

How Erdogan's Turkey has failed the Palestinians

The real problem Erdogan has with the UAE and Bahrain's normalization deals with Israel is how little Turkey now matters

Louis Fishman | Sep. 23, 2020 | 12:22 PM | 9

Almost a month ago, when news first broke of an imminent deal between the UAE and Israel, it took no time at all for Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to lash out at the Emirates: "I have given the necessary instructions to my foreign minister. We may either suspend diplomatic ties or recall our ambassador, because we stand with the Palestinian people. We have not let Palestine be defeated, neither will we let it be defeated."

This seems like quite a harsh statement coming from the president of a country that has full diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. Nevertheless, as expected, nothing much came of his words, and Turkey has still taken no action against the UAE. Just weeks later, when Israel and Bahrain announced a deal between the two countries, Turkey downgraded the rhetoric, leaving its foreign ministry to simply issue a curt official condemnation.

To understand the degree to which Turkey's condemnation has been contained and formalized, note the contrast between Erdogan's words in regard to the UAE's deal with Israel, a veritable call to (diplomatic) arms: "The move against Palestine is not a step that can be stomached," with what Turkey's Foreign Ministry noted on the Bahrain deal: a description of what Ankara sees as the new reality. The deal would "further encourage Israel to continue illegitimate practices toward Palestine and its efforts to make the occupation of Palestinian lands permanent."

Turkey's position is an open irony, of course: clearly Turkey's ties with Israel have not stopped Israel from its "illegitimate practices towards Palestine," and if anything, it was actually the UAE, and not Turkey, that stopped Israel from annexing parts of the West Bank.

Even if the talk about Palestinians is at the core of Turkey's protests, the real problem Turkey has with the normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE is that it reflects Turkey's failure to actually matter.

Certainly, the turn toward the Gulf states is just another proof that Israel has long relegated Turkey to the sidelines. What Jerusalem didn't get from its

relations with Turkey, it just might be able to get from ties with the UAE: a relationship based on mutual interests that will benefit both countries.

Israeli-Turkish relations over the last two decades has had its bad days, and its OK days, but they have really not seen many good days. Nevertheless, despite the yearly public spats between Erdogan, calling Israel out on human rights violations against Palestinians, and Netanyahu, calling out Erdogan on Turkey's treatment of Kurds, the two countries' bilateral trade kept humming along, even growing.

In Turkey's aggressive attempt to make Istanbul the world's largest international hub, Turkish Airlines has also continued to fly to Israel through thick and thin, second only to El Al in the number of passengers carried on the route to and from Tel Aviv. Even during the COVID-19 crisis, Turkish was one of the first companies to resume flights to Israel, even as El Al remained grounded, despite reports earlier in the summer that El Al would start bi-weekly cargo flights to Turkey.

However, even if Turkey and Israel have seen mutual monetary benefits from trade and aviation, Israel knows that beyond this level of ties, the return is not worth the investment, certainly not with an Erdogan-led government.

Israel's turn toward the Arab world and eastern Mediterranean countries as key partners in economic development is further proof that Turkey has missed the chance for a deal with the small country with one of the largest GDPs in the region.

And compounding the alienation is the fact that Turkey today looks a lot less appealing to Israel: a country struck with severe economic difficulties and continuous strife both domestically and internationally does not make it the most enticing candidate for greater intimacy.

Turkey now must be missing the period following the 2016 reconciliation talks with Israel when many believed there was a strong chance for Turkey to become Israel's partner in transporting Israeli natural gas resources to Europe.

Had Turkey pursued a policy of investing in the building of strong regional ties, rather than attempting to attract the loyalty of Arab Islamists, it could have avoided its current energy-strapped status, while Egypt, Israel, the Palestinians, Cyprus and Greece (and perhaps even Lebanon) unite to find a path to a better future for their energy needs.

Perhaps the greatest illusion is that Turkey is in some way actually making things better for the Palestinians.

One cannot disregard the importance of how Ankara keeps the Palestinians on the international agenda, especially when the Palestinian leadership is itself divided, as are Arab states.

But it is Turkey's nearly sole Arab ally, Qatar (and UAE adversary) that transfers cash to Gaza to keep ordinary Palestinians above water. In fact, just this year alone Israeli military officials and the Mossad head have visited the Gulf state twice to secure these payments. This is substantial proof to argue that times indeed have changed: Israeli national security officials are guests of the country that positions itself as the most pro-Palestinian of them all.

It is Qatar that is serving as a trusted intermediary between Israel and the Palestinians, and not Turkey, which historically certainly could have played that role. Even the Palestinians, justifiably outraged by the new UAE and Bahrain deals, know that Turkey cannot replace Arab states both in terms of aid and support, regardless of what their relations with Israel might be.

So, sure, attending meetings in Ankara with Erdogan and receiving passports from Turkey might top the agenda of the Hamas leadership, but it will be the Egyptians negotiating the deal between Israel and the Hamas when violence breaks out. So much for Erdogan's grandiose visions of being recognized as the first among less-than-equals in the leadership of the Muslim world.

Turkey's investment in the quest to be considered the region's pre-eminent presence has won insufficient returns. These days, it's safe to say that both domestically and regionally, Erdogan's government's prioritization of ideology over pragmatism has led the country into a series of economic and political crises.

In order to sustain this ideological bubble, every small achievement is inflated as a victory, the government's mistakes and shortcomings are glossed over by an obedient press, and critical voices calling foul are shouted down by an army of trolls.

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What perhaps is most ironic about Ankara preaching to the UAE is that Turkey itself established the model for a majority Muslim country to have

relations with Israel, while remaining a staunch defender of Palestinian rights. Turkey achieved this position not in spite of its relations with Israel, but because of its relations with Israel.

Turkey relies on relations with Israel to spread its soft-power influence in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Unlike like the Arab states that promoted and enforced a complete boycott of Israel, it is Erdogan who has consistently encouraged his citizens to visit Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa mosque. How can Turkey now criticize those Emiratis who also long to visit the Muslim holy site?

While relations are still fresh between the UAE and Israel, it seems they have the potential to give Israel much more than Turkey ever could. The success of these two economic powerhouses certainly open the door to enhanced trade, research, a market for academics and professionals and tourism.

It is not hard to imagine the day that Turkish Airlines' competitors in Dubai, Emirates Airlines, and Abu Dhabi, Etihad Airlines, will also serve as Israelis' first choice to fly to Asia and parts of Africa.

While the local Palestinian leadership opposes a deal that rewards Israel with normalization while leaving the occupation intact, it is the highly skilled Israeli Arab population that could find future opportunities in international companies in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

It's impossible to predict how Israel-UAE relations will develop, and whether it will manage the grassroots "warm peace" that has eluded Israel's relations with its other peace partners, Jordan and Egypt. Abu Dhabi's exuberant demonstrations of its new love for Israel hides uncertain domestic support for normalization with the Jewish state, and long-held pro-Palestinian sentiments in the Gulf more broadly.

But the signs are that both the UAE and Israel are looking for a long-term transformation of the region. For now, a picture emerges where Dubai and Abu Dhabi seem more than happy to add Israelis to the mix of tens of thousands of Palestinians, Lebanese, Turkish, European and American professionals who power their economy and that the UAE has calculated its future plans with a Jewish state not as a necessary evil but as an economic necessity.

For Israel, Turkey's protest is now not much more than background noise. For Jerusalem, it's enough to keep relations with Turkey on the back burner,

safe in the knowledge that Turkey's need for Israel will act as a brake on Ankara launching anything other than verbal attacks.

Israel does not need Turkey to remind it of the Palestinians. When Israelis wake up from their Gulf states dream, they'll find their new-found invincibility has a design flaw. The Palestinians are still there. Real peace does not end with them, but should have started with them.

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