



Erdoğan, You Can't Sail a Ship with Words¹

by Prof. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,294, August 4, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Erdoğan's threat that Turkey will enter Israel, as it did Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, is one of the most serious statements in the history of Israel-Turkey relations. This article describes the political context and background of this threat and explores what might be behind it and where it may lead in the relations between the countries. It analyzes the political and economic challenges Erdoğan is facing, with a focus on Turkey's foreign policy in recent years. While Erdoğan's threats should be taken seriously, it is unlikely that they will materialize at this stage, though it is important to keep a close watch on Turkey's actions in the future.

In 2017, I published a book on anti-Zionism and antisemitism in Turkey. In that book, besides describing the development of antisemitic and anti-Israel phenomena in Turkey over the years, I explored the question of whether Erdoğan himself is an antisemite. I argued that whether or not he is personally antisemitic – a judgment I leave to the reader – the crucial issue is his influence on the rise and spread of antisemitic sentiment in Turkish society. Unlike other countries, antisemitism and anti-Zionism in Turkey are often dictated from above.

I was reminded of this after Erdoğan's recent threat to Israel, in which he asserted that Turkey would enter Israel as it had entered Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh and that nothing could be done to prevent it. "We must be strong so that Israel does not continue its ridiculous actions against Palestine," he said. This threat, partially intended to create fear that Israel might do to the Turks what it allegedly did to

the Palestinians, came after Netanyahu's speech to Congress but is not necessarily related to it, except as an attempt to gain popularity in an arena other than Washington. Erdoğan has become obsessed with Netanyahu, portraying him in Turkish media as a new Hitler. This rhetoric is exemplified by a street ad with a graphic of Netanyahu's face gradually transforming into Hitler's. The image is captioned, "Hitler is not dead, he is only changing shape." Netanyahu's speech in Congress might have been a catalyst for the threat, but it was not the starting point of Erdoğan's hostility.

Erdoğan's statement came a day after the Hezbollah massacre of 12 Druze children in Majdal Shams, an event he did not address. Even after October 7, Erdoğan said simply, "We invite all parties to act reasonably and avoid impulsive measures."

Does Erdoğan intend to send military units to Gaza or to provide aid to Hamas in the form of ammunition? Turkey's arms exports have surged in recent years. In 2022, Turkey's defense industry recorded a turnover of \$10 billion, with arms exports at \$4.4 billion and expected to increase. The Turkish drone Bayraktar, which has played a significant role in the Russia-Ukraine war as well as in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, is not the only weapon Turkey produces.

Israel was surprised by Erdoğan's threat, though proof of his intentions surfaced as early as September 2023. This event was overshadowed by the October 2023 massacre. In September, customs officials at the port of Ashdod uncovered an attempt by Turkey to smuggle 16 tons of rocket material into the Gaza Strip. Two containers containing 54 tons of gypsum sacks that were sent by Turkey to Gaza were found to contain ammonium chloride, which is used by terrorist organizations in the Strip for rocket production.

What factors led Erdoğan to make such a severe threat against Israel?

These threats should be viewed against the backdrop of Turkey's rapprochement with Syria and Iran. Erdoğan spent much of the last decade trying to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, following a close personal relationship with Assad between 2007 and 2010 as part of Ankara's "zero problems" policy with its neighbors. At one point, Erdoğan even attempted to mediate peace talks between Syria and Israel. The current Turkish rapprochement with Assad, whom Erdoğan has called a terrorist multiple times, is mainly related to anti-Syrian riots in several

Turkish cities. In Ankara, opposition parties are calling for the mass deportation of Syrian refugees, and the government is turning to the Syrian regime it once sought to topple to help solve this problem. The riots exposed longstanding tensions between Syrians and Turks that are being exacerbated by economic pressures from Turkey's high inflation. The Syrian issue poses a threat to Erdoğan's popularity within Turkey and strengthens criticism of him.

Beyond Syria and Iran, there is also a strengthening of relations between Turkey and Russia. In May 2023, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, Syria and Iran met in Moscow. This warming of relations with enemies of the West is particularly notable as Turkey is a NATO member.

The Turkish threat to Israel and the Turkish-Israeli conflicts over the past decade and a half have repeatedly provided the Justice and Development Party and its leader with opportunities to position themselves as champions of Islam, an image they strive to project to fortify their electoral base. This base is under threat due to the erosion of political authority and the ongoing economic crisis, making it crucial for Erdoğan to act prominently against Israel. Recall that about a decade ago, during his first presidential campaign, Erdoğan erected large billboards showing him as the man who made Israel apologize for the Mavi Marmara incident. This is also why aviation, tourism, and trade relations between Israel and Turkey were almost completely halted by Erdoğan's order despite the tripling they had enjoyed through the countries' economic ties. Nevertheless, Erdoğan continues to face significant domestic criticism and protests regarding his policy toward Israel. In some circles, he is considered too lenient, as he has not suspended diplomatic relations and continues to allow a substantial supply of Azerbaijani gas to transit through Turkey on its way to Israel.

Criticism primarily comes from those close to Erdoğan – particularly the *Yeniden Refah Partisi* (New Welfare Party), which gained popularity at the expense of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party in the last local elections (the party gained 6.19% percent of the votes). In his speech threatening Israel, Erdoğan went out of his way to condemn Doğan Bekin, New Welfare Party Istanbul MP of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, thereby creating a direct link between the threat to Israel and this party.

Protests against the Justice and Development Party are not solely about economics or domestic and foreign politics. There is also controversy over a proposed law requiring the euthanization of stray dogs not housed in kennels. This law, which passed without consultation with veterinarians, sparked protests across the country. Such protests could ignite a broader movement, potentially leading to demonstrations driven by the ongoing economic crisis. Those demonstrations could be similar to the Gezi Park riots of 2013 or even more severe. It is therefore critical to Erdoğan that he maintain domestic support.

Additionally, [Turkey's relationship with Hamas](#) must be highlighted. Despite calls for Hamas leaders to leave Turkey after October 7, no action was taken to enforce this instruction. Turkish support for Hamas negatively affects ordinary Turkish citizens, including Turkish Jews. The law prohibiting dual citizenship with Israel further exacerbates alleged loyalty issues among Turkish Jews.

So what is the real significance of Erdoğan's threat?

It is unlikely that Turkey will send military units to Gaza at this point. Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel still exist. Turkey threatened to send flotillas and attack Israel after the Marmara incident in 2010 and following the denial of humanitarian aid to Gaza after October 7, but those threats turned out to be mere rhetoric. The current threat, while equally unlikely to be carried out, could indicate plans to send weapons and intelligence assistance to Israel's rivals.

Secondly, as Turkey is a member of NATO, it is improbable that the US would permit such a scenario. Whether or not Erdoğan's threats have any substance, the simple fact of a country's president threatening the military invasion of a country with which it has diplomatic relations is serious. This is significant for Israel, but also for other countries with which Turkey has relationships. Notably, aside from the extreme right leader in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, no other party has responded to the threat against Israel.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus, and Turkey continues to threaten Greece and Cyprus despite peace talks. The latter was warned by Sheikh Nasrallah not to allow Israel to attack from its territory in the event of war breaking out between Israel and Hezbollah, but it was

also called upon to “stay away” from the conflict by Hakan Fidan, Turkey's foreign minister.

It is noteworthy that Turkey can condemn and threaten Syria and Greece but still negotiate with them, as it did with Israel before Erdoğan's era. Erdoğan was recently quoted as saying, "We believe it is useful to open clenched fists. We want disputes to be resolved through mutual dialogue at the negotiating table." But it is hard to believe that Erdoğan's Turkey is capable of making such statements regarding Israel (which might answer the question of whether or not Erdoğan is an antisemite).

Lastly, regarding Majdal Shams: The massacre of 12 children during a soccer match should have shocked Erdoğan, who began his career as a soccer player.

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

Lafla peynir gemisi yürümez.¹