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Different and Yet the Same?

Prospects for a New Start in Israeli-Turkish Relations

Philipp Burkhardt/Nils Lange

Relations between Turkey and Israel are thawing. Historic visits by foreign ministers and Israel's president have highlighted the desire of both countries for rapprochement. However, this process may be impeded by domestic politics and the Middle East conflict. Turkey, as the driving force, has a strong interest in an energy partnership, whereas Israel is approaching the Turkish charm offensive with a degree of caution. However, if the rapprochement succeeds, both Brussels and Berlin should be supporting this process.

Regional Panorama

After fifteen years of tense diplomatic relations, it was a landmark moment when Isaac Herzog became the first Israeli head of state to visit Turkey once again, on 9 March 2022. The two countries had once enjoyed close strategic ties, but relations between Turkey and Israel had deteriorated, particularly after an incident, in 2010, in which nine Turkish citizens were killed when Israeli Defence Forces raided a Turkish ship, the Mavi Marmara, part of a humanitarian flotilla bringing aid to Gaza. As a result, Ankara expelled the Israeli ambassador, withdrew its own ambassador, and all bilateral military agreements were suspended.

An agreement was reached over the Mavi Marmara incident in 2016, but that first attempt at reconciliation ground to an abrupt halt in 2018 when a dispute escalated regarding the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem.

Today, the signs are once again pointing to détente and, each in its own way, Turkey and Israel both seem to be working to relaunch the old partnership. But how sustainable can such a revival of relations be? And what impact will it have on Germany and Europe?

Despite the longstanding diplomatic stalemate, both sides have a strong interest in rapprochement. The geopolitical climate in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean is changing rapidly. Over recent years and months, geopolitical shifts

and, above all, the war in Ukraine have led to unprecedented rapprochements and normalisations between very different actors in the region. There are many reasons for this.

The first of these is the diminishing involvement of the United States in the region, with the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan being the latest factor that has changed mindsets in the region. Regional actors are realising that they have to find a new direction, preferably cooperatively, in order to deal with today's challenges.¹ Second, the region faces major economic difficulties², partly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic shocks. Third, the Middle East is facing the implications of climate change, which can only be addressed collectively. Fourth, the threat posed by the hegemonic and nuclear ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran represents a security challenge to many countries, and it requires a coordinated response. And finally, Russia's war in Ukraine also poses major problems for the region. On the one hand, many countries in the region rely on food supplies from Ukraine but, on the other hand, Russia is a regional player that cannot be ignored due to its presence in Syria. As a result, many countries in the region are facing a complicated balancing act.

Ambivalent Bilateral Relations between Turkey and Israel

Israel and Turkey are particularly affected by these developments and are, each in its own way, striving to realign themselves within the

region. Turkey is currently trying to normalise its relations not just with Israel, but also with other countries in the region. This has been fuelled by Turkey's financial and economic crisis, and the upcoming elections in 2023. Furthermore, Ankara views rapprochement with Israel as a step towards normalising relations with the US. Ankara is seeking, at record speed, to repair relations with its neighbours and other regional powers, which have been damaged over the past decade, and to restore its reputation in the region. Turkey also remains a key state in the region for Israel, although relations between the two countries have seriously deteriorated in recent years. Back in 1949, Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognise the Jewish state and it sent an ambassador to Israel in 1950, even before the US. These two non-Arab powers in the Middle East were long considered natural allies, cooperating at various levels and pursuing common interests in their neighbourhood. Relations between Turkey and Israel reached a high point in the 1990s after hopes for a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians were fuelled by the Oslo Accords. In 1996, Turkey and Israel signed a free trade agreement³ and a comprehensive military cooperation agreement. Perhaps the most visible component of this formalised Turkish-Israeli defence agreement was the opportunity for Israeli pilots to conduct training flights from Turkish air bases and gain experience in long-range overland missions.⁴

In nearly seven decades of bilateral relations with Israel, Turkey has downgraded them three times.

However, the Israeli-Turkish relationship has been characterised by regular ups and downs. In nearly seven decades of bilateral relations with Israel, Turkey has downgraded them three times, most recently in 2016.⁵ After a decade of close cooperation, the first fractures in relations appeared back in 2007, when the rapprochement between Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood,

and Hamas in the Palestinian territories was met with great scepticism. High-ranking members of Hamas made frequent visits to Turkey, attracting strong criticism from Israel.

The “golden era” of bilateral relations finally ground to a halt with Operation Cast Lead, the first war in Gaza in 2008. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was Turkey's prime minister at the time, called the military operation a “crime against humanity”.⁶ Shortly thereafter, a panel discussion on the Middle East conflict between Israel's then president, Shimon Peres, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan escalated at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, casting a lasting shadow over relations between the two countries.⁷ Subsequently, in October 2009, Turkey excluded Israel from the Anatolian Eagle joint military exercise.⁸

Relations reached a low point in May 2010, when the Mavi Marmara was purchased with a view to breaking Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. Nine Turkish citizens were killed in the confrontation between the (partly extremist) activists and the Israeli commandos who stormed the ship. In September 2011, Turkey downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel and suspended military cooperation after the United Nations published its report on the flotilla incident.

Attempts at rapprochement in 2016 came to nothing, but since 2021 there have been signs that Turkey is once again interested in improving its relations with Israel. Indeed, it is possible to identify a number of common interests that could be the key to rapprochement.

Potential Keys to Rapprochement

Israel and Turkey both neighbour Syria and are keen to see stability in this war-torn country. While both governments supported regime change at the beginning of the war, their main priority now seems to be making Syria as stable as possible. Moreover, both Israel and Turkey oppose Iran's growing influence in Syria, and above all the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions. This is linked to the fight against international terrorism, which is of vital interest to



both countries. Turkey's ambassador to the US, Hasan Murat Mercan, recently published an opinion piece for an Israeli think tank in which he called for more robust cooperation between Turkey and Israel, "with a specific focus on fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." He also emphasised how Turkey and Israel face similar "malign actors and trends" in the region.⁹ Both countries are also interested in preventing a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which is why Israel has now welcomed an influx of Turkish humanitarian aid.

Turkey and Israel both provided massive logistical, technical, and operational support to Azerbaijan during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. The regional stimulus of rapprochement is also evident here. Israel and Azerbaijan share the perception of Iran as a serious threat and have developed extensive military and energy-related ties in recent years. From the Turkish perspective, the "one nation, two states" doctrine has applied since Azerbaijan's independence, under which close relations are maintained with Azerbaijan as a brother country.



Signal for a diplomatic ice age: After Israeli security forces stormed the pro-Gaza activist ship Mavi Marmara in May 2010, killing Turkish citizens, Israeli-Turkish relations reached a low point. [Source: © Emrah Dalkaya, Reuters.](#)

perspective, Turkey is a large and important market. The country was Israel's fifth-largest trading partner in 2020.

There is also potential with regard to security cooperation, which represents a priority for both states. In the past, it has repeatedly been made public that the Turkish and Israeli intelligence services cooperate closely on reconnaissance and counterterrorism.¹² Both countries have been targets of Islamist terrorist attacks, not least because of the instability in Syria and Iraq. Turkey is also regularly a location for Iranian espionage missions.

Both countries are eager to play a growing role in diversifying Europe's energy imports and to provide a long-term alternative to Russia.

Israel and Turkey will continue to share security interests on key strategic issues. They are mutually dependent when it comes to stabilising the situation in Syria, as well as containing Iran. A resurgence of strategic intelligence cooperation could restore the strained relationship of trust between the security apparatuses, and significantly boost normalisation efforts.

Energy Security as a Catalyst for Rapprochement

At the centre of current efforts, however, are the common interest in natural gas production in the eastern Mediterranean and the energy implications of the war in Ukraine, which could simultaneously strengthen Israel's role as a gas exporter and make Turkey a key energy transit

Despite diplomatic frictions, Israel and Turkey have maintained solid economic, trade, transportation, and tourism ties over the years, and could benefit still further from closer cooperation. Economic cooperation remained unaffected by the deterioration of bilateral relations, with the volume of trade actually more than doubling in nominal terms from 3.4 billion US dollars in 2010¹⁰ to 8.4 billion US dollars in 2021.¹¹ In 2021, Israel was one of the top ten export markets for Turkey, with a goods value of close to 6.4 billion US dollars. From Israel's

hub for Europe.¹³ Both countries are eager to play a growing role in diversifying Europe's energy imports and to provide a long-term alternative to Russia.

Natural gas production in the eastern Mediterranean was already a focus of the earlier attempt at rapprochement, and the plans for a pipeline between Haifa and Ceyhan attracted a great deal of attention.¹⁴ At the time, however, there were no face-to-face talks between high-level decision-makers, and the attempts failed, unable to withstand the escalating tensions caused by the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Instead, with the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2019, Israel pursued an initiative that included Egypt, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories — but excluded Turkey. In its gas export policy, the Netanyahu government of the time preferred to focus on transcontinental rather than regional cooperation.¹⁵ The construction of an EastMed pipeline was planned to connect Israel's Leviathan and Cyprus' Aphrodite gas fields to Europe via Crete and Greece. However, the project was effectively dealt a death blow when the Biden administration withdrew its support in January 2022.¹⁶ With estimated costs of some 6.5 billion US dollars, the undersea pipeline was never financially viable, but it was nevertheless touted by the Trump administration. As a result, Turkey has been increasingly isolated in the eastern Mediterranean in recent years, and it has been excluded from talks on energy policy.

From Israel's perspective, there is the urgent problem of the profitability of its limited natural gas resources, along with that of viability in the region's volatile security environment. Realistically, the question must be asked whether long-term pipeline projects can actually be planned at all. It is important to consider the route that gas exports can take. An alternative to pipeline projects is liquefied natural gas (LNG). At present, the only LNG terminals in the region that liquefy natural gas with considerable energy

consumption are located in Egypt. Cairo's long-term aim is to make Egypt a regional natural gas hub. The country has already signed agreements with Cyprus and Israel that will result in more gas being liquefied in Egypt.¹⁷ Specifically, this involves the delivery of Israeli gas to Egyptian LNG terminals for liquefaction. The Sharm el-Sheikh summit of September 2021 and the Negev summit in late March 2022 underlined the desire of governments to make "cold peace" a thing of the past. On 15 June 2022, the EU, Israel, and Egypt finally signed a landmark agreement on the export of natural gas to Europe. Under the terms of the agreement, the EU will help Egypt and Israel to ramp up their gas production and increase exploration in their territorial waters. Israel will supply the gas via Egypt, where it will be liquefied for export by sea to Europe. In the medium term, therefore, it is unlikely that an Israeli-Turkish project will attract EU support.¹⁸

Building a pipeline to Turkey would require Israel to make a long-term bet on Ankara's reliability.

Moreover, building a pipeline is a long-term project. Profits can only be expected after many years and the construction requires a huge amount of planning. According to Reuters, Israeli officials have stated that a 500 or 550-kilometre-long pipeline to Turkey would be feasible at a cost of around 1.5 billion euros, which would be significantly cheaper than the planned 2,000-kilometre EastMed pipeline (to Crete), which would cost at least 6 billion euros.¹⁹ However, this would require Israel to make a long-term bet on Turkey's reliability, which would be rather risky in light of the region's domestic political challenges and volatility (see below).²⁰ For Ankara, on the other hand, building an energy partnership with Israel would be a confirmation of its influence in the eastern Mediterranean, and would help to reduce its own energy dependence on Russia.

Russia supplied around 45 per cent of Turkey's gas consumption in 2021 and is also a key trading partner. Despite its stable relations with Russia, the current war in Ukraine has reminded Turkey of the need to continue diversifying its energy sources, and to seek other regional allies. Over recent months, President Erdoğan has repeatedly stressed that Turkey and Israel should work together to supply gas to Europe.²¹ In terms of energy security, for both Turkey and Europe, it is worth highlighting that gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean could complement the Southern Gas Corridor, an energy supply route from the Caspian Sea and Middle East. According to analysts, a new 500-kilometre pipeline could be up and running, supplying Israeli gas to Turkey, within two-and-a-half to three years.

The Cyprus issue remains a major obstacle to the construction of an Israel-Turkey pipeline. There are two conceivable routes for a pipeline between Israel and Turkey. The first and less expensive route would pass through Lebanon and Syria, but this would entail major security risks. The second route would pass through the disputed territorial waters of Cyprus, which in turn would require the consent of the Republic of Cyprus, which is not recognised by Turkey. Without a solution to the decades-long Cyprus conflict, it is currently difficult to imagine how such a gas pipeline could be constructed. Israel's relations with both Cyprus and Greece have also changed in the wake of the Mavi Marmara incident, filling the gap left by Turkey in Israel's regional strategy. In the process, both states took over Turkey's traditional role in joint naval and air exercises with Israel.

Domestic Factors

The rapprochement process could be slowed by the volatile domestic political situation in both Israel and Turkey. At home, Israel's political situation is fragile. In June 2021, after twelve years in office, Benjamin Netanyahu was replaced by an eight-party coalition under Naftali Bennett. However, this experiment was already over by the end of June 2022. The

government was unable to unite the various factions of both left and right, including an Arab party. New elections are scheduled for November 2022, but the outcome is uncertain. There is reason to fear a renewed paralysis of the Knesset, which could lead to yet another round of elections. Accordingly, Israel's interim government – now led by alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid – is not in a position to make decisions on major pipeline projects with Turkey. Should a government led by Benjamin Netanyahu return to office, there is a danger that the rapprochement efforts will fizzle out. Relations between Turkey and Israel cooled significantly during Netanyahu's last term in office.

The government in Ankara has a window of opportunity to change its foreign policy positions without being perceived as weak at home.

Although Turkey's current government has a stable majority, the domestic political situation is also tense. Turkey is in a deep economic crisis and is just over a year away from the next presidential and parliamentary elections, which will be held in the republic's centennial year. The ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Party) is seeking to normalise relations with regional actors such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt, not least in light of the current economic situation. Ankara is trying to end its regional isolation and restore investor confidence. Turkey's recent rapprochement with those Arab states that maintain good relations with Israel appears to be promoting normalisation between the two countries. Therefore, the timing of the Turkish initiative to recalibrate relations should not be ignored. In conjunction with the global geopolitical realignment in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the government in Ankara currently has a welcome window of opportunity to make a radical shift in its foreign policy positions

without being perceived as weak at home. Israel will, therefore, expect Turkey to come up with concrete initiatives before it will agree to a genuine relaunch of the “strategic partnership”.


The Importance of the Middle East Conflict

A permanent strain on relations between Turkey and Israel is the Middle East conflict. Over the last year, the Turkish president has repeatedly

stated that he is open to improving relations with Israel under certain conditions. However, he has previously called Israel’s policy on the Palestinians “unacceptable”, and Israel has stressed that relations cannot improve until Turkey expels Hamas.²² Ankara protested against the Abraham Accords²³ by receiving Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and his deputy Saleh al-Arouri in Istanbul shortly after the Accords were signed, in August 2020.²⁴



Position of strength: Israel has recently expanded its room for manoeuvre in the eastern Mediterranean by moving closer to Greece and Cyprus, not only in terms of energy policy, and can now afford to treat Turkey’s advances with scepticism. Source: © Louiza Vradi, Reuters.



Then, in December 2021, Erdoğan dangled the prospect of the two countries once again exchanging ambassadors if Israel acted “more sensitively with regard to its regional policy towards Palestine”.²⁵ A few weeks later, after phone calls with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and President Isaac Herzog, he said that relations with Israel had improved. The phone call with Bennett was the first contact between an Israeli prime minister and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2013. For its part, Israel is likely to want Turkey to tone down its rhetoric on Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians. Yet Turkey, and President Erdoğan in particular, see themselves as the patron saint of the Palestinians and Jerusalem. At a recent AK party conference, he condemned the actions of the Israeli security forces at the Al-Aqsa Mosque²⁶ and described Palestine, Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa as red lines for Turkey.²⁷ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu also told Israeli journalists that Turkey seeks a “sustainable relationship” with Israel, but said it depends on Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians.²⁸ Israel viewed Turkey’s deportation of dozens of individuals identified with Hamas as another positive step. However, a complete normalisation of relations will not be possible as long as Hamas officials are able to operate out of Turkey.

In Israel, there is a widespread feeling that Turkey is no longer a predictable and reliable actor.

In addition, the security situation in Jerusalem and the West Bank is steadily worsening, and a fresh escalation is possible at any time. Regardless of which prime minister is in office in Israel, or the specific form of government coalition, the risk of escalation in the Middle East conflict remains high. In the event of the crisis intensifying, and in light of Turkey’s and Israel’s different interests with regard to the conflict, it hovers like a sword of Damocles over the attempts at rapprochement, including in the area of energy policy.

A New Framework for the Bilateral Relationship

Many variables have changed since the last attempt to recalibrate relations in 2016. Turkey is generally confident that the formerly close relations will be restored, whereas Israel approaches it with more scepticism. In Israel, there is a widespread feeling that Turkey is no longer a predictable and reliable actor. In its 2020 annual security assessment, the Israel Defence Forces for the first time identified Turkey as a strategic challenge to Israel.²⁹ Public and published opinion in Israel is, therefore, cautious or sceptical about Ankara’s charm offensive. In March 2022, the Israeli daily newspaper Jerusalem Post described President Erdoğan as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”, whose economic woes and impending international isolation were the sole drivers of the sudden about-turn in his policy towards Israel.³⁰ Meanwhile, Ankara is making serious efforts to convince the Israeli public and politicians that its intentions are sincere, and it is working proactively on positive messaging. After his visit to Israel, the Turkish foreign minister said that the normalisation of ties between Turkey and Israel would have a “positive impact” for a “peaceful” resolution to the Palestinian conflict, bringing Turkey’s position on the Middle East conflict closer to that of Morocco, the UAE, and Bahrain.³¹ Nevertheless, the process of rapprochement between the two countries remains sluggish. An announced visit by the Turkish energy minister and foreign minister suddenly disappeared from the calendar.³²

There has also been a shift in terms of arms trade. In 2009, Ankara was Israel’s biggest customer for arms exports, but Israel has found strong buyers in India and Azerbaijan, whose imports of Israeli arms exceed the former volume of Turkish imports many times over.³³

Moreover, following the normalisation of relations under the Abraham Accords with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, Israel no

longer relies on its diplomatic presence in Turkey as a base in the Muslim world. Of course, an escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would also strain relations between, for example, the UAE and Israel in the long run, as shown by recent escalations on the Temple Mount.³⁴ However, the recently signed free trade agreement with the UAE indicates that relations between the two countries are deepening rapidly.³⁵ The historic energy agreement with Egypt and the EU will also help to further stabilise Israel's relations with its neighbours in this respect, and strengthen ties between Egypt and Israel.

Israel has also improved its relations with other Mediterranean actors. It is in the country's interest not to jeopardise its good relations with Greece and Cyprus.³⁶ In this respect, the Israeli government has a number of potential options – both economically and politically. This strengthens Israel's bargaining power vis-à-vis Turkey.

It is in Germany's interest to work to ensure Turkey is included in regional energy formats.

Accordingly, the recent visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to Israel was viewed with a degree of caution, though certain media outlets focused on the positive aspects of the visit.³⁷ However, their coverage tended to ignore a potential energy partnership with Turkey and focused on other issues, such as the likelihood of the two countries restoring their ambassadors, Turkey's position on the Middle East conflict, and above all Turkey's relations with Hamas. The issue of Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu visiting the Temple Mount in Jerusalem without Israeli officials also dominated the Israeli media. However, there was no mention of a potential energy partnership. Instead, the Director General of the Israeli

Ministry of Energy, Lior Schillat, announced that talks were being held with the EU regarding the export of Israeli gas via Egypt. And indeed, an agreement was signed a few weeks later after a visit by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.³⁸

Consequences for Germany and the European Union

Prospects for improving bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey remain unclear. However, any change in their relation will have implications for Germany and Europe. Rapprochement and enhanced cooperation would make a significant contribution to strengthening regional stability in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean and would be a step towards de-escalating conflicts in the region. In addition, Israeli-Turkish cooperation would bolster international efforts to contain and, in the long run, conceivably reintegrate Iran into the international community. Rapprochement between Israel and Turkey would make it easier to find a common position with regard to Tehran.

Furthermore, despite the LNG deal with Egypt and Israel, an energy partnership between Israel and Turkey is of particular interest for Europe's energy security. Although the EU has set ambitious climate targets – Europe is to be climate neutral by 2050, which means that the gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean will gradually lose importance³⁹ – natural gas plays an important role in the medium term as a bridging technology to climate neutrality. Its importance has increased due to the need for greater diversification in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine. In principle, Germany supports the European Green Deal that was presented to the European Council in December 2019 by Ursula von der Leyen. However, the EU is also faced with the urgent task of reducing its dependence on Russian gas in the medium term, for as long as this energy resource is still needed. For Germany (and the EU), this results in conflicting goals. More specifically, the foreign policy goals of regional

integration, conflict containment, and multi-lateralism are in competition with the goal of tackling the global problem of climate change, a priority for Germany's Foreign Office under its Green Party Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.⁴⁰ The question of whether Germany and the EU should support a possible pipeline between Israeli gas fields and Turkey should be considered from different angles. Along with climate targets, geopolitical factors such as regional stability, conflict resolution, and the potential for regional integration must be considered.

The prospect of an easing of Israel-Turkey relations, and subsequently a potential easing of the Cyprus conflict, should therefore be taken into account. Israel has established strategic relations with Cyprus in recent years and consequently has an interest in resolving the conflict. In light of the volatile security situation in Israel, the Palestinian territories, and the region as a whole, it is particularly important to seize opportunities for rapprochement, even if this means accepting that it will also involve costs. However, Germany's position will also be influenced by the sensitivities of the Republic of Cyprus due to its EU membership. It is in Germany's interest to find a solution and work to ensure Turkey is included in regional energy formats. This could reduce tensions between Turkey and its neighbours and shift them into an institutionalised framework.

Irrespective of this, it would be desirable for both Germany and the EU to provide positive support for the emerging re-normalisation of relations between Israel and Turkey. The increased contact between the two countries is a welcome sign, and it is good to see them creating channels to identify specific areas of cooperation. As far as Germany is concerned, they are both key states in the region – and rapprochement can only be of interest. While trends towards escalation and reconciliation can be observed in parallel in the Middle East, the possibility of rapprochement between Turkey and Israel is a positive sign. A regionally

reintegrated Turkey, along with Israel and its new partners in the Gulf, can only increase stability in this crisis-ridden region.

– translated from German –

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