the borders of Israel. (MFE, 2010) In particular, the 2003 Egyptian, 2007 Lebanon and 2010 Israel agreements of the Greek Cypriot Administration in the Eastern Mediterranean were all steps taken to break Türkiye's influence in the region. (MFE, 2010)

On the other hand, Türkiye tried to break this isolation in 2011 when the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) transferred its fields to TPAO for research. However, the agreement made with a recognized administration was only realized with the "Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the State of Libya on the Delimitation of Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean" signed with the Libyan Government of National Accord on November 27, 2019.

The East Med project (Pirinçci, 2022), which came to the fore in 2018 and was pre-signed in Israel on March 20, 2019 and finally signed in January 2020 in the Eastern Mediterranean issue, which has been progressing at the point of the regional engagement of the USA in the triangle of Greece - Greek Cypriot Administration - Israel and Greece - Egypt - Greek Cypriot Administration for years, has become one of the reflections of this transformation and an agreement has been made by the EU to provide funding of more than 36.5 million Euros. It is planned that the pipeline will be extended from a point between Israel and the Greek Cypriot Administration at sea, that is, from Israel's Leviathan Basin to Italy via the Poseidon and IGB pipelines via Crete Island and Greece.

However, the fact that the feasibility opportunities of this project needed to be revised and realistic led to the conclusion that it could contradict US interests in the long run and the USA's support was withdrawn in January 2022. East Med's primary goals are to make Greece an energy distribution center, make Greece an actor with a say in the Eastern Mediterranean, and limit Türkiye's influence in the region. With the withdrawal of support, Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration were dealt a blow, not Israel. (Pirinçci, 2022) The fact that the talks between Türkiye and Israel came to the fore after the failure of East Med is a subject that is open to debate to the extent that it cannot be a coincidence. With the end of such a project, the route of the resource from Israel has been on the agenda and publications and maps have emerged on the Ceyhan Pipeline and TANAP line. These possibilities were discussed before the East Med signatures were signed.

In the Eastern Mediterranean issue, it should continue to be emphasized that Türkiye and Israel have opposite coasts and that a delimitation should be made, like the agreement signed with the Libyan GNA. The withdrawal of the USA's support from the

East Med Pipeline Project, which the West has been on the agenda for a long time regarding the distribution of gas from Israel to Europe by following the Greek Cypriot Administration - Crete - Greece line, in January 2022 (Gençtüğrk, 2022), had significant repercussions. The project ended before implementation despite all EU funds and the support of many Eastern Mediterranean littoral countries. This development has raised several questions. It is known that Europe wants to minimize the natural gas it exports from Russia as much as possible and aims to reduce this dependency.

After the conflicts that started with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, these discussions intensified even more, and Europe began to look for new ways to break this dependency, considering Russia's possible gas cut-off. On the other hand, Israel has long intended to seek markets for its resources in high-potential maritime areas. However, apart from the exclusive economic zone agreements made so far, formations such as the East Med project, which are not feasible in terms of feasibility, or buildings such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum have been entirely conscious, often supported by the Greek Cypriot Administration-Greece lobbies, have been "political" steps. Another route that comes to mind after the project in question is shelved and is already in place points to Türkiye.

The highest-contact meeting between Israel and Türkiye since 2007 occurred on March 9, 2022, between the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, during the days when the Ukraine War intensified. During the meeting, where Türkiye mainly focused on the Eastern Mediterranean issue, it was stated that the problems related to Greece's obstruction of Türkiye's seismic surveys would be overcome with the cooperation of the two countries.

On the other hand, Herzog emphasized the importance of the meeting for both countries, acknowledging that the grievances of the past will not disappear. He emphasized that he would resolve his differences with openness and mutual respect, especially by focusing on the future, and stated that relations would proceed cautiously and transparently. (Bakir, no date). Türkiye-Israel economic relations have made significant progress in the last 20 years. The trade volume, which was \$1.41 billion in 2002, increased to \$8.91 billion in 2022. The trade balance followed a course in favor of Türkiye. (Euronews, 2023a) In addition, the officials noted that the energy-oriented cooperation that was previously initiated may continue. They predict that the trade volume with Israel will increase to 10 billion dollars in 2022. Again, Israel's Chargé d'Affaires in Ankara, Irit Lillian, stated in May 2022 that the trade volume between the two countries was 8 billion dollars in 2021 and that bilateral relations have come to the fore in recent years, with positive economic and industry-based cooperation (Karaca, 2022). Considering these developments, it was seen that the Türkiye-Israel pipeline

projects, which were on the agenda before East Med, could be renewed again and even continued through TANAP. The views of the two countries are familiar regarding energy. On the other hand, Türkiye's energy pipelines suggest the analogies of "game-changing" actors. When we look at the historical process, Israel and Türkiye are two countries that have been effective in separating the economy from politics. However, from time to time, the political atmosphere has prevented entrepreneurs and businesspeople of both countries from taking risks, and these policies have made it difficult to develop economic ties.

For this reason, progress has been made that is below the potential. Nowadays, if the common expectation proceeds under the heading of energy, the category of power will be added to Türkiye's Palestine-first Israeli policy. However, Israel should also move away from its violent attitude towards the Palestinian population, provide an environment where Palestinians can freely practice their faith, and try to improve its bilateral relations with Türkiye in all areas. On the other hand, Türkiye should be able to develop projects within the cultural framework of the Jewish population in its society. The steps to be taken in such different categories will undoubtedly accelerate the possible cooperation in the energy field and put its foundation on a more solid basis. In addition, it should be noted that even if such steps are not taken, both countries now need cooperation in areas of energy and economic priority on the axis of realpolitik. The increase in trade volume during the periods when the relations between the two countries were ruptured depended on the ability of both Türkiye and Israel to categorize and compartmentalize the titles. In addition to these, although both actors have different perspectives on their Syria policies, there are areas where they have a win-win relationship, such as supporting Azerbaijan in the Karabakh War, owning a natural gas pipeline, and finding a market for natural gas. In addition to these similarities, the differences that may arise manifest themselves in the Palestinian question.

Türkiye-HAMAS relations

Several factors have influenced the trajectory of Turkish-Hamas relations over the past two decades, as follows.

The Palestinian Issue: The status of the Palestinian territories and the ongoing conflict with Israel remain the most significant factor shaping Turkish-Hamas ties. Both actors share a common goal of ending the Israeli occupation and establishing an independent Palestinian state.

Ideology: Hamas's Islamic ideology and its close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood have been a source of both alignment and tension with Türkiye. While the AKP government shares ideological similarities with Hamas, it has also been careful to distance itself from the Muslim Brotherhood's more radical elements.

Regional Dynamics: Regional developments, such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War, and the rise of ISIS, have also impacted Turkish-Hamas relations. Türkiye's support for the Syrian opposition and its condemnation of the Assad regime have aligned it with Hamas, which has also been critical of the Syrian government.

The Impact of Individual Leaders: Erdoğan's Vision and Its Implications: President Erdoğan's personal views and leadership style have significantly influenced Türkiye's foreign policy towards Hamas and Israel. Western countries have criticized his strong rhetoric against Israel and his support for the Palestinian cause as hindering the normalization process. However, others argue that Erdoğan's assertive approach has allowed Türkiye to play a more prominent role in the region.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration's engagement with Hamas can be analyzed from two perspectives. Firstly, it sought to forge an alliance with Iran in the region to mitigate its perceived isolation (precious loneliness), particularly as its relations with the United States, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates deteriorated in the last decades. This strategy involved leveraging Hamas' support as a strategic asset against these countries. Secondly, the administration aimed to exploit the Israeli-Hamas conflict for domestic political gains, adopting a populist approach to garner support from entrenched religious factions loyal to it, especially in the context of upcoming local elections.

The Current State of Turkish-Hamas Relations

Turkish-Hamas relations have experienced a period of relative stability since the early 2010s. Despite occasional disagreements and tensions, both actors have maintained a dialogue and continue cooperating on issues of mutual interest. There are several Palestinian organizations in conflict with the Israeli army. Five armed structures stand out (Sharp & Iyengar, 2023) (Rathbone and Zilber, 2023).

Although the October 7 attack, which increased tension in the Middle East, was carried out by the Izzeddin Al Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the radical Islamist Hamas, Palestinian left Marxist organizations and other jihadist groups are also participating in the ongoing clashes with the Israeli army. Hamas and the armed extensions of the Islamic Jihad Movement lead the organizations active in the Gaza Strip.

Armed groups of left-wing organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic People's Liberation Front of Palestine (DPLFP) are also on the field.

Hamas, the Palestinian extension of the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the "Brotherhood", one of the oldest Islamist movements in the Middle East, is the largest organization in the region (Brittanica, 2024). Founded in 1987 during the "First Intifada" in Palestine, Hamas aims to establish an Islamic state. Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007, is firmly against the Oslo Peace Agreement, which was signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) 30 years ago and established the Palestinian Authority. (Maarashi, 2023)

The armed wing of this radical Islamist organization is the Izzeddin Al Qassam Brigades. This structure has approximately 30 thousand fighters. Many countries, especially the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), describe Hamas as a "terrorist organization" (Clarke,. Some countries, on the other hand, do not recognize Hamas, but only the Izzeddin Al Qassam Brigades as a "terrorist organization". However, Ankara disagrees with the West on this issue. In his statement to Bloomberg 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that he "does not see Hamas as a terrorist organization" (Gumrukcu & Hayatsever, 2023) And said that, "Hamas is a political party trying to (Clarke, 2023) protect its occupied country" (Yılmaz, 2023). Erdoğan, also the Chairman of the AKP, repeated these words in his speech at his party's group meeting. Erdoğan said the following about Hamas, which controls Gaza, "Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but a liberation and mujahideen group that struggles to protect its lands and citizens."

The organization's relations with Türkiye began to come to the fore in 2006, and Ankara held meetings with Hamas leaders at home and abroad. Dialogue became increasing, especially after the attack by Israeli soldiers on the Mavi Marmara ship in 2010. Khaled Meshaal, one of the Hamas leaders, attended the AKP's congress in Konya when Ahmet Davutoglu was prime minister. President Erdoğan also received one of the Hamas leaders, Ismail Haniye, in Dolmabahçe in 2019. The AKP's website put great emphasis on this visit. According to the article written by journalist Fehim Taştekin in *Al Monitör* on October 22, Ismail Haniye was also in Istanbul on the night of October 7, when Hamas attacked Israel. According to the claim in the same article, Ankara wanted Haniye to leave the country, yet denied later.

However, the relationship with the Gaza-based organization was not always maintained smoothly. Hamas reacted to Türkiye's condemnation of the attack they

carried out in Tel Aviv on April 7 last year. He also welcomed the visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Ankara in 2022 with "concern" in a written statement.

Another powerful organization in Palestine is Fatah (Brittanica, 2024a). This structure is the most vital component of the secular PLO. Fatah was founded in 1958 under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. Its character included left/secular and Arab nationalism. The organization's armed wing, which came to the fore during the "Second Intifada" that started in 2000, is known as the "Al-Aqsa Brigades." While Hamas rules Gaza, Fatah rules the West Bank and East Jerusalem. (Sharp & Iyengar, 2023).

After Hamas won the 2006 elections in Gaza, a power struggle broke out between these two organizations (Westervelt, 2006). These two "quarrelsome" organizations held national dialogue talks in Istanbul in 2020. Fatah leader and Palestinian Autonomous Administration President Mahmoud Abbas also visits Türkiye from time to time. Fatah does not take place in the Joint Operations Room of Palestinian Resistance Groups, which was established in 2018 and is currently involved in the war against Israel.

The Operations Room, which is involved in the latest attacks against Israel, brings together different Palestinian armed groups under one roof (MEMO, 2021). The reason for joining military groups with different ideologies was "coordinating actions from a single center," although Al-Aqsa Brigades, the armed wing of Fatah, is not included in this structure. Hamas is the group with the most vital relationship with Türkiye among the Palestinian organizations. Türkiye has relations with Fatah at the embassy level. However, Ankara somehow housed Hamas' middle/lower leaders and members in Türkiye. Türkiye seems to have no notable connections or relations with organizations other than Hamas.

Analysis of Türkiye's Support for Hamas

To understand Türkiye's relations with Hamas and Palestine, it is crucial to contextualize it within the broader historical framework of Turkish involvement in the region. Historically, Türkiye has maintained strong ties with the Palestinian people, stemming from its Ottoman past and its commitment to supporting the Palestinian cause for statehood and self-determination. Türkiye's recognition of the State of Palestine in 1988 and its diplomatic efforts to advance Palestinian rights reflect this historic commitment.

Türkiye's relationship with Hamas has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shaped by changing regional dynamics and Turkish foreign policy priorities. Initially, Türkiye maintained indirect contact with Hamas, viewing it as a legitimate political actor representing Palestinian interests. However, as Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Türkiye sought to deepen its engagement with the organization, providing political and financial support and advocating for its inclusion in the political process.

Strategic, ideological, and geopolitical factors drive Türkiye's support for Hamas. Ankara, unlikely many Western countries, sees Hamas as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and a key actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By supporting Hamas, Türkiye aims to bolster its influence in the region, counterbalance Israeli power, and project itself as a champion of Palestinian rights. Additionally, Türkiye's support for Hamas aligns with its broader strategy of promoting political Islam and challenging the status quo in the Middle East.

Both engagement and condemnation are prominent processes in Türkiye's relationship with Hamas. In the early 2000s, Türkiye hosted Hamas leaders and facilitated dialogue between the group and Fatah, the dominant Palestinian political faction. However, this engagement came to an end after Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections, which Israel and the international community did not recognize. Türkiye finds itself in a complex situation, trying to maintain its regional influence while navigating its delicate relationship with both Israel and the Palestinians.

Hamas emerged as a significant force in Palestinian politics during the 1980s and 1990s, challenging the dominance of the Fatah faction. Its victory in the 2006 elections marked a turning point, propelling it to the forefront of Palestinian politics and governance in the Gaza Strip. Türkiye's response to Hamas's rise was multifaceted, reflecting the AKP's evolving foreign policy and ideological orientation. Initially, the AKP government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan welcomed Hamas's electoral success, viewing it as a reflection of the Palestinian people's democratic will. However, the relationship between Türkiye and Hamas became increasingly strained following the 2008 Gaza War, with Türkiye criticizing Israel's military operations and calling for an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip.

It is not easy to understand why Türkiye directly supports Hamas instead of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which is a legitimate representative recognized officially by the UN and Western countries. AKP leadership highly likely would like to use Hamas as leverage against Israel to keep control of the region. Corrugated relations with Israel in the last decade, Israel made agreements with Egypt, Greece, and the Greek

Cypriot Administration to form an alliance against Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean issue. The region forced Ankara to embrace Hamas as a counterbalance. Even though Ankara assertively confronted the USA and EU.

The AKP government's support for Hamas has also been tempered by its desire to maintain positive relations with the United States and other Western countries, which have designated Hamas as a terrorist organization. This balancing act has led to occasional tensions between Türkiye and Hamas, particularly when Türkiye has cracked down on Hamas-linked activities on its territory.

Conclusion

Türkiye's engagement with the Palestinian issue has been a consistent feature of its foreign policy since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Over the years, Türkiye has sought to balance its strategic interests with its support for Palestinian rights and aspirations. Central to this engagement is Türkiye's relationship with Hamas, the Islamist political organization that governs the Gaza Strip. Türkiye's support for Hamas has not been without controversy, particularly in the context of its relations with Israel and the wider international community. Ankara's vocal criticism of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians and its close ties with Hamas has strained its relations with Israel and raised concerns among Western allies. Türkiye's role as a mediator between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority has also faced challenges, with divergent interests and agendas complicating efforts to achieve Palestinian unity and reconciliation.

Türkiye's relations with Hamas and Palestine are multifaceted, encompassing historical, political, and strategic dimensions. While Türkiye's support for Hamas reflects its commitment to Palestinian rights and aspirations, it also reflects broader geopolitical considerations and regional dynamics. The future of Turkish engagement with Hamas and Palestine will be shaped by a complex interplay of factors, highlighting the challenges and opportunities inherent in Türkiye's foreign policy in the Middle East.

Broader regional dynamics also shape Türkiye's foreign policy towards Hamas and Israel. Türkiye seeks to assert itself as a leading player in the Middle East, often positioning itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause. This stance brings Türkiye into competition with other regional powers, such as Iran, which also supports Hamas. Additionally, Türkiye's relationship with the United States, a key ally of Israel, further complicates the situation.

Turkish relations with Hamas and Palestine remain uncertain amidst shifting regional dynamics and geopolitical realities. Türkiye's evolving relationship with Israel,

its growing engagement with other regional actors, and the broader geopolitical landscape will shape the trajectory of its relations with Hamas and its approach to the Palestinian issue. While challenges persist, there are opportunities for constructive engagement and dialogue, paving the way for a more stable and inclusive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The character of Türkiye's Palestine policy is a solid commitment to the two-state solution and vocal criticism of Israel's occupation and settlement policies. This stance has aligned Türkiye with Hamas's position on the Palestinian issue, further strengthening their ties. With the visit of the Israeli President to Türkiye, the problematic process carried out at the highest level to develop relations has again been unpredictably damaged by the Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza. The reason for the deterioration of relations again is due to the attitude of both parties towards each other. While Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by Türkiye's Western allies, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Ankara's declaration that it accepts Hamas as a political entity representing the Palestinians has caused a reaction. In addition, Israel's indiscriminate participation in a race that kills civilians and children has become unacceptable for Ankara and the world.

The future of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Hamas and Israel remains uncertain. The recent escalation in Gaza and ongoing tensions highlight the challenges in achieving lasting peace in the region. However, there are also opportunities for progress. Continued dialogue, a focus on addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, and a commitment to international law could pave the way for a more stable and peaceful future.

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