

What is the role of Israel in Turkey's political universe? A Q&A with Dr. Emre Erdoğan

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Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's anti-Israel comments during Operation Protective Edge were driven by domestic concerns, including the August 10th Presidential elections; But Turkey needs to be wary of the impact of political rhetoric on the global stage, and instead advocate for peace, cooperation and friendship in the region



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1. How do you explain Prime Minister Erdoğan's recent statements against Israel, both in terms of timing and content?

It is not surprising. Erdoğan is very well known for his anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric and recent history shows that he does not hesitate to exploit public sentiments to position himself as an anti-imperialist warrior and the hero of the Arab Street. His epistemological roots push him to behave sympathetically towards Hamas leadership – as he did with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – and against the oligarchs of the Middle East.

Erdoğan appears to be a very emotional politician, and he is quite adept at transforming those emotions into public support. However, our experience also shows that he is a pragmatic person whose foreign policy objectives are dominated by domestic priorities: economic growth and covering foreign deficit through trade surplus.

Erdoğan sees himself and Turkey as an alternative to Israel – a soft power actor with significant political capital on the Arab Street and in the West. I believe that he is aware of the importance of Israel as an ally in the Middle East, except for when domestic demands overshadow it. Developing better relations with both

Israel and the Arabs states is an optimal situation, but developments this summer provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to remind voters of his role as the “voice of the silent people”, and frame his opponents as agents of “foreign powers” – another popular theme in Turkish politics.

2. Are anti-Israel declarations an electoral asset in advance of Turkey's presidential elections (August 10)?

Rhetorically yes. However, we do not have any empirical evidence. Polls before and after the 2009 Davos incident with President Shimon Peres showed that Erdoğan’s public support increased for a short period, then declined. Supporters of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) endorsed his behavior and his opponents did not approve it; nobody really changed his or her position.

Personally I don’t believe that his anti-Israel rhetoric will bring him extra votes due to the fact that 90 percent of Turkish voters have already decided how to cast their ballot. However it may help foster his position as an “advocate of victims”, particularly in the Muslim world.¹

Yet political rhetoric does shape public opinion, and can be inter-generationally transferrable. As political elites interpret developments and reframe them according to their point of view, voters buy it and reposition themselves according to this framing. For example the majority of the Turkish elite perceives Operation Protective Edge as an Israeli “invasion”. It is presented to the public as an assault against the weak – babies, children, and women. Considering the extraordinary xenophobic attitudes of the Turkish public, such statements are quite welcome. Therefore, it is not surprising that voters will interpret every development from a viewpoint that presents the “brutality” of Israeli forces.

That being said, the divide between Erdoğan and Turkish nationalists is primarily based on the Kurdish issue. His anti-Israeli rhetoric cannot remedy this divide.

3. How do other parties or politicians relate to this topic? Are there voices that criticize Erdoğan for his anti-Israel remarks?

No. There is a fertile environment for anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric in Turkey and every politician can use this opportunity to attract some extra votes or consolidate his constituency. Opposition parties have even requested breaking economic and strategic ties with Israel and imposing further sanctions.

For example, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the CHP (the Republican People’s Party - Turkey’s secularist opposition party), requested that Turkey shut

¹ For more on Erdoğan’s campaign strategies and Turkish public opinion, see: Emre Erdoğan, “[Turkey’s Longest Year Continues with Presidential Elections](#),” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 17 July 2014.

down its NATO radar station in order to “prevent Israel’s defense against Hamas missiles”.² Another member of the same party accused the government of selling fighter jet fuel to Israel.

The leader of the miniscule liberal party, Cem Tokar, attacked the government by underlining how trade volume between Israel and Turkey has multiplied during AKP rule, and there are many daily flights from Istanbul to Tel Aviv (meanwhile the percentage of Turkish exports to Israel declined from 2.2 in 2004 to 1.7 in 2012).

As for the Gülen Movement: it is widely known that they criticized the AKP government, and Erdoğan in particular, for how the 2010 Mavi Marmara affair was handled. However the only purpose behind this effort was to cast Erdoğan as anti-Western. Since 2002, many of Erdoğan’s domestic opponents have tried to convince the West, especially the American Jewish lobby, of the "Islamic shift" in Turkish foreign policy.

Therefore, we can say that while anti-Israel rhetoric does garner competition amongst politicians, few are vocally opposed to it. And it requires a lot of social courage to voice alternative points of views.

4. Do you believe there will be a shift in attitude toward Israel at the end of the current operation in Gaza or after Turkey's presidential elections?

I believe that the link between foreign policy issues and voting behavior is unclear and the positions of political parties do not directly affect voters’ decisions. But these positions have a critical function:

Foreign policy issues help parties clarify their positions on domestic issues and consolidate their voters. For example, the war in Gaza serves as an acid test to show your party’s anti-imperialist position just as any confrontation with the EU provides a good opportunity to show how much your party is pro-EU or not.

This is not a serious threat, because the overall weight of this anti-Israel opportunity is relatively small and it can change over time according to domestic demands. For example, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq was once the biggest enemy of Turkey. Now, it is not.

But we need to be wary of the impact of political rhetoric, and suggest alternative approaches that advocate for peace, cooperation and friendship in the region.

As for the post-election situation, Erdoğan has openly stated that he will be an active president and all of the AKP leaders declared that Turkey would be ruled by a presidential or quasi-presidential regime. In short, Erdoğan will remain in charge of Turkey’s foreign policy.

² An erroneous claim, as Israel’s Iron Dome works off its own radar stations.