EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

Could Erdogan's Charm Offensive Open a New Chapter with Israel?

APRIL 5, 2022

When Israel President Isaac Herzog visited Turkey in early March, it was a victory of sorts for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who welcomed his Israeli counterpart with open arms. The president and his foreign policy team had worked diligently for the past couple of months to make this moment of détente in an otherwise tense relationship between the two countries a reality. Fed by ongoing regional isolation and a domestic economic crisis with no signs of a quick recovery in sight, the visit also represented a potential breakthrough for Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Erdogan described Herzog's visit as a "historic and turning point" and emphasized the two countries' partnership in the energy sector. If the description is accurate, then clearly this visit could be a turning point for Erdogan who, until recently, had embraced the use of aggressive rhetoric against Israel. Erdogan's change of heart toward Israel, however, may be motivated less by a sense of benevolence and more by what he sees as a golden opportunity for Turkey and, by extension, Erdogan himself amid the war in Ukraine. Eyeing on Russian oligarchs' wealth, Erdogan wants to benefit from Russia-Ukraine war through evading sanctions against Russia, and at the same time, use this opportunity to reduce Turkey's dependence on Russia's natural gas with a new pipeline from Israel. Turkey imports much of its natural gas from Russia. That dependence puts Turkey in a bind. Erdogan's solution is twofold: find ways to evade the sanctions against Russiaand reduce Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas by connecting to a new natural-gas pipeline from Israel to Turkey.

Erdogan's latest interest in Israel reflects the status of Israel as a key country for Turkey in terms of both bilateral relations and regional alliances dominated by gigantic energy initiatives and emerging new alliances. At the top of Erdogan's agenda are alternative suppliers and

routes for the natural gas Turkey needs to meet its energy needs. Erdogan, for example, has indicated his willingness to help deliver supplies of Israeli natural gas to Europe, thereby reducing Europe's dependence on natural gas from Russia. Erdogan also is eager to build a new pipeline to bring Eastern Mediterranean gas to Turkey and perhaps to Europe.

The Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project is attractive for Erdogan because it would enable Turkey to further its energy-diversification efforts and possibly open a pathway for the country to become a member of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum. However, Erdogan's proposal to reroute the pipeline through Turkey could require significant changes in the project and concessions by participating countries which could ignite new tensions.

What Erdogan expects from a potentially thriving relationship with Israel extends beyond energy diversification to include an ally it can call on to support its efforts to ease tensions between Turkey and regional countries in the Middle East and to act as a mediator between Turkey and the West, primarily the United States.

As the United States' interest and presence in the Middle East continues to diminish, regional governments have increasingly sought new alliances. The rapprochement between Israel and other countries, such as Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a prime example of such efforts. The recent opening of diplomatic channels between Turkey and the UAE and now between Turkey and Israel is indicative of Turkey's quest to end its isolation in the region. Herzog's visit with Erdogan, therefore, is critical not only for improved Turkish-Israeli relations but also for ensuring that Turkey is not excluded from the emerging "Axis of Abraham" in the Middle East. However, Israel's concerns about Erdogan's true intentions and the future direction of bilateral relations linger. These concerns stem from incidents such as Erdogan's ' one minute' clash with then Israeli President Shimon Perez and Mavi Marmara incident, and his anti-Israel rhetoric which has dominated his political career until very recently. Israel also continues to be troubled by Erdogan's personal rapport with Hamas and religious extremists. In short, Erdogan's and his party's long-standing Islamist-influenced motivations have led to the years of tensions between the two countries.

Erdogan's popularity at home has been the most critical strength he and his party have at their disposal to use as leverage on the international stage. During the AKP's heyday, he relied on Islamist and nationalist narratives and assertive policies, which has led to isolation of Turkey in the region. In other words, Turkey's current predicament is of Erdogan's own making. As he now faces a crisis of legitimacy both at home and in the international arena, his isolation has deepened.

President Herzog's cordial visit with Erdogan may be a sign of transitioning from antagonism to fast-track normalization in Turkish-Israeli relations; however, invested in the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, Israel is very cautious and skeptical about Erdogan's new charm offensive. Is Erdogan really changing, or is this about breaking his isolation in the world and weathering his political predicament at home? Could he go so far as to seize his support for Hamas and religious extremist groups in the Middle East? These and other unanswered questions most likely explain why Tel Aviv approaches Ankara's quest for a new chapter with extreme caution, stressing that Israel has "no illusions" about Erdogan's true intentions.

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