



What is new about the reset between Israel and Turkey?

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Entering 2021, revising its foreign policy became an ever more pressing necessity for Ankara, in the light of both international and domestic developments.
- The Turkish government only took steps towards mending its broken ties with countries in the region, including Israel, when the economic cost of its assertive policies began to threaten Erdoğan's rule.
- Israeli PM Netanyahu's defeat in the 2021 elections provided an opportunity for Ankara to step up its diplomatic overtures toward Israel.
- Bilateral relations may follow a different course than they did in the 2000s, primarily because the basic parameters of the relationship between Israel and Turkey have changed since Israel made new friends in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.
- The erosion of institutions and the subsequent personalization of Turkish foreign policy render bilateral relations prone to crisis. For Israelis, this is a manageable risk, at least for now, given the benefits Ankara can expect from normalizing relations with Israel.
- Against the backdrop of an intensifying power competition between the US and China, Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and the current security landscape in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, opportunities for cooperation between Israel and Turkey remain dependent on the resolution of long-standing issues.

What is new about the reset between Israel and Turkey?

The crawling reconciliation process has indeed gained impetus following Israeli President Isaac Herzog's landmark visit to Ankara in March 2022—the first by an Israeli President in 15 years.

A NEW ERA in Israeli-Turkish relations has been ushered in with the exchange of envoys after four years of turbulence. The crawling reconciliation process has indeed gained impetus following Israeli President Isaac Herzog's landmark visit to Ankara in March 2022—the first by an Israeli President in 15 years. The warm messages, high-level visits and phone calls the two leaders shared in its aftermath all indicated that the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement was set to warm still further. In July, the two countries signed a new [aviation](#) deal, paving the way for Israel's national airline, El Al, to resume flights to Turkey, which had been suspended in 2007 over security concerns. Shortly thereafter, Israel declared that it would be relaunching the office of its economic attaché in Istanbul. Then, in August, the two sides [expressed](#) their intention to reach full normalization in bilateral relations through the dispatch of ambassadors. As a sign of warming ties, in September, Israel appointed Irit Lillian, who had served as chargé d'affaires in Ankara for the previous two years, as its new ambassador to Turkey. A few weeks later, in a reciprocal move, Ankara announced Ambassador Şakir Özkan Torunlar, who had formerly served as Turkey's Consul General in Jerusalem (2010–2014), as its new envoy to Israel.

Given the ups and downs in bilateral relations over the last two decades, these recent developments raise the question of whether the thaw between Israel and Turkey could lead to a genuine and long-lasting normalization this time round. Many view a return to the status quo in place before the Mavi Marmara Incident in 2010 as a possible and even satisfactory outcome. However, the new reset between Israel and Turkey does not guarantee a return to the status quo ante, and bilateral relations could follow a zigzagging course instead.

The basic parameters of the relationship between Israel and Turkey have changed in the post-Mavi Marmara period, in which Israel has forged closer diplomatic and security ties with various countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. As a result, Israel is no longer isolated in the region, as it was in the past. Turkish politics have also undergone a major transformation over the years as the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) consolidated its power, excluding the military from politics and concentrating power in the hands of the executive. Turkey's transition to a presidential system in 2018, though in effect it simply formalized the ongoing power transfer, has changed the institutional structure of its foreign policy-making, paving the way for a personalization of foreign policy and eroding the role of traditional institutions such as the foreign ministry. As such, foreign policy decisions have become more open to the influence of domestic politics and leader preferences.

Geopolitical interests and domestic concerns appear to be the two currents guiding Turkey's policy towards Israel, flowing in opposite directions, undermining the consistency and predictability of bilateral relations. Against the backdrop of an intensifying power struggle between the US and China, and Russia, the current security landscape in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean fosters an Israeli-Turkish rapprochement. However, bilateral cooperation may nevertheless remain limited, as long as long-standing issues are not addressed.

The long fall out between Israel and Turkey

During its first period in power (2002–2007), the AKP's Muslim identity along with its declared commitment to democratic values and secularism, elevated Turkey's profile in the international arena as a model country in the post-9/11 world. Its multilateral and pragmatic foreign policy approach also enabled the defense cooperation between Israel and Turkey, whose foundations were laid in the mid-1990s, to continue.

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The course of bilateral relations started to change as the AKP government, having gained experience and confidence, shifted to an autonomous/independent foreign policy line and moved away from the West. As it pivoted toward the Middle East through the cultivation of closer ties with Syria, Turkey had come to see Israel as a liability, and even as a regional rival. In this context, the outbreak of the Arab protests in late 2010 would trigger a more fundamental shift in Turkish foreign policy, with some grave implications.

As much as the favorable international setting, it was the AKP's power consolidation at home that made this policy shift possible. The EU harmonization packages (2003, 2004) contributed to the civilianization of the political sphere in Turkey, reducing the military's involvement in politics. The "Ergenekon" and "Balyoz" [Sledgehammer] trials of 2007 and 2010 severely damaged the image of the Turkish military, which had traditionally been perceived as Turkey's most trustworthy institution and the guardian of secularism. The military also formed the backbone of strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey. Thus, the waning of its power caused a setback in bilateral relations, albeit indirectly. The government had gradually taken firm control of all kinds of rival institutions (including the military and the judiciary) which might pose a risk to Erdoğan's leadership. In this respect, the constitutional amendments paved the way for power to be concentrated in the hands of the executive and gave the government more room to maneuver in foreign affairs. Turkish policymakers were thus able to pursue policies that reflected ideological preferences and domestic concerns to a greater extent.

From 2010 on, Turkish foreign policy shifted toward a pro-Islamist and pro-Muslim Brotherhood line, with rhetoric that was increasingly anti-Israel. This paradigm shift not only slowed down the normalization process with Israel, it also led to a deterioration in Turkey's relations with several allies in the Middle East and North Africa.

Against this backdrop, Israeli-Turkish relations began to deteriorate with the collapse of Turkey-brokered negotiations between Israel and Syria in 2008. At the time, Prime Minister Erdoğan, who had invested in the initiative personally, perceived Israeli Prime Minister's Ehud Olmert's decision to launch Operation Cast Lead only a couple of days after their meeting in Ankara in late December as a betrayal. This was followed in January 2009 by Erdoğan storming out of the Middle East panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos, when he got angry with the moderator for cutting him short, having mauled Israeli President Shimon Peres by saying "When it comes to killing, you know how to kill..." In hindsight, the poor timing of the Davos panel was an invitation to crisis. Interestingly, the two leaders had a positive phone conversation after the panel and agreed to control the damage. On his way back, seeing the positive reverberations of his defiance of Israel at home and in the Arab street, Prime Minister Erdoğan would come to view what happened in Davos in a different light, and the "One Minute Incident" would mark the beginning of megaphone diplomacy in Israeli-Turkish relations.

The decline continued after the Davos Summit and reached its nadir in May 2010, with the deadly Israeli assault on the Turkish Mavi Marmara aid flotilla, which the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) had organized to break the Israeli siege of Gaza. It was the first time the two countries had ever been involved in a direct military confrontation. Immediately after the incident, Turkey called its ambassador back to Ankara, and a year later downgraded its diplomatic relations to the level of chargé d'affaires. Still, diplomatic negotiations continued behind the scenes; in fact, a draft agreement was soon ready on the table. Nonetheless, given the international and domestic factors at play, it would take six years for the two sides to finally sign the reconciliation deal.

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Israel, on the other hand, embarked on a search for alternative partners to compensate for the loss of its close ties with Turkey. In retrospect, the deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations after

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2008 provided an opportunity for Greece and Cyprus, which have traditionally maintained a pro-Palestinian stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, to replace Turkey as a close partner of Israel. It is noteworthy that Netanyahu became the first Israeli prime minister to visit Greece just two months after the Mavi Marmara Incident. Moreover, between 2009 and 2011, Israeli exports to Greece increased from \$213 million to \$330 million, while Israeli exports to Cyprus almost doubled, rising from \$23million to \$40 million (World Bank 2009, 2011). In addition, Greece and Cyprus emerged as favorite destinations for Israeli tourists who were hesitant about travelling to Turkey amidst the political tension. Between 2009–2011, the number of Israeli tourists who visited Greece rose from 82,400 to 226,100 (Greek Ministry of Tourism).

In the meantime, the signing of military training and defense cooperation agreements consolidated the strategic ties between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Furthermore, the discovery of hydrocarbon resources like Tamar (2008) and Leviathan (2010) in Israel, and Aphrodite (2011) in Cyprus, have provided a catalyst for the sides to develop closer cooperation by adding an energy security dimension. Shared economic interests with regard to the exploitation and marketing of energy resources fostered dialogue among the Mediterranean nations. The US-backed trilateral mechanism soon expanded and, with the participation of new members, evolved into a regional energy platform, culminating in the establishment of the East Med Gas Forum in 2020.

From Turkey's perspective, both the gas drilling activities in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), specifically in Block 12, and the East Med pipeline project to carry eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe through Cyprus and Greece, violated the rights of Turkish Cypriots and of Turkey. In addition, Ankara viewed the emerging power bloc as a hostile entity, which it sought to contain and circumvent, given that Turkey's relations with the majority of the countries involved in the East Med Forum were problematic.

In parallel with the alignment in the eastern Mediterranean, the geopolitics of the Arab protests coupled with the Obama administration's decision to launch nuclear negotiations with Iran, fostered an unforeseen rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf countries based on their shared concern over the rise of Iran's power in the region. In addition, for the Gulf monarchies that espoused Wahhabi teachings, the rise of pro-Muslim Brotherhood governments posed an equally existential threat, given the organization's grassroots activism and nationalist perspective.

Acknowledging its growing isolation internationally and shaken by a failed coup attempt at home, Ankara shifted toward a muscular foreign policy from 2016 on, in order to impact on developments on the ground. To an extent, Turkey did succeed in shifting the balances on the ground (e.g. in Syria, Libya, and later, in Karabakh), however it was unable to establish a political settlement on its own. In fact, this assertive foreign policy line further consolidated the power block emerging in the region.

Against this backdrop, the normalization deal signed between Israel and Turkey in June 2016 failed to foster a genuine normalization. In the wake of the downing of the Russian jet in November 2015, *concerns over the Kremlin possibly retaliating using energy as a weapon incentivized Ankara to resume diplomatic negotiations with Israel, a move which would also balance Turkey's relations with the West.* Soon after the deal, however, the investors lost their enthusiasm for the pipeline project which was to carry Israeli gas to Turkey via undersea pipelines across the Mediterranean, both because of commercial viability concerns and the political risks of engaging in a long-term investment. Meanwhile, the emergence of areas controlled by the US-backed Syrian Kurds during the Syrian Civil War triggered Ankara's deep-seated fears of encirclement. In this context, the divergent approaches taken to Kurdish sovereignty in the region by Israel and Turkey have undermined their mutual trust. All the

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while, the bad blood between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Erdoğan was not making the management of bilateral disputes any easier.

The unfulfilled normalization process of 2016 came to an end in May 2018, just a month before Turkey's first presidential elections, as Turkey recalled its ambassador in response to Israel's heavy crack down on protests along the Gaza border over the decision by the US to move its embassy to Jerusalem.

Towards a New Reset

At a time when rolling back Iran's regional power had come to overshadow the Palestinian issue, the Muslim Brotherhood movement had weakened, and the Gulf countries were cozying up to Israel, Turkey's reasons for prolonging its disagreement with Israel had become increasingly irrelevant. Indeed, maintaining cordial ties with Israel had always enabled Turkey to play a more constructive role in the Palestinian issue.

As 2021 approached, a foreign policy revision was increasingly becoming a necessity for Ankara in the light of both international and domestic developments. The on-and-off tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the election of Joe Biden to the U.S. presidency, the U.S. Congress's decision to impose sanctions on Turkey over its purchase of the S-400s and the EU lining up to impose new sanctions immediately after that, all served to accelerate Ankara's search for a diplomatic opening. However, the government only stepped up its diplomatic campaign to mend its broken ties with countries in the region, including Israel, when the economic cost of its assertive policies started to destabilize domestic politics. Economic deterioration presented a risk in the upcoming elections for President Erdoğan, whose popularity was in decline. In order to bring its soaring inflation under control and ease the currency crisis, Turkey had to de-escalate politically and adopt a moderate rhetoric. In this respect, mending ties with the Gulf countries and Israel would pave the way for increased trade, investment and tourism while shoring up support for Erdoğan over a positive narrative in foreign policy.

When Ankara finally felt ready to bury the hatchet, it took some time for Turkish policymakers to acknowledge how much the region had changed over the years. The signing in 2020 of the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the UAE (and later Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco), was a true game changer in terms of upending the region's power dynamics. Until then, the Arab countries had always set the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the framework of UN decisions as a precondition for establishing dialogue with Israel. The Abraham Accords also undermined the advantageous position Turkey had traditionally enjoyed as an intermediary between Israel and the Arab countries. At a time when rolling back Iran's regional power had come to overshadow the Palestinian issue, the Muslim Brotherhood movement had weakened, and the Gulf countries were cozying up to Israel, Turkey's reasons for prolonging its disagreement with Israel had become increasingly irrelevant. Indeed, maintaining cordial ties with Israel had always enabled Turkey to play a more constructive role in the Palestinian issue, in terms of improving the conditions in which the Palestinians live.

The election of US President Joe Biden, who had campaigned for more distanced relations with the Gulf countries in the light of human rights concerns and his intention to renegotiate the nuclear deal with Iran, provided an environment conducive to Turkey's diplomatic overtures. The US pivot to the Pacific in foreign policy, which meant a diminishing commitment to the security of the Middle East, was a major concern for countries in the region, which moved to de-escalate tensions among themselves. In January 2021, even before Biden took office, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had announced the lifting of a three-and-a-half year embargo on Qatar. Having stood by Qatar during the Gulf crisis, Turkey read the GCC decision as a positive development which would allow it to improve its fraught relations with countries in the region.

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Against this backdrop, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's defeat in the 2021 elections provided an opportunity for Ankara to step up its diplomatic overtures toward Israel. At around the same time as the parliamentary elections, a new president took office in Israel, and President Erdoğan called President Isaac Herzog to congratulate him on his new post.

The dialogue channel established between the two presidents contributed to the solution of crises such as the release of the [Oknin](#) couple in November 2021 and helped to thwart Iranian [plots](#) against Israelis in Turkey. The improved coordination and coordination between the two countries also eased Israel's doubts over Ankara's commitment to reconciliation and eventually paved the way for President Herzog's pathbreaking visit to Ankara in March 2022.

The Way Forward

Israeli-Turkish diplomatic relations will mark their 74th anniversary next year. Which is a mature stage in life, when you consider the long history of bilateral ties from the perspective of human relations. "We are going into proper, positive bilateral relations that have a wide range of activities, but we know that there are points we don't agree on. We know that we are not going into a perfect marriage," said Ambassador Lillian in a recent [interview](#), hinting at an age of reason between the countries in a similar vein.

Indeed, throughout the tumultuous course of Israeli-Turkish relations, the two sides have managed to pursue cooperation in a pragmatic and compartmentalized manner. The steady growth in bilateral trade, insulated from political tensions, left many bewildered. Intelligence sharing between the two countries has also continued, by and large. Despite everything, Turkey still remains a favorite travel destinations for Israeli tourists.

There are ample opportunities for developing bilateral cooperation in the areas of energy, sustainable agriculture, and water technology. And one can add defense cooperation to the list. The [docking](#) of the Turkish frigate *Kemalreis* in the port of Haifa last September on the sidelines of a NATO drill—the first time a Turkish warship has done so since the Mavi Marmara—indicates a possible thaw in this area. It will definitely take time to repair the broken trust. While Israel and Turkey do not always see eye to eye on regional issues, be it the future of Palestine or Syria after the war, they have a shared interest in counterbalancing Iranian power and influence in the region. More importantly, as two militarily strong regional actors, they have the power to shift the balance on the ground when they cooperate. Still, the question remains: will they be able to focus on their common interests rather than their differences?

Manageable risk?

The new reset in bilateral ties may open doors to fully exploit the potential of cooperation between Israel and Turkey. However, relations may follow a different course than they did in the 2000s, primarily because the basic parameters of their relationship has changed since Israel made new friends in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The power asymmetry that had always favored Turkey has changed; with its strategic location (bordering Syria and Iran), Muslim identity and NATO membership, Turkey will always be a significant partner for Israel, but it has become less indispensable. It will therefore take concrete steps, going beyond tactical openings to convince Israelis that Ankara is sincerely committed to restoring ties.

On the other hand, Turkish foreign policy has become increasingly unpredictable. The erosion of institutions and the subsequent personalization of foreign policy render bilateral relations

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prone to crisis. However, it seems that the Israelis consider this a manageable risk for now, given the benefits Ankara can expect from normalizing relations with Israel. Thus, for one thing, Ankara hopes that mending ties with Israel will allow it to expand its area of maneuver in foreign affairs, while also dividing the power bloc in the Mediterranean. For its part, Israel has avoided being drawn into a hot conflict and repeatedly underscored that rapprochement with Turkey will not be carried out at the expense of the relations it has developed with Greece and Cyprus. Still, Israel has the potential to play a constructive role in terms of de-escalating tensions in the region, and even facilitating a normalization in relations between Turkey and third nations.

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From a historical perspective, maintaining cordial relations with Israel has always been considered a key to Washington's ear. In this respect, Ankara is expecting some support from the pro-Israeli lobbies in securing a positive decision from Congress regarding its request to purchase 40 new F-16s and 80 modernization kits for its existing F-16 fleet. Given Turkey's removal from the F-35 stealth fighter jet program as a result of its purchase of Russian made S-400s, addressing the emerging military imbalance in its air defense capability has become of vital importance to Turkey.

Another topic which incentivizes rapprochement for both sides is energy cooperation. Amidst the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, Europe's push to diversify away from Russia's energy resources has revived interest in Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves. However, political obstacles stemming from the littoral states contested maritime zones, as well as doubts about the commercial viability of the project's projected pipelines, make LNG a more attractive option, at least in the short run. In the long run, however, the construction of an undersea pipeline that would transport Israeli gas to Turkey could be the most feasible way to transport Israeli gas to Europe, if a solution to the Cyprus problem is reached. Such a project could be designed to involve multiple pipelines and connectors suitable also for the transportation of electricity and clean hydrogen. It could reinforce energy cooperation between Israel and Turkey (and other neighboring countries), reduce energy dependency on Russia, and also help to mitigate the impact of climate change. The signing of the US-brokered maritime [deal](#) between Israel and Lebanon in October could set a precedent in the region and encourage parties to engage in win-win economic endeavors prior to any political settlement.

The geopolitical impact of the Ukraine War

In many aspects, the war in Ukraine marks a turning point in world politics. The Russian invasion upended the post-Cold War international order which secured peace and stability in Europe. Contrary to Russian President Vladimir Putin's expectations, his "war of choice" united the West around NATO and put the US back in the driver's seat as leader of the Atlantic alliance. Undoubtedly, there are many uncertainties hanging over the future of the liberal international order. However, the war has already begun to transform Europe's security structure, transatlantic relations, and the global economy. From the western viewpoint, Russia's defeat in Ukraine is necessary to deter other actors, such as China, from using force.

It is hard to tell whether or not Ankara fully comprehends the ongoing geopolitical transformation against the backdrop of the Ukraine War, or if it shares the concerns of its western allies. Over the last two decades, global trends such as the west-east power shift, a decreasing US military footprint abroad, and political incoherence within the EU reinforced the perception among Turkish policymakers that the west was in terminal decline. In addition, the persisting stalemate in Turkey's EU accession process, the divergence of interests between Ankara and Washington particularly in the Middle East, and the subsequent erosion of trust,

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have also played a role in Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in foreign policy and its rapprochement with Russia and China. Taking into account the geopolitical uncertainties within the international system and the unresolved issues between Turkey and its western partners, we can expect Ankara to retain its current foreign policy orientation, even if there is a change of government. It is open to debate whether or not an autonomous foreign policy should always be incompatible with having cordial relations with the West. Either way, Ankara's current foreign policy approach does not impede a rapprochement with Israel, since it essentially relies on (and promotes) a diversification of alliance ties.

Interestingly, since the start of the war in Ukraine, Turkey and Israel, both of which have enjoyed close ties with Ukraine and Russia, have found themselves in a difficult position as they try to strike a balance between the Kremlin and the West. Politically, both countries have sided with Ukraine, condemning the Russian invasion. However, they have refused to implement economic sanctions against Russia in order not to antagonize the Kremlin. Both Turkey and Israel have offered to mediate for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, while Turkey acted as a facilitator in establishing a safe corridor for grain exports from the Black Sea. On the military front, Turkish-made TB2 drones have given Ukraine a defensive edge on the ground over Russia, whereas Israel is reportedly providing Kiev with intelligence on Iranian drones deployed by the Russian army.

The last two years, the Turkish government has adopted a largely moderate and well-balanced rhetoric when addressing clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza and the West bank. However, should another round of tension begin in the region, that tone may change as elections near, depending on how Turkish politics play out in the coming months.

For Turkey, Russia is an important trade partner and one of its main gas suppliers. Russia's Rosatom is supervising the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Mersin. Moreover, Russian tourists constitute an important source of revenue for Turkey's deteriorating economy. In addition, maintaining friendly relations with Russia is strategically important for Turkey in terms of retaining its area of maneuver in Syria. Russia has effectively controlled Syrian airspace since its military intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 to keep the Al-Assad regime in power. Therefore, Ankara needs the Kremlin's blessing in order to carry out military operations in northern Syria, be it to preserve the safe zones administered by Turkey-backed rebels, or to roll back Kurdish YPG forces.

In a similar vein, tacit Russia-Israel coordination which is in place since 2015, has enabled the latter to launch airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed militia in Syria, when it is deemed essential. Not surprisingly, Russia has adopted a more hostile tone towards Israel's activities in Syria, as Israel has sided with the US and Ukraine over the course of war. The Kremlin has also threatened to [close](#) the Jewish Agency office in Moscow. As the War in Ukraine enters a new and perilous phase, with the Russian-administered referendums in Ukraine's occupied territories, maintaining a balance between Russia and the West is becoming harder for Ankara, too. In this context, Turkey restoring relations with Israel might serve to anchor it to the West, even if Turkey shifts further towards Russia.

Challenges ahead

The exchange of envoys indicates that Israel and Turkey are ready to move forward onto the next stage. Still, there may be challenges along the way, which could slow the normalization process down. Over the last two years, the Turkish government has adopted a largely moderate and well-balanced rhetoric when addressing clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza and the West bank. However, should another round of tension begin in the region, that tone may change as elections near, depending on how Turkish politics play out in the coming months. In a similar vein, Ankara's reluctance to recalibrate its ties with Hamas is likely to thwart efforts to rebuild mutual trust. That said, a number of reassuring steps have been [taken](#)

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in terms of limiting Hamas' activities on Turkish soil, but the Israeli side expects Ankara to do more in this regard.

Another heated topic is the possibility of Netanyahu returning to Israeli politics, and the implications such a come-back would have on Israeli-Turkish relations. It is true that, as two strong leaders with populist leadership styles, Erdoğan and Netanyahu have not gotten along well in the past. Should Netanyahu be re-elected, it is likely to create some uneasiness on the Turkish side, at least in the beginning. However, pragmatism may ultimately prevail, and in the absence of provocation on either side, Turkey and Israel's mutual interests may favor the maintaining of cordial relations. In this respect, President Erdoğan's declared plans to visit Israel after the Israeli elections may be interpreted as a sign of Ankara's commitment to restoring relations, regardless of the election outcome.

At the end of the day, rebuilding mutual trust is the key to a genuine and long-lasting reconciliation in Israeli-Turkish relations. This requires good leadership, consistency and, above all, time.