

Will Israeli-Turkish Enmity Survive Passing of the Leadership?

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Recent press reports on health issues affecting Turkish President Recip Tayyip Erdogan¹ coinciding with the beginning of the trial of Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu should remind us that these two individuals personally demolished the previous close ties between the two countries. Israel's bloody war in Gaza, which killed 1,200 civilians and the subsequent blockade that caused humanitarian suffering outraged Erdogan. It also gave him a platform from which to further attack Israel. The war of words escalated and, in 2015, Erdogan organized a flotilla of ships carrying relief supplies to Gaza. The Israelis intercepted the flotilla but botched the operation, killing nine Turks and one American on the lead ship, the M/S Mavi Mari. Rhetoric boiled over. Who can forget the drama of Erdogan walking out of a conversation with Shimon Peres at Davos in 2015? Or, Erdogan comparing Israeli conduct in Gaza to the Holocaust while Netanyahu responded in kind accusing Erdogan of murdering Kurdish children.

The relationship went straight downhill thereafter. Within a few months Erdogan and Netanyahu vied with one another in dismantling a carefully constructed strategic relationship. That relationship, which had begun in the late 1980's, produced enormous benefits for the militaries of both countries. The Israeli Air Force had acquired a vast airspace over Turkish territory to conduct flight training, escaping the narrow geographic restrictions of Israeli territory. In the process, the heretofore-sorry quality of Turkish air operations improved significantly through Israeli tutelage and joint maneuvers. Israel sold almost two billion dollars worth of advanced military equipment and services to Turkey in a decade. Israel provided the initial technological investments that have since allowed Turkey to create a significant arms industry.

Israel acquired a geostrategic ally who outflanked Israel's principal threats, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The alliance with Turkey also gave Israel some additional international leverage with the USSR and a powerful supporter within NATO. Turkey, in turn, filled a vital strategic gap in domestic American politics. In the wake of Turkey's 1974 invasion and occupation of Cyprus, the Greek and Armenian lobbies in Washington battered Ankara at every conceivable moment.

¹ <https://www.meforum.org/60978/erdogan-had-cancer-suffers-from-epilepsy>

The even more powerful Jewish lobby had generally supported its ethnic lobby colleagues out of self-interest if not conviction. As the Israeli-Turkish alliance gelled, the Jewish lobby slowly lessened its support for the Greek position on Cyprus and Armenian efforts to get a Genocide Resolution through Congress. Prominent American Jewish groups even opposed Armenian efforts to include exhibits of the Armenian Genocide in Washington's Holocaust Museum. Prominent advocates for Israel in Washington's think-tank world now advocated support for Turkey.

The relationship, as noted, had primarily benefitted Erdogan's *bête noire* the military-industrial complex; the Kemalist 'deep state' that had dominated Turkish politics since the 1950's. The Turkish military enjoyed political power unrivaled in any other NATO country. It regularly removed civilian governments. The Kemalists directed special hostility to political movements that had religious support. In 1961, the Army even executed a Prime Minister, Adnan Menderes who had tried to undo some of the secularist laws of the Turkish Republic². In 1997, the Armed Forces forced out the avowedly Islamist PM Necmettin Erbakan, whose Refah (Welfare) Party was the precursor to Erdogan's Islamist AKP Party³. Erdogan himself felt the anti-Islamist wrath of the generals who jailed him for some months for mixing Islamist symbolism in nationalist campaign slogans⁴. The relationship with Israel had not only improved Turkish military capabilities, it had also contributed to the enrichment of individuals within the deep state. The Army rewarded retired Turkish generals with management positions in the Turkish military industrial complex. Others benefitted earlier in their careers as Israeli exporters had a reputation of generosity to Turkish procurement officers and their superiors.

Many observers believed that there was more method than madness in Erdogan picking a fight with Israel. Turkish public opinion had always sided with the Palestinians; the AKP's Islamist slogans heightened popular hostility to Israel. By striking at the Israeli relationship, Erdogan struck at the military in an arena where they could not fight back. The generals could not appear to support what Erdogan successfully depicted as Israel's oppression of Muslims. Breaking the alliance with Israel was an early blow in the AKP's unraveling of the Kemalist deep state. The erosion in the power of the military continued as Erdogan increased his own power and popularity. Erdogan decisively broke the power of the military by suppressing its last gasp coup in 2016.

Israel had started withdrawing its military from Turkey in 2009. Other ties also came apart. Israeli tourists, inveterate gamblers, stopped frequenting the casinos of Istanbul, Izmir and Adana and shifted their custom to the establishments of Rhodes and mainland Greece. The break in relations with Turkey coincided with a game-changing economic development: the discovery of major natural gas deposits where the Israeli and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and continental shelves intersected. Turkey moved quickly to demand that the

² <https://www.worldbulletin.net/historical-events/the-execution-that-still-overshadows-politics-h118185.html>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Necmettin-Erbakan>

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan>

Republic of Cyprus share any gas with its puppet 'Turkish Republic of North Cyprus' (TRNC) established after the 1974 invasion.

More menacingly, Turkey expounded a legal assertion that islands, even sovereign island states, had no right to claim an EEZ or continental shelf. (Turkey has not ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)⁵.) Ankara had argued in its disputes with Greece in the Aegean that only continental states, such as Turkey, could claim the shelf and that Turkey's EEZ extended to the middle of the Aegean sea, unencumbered by any Greek islands in the eastern half of that body of water. Ankara also asserted that its EEZ extended to the limit of Cyprus' 12-mile territorial waters despite Greek and Cypriot recourse to UNCLOS in rejecting Turkey's claims. Ankara threatened military action against the Republic of Cyprus should it attempt to exploit the gas deposits. Israel responded with a shot across Turkey's bow by sending Israeli fighter planes over the TRNC in December 2011⁶. Over the last few years, Israel has developed a strong military relationship with Greece and Cyprus, much like it had enjoyed with Turkey. Israeli aircraft regularly exercise over Greek airspace and Greek navy ships have repeatedly visited Israeli ports.

The strategic relationship with Israel now figures strongly in Greek planning in the event of hostilities with Turkey. Israel has done little to dispel the notion that it could come to Greece's assistance even without a formal defense agreement obligation. For its part, Turkey has announced it will block any Trans-Mediterranean pipeline carrying natural gas from the Cyprus-Israel-Egyptian fields to Europe prompting protests from all three countries.

Assuming that the departure of either Erdogan or Netanyahu (or both) from the scene would eliminate the personal animosity that originally created the rift between Jerusalem and Ankara, what would attract the two countries to rebuild the original alliance? Israel could decide that Turkey's geostrategic position bordering Iran, Israel's declared existential threat, would give it leverage and reach in any hostilities. Turkey protects anti-Assad revolutionaries in Syria against Iranian-supported Shi'a militias. It also fears that those militias could aggravate its problems with Syrian refugees. Israeli support for expanded Turkish influence in the Kurdish regions of both Syria and Iraq could complicate the game for Iran. Both the US and Russia would have reason to welcome such a rapprochement. Having established Russian dominance of Syria, Putin needs stability. Stability includes seeing Iran out and promoting international investment, which would require bringing Assad to heel. Neither Israel nor Turkey would have reason not to cooperate with Putin in both endeavors. Trump has developed close personal rapport with both leaders. Should one depart, the other might believe he can count on Trump's support.

Turkish claims in the Mediterranean EEZ would be the one non-negotiable obstacle for Israel in rebuilding the relationship. One cannot imagine Erdogan backing away from what appears to be his signature position informing both his confrontation with Greece and Turkey's claim to Mediterranean hydrocarbon wealth. Even if Netanyahu exits power, no imaginable successor could acquiesce to Turkey's claim. *Should Erdogan depart the scene first, his*

⁵ <https://www.turkishminute.com/2019/12/12/turkey-only-country-to-vote-against-un-resolution-on-oceans-and-seas/>

⁶ <https://theaviationist.com/2012/10/18/turkey-israel/>

successor would still have difficulty abandoning an issue that has great popular resonance. Here Trump becomes a wild card. The US is the only other major littoral state, besides Turkey, that has not ratified (UNCLOS) ⁷so he could swing in either direction. The other wild card is the American election.

⁷ <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3700&context=lcp>