



Erdoğan and His Arab “Brothers”

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: After the infamous [Mavi Marmara incident](#) of May 2010, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then foreign policy czar Ahmet Davutoğlu (later PM and now an Erdoğan opponent) [pledged](#) to internationally isolate Israel. This was intended to help them advance their Islamist agenda and augment an emerging unity in the *umma*, preferably under Turkish leadership. A decade later, pragmatic Arab states are lining up to normalize relations with Israel, leaving state actors Iran and Turkey as well as non-state actor Hamas in a punishing position of international isolation—exactly where Turkey wanted to push Israel.

Neither the Ottoman nor the modern Turkish language has ever been short of racist proverbs denigrating Arabs and their culture. No more, said Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Islamist leader who has been at the helm in Turkey since 2002. He made it a habit to publicly refer to Arabs, including his then regional nemesis Syrian president Bashar Assad, as “[my Arab brothers](#).” His goal was to build a Muslim-Arab pact, a modern *umma* under Turkish leadership as in Ottoman times, to challenge Israel in the region and, more broadly, Western civilization. In 2010, Turkey’s state broadcaster TRT even [launched](#) an Arabic language channel, TRT Arabi. Sadly for Erdoğan, his attempt to fuse Islam and anti-Zionism seems to have fallen apart.

Turkish diplomats officially said the recent normalization deal between the UAE and Israel meant Abu Dhabi was betraying the “Palestinian cause.” This response from Ankara looked [ridiculous](#), as it appeared to have forgotten that Turkey itself has had diplomatic relations with Israel since 1949. Turkish Islamists apparently do not care about looking ridiculous.

In its September 10 edition, *Yeni Akit*, a staunchly pro-Erdoğan and Islamist militant newspaper, [said](#) the “Saudis were competing with the UAE in treason [against the ‘Palestinian cause’].” *Yeni Akit* was referring to the

decision by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, in a landmark [change of policy](#), to allow all flights to and from Israel to use their airspace. The trouble with that criticism is that there too, [Israel is](#) one of the 138 countries with which Turkey has mutual accords for the use of airspace.

According to this logic, diplomatic relations with Israel and flights using the airspace of both countries are privileges that should be accorded to one Muslim country alone: Turkey. If other Muslim countries sign identical accords with Israel, it's treason.

This rhetoric reflects Turkey's increasing loneliness in the Muslim/Arab world (with the sole exception of Qatar) after several years of loneliness within the NATO alliance. Turkey can thus claim the bizarre title: "Odd man out in both NATO and the Muslim world."

This state of affairs has been coming on for years, but Erdoğan has stubbornly refused to recalibrate his policy.

In early 2019, six nations, including the Palestinian Authority (Erdoğan's ideological next of kin), agreed to found the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#). At a July 2019 meeting in Cairo, the energy ministers of Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, and the PA, as well as a representative of the energy minister of Jordan, said they would form a committee to elevate the Forum to the level of an international organization that respects the rights of its members to their natural resources. Erdoğan privately felt betrayed by this act of treason from his "Palestinian brothers," comforting himself that the traitors were not members of his beloved Hamas.

In October 2019, the Arab League [condemned](#) Turkey's cross-border military operation in northeast Syria as an "invasion of an Arab state's land and an aggression on its sovereignty." The League would consider taking measures against Turkey in the economic, investment, and cultural sectors, including tourism and military cooperation. It also called on the UN Security Council to "take the necessary measures to stop the Turkish aggression and [enforce] the withdrawal from Syrian territory immediately." To Ankara's deep embarrassment, its closest regional ally, Qatar, did not block the League's communique condemning Turkey.

Turkey's reaction was characteristically childish. Fahrettin Altun, Erdoğan's communications director, [said](#) the "Arab League do not speak for the Arab world." An angry Erdoğan [said](#), "All of you [Arab nations] won't make one Turkey." That's quite a drift from his "our Arab brothers" rhetoric.

Apparently in the Turkish world of make-believe, only Turkey's Islamists or those with a seal of approval from Ankara can speak for the Arab world. Worse, Erdoğan *et al* believe this idea can sell on the Arab street if it is dressed up in nice anti-Zionist, pro-Hamas rhetoric.

On September 9, the Arab League condemned Turkey (along with Iran) for "interference in the region and the Palestinian cause." At the League's [foreign ministers' meeting](#), Egypt's FM Sameh Shoukry said Cairo "will not stand motionless in face of the Turkish greed that is especially being shown in northern Iraq, Libya, and Syria." Once again, Ankara "[totally rejected](#)" all the decisions taken at the meeting.

Murat Yetkin, a prominent Turkish journalist and editor of *Yetkin Report*, recently [wrote](#): "With the exception of [currently ambiguous] Libya and Qatar, what unites the Arabs now is no longer anti-Israeli sentiment but anti-Turkish sentiment."

That's quite a long political journey to travel, and a tough destination for Erdoğan.

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