



# TÜRKİYE-ISRAEL NORMALIZATION PERCEPTIONS-REALITY

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**n the course of Turkish-Israeli relations, which deteriorated with successive crises in the post-2008 period, positive developments were observed throughout 2021 with the telephone diplomacy between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who was elected in July. The constructive

contribution of the talks between the leaders in the process of the release of the Oaknin couple, who were detained in Türkiye for espionage allegations in November 2021, served as a catalyst for the most positive period in the last ten years of relations between the two countries. On the other hand, the reduction of the process leading to normalization in the context of the telephone diplomacy between Erdoğan and Herzog,

although it is a highly successful diplomatic achievement, would prevent the correct understanding of the background dynamics. In fact, the expectations that relations would settle into a warmer framework were strengthened when the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) cracked down on an Iranian network that was preparing to attack Yair Geller, a businessman with Turkish and Israeli citizenship, and shared information with Mossad. Furthermore, the manner in which these developments in the process were reflected to the public also supported this expectation. On the other hand, it is observed that the publicly-known developments regarding the improvement of relations do not match the actual situation, especially when we look at the way they are understood and explained in some media organs, the press, academia, and think-tank circles in Israel. In Türkiye, especially in the media, the struggle to understand the indications of normalization through the opinions taken from Israeli spheres causes confusion, although there are very material facts at the core of the issue.

The analyzes about normalization, which are generally made known in public opinion, stipulate that deterioration and normalization of relations are entirely in Türkiye's initiative. In some prominent comments, it is observed that Türkiye needs to get closer to Israel as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has deeply shaken the world economy, and the difficulties it has experienced in the following period. Accordingly; Ankara, in line with its goal of becoming a regional trade center in energy, wants to be a transit route for the transportation of Israel's hydrocar-

bon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, and this situation has become a motivation for rapprochement with Tel Aviv. Another claim that draws attention is that as a result of Israel's establishment and normalization of overt/covert relations after the Abraham Agreements with many Arab and Muslim countries, especially the Gulf countries, and developing relations with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCA), it does not rely on Türkiye as much as it did in the past. In line with this view, it is stated that Türkiye's initiative determines the normalization process. In fact, there are allegations that Israel deliberately slowed down the progress in the improvement of relations and held back issues such as the appointment of ambassadors. There were extensive efforts to manipulate public opinion that Türkiye was in dire need of normalizing relations. Even though these claims were refuted by the decisions<sup>1</sup> taken during Lapid's visit and the announcements<sup>2</sup> that mutual ambassadors would be appointed in mid-August, the same course still continues in the perception dimension of the issue.

While the normalization process continues between the two countries, it is observed that some preconditions for normalizing relations with Israel have been put to the fore, even though such demands were not uttered in an official capacity. In addition to these, there is a contradictory approach that the responsibility for the deterioration of Türkiye-Israel relations belongs to Ankara. However, Israel's approach, which is difficult to describe as constructive, has been witnessed on many occasions, including the Mavi Marmara incident, for which Tel Aviv lat-

<sup>1</sup> Ece Göksedef, "İsrail Dışişleri Bakanı Lapid Ankara'da: Büyükelçilerin geri dönmesi için çalışma başlatıldı", *BBC*, 23 June 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Behlül Çetinkaya ve Enes Canlı, "Türkiye ve İsrail karşılıklı olarak büyükelçi atama kararı aldı", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 17 August 2022.



Israeli President Isaac Herzog's Ankara Visit and Meeting with President Erdoğan

er apologized,-that caused deterioration in relations after 2008. It is possible to say that Israel's policies in the region were provocative in terms of Türkiye's threat perceptions during the period when relations were extremely strained and the ties between the two countries were severed after 2010. For example, the overt support of Israel in the so-called independence referendum of the Regional Government in the north of Iraq in 2017 is an important factor that deepened the negative course in relations. On the other hand, in 2018, when the discussions on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean and the East-Med Project flared up, a meeting was

held in the Greek Cypriot Administration, in which the ambassadors of Israel, Egypt, and the USA participated. The statements made at the said meeting that military options against Türkiye are also on the table in the Eastern Mediterranean have been a clear indication of Israel's framework of regional security policy and its attitude towards Türkiye. Again, there was a harsh reaction by the Israeli side against Türkiye's anti-terrorist operations against the PKK/YPG in northern Syria, which was uttered by many actors in the government and opposition, and the operations were unfairly accused.<sup>3</sup>

In this general framework, a correct analysis of the breaking points and the process

<sup>3</sup> Göktuğ Sönmez ve Gökhan Batu, İsrail-Türkiye İlişkilerinde Öne Çıkan Faktörler (2010-2020) ve İlişkilerin Geleceği, *ORSAM*, 2020, s. 9; "İsrail ve Mısır'dan Türkiye'ye tehdit", *CNN Türk*, 29 June 2018.

The current normalization is a security-centered initiative based on historical experience with a strategic background for Israel and a choice for Türkiye in terms of its interests.

in general is essential in order to make the discussions on normalization, what it means for the parties and what it might mean in the foreseeable future, on healthier ground.

### FIRST SIGNS OF RAPPROCHEMENT IN THE RELATIONS

Especially in 2020, there were signs that Israel has softened its attitude towards Türkiye. Israel gradually diverged from the sharp attitude that characterized the anti-Türkiye axis, encouraged actively by the U.S. and France and consisting of the dominant actors of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf countries, Greece, GCA, and Egypt. There are two main motivations for this. First of all, the fact that East-Med is not an economically viable project is an important factor. Second, and more importantly, is Israel's growing national security concerns. The limitations of cooperation on security issues in the Israel-Gulf line against the rising Iranian threat have highlighted Türkiye's geostrategic importance. Iran's proxies, which are gradually consolidating themselves in Syria, and its nuclear program, which it

has managed to advance despite the sanctions, bring about a deepening threat perception for Tel Aviv. Although during Biden's visit, messages were given that the hard power options against Iran's nuclear program were also on the table, Tel Aviv signaled that it would seek autonomy in its Iranian policy during the talks in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> Although the conjuncture created by Gulf-American relations and Israel-Gulf normalization will provide a relatively suitable environment for such a choice in the region, the effect of this synergy will be limited within the framework of the capacity of the alliance's stakeholders other than Israel. Likewise, apart from the high-cost arms purchases made by Saudi Arabia and the UAE with the contribution of their oil-dependent rentier economies; their military competence is questionable in terms of many parameters such as military culture, preparation for war, education, doctrine, experience, and population. Moreover, these countries differ from Israel in their policies towards Tehran, despite the threat perception stemming from Iran<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, Israel sought to balance Anka-

<sup>4</sup> Mahjoob Zweiri ve Lakshmi Venugopal Menon, "Iran-GCC detente could ultimately dilute Israel's role in Middle East", *Middle East Eye*, 16 December 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Syed Zafar Mehdi, "Iran says talks with Saudi Arabia to advance from security to political level", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 22 June 2022. "UAE, upgrading ties with Iran, says envoy to return to Tehran within days", *Reuters*, 21 August 2022.



Far-Right Deputy Itamar Ben Gvir showing strong reaction in the Knesset against Naftali Bennett

ra by getting closer to Greece and the GCA after its tense relations with Türkiye. Relations between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece have deepened in parallel with their positioning in security and energy-centered tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the last 10 years. Although this alliance also has a military dimension concerning exercises and training activities, its contribution to the security of Israel, apart from its regional political and economic benefits, is controversial and presents a contradictory image as relations with Türkiye develop.

Some developments in 2022 have the potential to distinctively narrow Israel's area of operations against Iran-backed elements in the Syrian territory. The active neutrality policy that Israel tried to maintain during the

Russia-Ukraine war failed, and at this point, relations with the Kremlin are tense. As a result, Türkiye, which has one of the strongest military and intelligence networks in the region, is in a critical position for Israel, which is extremely disturbed by Iran's influence in the Middle East and the activities of Iran-backed actors, especially in Syria.

## ISRAEL'S INITIATIVE THAT STARTED IN 2020

On behalf of Israel-Türkiye relations, the development that marks the year 2020 was the heavy blow dealt to Hezbollah militants who participated in the clashes alongside the regime in Operation Spring Shield. It is worth reminding again that this situation contradicted the analyzes made in think-

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tank and academia circles in Israel. This is because the extent to which the interpretations of these focus groups, which influence analyses related to Türkiye in Israel, deviate from the practice in the field, especially about Türkiye-Iran relations, has once again been demonstrated. In the ongoing process, the gap between the aforementioned analysis and Israel's policy towards Türkiye continued to widen as Israel softened its attitude towards Türkiye. Therefore, the current normalization is a security-centered initiative based on historical experience with a strategic background for Israel and a choice for Türkiye in terms of its interests. Likewise, as in the examples of Syria and Iraq, Türkiye has a deep concern about Iran's proxies as well. In fact, aside from the discussion of whether Ankara should be an active party in the Tel Aviv-Tehran struggle, it is possible that Türkiye's discomfort regarding the activities of Iran's proxies

and its relations with the terrorist organization PKK may also affect relations with Israel.

As the government crisis in Israel, which has been going on since 2018, was temporarily overcome in 2020 with the cooperation of Gantz-Netanyahu, a foreign policy orientation that also concerns Türkiye began to become evident after Gabi Ashkenazi took the seat of the foreign ministry. On May 7, 2020, the official Twitter account of the State of Israel posted a tweet,<sup>6</sup> stating that Israel is proud of its diplomatic relations with Türkiye and hopes to develop these relations in the future, a statement which could be considered unexpected for that period.

Another important development in the following period was that Israel refrained from being a party to the statement in which the UAE, Egypt, Greek Cypriot Administration, Greece, and France condemned Türkiye's drilling activities in the

<sup>6</sup> Israel, "We are proud.. our #Turkish followers!", *Twitter*, 7 Mayıs 2020.

Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> In addition, on May 21, Roey Gilad, Undersecretary of the Israeli Embassy in Ankara, put forward an analysis in which the framework of the current normalization was drawn. On May 24, Israel Airlines (El Al) started a flight to Türkiye for the first time in thirteen years. As an indicator of the initiative that started to mature after Operation Spring Shield, Gilad stated that Iran's presence in Syria contradicted the interests of both countries, and underlined that Israel is also fighting the same groups in the south of Syria. In between the lines of Gilad's statements, there are clues about Israel's expectations from a possible normalization with Türkiye.

**"We don't have to agree on everything to bring our relations to a normal level. This normal level could benefit both Turkey and Israel to face similar challenges more successfully, as can be seen in Syria. Syria is not the only example where this can be seen...These disagreements will not go away. However, a normal level of relationship between the two states will serve the common interests of Turkey and Israel better. The ball is now on the Turkish side."<sup>8</sup>**

With these statements, Gilad has clearly revealed Israel's will for a normalization shaped in line with "common interests". It has been observed that Herzog's speech at

the press conference held during his visit to Türkiye fits perfectly within the framework drawn by Gilad:

**"...Disagreements in the past will not go away on their own... We have to agree in advance that we cannot reach a common point on everything. This is natural in a relationship with a rich history like ours. However, we will try to resolve disputes by looking to the future. I wish that we work together to establish stability, prosperity, peace and security in the region."<sup>9</sup>**

Despite President Erdogan's emphasis on respect for mutual interests and concerns in his speech during the visit and the will for normalization, Türkiye's traditional policy on critical issues such as the two-state solution to the Palestinian issue, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the status of Jerusalem, the protection of the religious identity and sanctity of Masjid al-Aqsa is being maintained. From this point of view, it is understood that the issues of disagreement are not over, or even may not be over, but there is a consensus to ensure the continuity of the dialogue between the parties in the developments that may adversely affect the relations in order to protect the mutual interests of the parties in the region. Another important issue was the statements that said that Türkiye is ready for cooperation in energy and energy security projects. In fact, the failure of the East-Med

<sup>7</sup> Sönmez ve Batu, "İsrail-Türkiye İlişkilerinde Öne Çıkan Faktörler (2010-2020) ve İlişkilerin Geleceği", *ORSAM*, 2020, s.13.

<sup>8</sup> Roey Gilad, "Türkiye ve İsrail'in İdlib ve Covid-19 Dahil Ortak Çıkarları", 21 May 2020, [ortakcikarlari.com/doing\\_wp\\_cron=1590839167.2758109569549560546875/](https://ortakcikarlari.com/doing_wp_cron=1590839167.2758109569549560546875/); "İsrail-Türkiye İlişkilerinde Öne Çıkan Faktörler (2010-2020) ve İlişkilerin Geleceği".

<sup>9</sup> "İsrail Devlet Başkanı Isaac Herzog ile Ortak Basın Toplantısı", *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Youtube Hesabı*, 9 March 2022.

Although the positive course of Türkiye-Israel relations and strong dialogue will increase Türkiye's influence on Israel in the aforementioned problems, there are also limitations in this regard in order for the relations to progress in a healthy way.

Project and the deepening of the energy supply security crisis in Europe after the Russia-Ukraine war and the fact that the issue of reducing dependency on Russian gas has reached a position that directly affects the security of Europe, has brought strategic value to alternative projects. On the other hand, Türkiye stands out as a route through which the most convenient and stable line in the region passes. In addition to these, a call for cooperation has been made by President Erdoğan for the activities of TİKA and Kızılay, which have been blocked in Israel in recent years.

### POSSIBLE SCENARIOS AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE GOVERNMENT IN ISRAEL

As examined in this study, the Türkiye-Israel normalization process is a strategic decision taken on behalf of Israel. Although it is open to challenges, it is not expected that there will be a sharp change in Israel's policy when the politicians change. On the other hand, it is interpreted that Israel's domestic political dimen-

sion will not have a different reflection as well. In this context, it is useful to remember that the nucleus of normalization with Türkiye emerged in Israel in 2020, when Netanyahu was prime minister. Besides, the institutionalization of normalization took place during Bennett's tenure as prime minister and Yair Lapid's tenure, first as the foreign minister and later as the prime minister, after his alternation became decisive as per the agreement, with the disintegration of the coalition, just before his visit to Türkiye. Benny Gantz served as defense minister in both governments. The warm messages of both Lapid and Bennett towards Türkiye throughout the process are particularly noteworthy. Therefore, all figures that are expected to be decisive in Israeli politics in the upcoming elections are either part of the normalization process with Türkiye or do not display an opposing attitude. As a matter of fact, the declaration of will on the appointment of ambassadors after Yair Lapid's visit, the steps taken in this regard,<sup>10</sup> and the signing of the new "bilateral aviation agreement"<sup>11</sup> that will enable the resumption of flights by Israeli

<sup>10</sup> "Çavuşoğlu'nun tarihi İsrail ziyaretinin ardından artık sıra elçi atamalarında", *Şalom*, 1 June 2022; Çetinkaya ve Canlı, "Türkiye ve İsrail karşılıklı olarak büyükelçi atama kararı aldı".

<sup>11</sup> Mücahit Aydemir, "Türkiye ile İsrail arasında 71 yıl sonra havacılık anlaşması imzalanacak", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 7 June 2022.

airline companies to Türkiye in the following period are also indicators of the positive trend in relations.

On the other hand, it is possible to state that Israel's settlements in the West Bank, the Gaza blockade, and actions against Masjid al-Aqsa will continue to be a pressure factor on normalization in a possible government change. Although the positive course of Türkiye-Israel relations and strong dialogue will increase Türkiye's influence on

Israel in the aforementioned problems, there are also limitations in this regard in order for the relations to progress in a healthy way. Operation Breaking Dawn was the first test experienced within this framework. Türkiye has issued a statement<sup>12</sup> expressing its condemnation of civilian casualties, including children, in Israel's attacks, which is a reflection of Ankara's historical approach to the Israel-Palestine issue and the continuation of its traditional stance, which it has repeatedly voiced in the international arena.

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<sup>12</sup> "No: 250, Press Release Regarding Israel's Airstrikes on Gaza", *T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı*, 6 August 2022.

The contribution of normalization with the Gulf to Israel's security in the context of the Iranian threat is limited.



## CONCLUSION

As of now, it is thought that the Türkiye-Israeli normalization should be considered outside the generalizations and stereotypes about relations. It's understood that the preservation of the current situation and preventing ruptures that would be caused by the regional disputes, including any potential degradation stemming from the nature, which is open to sudden and deep crises, of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, which has always been a focus for Turkey, in the essence of normalization. The framework regarding the normalization, discussed in this article, is put forward by Israel rather than Türkiye, and maintains the preservation of relations, as reaffirmed by Irit Lillian, Charge d'affaires of the Israeli Embas-

sy in Ankara, in a way that is "not being agreed on every issue, still focusing on the areas where dialogue and cooperation will continue".

On the other hand, the framework drawn by Tel Aviv is based on the assumption that Israel, traditionally positioned as a "lonely country in the Arabian Sea", is now able to overcome this siege after the Abraham Agreements and does not need Türkiye as much as before. As stated in this article, although the Gulf countries, with which Israel normalized its relations, centering around the Iranian threat, have some of the parameters that make them strong thanks to their oil-dependent economies, their military qualities are questionable in the face of the Iranian threat, which they are

exposed to, and that constitutes motivation to normalize their relations with Israel. The problematic performance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemeni civil war and their failure to deter the Houthis, as well as the attacks they have suffered, are indicative of this situation. As a result, the contribution of the normalization with the Gulf to Israel's security in the context of the Iranian threat is limited. Moreover, it is not possible to say that normalization with the Gulf has established a firm trust between the parties. One of the most important indicators of this is the failure of the UAE's attempts to procure F-35 warplanes and the negative attitude of Israel at this point. As a matter of fact, it is considered that it is not possible to go beyond very limited alliances such as the "Middle East Air Defense Alliance" between the parties, and that Israel basically does not want Arab armies that balance its "qualitative military

edge" in its own environment. Finally, it is possible to state that Israel-Türkiye relations continue to maintain their critical position for Tel Aviv in the region and are of strategic importance. Likewise, Israel's initiative to improve relations by 2020 also confirms this equation.

While it is possible for the normalization of relations to offer some opportunities in line with areas of common interest, it is a fact that the limitations cannot be underestimated. This awareness, on the other hand, has brought the current normalization framework in which the parties seek to ensure that the relations are not broken in times of crisis. How this process will progress and which areas will remain within the possible normalization framework will also be shaped depending on the priority agendas of the two sides and the main domestic actors taking part in the process.



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