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Despite meagre results of Blinken's talks in Ankara, Turkey remains a crucial partner for resolving the crisis in the Middle East

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Turkey did not produce specific results regarding the war between Israel and Hamas. However, in the long run, it may turn out to be the most significant point of his last blitz tour of the region. After challenging negotiations with the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, Jordan, and Iraq, Blinken visited Turkey during the last leg of his new Middle East tour. A greeting was not pleasant in Ankara. During the conversation between Blinken and his host, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, hundreds of protestors shouted anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans in the street outside the headquarters of the Turkish ministry. Simultaneously, the protest took place in front of the US embassy in Ankara and in front of the US military base in South-eastern Turkey. Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan travelled to the North-eastern part of the country last Monday, on the day of Antony Blinken's visit. This was a cold gesture towards the US, even though the meeting between Erdoğan and Blinken was not announced.

Symbolism could be deceiving

Even with all the powerful symbolism characteristic of Turkish politics, Ministers Fidan and Blinken talked for two and a half hours. This means that the 2 allies have enough space to seek a compromise, not only regarding the crisis in Israel, but also many other issues on the table.

The positions of the US and Turkey regarding the war between Israel and Hamas seem to have no common ground currently. While in the first days after the Hamas attack on Israel, President Erdoğan expressed solidarity with Israel and spoke with President Isaac Herzog, Turkey's positions quickly shifted towards support for the Palestinians and condemnation of Israel as the Israeli action in Gaza progressed. Turkey became the loudest critic of the Israeli operation, which culminated in the harsh rhetoric of President Erdoğan at a mass rally on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Republic and the withdrawal of the ambassador from Israel. Blinken's initiative, which he previously suggested to the Arab capitals, about a "humanitarian pause" did not pass in Ankara, given that Turkey has been explicitly demanding a ceasefire from Israel. However, there was still much to discuss during the two-and-a-half hours that the chiefs of the 2 allied diplomacies had.

Turkey sees the crisis as an opportunity

Ankara sees the conflict in Israel as a new chance to impose itself as a peace mediator but also as a factor that will play a significant role in creating long-term post-conflict solutions. It has an identical interest in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, even though its efforts in that field have not produced much success, except for the one-year lifting of the blockade on the export of Ukrainian grain via the Black Sea. Last Friday, President Erdoğan confirmed that Ankara "was working behind the scenes" with regional partners to ensure a ceasefire and the smooth arrival of humanitarian aid to Gaza. That strategy is similar to the US effort, except that Washington has only been asking for a "humanitarian pause", not a complete ceasefire. However, Turkey is aware of America's limitations regarding its Arab partners in the region due to its strong support for Israel, so it wants to exploit this handicap and position itself as a principal mediator with the capacity to produce a solution. Erdoğan's strong rhetoric in condemning Israel and supporting Palestine should reassure regional partners that he would be a firm supporter of Palestinian interests. But at the same time, regardless of Erdoğan's anger towards Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu ("He is no longer someone we can

talk to"), Turkey has significant shared strategic interests with Israel, which it will not ignore. This is definitely easier without Netanyahu as the head of the Israeli government. This regards shared support for Azerbaijan, as one of the crucial allies of both countries in the Caucasus region. Also, Turkey and Israel share a strategic rivalry with Iran that goes beyond the occasional disagreements in relations.

Space for mutual concessions

Turkey and the US already have enough unresolved, disputed issues that could be points for reaching a compromise, which would give both countries a much greater diplomatic potential regarding the resolution of the regional crises. Turkey, for example, continues to provide hospitality to Hamas, with whom it has developed a much closer relations over the years than with the rival Palestinian Authority. However, this is now burdening Turkey since Hamas is losing support among the Arab states in the region as a result of US pressure for its clearly terrorist actions against Israel. Ankara could cancel hospitality to the leadership of Hamas without significant consequences, thus gaining greater credibility with the US and regional partners in the Middle East. Also, the admission of Sweden to NATO is still in the hands of Turkey. This is a matter significant to the Western partners and the US. The outbreak of war in Israel paused the procedure for giving consent to Swedish NATO membership in the Turkish parliament, so it remains a significant negotiating trump card in the hands of Ankara. Turkey has a long list of demands for the US, and it could decide that now is the right time to ask for their rapid fulfilment. First, there is the request regarding the delivery of the F16 fighter jet fleet, which is delayed because of the US Congress debate. Also, there is the support of the US forces to the Syrian opposition, primarily the Kurds, which Turkey considers terrorist formations against which it carries out combat operations. Finally, despite the failures so far, Turkey remains interested in mediating the war in Ukraine as the only NATO member with open channels to both warring parties. This makes Turkey the most valuable American partner in solving the crisis in the Middle East, with the previous concessions, the fulfilment of which Ankara will undoubtedly seek to exert a possibly decisive influence on the Arab partners. Turkey will have to make concessions to the US and Western partners, but this is an acceptable price for Ankara and its long-term interests as a dominant political, security and economic player in the Middle East.