

Erdogan's Diplomatic U-Turn: Prospects and Pitfalls in Turkish-Israeli Relations

*Featuring Aykan Erdemir, Gallia Lindenstrauss, and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak
Moderated by Enia Krivine
Introductory remarks by Amb. Eric S. Edelman*

EDELMAN: Thank you for joining us for today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Ambassador Eric Edelman, Chair of FDD's Turkey Program.

Today's discussion comes at a time of enormous crisis with Vladimir Putin's unprovoked, premeditated war of aggression against Ukraine and indiscriminate Russian attacks on innocent civilians there. These are war crimes.

At the same time, the diplomatic map of the Middle East may be shifting yet again. Israeli President Isaac Herzog is slated to visit Turkey in the coming days, making it the first visit by an Israeli president to Turkey since 2007.

When I served as U.S. ambassador to Turkey in the early 2000s, I witnessed first-hand the early warning signs of the risks posed by the rise of the Islamo-nationalist Justice and Development Party –the AKP–to power.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's subsequent consolidation of one-man rule has turned Ankara into a far more difficult and challenging partner for America and the West. Erdogan's anti-Semitic vitriol and support for and patronage of Hamas has caused a major strain in Turkish-Israeli relations over the last decade. Turkey not only hosts Hamas' headquarters in Istanbul, but also has granted citizenship and passports to senior Hamas operatives.

But their relationship has not always been so fraught. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to welcome and recognize the state of Israel in 1949 following its independence, and the two countries have shared close ties for decades.

As a new regional paradigm emerged after the Cold War, Ankara and Jerusalem enjoyed close diplomatic, security, and intelligence cooperation during the 1990s.

Erdogan's outreach efforts to normalize relations between Ankara and Jerusalem today stem from his own personal, domestic political interests. He is looking for new partners as Turkey faces a collapsing economy, rising opposition to his rule, conflict with Arab neighbors as well as traditional Western allies and now the specter of unprovoked Russian aggression in his neighborhood.

This backdrop of tense domestic and foreign policy issues is occurring in the run-up to Turkey's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.

As Erdogan and the AKP work to retain their hold on power, their diplomatic overtures to Israel and their Arab neighbors all fit within the ambit of their broader goal – making Turkey the leading Islamic power in the Middle East.

In this context, and with the future of Turkish-Israeli relations in the balance, we are glad to be joined by an expert lineup with decades of experience covering Turkey and Israel to discuss these timely issues.

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak is a researcher at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, where he serves as a co-editor of "Turkeyscope". He is also a Turkey analyst at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security.

Aykan Erdemir, my colleague at FDD, is Senior Director of FDD's Turkey Program. Aykan previously served as a member of the Turkish Parliament, including on the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee and the EU Harmonization Committee. He also serves on the Anti-Defamation League's Task Force on Middle East Minorities.

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Gallia Lindenstrauss is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, specializing in Turkish foreign policy. Her analysis regularly appears in major Israeli and international media outlets.

And finally, my colleague Enia Krivine is a senior director of FDD's Israel Program and National Security Network and will be moderating today's conversation. Prior to joining FDD, Enia worked at AIPAC, the Israel Allies Foundation, at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and on several political campaigns.

Before I turn over the floor to Enia and the panelists, I'd like to say a few words about FDD. FDD is a non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. FDD is a source for timely research, analysis, and policy options. FDD takes no foreign government or foreign corporate funding.

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Thank you again for joining us for this critical and timely event. With that, over to you Enia to start today's conversation.

KRIVINE: Thank you, Eric, for that impactful introduction, and for your service to our country. Eric's remarks give crucial context on the history of Israeli-Turkish relations, and Erdogan's recent diplomatic overtures to Israel ahead of President Herzog's visit to Turkey.

Let's jump straight into the discussion with our panelists today. So, Gallia, I'll start with you. If we look back to a time before Erdogan, can you highlight some of the win-wins of the Turkish-Israeli relationship?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, when we look at the Turkey and its west coast, there's all these wonderful, all-inclusive resorts and I would define Israeli-Turkish relations, in the 1990s, as all inclusive. We cooperated in so many matters [including] if it was intelligence sharing, if it was a defense procurement that Turkey bought from Israel [et cetera]. We had a free trade agreement signed in 1996. Of course, there was also tourism. It was really everything. We got everything from each other.

It was also the Oslo [peace process] days, and we know that there is a correlation between developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and how good Turkish-Israeli relations are. So, this was also very helpful for these honeymoon years in Turkish-Israeli relations. We had Syria as a joint enemy in these days. So much so, that it's interesting to say that, when Israel and Syria were in peace talks in the mid-1990s, Turkey didn't like it. 10 years later, Turkey mitigated it [peace talks] between Israel and Syria. But in the 1990s, it was not good that Israel was moving to peace with Syria. So, this was the contest, and that's when Erdogan came to power.

KRIVINE: So, since Erdogan came to power and the AKP, how have Israeli-Turkish relations been challenged?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, the relationship didn't change immediately. Actually, in the first term of office, Erdogan maintained this relationship. Maybe it was because he was fearful of the army. He was still not secure enough, and the army was very much pushing this relationship forward. Maybe it was because the peace process was still alive and so, that was also beneficial to keeping the relationship intact. He even visited Israel in 2005, in light of Israel's disengagement for Gaza. We have him visiting for the first and only time in Israel and as I said, as a twist of irony, he even mediated himself between Israel and Syria in indirect talks.

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KRIVINE: Interesting. Aykan, let's go to you. After years of antisemitic and anti-Israel vitriol, which you've written about extensively, and after Erdogan joined Iran and Hamas in condemning the Abraham Accords, why is Erdogan now reaching out to Israel for normalization? Why the U-turn?

ERDEMIR: Thank you Enia, for having me. Now, there's a complex mix of domestic and international factors, including economic, diplomatic and security factors, that push Erdogan to take such a step. I said, Erdogan and not Turkey, to clarify the agency here. Let's not fool ourselves. In Erdogan's Turkey, where political power is hyper-centralized in one person, in the presidential office, if Erdogan was not 100 percent behind this initiative, it wouldn't have happened. Yes, there must have been influencers, particularly within Turkey's security establishment, to push for normalization, and to encourage Erdogan to take a step. But ultimately, the Turkish president has the final say here.

Another important prelude— is this a one-off initiative, or part of a wider set of initiatives? I would argue it's the latter. Turkey's outreach to Israel comes on the heels of Ankara's outreach to Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. One could even argue that Turkey's outreach to Armenia, to some extent, results from similar motivations.

In January, Erdogan started referring to a new concept in Turkish foreign policy, called "sorunsuz çember" – the problem-free circle. Turkey's pro-government media reported that the key driving factor for this was the belief that foreign policy will offer solutions to Turkey's problems at home, namely the economic crisis and the growing social and political discontent. This new approach was later interpreted in pro-government media outlets as a move to de-securitize Turkey's foreign policy agenda. A pro-government pundit talked about the risks of economically driven, popular protests, Ankara becoming tired of maintaining unending conflicts, and armed confrontations in the Middle East and North Africa.

So, it seems Erdogan is rebranding "zero problems with neighbors," which is mostly associated with Ahmet Davutoğlu, his former ally and colleague turned political rival, but Erdogan's U-turn in foreign policy and his taking a respite from a hyper-belligerent foreign and security policy goes back at least a year, and it is not a "full [problem-free] circle," I would argue. Because Turkey is increasingly troubled by its unprecedented isolation in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Particularly, Ankara watches with concern the EastMed Gas Forum and the new diplomatic and security partnerships emerging among Israel, Greece, Cyprus, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, and wants to disrupt this by isolating Greece and Cyprus.

Israel is keenly aware of this move. Herzog's March 2nd visit to Cyprus, and his Greece visit the previous week and Israeli officials' repeated statements that normalization with Turkey does not come at the expense of Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus, shows Jerusalem's understanding of these dynamics. Furthermore, Erdogan hopes that these normalization initiatives will also help repair Turkey's image in Washington and Brussels, and [ease] some of the arms export restrictions. Turkey's inability to upgrade its air force by purchasing F-35s, a new generation of F-16s or F-16 upgrade kits are a growing concern in Ankara.

So, Erdogan, I would argue, quite naively hopes that normalization with Israel and others can offer a quick fix to his troubles in the United States and the European Union. But ultimately, let's not fool ourselves. The key driving factor here is Erdogan's political survival instincts in the run up to the most challenging elections he will ever face since the rise of his Islamist-rooted, Justice and Development party [AKP] to power in 2002.

This is particularly significant because the opposition is more united than ever. They defeated Erdogan in the 2019 municipal elections, and recently, they just united forces to establish what they call an enhanced parliamentary system

and end Erdogan's executive presidential system. Now, a quick question here is, will Erdogan's diplomatic stunts offer any remedy for Turkey's economic troubles and reverse Erdogan's electoral fortunes or misfortunes?

I've been a pessimist when it comes to Turkey's economic trajectory, and time has proven me right again and again. Turkey's inflation hit 50% last month. Turkey's net international reserves, excluding swap deals, is around negative \$60 billion, and last month Turkey's trade deficit climbed 142%, to \$60 billion. So, I think these are the key drivers.

But let me end here with a key foreign and security driver, namely the elephant in the room – the ongoing U.S.-Iran talks, and concerns about Tehran's hegemony, not only in Turkey, but also elsewhere in the Middle East. These [talks] are pushing these former adversaries [Israel and Turkey] toward one another. Yes, I know Erdogan has always played a double game with Iran, helping Tehran evade U.S. sanctions to the tune of \$20 billion at the height of U.S. sanctions, thereby, bailing the Iranian regime out when it was close to bankruptcy.

This results from the ideological affinities Erdogan shares with Tehran, despite the sectarian differences between the two nations. But at the same time, Erdogan knows that beyond their shared disdain for the Western-led international order, he and his Iranian counterparts are rivals competing for hegemony in the Middle East; and Israel here is the obvious counterweight Erdogan can tap into.

KRIVINE: That's an interesting point. Hay, let's talk about Israeli foreign policy for a second.

COHEN YANAROCAK: Sure.

KRIVINE: The Abraham Accords were signed in September 2020 and were harshly criticized in Ankara with Erdogan publicly condemning them, and expressing his support for the Palestinians, who were perceived by many to have been largely left behind by the normalization agreements. You've made comments previously that, following the Abraham Accords, "Israel is no longer the isolated Middle Eastern state it used to be, and that Israel now enjoys "unprecedented diplomatic maneuvering capabilities." Can you spend a couple of minutes expanding on that idea for us?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Sure. First of all, thank you very much for having me here. From my perspective, the most important issue here, the architect of the normalization, in my opinion, is Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates. Recently, we have seen that Mohammed bin Zayed paid a visit to Ankara, and there, he declared \$10 billion of investment. In my perspective, by investing such a huge money into the Turkish economy, Mohammed bin Zayed bought the tendency of the Turkish foreign policy and in this regard, he's expecting the Turks to mend their fences, not only with Israel, but also with Egypt and with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The common denominator of all these states is their negative stance against the Muslim Brotherhood movement. We all know that because of this deterioration of relations between Egypt and Turkey, Turkey became a hub for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement. Also, since the Gilad Shalit deal, we know that Hamas' terrorist cells are also inside Turkey. So, Israel is trying to increase its influence by using all of these regional balances as a leverage. Israel is multiplying its own power influence thanks to the Abraham Accords, and thanks to the Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, and the Emirati pressures on Ankara.

Israel can come to the table with the Turkish decisionmakers, and we can tell them, "Yes, we are willing to normalize our relations with Turkey, but this time, with a condition. We want Hamas out of Turkey." In my opinion, the

second important component here, of course, is the devaluation of the Turkish economy. Mr. Erdogan gravely needs to shake the hands of a Western leader. In this regard, I guess Mr. Herzog, our president, will be a very good photo for him.

Because I would like to give you a concrete example again. Approximately a month ago, Erdogan was infected with COVID-19, and no Western leader even called him to say, "Get well soon." So, with this kind of a picture with Mr. Herzog, basically Mr. Erdogan is trying to attract the foreign investors – European foreign investors, back into Turkey.

Of course, let us not forget also the Eastern Mediterranean by mention. By launching this normalization with Israel, Turkey is seeking to destroy the axis of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. This alliance is crucial for the state of Israel. These two states are members of the European Union, and at last, we have regional allies that we are thinking alike. So, in terms of the Turkish political perspective, of course, Greece and Cyprus are considered national security threats for Turkey. Ironically, Turkey was the core architect here of this trilateral alliance against itself. Last but not the least, in the Turkish point of view, I think this normalization was launched to mend the fences with the United States. If you like, I can come to that later.

KRIVINE: Thank you. Gallia, do you want to weigh in here?

LINDENSTRAUSS: I just want to add that, when we look backwards on what happened from the second term of office for Erdogan and why relations deteriorated. We know the obvious like the [Mavi Marmara] flotilla, and we know that Erdogan got the domestic dividends from being very critical on Israel. He wanted regional clout and it was also good to fight with Israel in this regard.

But I think the less obvious point is that Israel and Turkey had less shared interests in the 21st century. If I go to Syria before the Syrian civil war, then Turkey and Syria were best friends. Even after the Syrian civil war started, Turkey's interested in what is happening in the north, and we are interested in what is happening in the south. So, it didn't translate into a shared interest.

In terms of defense equipment. If once, Turkey bought [defense equipment] from Israel, now Turkey is manufacturing for itself. It doesn't need Israel the way it did. As Aykan and Hay mentioned, there's the issue of whether Israel is a lobby for some points from Turkey, but Turkey felt mostly secure in these 20 years, and it didn't feel like it needed Israel. Most importantly, I think Turkey became a revisionist power. In this respect, that's the main point why Israel and Turkey had a hard time to cooperate because Israel at the end of the day is a status quo power and is comfortable with status quo powers. Once Turkey became more and more revisionist [in power], and also was more open to other revisionist actors in the system like Iran, for example, then it became more difficult for Israel and Turkey to cooperate.

KRIVINE: So, Gallia let's stay with you. Where do you see the greatest potential for advancing bilateral relations this year between Israel and Turkey?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, I think a good case for comparison is what happened after the 2016 normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey. Then we saw that in 2017, there were definitely good vibes and when I interviewed some senior official at the time, he said that relations are going forward better than he expected. But then came 2018 and the U.S. moved the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. There was this diplomatic crisis between Turkey [and Israel]. I think we can take from that in the short term, if we have a presidential visit and the return of investors, this will give a boost to relations. But any deterioration in the Israeli-Palestinian context again, [we] will go back to square one in

Turkey-Israeli relations. I think, however, also the situation in Ukraine will influence whatever things unwrap in Ukraine and I have to say between Israel and Turkey, there is no conflict of interest in the bilateral level.

Our arguments are about things that relate to third parties. So, in this respect, I think the situation in Ukraine is causing all the states to think –what are our core security interests? What is really important to us? In this respect, I think the Ukrainian crisis does provide the context for more meaningful cooperation between Israel and Turkey. So, this is in the next two years. In the long run, I think as Aykan said, Herzog visited Athens and Nicosia before going to Turkey. He highlighted very correctly, in my view, the issue of climate change in his visits. I think this is where really Israel, Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus should cooperate. Whether they do it through the EastMed Gas Forum, if they expand it both in substance and also becoming more inclusive, because today Turkey is not in the EastMed Gas Forum, or they make a new forum for climate issues.

I think that's an issue that really, we can see great cooperation and I'll end with an anecdote. In the 1990s, it was discussed that Turkey would export water to Israel. This didn't materialize, we won't get into it, but today Turkey is a water-stressed country. It just can't afford to export water. The only solution to this issue is water management and desalination and for this, you need energy. You can't do desalination if you don't have enough energy. So, these countries will have to cooperate because they're all really suffering from climate change more than other countries around the world.

KRIVINE: Thank you. So, let's shift gears and turn to Erdogan's troubling patronage of Hamas. Hay, Hamas has headquarters in Istanbul and Erdogan has enjoyed close ties with the terrorist organization for years. Ankara's support of Hamas has been a major source of contention in Israeli-Turkish relations. What changes does Israel need to see in this department for normalization between the two countries to go forward?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Well, first of all, we would like to understand that Turkey provided citizenship and even residence permits to these Hamas terrorists. So of course, Israel is monitoring about that, but we understand that there's a change in this Turkish perception and in this Turkish policy vis-à-vis Hamas in January 2021. Last year, *The Times* newspaper published an article ["How Hamas has worn out its welcome in Turkey"], and in that particular article, it was written that Turkey began to limit Hamas militant activities inside Turkey, and even they began to deport them to other countries. From the Israeli point of view, as far as I understand, this Turkish act did not come to a satisfactory level last year. Again, this time in December, our Foreign Minister Yair Lapid made it very clear that Hamas' Turkey cell unfortunately is still active. He emphasized in order to reach to a genuine normalization, Turkey should dismantle the Hamas cell in Turkey. So basically, in my opinion, if we are marching towards a genuine normalization with Turkey, we really would like to see the end of the Hamas' activities in Turkey. I think this is mission possible, and this should also be seen again, in the framework of Turkey's bilateral relations with Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

KRIVINE: So, Aykan, let's talk about the future. Turkey is going to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. How much did these diplomatic U-turns we've seen recently represent a long-lasting strategic shift and how much of it is purely politics?

ERDEMIR: Now, Enia, if you're asking me whether Erdogan's moves are tactical, the answer is definitely yes. I don't think any sound analyst would believe that Erdogan has gone through an intellectual or moral transformation and repented his antisemitic core values. No, he's seeking a temporary alliance to survive the next storm, just as he has earlier done with the Fethullah Gülen network, Turkey's center right, the so-called "liberaler", the Kurds, and more

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recently with Turkey's pro-Russia and pro-China Eurasianist factions. In general, once Erdogan overcomes the next set of challenges and consolidates power, and the weather clears, he often strikes his tactical allies with great vengeance and gets back on his ideological path. Here to give Erdogan credit, he has always provided clear signs that his offers are temporary and tactical. Within the last month, we have seen Erdogan and his spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, give the four finger Muslim Brotherhood salute, publicly.

So, if you expect Erdogan to give up the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas for good and will resent him in the future for not doing so, it's not really Erdogan's fault. As they say, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." By the way, I'm not saying this to minimize the importance of Erdogan's normalization initiative. It is a great opportunity for Erdogan to start undoing the damage he has caused in Turkey's foreign and security policy, especially in Ankara's relations with Israel. If Turkey's big tent opposition bloc succeeds in defeating Erdogan and his ultranationalist allies in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections you just mentioned, normalization will offer them a great foundation to build on. The fact that Erdogan himself started normalization could even help limit the pushback from Turkey's Islamist factions. The next governments can always argue that they are simply completing a process of normalization that Erdogan himself started.

Of course, this is the optimistic scenario on my end. Ultimately, Erdogan is the mastermind of tilting the electoral playing field, even changing the rules of voting and counting in the middle of an election and annulling an election when things don't go the way he likes. For example, as he did with Istanbul's mayoral elections in 2019, and lost again with a greater margin. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that he will concede power if and when he loses elections. So, it's a fair question to ask: What would Erdogan do if he could consolidate power again and feels he no longer needs a tactical outreach to Israel and other regional powers? Now, at that point, it wouldn't be surprising to witness yet another one of Erdogan's U-turns in foreign policy and particularly in relations with Israel. As recent as last year, the U.S. State Department and the U.S. House Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism condemned Erdogan. The latter slammed his statements as being tantamount to blood libel against the Jewish people.

This is a very strong language that you do not necessarily see coming from Washington that often. I wouldn't be at all surprised if I see Erdogan reverting back to his antisemitic and anti-Israeli vitriols overnight. But at the same time, I believe that there are enough factors at work, which will motivate him to self-censor for the time being, and keep his prejudices and hatred to himself, at least for the next year. At least until the elections.

Ultimately, it will take long years and intense efforts to undo the damage Erdogan has done to Turkish-Israeli relations. As one Israeli official told me, diplomatic and cultural relations can bounce back rapidly in bilateral affairs and then he added, but for security and intelligence relations to improve, you need trust. So, I do not think that the level of trust is there for now.

Now, Turkey's opposition has an opportunity here, though. There are robust trade relations between Turkey and Israel, despite all the ups and downs. Again, despite an alarming rise in antisemitism, there are significant people-to-people ties. There are also key areas of common interest in the diplomatic, security, and intelligence fields. So, Turkey's next government, hopefully a democratic and pro-Western government, can build on these strengths to carry bilateral affairs to the win-win relationship of the 1990s that Gallia detailed very well. But Turkey's opposition, however, has to come to the realization that such a win-win relationship will not come by itself. There is a lot of work to be done at home for the Turkish-Israeli partnership to be sustainable. Turkey needs to tackle rampant antisemitism. The country needs a comprehensive hate crimes bill and its effective implementation.

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Turkey needs to revise its textbooks and tackle the antisemitic content on its state-funded media outlets. My colleague Hay here has great research on Turkey's textbooks [*The Erdogan Revolution in the Turkish Curriculum Textbooks* and *The Portrayal of Jews and Israel in Turkish School Textbooks*]. So, Ankara should definitely get his help on this issue. Also, Turkey's state-backed troll armies funded by Ankara should stop disseminating all the antisemitic conspiracies and all the anti-Israeli vitriol that they have been pushing 24/7.

In short, the enormous resources the Erdogan government has poured into disseminating and inculcating antisemitic and anti-Israeli hate and prejudice should be channeled in the same volume into combating antisemitism and promoting people-to-people ties. If normalization remains only a high-level issue among top officials between Turkey and Israel, it will remain prone to sudden reversals. But if it leads to changes in values and outlook among the wider political elites and society at large, it has a greater potential to last, and greater potential to offer bigger dividends. So, my final take is, even a broken clock shows the right time twice a day. When it comes to Erdogan, this is one of those moments when he's pointing in the right direction. I think it's important to seize the day while it still lasts.

KRIVINE: So, let's stay here for a minute, and I'd love to hear from Gallia and Hay on this. If we look into our crystal balls, what do Israeli-Turkish relations look like if Erdogan wins in 2023 and sweeps? What do they look like if Erdogan loses, and we have a new government in Ankara? Hay, do you want to start?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Well, I'm curious if there will be elections in Turkey in 2023, but that's another issue. Let me concentrate on your question. If Erdogan will win, if nothing will happen drastically, let's say, there will not be an escalation in the Gaza Strip, or if there will not be a third Lebanese Israeli war, I assume if we will not see an improvement in the Turkish economy, I guess in the very near future, we will see the continuation of the current status quo. But if Erdogan will lose, then we may see again, a very slow improvement in the relations. But again, in my opinion, during the first term of the new Turkish government, they will be more cautious and, I guess, they will be concentrating more into their own domestic issues, and I don't think that they will make important, drastic steps in their foreign policy. That is why I think if there will be a further improvement in these bilateral relations, I guess it will be only in the second term of the post-Erdogan government days.

KRIVINE: Interesting. Gallia, do you want to weigh in on that?

LINDENSTRAUSS: I would just add that I share the skepticism voiced by Aykan and if you would've asked me this before the war broke out with Ukraine, I would be completely in agreement with him. But again, I think the Ukraine war has so many ramifications and it's really causing shaky ground to everybody to feel along their current assumptions, that, although I do think still that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and sympathy to Palestinians in Turkey is very wide and also not just government supporters, but also in other parts of the society.

It [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Turkish sympathy to Palestinians] does influence, of course, all the Turkish calculations. At the end of the day, when there is a threat to more concrete security concerns of Turkey, it will manage to brush these disagreements with Israel aside and think that where it has to focus its energy on.

KRIVINE: Hay, let's go back to you. How do you see these Turkish domestic issues that we're talking about playing into Erdogan's outreach to Jerusalem?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Well, Erdogan, Aykan already mentioned about my research. If you're going to look at Turkey's school textbooks, you're going to find lots of new content regarding Jerusalem. We also see the Islamic

discourse that we can also see in the soap operas. For instance, we see Abdul Hamid II and his political maneuvers in order to save the [Ottoman] empire was praised in this framework of Jerusalem.

Erdogan is trying to basically pump a consciousness. Erdogan, basically, is trying to create a consciousness on Jerusalem. He's doing that, not only via textbooks, via soap operas but also via NGOs – non-governmental organizations, and also governmental organizations, for instance, like TİKA [Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency], that they're coming to Jerusalem and they're repairing the Palestinian properties so that they will not sell their properties to Jews.

So long story short, I can see that as long as these activities are going to remain in legal frames, Israel is monitoring all of these activities, but for now, Israel did not take any action against all of these Turkish actions as long as they are legal. But let me tell you frankly, the Israeli establishment is monitoring this very closely.

KRIVINE: So, branching off of that –

ERDEMIR: Enia, may I just follow up with Hay's comment?

KRIVINE: That's good.

ERDEMIR: Because I think Hay really touched on a very important topic, and he mentioned soap operas and I'd like to expand on it because I've written on this back in 2017 for *The Washington Post* ["A Turkish TV blockbuster reveals Erdogan's conspiratorial, anti-Semitic worldview"]. That's really one aspect of Erdogan's policy that gets overlooked because the dissemination of hate, especially antisemitic hate and conspiracies, has taken a wholly new level with the involvement of Turkey's state broadcaster, state-owned and state-run broadcaster, *TRT*.

The historical drama that Hay refers to is now available in English, in Spanish, in Arabic and multiple languages around the world with the title of "The Last Emperor". As I exposed in my *Washington Post* piece, this revisionist drama promotes all sorts of anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Western conspiracies. It's a completely revisionist drama.

It's all made up facts, and it simply portrays Jews, Christians, and all Westerners as conspiring evil characters or fifth columns within the Ottoman Empire and all the Turks/Muslims who work with them also as traitors. Now, you can imagine the damage such propagation does, not only within Turkey, but also globally too.

So, I think any bilateral normalization attempt should also require that Turkey's robust state-run media empire stops disseminating hate, stops promoting hate and conspiracies and instead puts that same energy, puts that same resource into promoting pluralism, coexistence, tolerance, and understanding.

We have started seeing some of this in the post-Abraham Accords period with some of the Arab countries. I would argue that Turkey is uniquely positioned with its movie industry, with its series, with its strong state-run and -owned media to be at the forefront of promoting pluralism and understanding.

KRIVINE: Interesting. Thank you. Let's move a little bit into regional dynamics, which I think are really important here. Hay, you've argued that in Turkey's eyes, "the road to ameliorate ties with Washington passes through Jerusalem." Can you unpack that a little bit?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Sure. Right after Biden's ascension to power, we all witnessed in Turkish media that people were speaking about, "Now, there is a new era, Joe Biden came to power, but his relations with Israel is also as strong as Donald Trump's." Of course, in Israel, including me, many of us, we do not think this way, but in Turkey, there is a prejudice about that. I would like to give you a concrete example.

Right after Joe Biden's formation of his cabinet, we witnessed a news piece that appeared in the Anadolu News Agency – the state-sponsored news agency of Turkey. They have written that, "Please let us introduce you to the new cabinet of Joe Biden, half of the cabinet is composed of Jews."

So, it's like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion's* style written articles are highlighting the Jewish identity of the cabinet's members of the American administration, but they're of course ignoring the most important disagreements between our governments. But still in Turkish eyes, they think that they need the Jewish lobby.

In the past, they needed the Jewish lobby gravely because of these Armenian Genocide bills. We all know that it's not a concern anymore because they were all passed both in the U.S. House of Representatives and also in the Senate. But now, Turkey has another important headache, which is the F-16s because Turkey cannot receive F-35s because of its acquisition of S-400 anti-ballistic missile systems. Turkey is facing U.S. sanctions against it. So, since it is not getting its F-35s, Turkey would like to receive F-16s instead. In order to do that, it needs the U.S. Congress' approval. For such an approval, again, the Jewish lobby can act as an important player.

In this regard, I assume the Turks are also trying to use the Azerbaijani card in order to underline the common denominators between the three countries. As we all know, during the latest skirmish in Caucasia, Turkey and Israel were on the same side. They armed Azerbaijan. Both sides provided the Azeris [with] important technologies.

Given that common denominator, as far as I understand, the Turks are seeking to use their good relations with the Azeris so that they can also persuade Israelis. We will see, again, the Israeli or Jewish lobby to act in favor of Turkey. This is – of course, I don't know if it is implementable or not implementable.

In my opinion, the Jewish lobby in the United States will not be tempted to take action only because of such a policy, I guess. I assume we would like to see concrete actions here. We would like to see a general normalization. Aykan already mentioned the need for more constructive language that should be used.

Unfortunately, we still see very antisemitic and very anti-Israeli de-legitimizing language in the Turkish media. The vast majority of these news outlets are sponsored by the government, or they are considered as loyal to the government. Therefore, in my opinion, we should also need to put this as another secondary condition on the table as a condition for normalization.

If we would like to have genuine normalization, we have to see the end of de-legitimization attempts against the state of Israel. For instance, I would like to give you another concrete example – the Turkish school textbooks. For instance, the textbook is called the *International Relations and the Contemporary Turkish History*. So, they are explaining the concept of non-recognition by giving Israel as a case study that there are other states in the world not recognizing the state of Israel. But, for instance, I can give you another example. In Cyprus, there is a state called the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and it is not recognized by any other state in the world other than Turkey.

So, these kinds of concepts could be explicated, could be explained to the students, not only by de-legitimizing the state of Israel and – I only would like to highlight that this was not the only example that I could give to you. I only provided you with one example. I can show you and highlight many different examples.

Long story short, we need to see the end of this anti-Israeli indoctrination via school textbooks and also via the soap operas. Soap operas are really important because the Turkish people, they do not read a lot. So, when these people are coming home after work, they're turning on their TVs and they're becoming passive objects for the governmental indoctrination.

You cannot send these people back to school, because at school, when they were young students, they learned that Abdul Hamid II was an oppressor because these school textbooks then were penned by the secular governments. Now the current Islamist government of Turkey is seeking to indoctrinate the masses by using this soap opera machine.

ERDEMIR: Enia, if I may just follow up on these very important points. I don't think Ankara is – even while it's busy trying to normalize relations with Israel, sending the right signals with the steps it's taking. It's not just in the media field.

For example, earlier this year the Turkish parliament elected a new member to Turkey's highest court– the Constitutional Court, and Erdogan's Islamist AKP joined forces with the ultranationalist MHP to elect their own candidate. There were other candidates. In fact, there was a public push to elect the first woman member to the Turkish Constitutional Court.

No. The AKP and MHP joined forces and used their majority to elect another gentleman. Now, it's interesting because this gentleman, Kenan Yaşar, has a history of antisemitic and anti-Israeli tweets. For example, in a now-deleted tweet, he said, "Jews are such people that they will set the world on fire to cook two eggs." Now, this was raising–

COHEN YANAROCAK: A quotation. This is a quotation.

ERDEMIR: Yes, this is a direct quotation. Yes from –

COHEN YANAROCAK: Erdogan or Kısakürek?

ERDEMIR: Possibly Kısakürek. Both Erdogan' and his political mentor Erbakan's muse. The issue here is, can you imagine in any democracy, in any Western democracy where a nominee for the Constitutional Court, or the Supreme Court, is supposed to have tweeted some of the worst forms of antisemitic hate, and then still gets an easy majority vote and confirmation? And he does not necessarily come clean with it or even issue an apology. I've seen the interview, this new Constitutional Court judge provided after his election, and the only comment he had about this was, he didn't really mean Jews, he meant Zionists.

But we all know that this is the typical cover Islamists and other types of antisemites use to argue that, "No, no, no. I'm not antisemitic. I'm anti-Zionist. It's a political issue." But I think, once again, this exposes not only the contemporary forms of antisemitism at work, but also the significant political legal institutional failures on the part of Turkey when it comes to normalization. That Erdogan doesn't see a tension between his choice of a Constitutional Court judge and his outreach to Israel. And that, I find, really still shocking.

KRIVINE: Thank you. So, we have one more big topic that we haven't touched on yet, and I definitely want to do so before we move to the next portion of the conversation. Gulf. The Gulf has played an important role. Hay alluded to it earlier. Maybe, Hay, we'll start with you. What role does the UAE in particular play in Erdogan's diplomatic overtures to Israel?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Can you please repeat your question? I can't hear you.

KRIVINE: Sorry. What role does the UAE play in Erdogan's diplomatic overtures to Israel?

COHEN YANAROCAK: Well, as I already mentioned before, I think Mohammed bin Zayed, when he visited Turkey with this huge investment, with \$10 billion of investment, he bought the tendency of the Turkish foreign policy. Basically, Turkey is making its foreign policy compatible with the Abraham Accords axis. What I'm seeing here is all of the moderate Sunni nations, meaning the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey are coming together.

Without declaring, these are all states making a union against Iran. This is not declared on a daily basis but let me highlight here that Turkish and Iranian interests are clashing in Iraq. The Iraqi sponsored al-Hashd al-Shaabi are sponsoring and providing shelter to the PKK and approximately three or four months ago, they launched a rocket attack against the Turkish Bashiqa base in Northern Iraq, and they killed a Turkish soldier. In order to lower the tension, the Turks did not retaliate, but we all know that the situation is very tense, and both of the countries, maybe they do not fight with each other since the Treaty of Zuhāb – Qa r-e Shīrīn, since the Ottoman Safavid times.

But in fact, the tension can be felt in other theaters in the Middle East. In this regard, I think Israel and Turkey can cooperate. We all speak about the trust building measures. If the two countries will begin to work together, especially in Syria and in Iraq together, I think this trust building can be achieved.

Another important message or case study that can be seen during the last month, if I'm not mistaken is the Turkish intelligence agency foiled an assassination attempt against an Israeli businessman inside Turkey. In my opinion, the fact that we all have heard this news from the open press channels was a message that Iran is the most important opponent and enemy of this new bilateral normalization process. This is the first thing.

The second thing is the intelligence agencies, both of Israel and Turkey, they begin to cooperate together so that the healthy cooperation between themselves provided the successful result of this anti-espionage mission inside Turkey. This is, again, a very crucial message that the Israeli Mossad and Turkish MiT are working together, and this cooperation finally gave its fruits when the Iranian cell was arrested by the Turkish security officials. So, we should read between the lines.

KRIVINE: Out of an interest of time, I'm going to move on. We've had a question from the press. Adam Nixon from *Middle East Broadcasting* poses a two-part question, and Gallia, I'm going to direct this towards you because it touches on some of the themes that you've talked about in the conversation today. Adam Nixon asks, "will Russia's invasion of Ukraine embolden our adversaries? Do you see the Russian incursion into Ukraine opening up space for China to attack Taiwan, North Korea to invade South Korea, or the Iranians to further tighten their grip on the Shiite crescent? I'll give you the second piece now. In turn, has the Abraham Accords and the Sunni allied Middle East become a new haven of stability?"

Erdogan's Diplomatic U-Turn: Prospects and Pitfalls in Turkish-Israeli Relations

*Featuring Aykan Erdemir, Gallia Lindenstrauß, and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak
Moderated by Enia Krivine
Introductory remarks by Amb. Eric S. Edelman*

LINDENSTRAUSS: I'll start from, I think the situation in Ukraine, it's unraveling and we're in the beginning. It looks like it's really a game changer. In this respect, I think what has been is not what it's going to be. So, Turkey and Israel could, not fight, but being in a crisis, in a certain situation, but if it's a global rivalry, we're not in the same game. So, here, definitely, I think there is going to be impact, but it's still a little bit soon to analyze it.

With regard to the Sunni states, yes, these are status quo actors and that's why Israel felt better. It was easier for Israel to cooperate with them because of the Turkish threat as revisionist actors. So, basically Turkey started to annoy a lot of actors in the Middle East, and we started to see an anti-Turk axis from Greece in the west, through Cyprus, through Egypt, through Israel, and then through Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

If Aykan is right, and these U-turns of Turkey are only tactical, then this axis will stay put in place. If, however, maybe my point on the dramatic change that Ukraine is doing also has some validity, then if Turkey seems more moderate, then of course the anti-Turkey axis will weaken. But a lot of people ask me what, "Okay, so Israel is normalizing relations with Turkey. How does that impact Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus?"

Here again, I go back to is the 2016 normalization agreement, which also people were worried would impact Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus and we saw it the other way around. This was actually the impetus for a trilateral mechanism of yearly meetings, even twice-a-year meetings, at a trilateral level between the heads of states. We had eight trilateral meetings between the heads of states of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. As I said, it's not coincidental that before visiting Turkey that Herzog went to Greece and Cyprus.

KRIVINE: Okay. Thank you. So, let's move to my favorite part of the session, which is the lightning round. I'll ask each one of you a question, and if you could do your best to respond with a one sentence answer, we can knock out a few more questions with the short minutes we have remaining. So, Gallia, I'll stay with you. Do you expect an Israel-Turkey natural gas pipeline to come into service within the next decade?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, months ago if you would've asked me, I would say most likely, no. But now, with the cancellation of the Nord Stream II, and the rise in the price of gas, there's a renewed interest in the gas and Eastern Mediterranean, and also, there might be new gas exploration. So, I would say, never say never.

KRIVINE: Hay, what would be Hamas's Plan B if Turkey does push them out?

COHEN YANAROCAK: I don't want to give ideas to Hamas, but if I was a Hamas member, if I was a terrorist, I could go to Qatar, or maybe I could go and found a shelter in Turkey's controlled areas in Syria. I hope they will not do that, because it will still create a huge headache for the Israeli-Turkish relations.

KRIVINE: Aykan, do you see a return to the close military and intelligence cooperation between Turkey and Israel of the 1990s?

ERDEMIR: Yes, but it will take time. That's the short answer. A slightly longer answer is it will, I think, ultimately depend on the moral courage, vision, and resourcefulness of Turkey's big tent opposition bloc that is in the making. If they can win elections and then really take solid action, why not?

KRIVINE: In the spirit of the lightning round, any other one or two sentence final thoughts that you'd like to share before we wrap up?

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LINDENSTRAUSS: Just on an optimistic note, because Aykan and Hay talked a lot about a TV series, and there’s now this TV series on Netflix, “The Club”, which basically deals with a very painful period in Turkish-Jewish history of the welfare tax. It gives a more nuanced picture on Turkey’s, in general, relations with minorities. I think that’s maybe a hopeful not with very valid critics from Aykan and Hay of what is happening in the media sphere.

COHEN YANAROCAK: I would like to add a sentence here. I totally agree with you, Gallia, and I’m not trying to challenge you, but if that particular soap opera will be broadcasted in the national TV, then I’m with you. But if it’ll be limited to Netflix, so, unfortunately, it’s only for the consumption of the elite. Thank you very much and again, apologies that I had to respond to you.

ERDEMIR: But Hay and Gallia, to, again, end on a positive note, Turkey’s new opposition bloc, when they issued their program on February 28th, they said that Turkey’s state run media outlets will be completely restructured, so that could be the hope that wonderful Netflix series, “The Club”, which I also strongly recommend, there can be sequels where Turkey faces its antisemitic and anti-Christian policies, and discourses, broadcast it on national TV, so that pluralism is promoted by the same outlets that, for a decade or more, promoted hate and intolerance.

KRIVINE: Thank you. It’s nice to end on a positive note. Thanks to all the panelists today for participating.

COHEN YANAROCAK: Thank you.

KRIVINE: And for providing your insight on these important and very timely issues. Thanks to our audience for watching. For more information on FDD and the latest analysis from our Turkey and Israel programs, we encourage you to visit fdd.org, and we hope to see you again soon.