

## Israel-Turkey reconciliation: a progress report

### Key points

- Having consolidated his authority after a failed coup attempt in June 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seeking to gain sweeping new powers with victory in the forthcoming referendum.
- Erdogan's campaign has featured some extraordinary populist rhetoric against European powers, rather than against his usual target Israel, following the recent restoration of Israel-Turkey relations.
- The return of Ambassadors in December came at a moment when Turkey was seeking to mend foreign relations on a number of fronts. Specific drivers for cooperation with Israel include the potential for Israel to supply gas to Turkey.
- Whatever the outcome of the Turkish referendum, Israel-Turkey relations will remain delicate, in particular due to Erdogan's and the ruling AKP's Islamist affinities and support for Hamas. The strength of Israel-Turkey reconciliation will be severely tested if and when a fresh round of conflict occurs between Israel and Gaza.
- Another source of deep uncertainty is the fast changing and unpredictable regional role of the Trump administration, which has sought to position itself as more pro-Israel than Obama, but whose relations with Turkey are fraught with difficulties, including US support for Kurdish fighters in the battle against ISIS.
- From a European perspective, Turkey's reconciliation with Israel, whilst welcome, should be interpreted as a pragmatic move rather than signalling a change in Erdogan's world view, which builds on populist Islamist and anti-Western tropes. Furthermore, the

increasingly repressive character of the Turkish government, which has contributed to souring relations with Europe, seems unlikely to change.

### Introduction: Is the reconciliation on track?

The restoration of diplomatic ties between Israel and Turkey followed a six-year freeze, triggered by the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in 2010, when an attempt to break Israel's naval blockade of Gaza left nine Turkish civilians dead after a raid on their boat by Israeli commandos.

The new ambassadors entered their posts in December 2016, following a reconciliation deal signed in June, more than three years after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued an apology over the phone to Erdogan. The way was cleared to full restoration of ties by a £16m compensation payment from Israel to the Mavi Marmara victims' families, in return for which Turkey dropped court cases against IDF soldiers, commanders and civilian officials. In addition, a compromise was found on the issue of Gaza. Turkish demand for an end to the naval blockade of Gaza was not met, but Israel has accepted an increased Turkish role in Gaza's reconstruction. Two Turkish aid shipments were channelled through Israel's Ashdod Port in July and September and Turkey is playing a role addressing Gaza's energy crisis. Meanwhile, Turkey agreed to stop Hamas operating within its borders, though Israel believes Hamas continues to operate in Turkey.

Given these unresolved tensions the ambassadors have been sent, in the words of Israeli journalist Smadar Perry, "to walk on eggshells," but nonetheless their arrival signals an important diplomatic improvement.

## What are the factors strengthening the reconciliation process?

### *Mutual strategic interests*

Turkey led by Erdogan is never going to have a comfortable relationship with Israel, but restoring relations represents a victory of *realpolitik* over ideological differences. The reconciliation overcame its obstacles by a recognition on both sides that the other is a very significant player in a highly complex and unstable region and that the lack of full diplomatic relations reduced the scope of each party to advance their policies.

### *Turkey's desire for fewer problems*

On Turkey's part, Erdogan has seen a simultaneous collapse in foreign policy and domestic stability. Over the last decade, Turkey's strategy of having "zero problems with neighbours" unravelled to the point where Turkey faced frictions on almost every foreign front, as well as domestic Kurdish and Islamist terror, and dangerous rifts within Turkish society. Erdogan's international approach in the second half of 2016 consisted of mending ties, in particular with Russia – symbolised by their joint sponsorship of a ceasefire deal in Syria – as well as Israel.

### *Potential energy cooperation*

The recommencement of gas transfer talks was an explicit part of the reconciliation deal. Israel's Minister of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources Yuval Steinitz, who is close to Netanyahu, and his Turkish counterpart Berat Albayrak, who is also President Erdogan's son-in-law, met in Istanbul on 13 October to discuss a bilateral natural gas pipeline. Turkey seeks to diversify its gas imports, possessing few domestic sources of its own and being dependent on Russia for more than 50 per cent of its supply. Israel offers considerable potential as a reliable source. For Israel, seeking export markets, including pipelines into Europe, it is *cheaper* to export gas to Turkey than to lay a pipeline to Cyprus and Greece, who are also discussing energy cooperation with Israel.

### *Trade*

Remarkably, even during the six-year hiatus in relations, bilateral trade volume actually increased from approx. £2.4bn in 2010 to approx. £4.5bn in 2014. Meanwhile, the collapse of Syria raised the significance of Israel as a transit option for trade from Europe and Turkey to Jordan and the Gulf.

If economic cooperation bound Israel and Turkey even at their worst moments of diplomatic relations, they will likely be further strengthened now that diplomatic ties have been fully restored. Turkish academic Ahmet Kasim Han has *said*: "During the 1990s, Israeli-Turkey relations were maintained by the co-operation of the two armies' generals. Now businessmen will carry that responsibility."

### *Common interests in the Caucasus*

Another area of common interest is support for Azerbaijan in its border conflict with Armenia, which reignited in April 2016. Both Israel and Turkey support Azerbaijan, which is an important source of crude oil for Israel.

### *Syria and counter-terror cooperation*

The conflict in Syria could be a source of cooperation or tension between Israel and Turkey. Turkey is now actively engaged in the fight against ISIS and has been targeted with a series of attacks from the radical Sunni Jihadist actor. This creates an added impetus for Turkey to restore ties with Israel, which could facilitate intelligence and other cooperation against the terror threat. That said, Turkey has recently cooperated with Russia and Iran on a ceasefire deal for Syria which excludes the US. Until recently Turkey had been demanding Bashar al-Assad's removal and was in tension with Iran over the future of Syria, but the Russian led process could leave Iran and its proxy Hezbollah with a significant presence in the country. This is a source of growing concern in Israel. Furthermore, Turkey's overriding priority is to keep Kurdish fighters away from its borders, whereas Israelis are instinctively sympathetic to the aspirations of the Kurds, as a non-Arab minority seeking independence in the region.

## What are the threats to Israel-Turkey reconciliation?

### *Erdogan's unpredictability*

Erdogan's leadership represents a key threat to Israel-Turkey reconciliation. Until his ascent to power as leader of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2003, Israel and Turkey were close partners; as pro-Western US allies sharing many strategic concerns and aspirations. Ties between Israel and the dominant military establishment in Turkey were particularly strong. All that was changed with Erdogan's ascent to power. His world view includes strong Islamist, anti-Western and anti-Zionist tropes, and

he harbours grand ambitions to restore Turkey's status as the leader of the Islamic world. This has driven Erdogan's pro-Muslim Brotherhood and pro-Hamas sympathies and his populist anti-Zionist and sometimes antisemitic outbursts. Following the failed coup against him in July 2016, he has systematically purged the opposition and consolidated power. The influence of the military has declined dramatically. His preferences are therefore critical to upholding the deal with Israel.

His personal clashes with Israeli leaders run deep. Erdogan's public disagreement with Shimon Peres at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos, in the wake of a major round of Israel-Hamas violence in Gaza, marked a significant downturn in relations. Turkey did not offer Israel condolences after Peres's death in September 2016. Following the coup attempt in Turkey, while Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon [said](#) that "Israel respects the democratic process in Turkey and looks forward to the continuation of the reconciliation process between Turkey and Israel," Erdogan was reportedly annoyed that Israel did not condemn it outright. These tensions will likely render the political relationship a distant one that will be under permanent threat of deterioration.

Moreover, Erdogan's domestic challenges may also impact his diplomacy. Since the attempted coup his administration has carried out a wide-ranging crackdown against internal opponents, widely criticised in the West as a sign of increasing intolerance, autocracy and repression. Erdogan has long used hostility to Israel as a source of legitimacy at home and abroad, and may do so again.

Erdogan's power will be enhanced further if he succeeds in advancing constitutional reforms shifting Turkey to a presidential system along the lines of that in the US and France, allowing Erdogan to be the Head of State, the head of government and the head of the ruling party and potentially allowing him to stay in power for two more terms up to 2029. In January 2017 Turkey's parliament approved a new 18-article constitution to create an executive presidency and a referendum is due to take place on the 16th April.

### *The Trump Factor*

Whilst US President Barack Obama played a personal role in trying to restore relations between two important US regional allies, the Trump administration could complicate Israel-Turkey relations.

In the Cold War period, a triangular relationship existed between the US and Israel and Turkey, the two key non-Arab US military allies on the periphery of the Middle East. The US has had significant strategic interests in its relations with both countries, and deep interests in the two getting along. The US currently conducts operations against ISIS in Syria and Iraq from the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, and the US Department of State and USAID are forecasted to allocate approximately [£3bn](#) in aid to Turkey in 2017. However, US-Turkey relations have suffered in recent years. The US has been concerned with Erdogan's increasingly autocratic orientation, whilst Erdogan is perturbed by US assistance to the Kurds in Syria and the unfulfilled demand to extradite Islamic leader Fetula Gulen, whom Erdogan considers responsible for the coup attempt against him.

None of these issues appeared to be resolved when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Turkey on 30 March, despite his stressing the importance of Turkey as a strategic ally to the US. Whilst Trump has emphasised his commitment to destroying ISIS, against whom Turkey is fighting on the ground in Syria, the strong strain of anti-Islamic populism in the Trump administration will be a constant potential source of friction with the proudly Islamic Erdogan.

Meanwhile Trump has sought to differentiate himself from Obama with a much warmer tone towards the current Israeli Government. This orientation, and particular potential Trump policies such as moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, could become additional sources of strain between Israel and Turkey.

### *Hamas, Gaza and Egypt*

The Palestinian issue is the factor most likely to exacerbate Erdogan's deep lying antipathy to Israel. Erdogan has positioned Turkey as a key political and financial supporter of Hamas, allowing Hamas to operate on Turkish soil, demanding an end to Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, meeting regularly with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, and seeking to play a leading role in Gaza's rehabilitation. The deal does allow Turkey to play a greater role in the Gaza Strip, in particular in addressing the water and electricity crises. This has been illustrated recently with Turkey promising to send fuel to alleviate Gaza's acute energy crisis and sending officials via Israel to Gaza to offer assistance.

However, renewed fighting between Israel and Hamas will test the agreement's resilience and

the unstable situation inside Gaza, coupled with the [recent election](#) of hardliner Yahya Sinwar to lead Hamas, may raise the likelihood of such an escalation. In each instance of military escalation in Gaza since 2008-09's Operation Cast Lead, Erdogan has vociferously condemned Israel, accusing Israel of "ethnic cleansing" and labelling Israel a "terrorist state" in 2012. In a rare [interview](#) with Israeli media on 21 November 2016, he was asked about his previous comparison between Israeli actions and Hitler and replied, "I don't agree with what Hitler did and I also don't agree with what Israel did in Gaza," a remark that drew a sharp [reaction](#) in Israel.

One of the key features of the [Israel-Turkey reconciliation deal](#) was Israel's request for Turkey to stop Hamas operating in Turkey. Yet, Israel believes Hamas is continuing to operate there, and that attempts to organise terrorism in the West Bank have been guided from Turkey.

Meanwhile, Israel is also sensitive to the concerns of the Egyptian regime, which broke off relations with Turkey in 2013 in response to the latter's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt opposes Turkish involvement in Gaza and shares Israel's concerns about empowering Hamas. Ultimately, good relations with Egypt are more important to Israel than good relations with Turkey.

## What are the implications for Britain and Europe?

Last summer's Turkish-Israeli reconciliation agreement appears to be holding steady, as Erdogan shifts his focus to the upcoming referendum to determine whether the powers of the presidency should be expanded. In the past, as one Turkey observer [noted](#), "You knew when elections were getting closer in Turkey over the last eight years by the fierceness of the attacks on Israel". Now, for the [first time](#) since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, neither Israel-Turkish relations, nor the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are being utilised to drum up public support. Instead, rhetorical attacks on Israel have been replaced by Erdogan shifting his attention to Europe.

Israel-Turkey reconciliation is clearly something to be welcomed for Western powers with an interest in the promotion of stability and reduction of tensions in the region. The restoration of ties has the potential to create a positive axis of cooperation in containing the fallout from the Syrian conflict, including countering the threat posed by ISIS and likeminded groups, and a new channel of support for

humanitarian efforts in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, it could pave the way for future energy cooperation which would underpin the Israel-Turkey relationship in the long term and could make Israeli gas available for European markets.

At the same time, Erdogan's readiness to take the reconciliation forward should be interpreted as a pragmatic move, rather than signalling a deeper change in his world view, which remains anchored in Islamist and anti-Western tropes and which could receive a tailwind if he were to win the upcoming referendum. Former Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon recently [argued](#) that Erdogan's Turkey represents one of the three radical Islamic movements currently vying for hegemony in the Middle East and beyond that represent a threat to Europe (the other two being Iran and the Sunni jihadists from Al Qaeda to ISIS). According to Ya'alon, for some time now Erdogan's approach to Europe has been predicated on his goal of "creating a neo-Ottoman empire based on the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood," with the ultimate goal of "Islamising Europe". Victory in the referendum could reinforce Erdogan's increasingly aggressive policy towards Europe, which has included belligerent rhetoric towards its leaders and the facilitation of illegal immigration to the continent.

Furthermore, the increasingly repressive character of the Turkish government, which further contributed to the souring relations with Europe, and which included recent [comments by Erdogan](#) accusing the Dutch government of Nazism, seems unlikely to change. While Turkey is looking to build a relationship with the new administration in the US, and has economic and strategic interests in maintaining a viable relationship with Israel, for the moment, Erdogan feels he has little to lose by a diplomatic row with Europe.

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