

War of Words: Israel, Turkey on collision course

Ties between the once-staunch allies continue to plummet, a trend that shows no signs of reversing.

- The complex, and often toxic, Israel-Turkey relationship
- Report: Israel, Turkey working to re-establish normal ties



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. (photo credit: TUMAY BERKIN/REUTERS AND MARC ISRAEL SELLEM/THE JERUSALEM POST)

The ongoing war of words between Israel and Turkey is likely to become harsher as both countries head to the polls in the coming months, analysts told The Media Line.

Officials recently traded heated accusations, with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu accusing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of overseeing a military that “massacres women and children in Kurdish villages;” this, after Ankara’s foreign minister called Netanyahu “a cold-blooded killer of modern times, responsible for massacres of thousands of innocent Palestinians, bombing children on beaches.”

Selim Sazak, a U.S.-based expert on Turkey, contends that the negative dialogue will continue as the leaders of both states are liable to face pressure from the right during their political campaigns. “It’s election talk, it’s that time of the year,” he asserted to The Media Line. “I would expect both [Netanyahu] and Erdogan to double down on the nationalist rhetoric.”

Erdogan’s AK Party will compete in municipal elections slated for March and depends on support of the staunchly right-wing MHP. The two parties formed a coalition in last year’s parliamentary vote but have since often been at odds.

For his part, Netanyahu, who is seeking re-election in an April national vote, has been dogged by legal woes and is under fire for accepting a ceasefire with Hamas following months of violence along the Gaza Strip border.

Muzaffer Senel, Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul Şehir University, similarly predicts that the prevailing discourse will intensify. “The sides are bullying each other,” he explained to The Media Line, “as both leaders are populists that made this [conflict] for [public] consumption.... There is a political will behind this.”

Ties between the two countries had already deteriorated sharply over the summer, with Erdogan labeling Israel an apartheid state and Netanyahu slamming the Turkish president for supporting Hamas, which is deemed a terrorist group by the West.

That spat—which unfolded on Twitter—led to the reciprocal expulsion of diplomats, an example of how verbal disputes can have tangible implications.

Nevertheless, Shira Efron, a researcher and special adviser on Israel at RAND, does not envision a total break in bilateral relations. “Worse crises have occurred between the two countries and ties persisted,” she wrote in an email to The Media Line. “[At] the diplomatic level, I don’t foresee meaningful change without [an unlikely] shift in the political leaderships or progress [also unlikely] in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which [in] the past has been associated with improvement in Israeli-Turkish affairs.”

The recent announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump of a prospective pull-out of American forces from Syria has complicated matters between Jerusalem and Ankara.

While Washington has sought reassurances from Erdogan to not attack U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters, the proposed quick withdrawal could provide the opportunity to do so. Turkey views the Kurdish YPG in Syria as an extension of the banned PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey and is thus widely designated a terrorist group.

The drawdown of American troops from Syria also will allow Iran to increase its influence in the country, something that Netanyahu’s government vehemently opposes but is more palatable to Ankara.

“Now that the U.S. is withdrawing, and Erdogan is the person that talked Trump into it, it’s made life more difficult for Israel,” Sazak opined.

Another sticking point is an agreement expected to be finalized this year for a gas pipeline stretching from Israel to Greece and Cyprus, two nations that have longstanding fraught relations with Turkey.

Simon Waldman, a Middle East analyst at the Istanbul Policy Centre, told The Media Line that plans for the 7\$ billion project may not be actualized. "There is still much that needs to be done, and not just administrative issues but also to determine feasibility," he stated.

Despite the diplomatic standoff, trade between Israel and Turkey remains robust, with companies urging their respective governments to not interfere even amid the tough talk.

"As long as [Netanyahu and Erdogan] are in power, the personal differences, personal animosity is way too strong," Sazak concluded. "But this might not necessarily thwart the much-needed and profitable business-to-business cooperation, and there are people working towards this."

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