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Ankara vs. Tel Aviv – A NATO member state as protector of Palestine



Turkey's decision to completely cut off trade with Israel and close its ports and airspace for Israeli state and military flights marks the deepest crisis in relations between the two countries in decades.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan **announced** on 29 August that Ankara had "totally cut trade with Israel, closed off its ports to Israeli ships and banned flights carrying weapons or ammunition."

The political signal is unmistakable: Turkey is positioning itself as the only NATO member to take such far-reaching measures against Israel.

The decision comes after almost two years of war in Gaza, which Ankara describes as genocide against the Palestinian people. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been **using** harsh rhetoric for months, often comparing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Hitler and labelling Israel "a terrorist state."

Turkey is thus assuming the role of protector of the Palestinian issue, while other Western countries mostly express their concern but do not break off relations with Tel Aviv.

The symbolism is even greater, as Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognise Israel in 1949 and has been an important partner for decades. Trade between the two countries reached around seven billion dollars in 2023, but the political crisis has now **cut** these ties almost completely.

Erdogan's political calculations

Although Ankara justifies its steps with moral reasons and solidarity with the Palestinians, there is also a clear political calculation behind them.

In a country suffering from inflation and declining purchasing power, the Palestinian issue has become the strongest instrument for mobilisation. Erdogan is **using** it to homogenise the electorate and distract

attention from economic difficulties.

Supporting Palestine has a broad social base in Turkey, and even the opposition parties rarely criticise the government on this issue. This strengthens the president's legitimacy both at home and in the region, where the public in Arab countries increasingly perceives him as a leader who is willing to do what their leaders avoid.

Erdogan ratified Sweden's accession to the Alliance after a delay, and in return, he ensured the modernisation of Turkish aviation by purchasing F-16 aircraft

Internationally, a tough stance on Israel gives Erdogan additional bargaining power. While he publicly criticises the West for "double standards," he simultaneously uses NATO membership and relationships with the US to achieve his goals.

For example, he ratified Sweden's accession to the Alliance after a delay, and in return, he **ensured** the modernisation of Turkish aviation by purchasing F-16 aircraft.

Such steps show that Ankara knows how to combine confrontation and pragmatism and use crises to raise its own price in negotiations.

Rivalry for leadership in the Muslim world

Erdogan's course towards Israel also fits with Turkey's broader ambition to take over supremacy in the Muslim world.

While Saudi Arabia and Egypt are balancing their own interests and relations with Washington, Ankara presents itself as the only authentic representative of the Palestinian cause.

Meetings with Hamas leaders in Istanbul and a strong diplomatic campaign within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation reinforce this image.

Hamas recently publicly **praised** Turkey's actions and called on other Muslim countries to follow its example, giving Erdogan additional political clout in the region. However, the traditional powers are resisting Ankara's attempts to take a leadership position.

Turkey increasingly appears on the streets of Arab cities as a country that has "done what others have not dared to do"

Riyadh and Cairo are unwilling to relinquish control to Turkey and maintain the possibility of restoring normal relations with Israel in the future. Erdogan is aware of this and has improved relations with the Gulf monarchies in recent years in order to avoid a head-on conflict.

Nevertheless, Turkey increasingly appears on the streets of Arab cities as a country that has "done what others have not dared to do," which could change perceptions of its leadership in the Islamic world in the long term.

Shifting away from the West or redefining relations?

The West views Erdogan's actions with unease. In Washington and Brussels, there is growing concern that Turkey is undermining the unity of the alliance and moving ever closer to the agenda of the Global South.

Erdogan's refusal to label Hamas a terrorist organisation and his inflammatory rhetoric have led to Ankara being excluded from key talks over a ceasefire and hostage exchange in Gaza. Nevertheless, the US and the EU continue to **preserve** their cooperation with Turkey, recognising its strategic importance in

the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the migrant crisis.

Distancing from Israel is not a rejection of the West but a demand for Ankara to get a new seat at the table

Ankara, on the other hand, does not want to leave NATO. Its strategy is to redefine its role: remain in the alliance but pursue its own policy when it comes to the Middle East and the Muslim world.

Erdogan insists that Turkey has the right to chart its own course and is using the crisis to strengthen his negotiating power. In this respect, distancing himself from Israel is not a rejection of the West but a demand for Ankara to get a new seat at the table.

Consequences and possible outcomes

In the short term, the measures against Israel will not have any significant impact on the Turkish economy, but they have enormous symbolic significance. They further isolate Tel Aviv and increase the sense of strategic pressure.

At the same time, Turkey is raising its profile in the Muslim world while being viewed with increasing suspicion in the West. In the long term, the relationship between Ankara and Tel Aviv could go through a new cycle.



Ankara is showing that NATO membership does not mean an obligation to share the views of its allies when it comes to the Middle East - Mark Rutte with Hakan Fidan

Turkey may seek a path towards partial normalisation following the conclusion of the conflict and the potential transition of Israeli leadership. Erdogan frequently personalises the conflict with Netanyahu, creating opportunities for future cooperation with a different Israeli government.

For now, it is certain that Turkey will not deviate from its chosen course. Erdogan is using the Palestinian issue to unify the domestic political scene, regain international influence, and expand Turkey's role as an independent actor between the West and the East.

In doing so, Ankara is showing that NATO membership does not mean an obligation to share the views of its allies when it comes to the Middle East.

This is precisely where the weight of the precedent lies: a country that remains part of the Western military alliance while pursuing a policy that confronts Israel head-on. This raises questions not only about the future of Israeli-Turkish relations but also about the ability of the transatlantic community to accept different paths within its own ranks.