



Turkey Will Not Alter Its Anti-Israel, Anti-Western Position Until It Pays a Price for It

by Dr. Efrat Aviv

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the first days of the war that broke out following the October 7 massacre conducted by Hamas, Turkey employed a relatively balanced discourse about it. But after the bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on October 17, Ankara hardened its stance and bluntly condemned Israel. This change in Erdoğan's rhetoric reflects a long pattern of anti-Israel sentiment. Erdoğan's support for Hamas in the wake of the massacre pulls Turkey, a NATO member, further away from the West. As long as Turkey pays no price for its anti-Israeli rhetoric, it will continue, and the resulting distance between Turkey and the West could have serious consequences.

After the events of October 7, Turkey remained silent. It issued no condemnation of Hamas for the massacre and did not express any sympathy for Israel's grief and shock. Following the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on October 17, Turkey finally spoke out on the war by issuing a condemnation of the State of Israel.

Turkey's support for Hamas is not new. The connection between Turkey and Hamas has long been a stumbling block on the path to normalization with Israel, and it became highly visible with the Mavi Marmara flotilla clash in 2010.

In 2011, Ankara issued a direct invitation to Hamas to establish a presence in Turkey, which it immediately did. Ever since, Turkey has served as a safe haven

for Hamas senior leadership. Experts label Turkey the second-largest Hamas center after Gaza – a striking fact, as Turkey is a member of NATO.

Turkey is the only NATO country to maintain such close ties to a terrorist organization. The Hamas office in Turkey is well-armed, able to launder money through Turkish financial institutions, and equipped to facilitate the entrance of terrorists into Israeli territory.

In 2015, Cihat Yağmur, a Hamas operative involved in the kidnapping of IDF soldier Nachshon Wachsman, became the Hamas representative in Turkey. Among other responsibilities, Yağmur oversees terror units in Judea and Samaria and maintains connections with the Turkish government and its intelligence services. In an interview with the Islamist newspaper *-Yeni Akit* in 2018, Yağmur said that unlike other Muslim leaders and most Muslim-majority countries, Erdoğan genuinely loves Jerusalem, as is evident in Turkey's substantial investments in charities and material and moral support for Jerusalem. According to Yağmur, Erdoğan is the only leader who truly cares about the Al-Aqsa Mosque and understands what needs to be done.

Erdoğan does not attempt to conceal his support of Hamas and holds public meetings with senior Hamas leaders. In July 2023, he hosted the head of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh. In 2020, Ankara granted Turkish citizenship to Haniyeh and 12 other Hamas activists. Haniyeh's deputy, Saleh al-Arouri, who is referred to as the commander of Hamas West Bank, is a US-designated terrorist with a bounty of \$5 million on his head. Al-Arouri celebrated the massacre on October 7 on social media and is believed to be one of the chief planners of the attacks. He holds a Turkish passport, which grants him freedom of movement worldwide.

In 2012, Zahir Jabarin, Hamas's financial chief, reported that more than 1,000 Palestinian terrorists who were released as part of the Shalit deal with Israel in 2011 were managed and funded for terrorist activities in Israel from his office in Istanbul. Jabarin serves the Hamas network by establishing businesses, obtaining permits, and acquiring commercial real estate in Turkey.

The Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), a Turkish non-governmental organization with close ties to the Turkish government, has been transferring cash payments to its Gaza branch since 2010. Hamas uses these payments to fund

terrorism. In July 2023, Israeli authorities seized 16 tons of explosive material originating from Turkey and destined for Gaza, likely intended for Hamas rockets.

Erdoğan's political views align with the ideology of Hamas, and in 2017, he even quoted a Hamas leader calling for the destruction of Israel. Erdoğan frequently compares Israel to Nazi Germany. After October 7, he referred to Hamas as a "resistance group fighting to defend its lands." In his view, Hamas represents the essence of the Palestinian liberation movement, and for that reason he refused to condemn Hamas after October 7. Similarly to his response at the time of the Mavi Marmara incident, he threatened that Turkey could "come unexpectedly any night." It is worth noting that a year ago, he made similar threats to send missiles to Athens. Erdoğan often expresses his political positions via threat, and his words should not be dismissed lightly.

Turkey has raised the issue of Israel's nuclear capability and suggested that Israel, as well as other countries, should be disarmed of nuclear weapons. Erdoğan also told UN Secretary-General António Guterres that "Israel must be prosecuted in international courts for the war crimes it commits in the Gaza Strip" and later claimed that Israel is carrying out "the most heinous attacks in human history." He reiterated his anti-Western rhetoric, which aligns well with Hamas's values. In response, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen instructed Israeli diplomats to leave Turkey "to reassess the relations between Israel and Turkey."

In a conversation with Al Jazeera, Turkish Foreign Minister -Hakan Fidan said Hamas operates as a political party within the Palestinian state system and is a product of occupation. "We are a country that recognizes the State of Palestine, and along with us, close to 140 countries also recognize it," he said. "Therefore, we do not classify factors operating within any country as terrorists or non-terrorists." When asked if Turkey would lead an economic, diplomatic, and military embargo of Israel similar to the one the US imposed on Russia during the Ukraine war, - Fidan said there are no obstacles to such an initiative and added that the issue is on Turkey's agenda.

Whether Turkey decides to halt trade with Israel or not, expectations published on October 9, 2023, in *The Marker* indicate that even accounting for the consistent increase in the volume of bilateral trade between the countries, there remains

enormous untapped potential for business cooperation between the two states. It is speculated that one million Israeli tourists will visit Turkey in 2023-24. Israelis have a short memory, and despite the tourist boycott and suspension of purchases at Turkish online sites, it is expected that trade will fully resume after tensions ease between the countries.

Considering Turkey's pressing economic challenges, Erdoğan will find it difficult to unilaterally sever ties with Israel, though he is likely to display a tougher stance towards Israel to divert attention from those challenges. However, a massacre on the scale of what occurred on October 7, an atrocity of a severity that Israel had never before experienced throughout its existence as a state, makes it hard to believe that trade with Turkey will return to what it once was. The fact that Erdoğan held a major rally in support of Hamas on October 28, 2023, the day before the centennial of the birth of modern Turkey, did not go unnoticed in Israel. Supporting Hamas on that day in particular painted a picture of Turkey's future – one in which the Turkey of Atatürk and even of Demirel no longer exists.

Today's Turkey aims to see itself in a hundred years as the Turkey shaped by Erdoğan: a country with dictatorial rule and rife with anti-Israel and anti-Western sentiment. Turkey does not cease to blame the West, the United States, and Israel for a wide variety of ills but never points a similar accusing finger at Russia.

The Turkish elite may be uncomfortable with the idea of dictatorship, but it is not bothered in the least by that dictatorship's anti-Israel position. With that position, the intellectual elite in Turkey reveals its ignorance of the history of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. When it comes to this conflict in particular, the elite has no concerns about press freedom in Turkey. No one wonders why the Turkish media is so one-sided regarding Israel. The Turkish elite's blind support of Hamas and implacable hatred of the Jews is as unsurprising as Erdoğan's reaction to the October 7 massacre.

Anyone who thought Turkey's normalization with Israel would succeed, particularly insofar as it works in Turkish interests by turning it towards the West, was mistaken. Turkey opposes Israel and the Jews for the same reasons as Hamas. The hatred is not about time- and place-dependent factors; it's about a deep-seated antisemitic enmity that tolerates the spilling of Jewish blood inside Turkey by

labeling the Jews "internal enemies" and accusing them, rather than their attackers, of being criminals. It was only a matter of time before Erdoğan's rhetoric would exact a cost on the Jewish community in Turkey.

Erdoğan is taking quite a few risks by maintaining this position. The partitioning policy that Turkey implemented to protect its interests vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia, which it has operated for many decades, will not work in the Middle East nor vis-à-vis Israel. Turkey's credibility as a regional mediator is also at stake: as Turkey moves away from the West, it loses credibility in the region. Erdoğan has not proposed that Turkey act as a mediating or compromising force in the Hamas-Israel war, and that stance may prevent Turkey from mediating other conflicts.

Israel must not underestimate the degree of Erdoğan's hostility. He has never acknowledged Israel's right to exist as a state, and in view of his consistently virulent anti-Israel rhetoric over the years, any such statement would only be made if he were either very secure or very desperate.

It is worth noting that the current tension between Ankara and Jerusalem makes cooperation on the Eastern Mediterranean gas reservoirs an impossibility for Turkey. Erdoğan's willingness to persist in his anti-Israelism against Turkey's interests suggests that he is not yet paying a sufficient price for his statements and actions in the region.

One of the main reasons for Erdoğan's support for Hamas was his desire to divert the attention of his electorate away from the removal of Turkey's veto on Sweden's entry into NATO. Local elections in Turkey are coming up, and Erdoğan, who has already lost Ankara and Istanbul in the past, is concerned about a similar loss. Erdoğan's deviation from the West, as expressed in his statements in favor of Palestine, stands in stark contrast to his signature on the protocol for Sweden's NATO accession and its submission to Parliament for final approval.

Although the Turkish parliamentary subcommittee on foreign affairs has not yet voted on the matter, Erdoğan's move with the protocol seems strategically planned as an olive branch to the West. Erdoğan is waiting for the green light from Washington to purchase F-16 fighter jets worth \$20 billion. Turkey removed its opposition to Swedish accession to NATO after steps were taken by Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands to influence Turkish opinion.

Turkey's main objection to Sweden's NATO entry was its purported status as a haven for Kurds, whom Ankara regards as terrorists. It is interesting to consider what would happen if the EU and the US, where the Kurdish militant group PKK is designated as a terrorist organization, treated PKK fighters the way Turkey treats Hamas "fighters."

As long as Turkey pays no price for its anti-Western policy, that policy will continue. During World War II, Turkey managed to remain neutral for most of the war despite its strategic location, which could have influenced the course of the war. That neutrality is unlikely to be sustained in the next world war.

Dr. Efrat Aviv is a senior researcher at the BESA Center and a senior lecturer in the Department of General History at Bar-Ilan University.