

A New Era in Turkey-Israel Relations

Political relations between Turkey and Israel have been strained since Operation Cast Lead in 2008. Tensions in relations have also escalated to the highest level with the “One Minute” incident in Davos, the “low chair” dispute and the Mavi Marmara attack on May 30, 2010. An agreement was made between the two countries in 2016. However, the continuation of Israel's occupation policy towards Palestine and its justification, especially with the support of the Donald Trump administration, has led to an increase in tensions in Turkey-Israel relations. Turkey also withdrew its ambassador after Israel used disproportionate force against the Great March of Return demonstrations in 2018. Although the issue of normalization between the two countries has been raised from time to time since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, no significant steps have been taken until the visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Turkey on March 9-10.

The prelude of the visit was done with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's “phone diplomacy” to congratulate Herzog for assuming the office in July 2021. During this period, there was also a telephone communication between Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Erdogan after the release of an Israeli couple detained on the charge of espionage. This is significant as it was the first high-level political meeting between an Israeli prime minister and the Turkish president in eight years. “Telephone diplomacy” and the official visit have again raised the issues of opportunities, weaknesses and expectations in the relations of the two countries.

Although the presidency has a mere symbolic value in Israel, it is noted that Herzog's visit will play a historic role in the beginning of normalization in the relations between the two countries. But it is known that some differences of opinion that formed the basis of previous crises are still ongoing, and both parties have some demands from each other. The main issue of disagreement between Turkey and Israel is the difference in the countries' approach to Palestine. After the Palestinian general elections in 2006, Turkey improved its relations with Hamas. Israel demands that Turkey cut off its support for Hamas, which it considers a terrorist organization. On the other hand, Turkey demands that Israel end its attacks on Palestinians and all rights violations. At this point, it is understood that Israel will not put forward pressure on Hamas as a pre-condition in its negotiations with Turkey, and that Turkey will follow a balanced policy between Israel and Palestine.

The main agenda item between the two countries is the “Eastern Mediterranean” issue. Both tense political relations and Trump's aggressive Middle East policy have led to hostile steps against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean since 2019. Israel acted - by excluding Turkey - together with Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCASC) and Egypt in the extraction and distribution of energy in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this context, the “Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum” was established first in 2019. On January 2, 2020, the East-Med Pipeline Accord, which is an agreement to transport energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean to Greece and Europe via Cyprus and Crete, was signed. However, the fact that Turkey signed the maritime jurisdiction deal with Libya on November 27, 2019, and the high pipeline cost, made the project controversial both legally and financially.

While normalization steps were taken between Turkey and Israel, the United States announced that it was withdrawing its support from the East-Med project. Russia's use of natural gas exports as a trump card against the European Union was the most important motivation for Washington to support the project. However, factors such as the project's high cost, the Turkey-Libya agreement, Russia's growing power in the region, and the request to get Turkey closer to the Western policy have led the United States withdrawing its support from the project. Israel needs infrastructure to export its energy resources, while Turkey wants to be a bridge in the energy supply. However, Israel is also not expected to make an agreement that is opposed by Greece and [GCASC](#). Although it is known that Turkey is also willing to use its own potential in Israeli gas that will be transported to Europe, it is estimated that it will not turn its back on the Palestinian State.

It is understood that Turkey and Israel are willing to normalize their relations, although there has been no radical break from their current policies and their allies. The global and regional system that has changed with Biden's victory as US president has been effective in this change of attitude. The decline of the US' interest in the Middle East due to increased tension and competition with China continues during the Biden era. In addition, Biden has a peaceful and moderate rhetoric and follows a policy in accordance with diplomatic practices. Also, since Biden assumed his position, normalization efforts have begun between

actors with previous tense relations, such as Iran-Gulf, Israel-Arab and Gulf-Qatar. On top of that, the devastating economic consequences caused by the coronavirus pandemic in the international system have begun to be felt thoroughly. Consequently, states will have to strive to improve their relations with different actors in order to diversify their economic resources and increase their investments.

The US-China rivalry, Biden administration's Middle East Policy, Russia's expansionary moves, increased normalization efforts between actors in the region and the economic crisis that reveals a new international order, caused Turkey and other countries of the region to change their foreign policy approach. In this regard, it seems that Turkey has an agenda to normalize its relations with Israel, as well as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even Armenia.

In Turkey-Israel relations, it will take time to institutionalize relations in the process that began with Herzog's visit. It is expected that mutual ambassadors will be appointed as the first step. During the subsequent negotiations, many issues will be discussed, such as cooperation on Syria and Iran, development of mutual trade and tourism, cooperation in the political sphere and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel has expanded its options in foreign policy by establishing diplomatic relations with the UAE, Morocco, Sudan and Bahrain through the Ibrahim Agreements. However, both the new understanding of the regional order and the desire to cooperate with Turkey in the face of Iran cause Israel to approach this process positively.

It is currently understood that the parties are cautious about taking a new step. Therefore, despite the positive messages exchanged, a radical change in relations is not expected to happen in a short time. Moreover, it is estimated that elements such as Greece and the GCASC's approach to the Eastern Mediterranean issue and the distrust of the Turkish public towards Israel will also be immensely considered in the process. Meanwhile, the Israeli government has lost its majority in parliament when Idit Silman, a deputy from the Yamina Party, a member of the coalition government, resigned. If Silman moves to the opposition front, led by Netanyahu, and the elections are repeated, a different reality will emerge in Israeli politics. In this case, Israel-Turkey relations will have to be reevaluated.