

Tunisia's parliament picks Ennahda leader as speaker

Wed, 2019-11-13 19:57

TUNIS: Tunisia's new parliament on Wednesday elected Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, as its speaker after the rival Heart of Tunisia party backed him, opening the way for a possible coalition government between them.

Ennahda came first in last month's election, but took only 52 of 217 seats in a deeply fragmented parliament, forcing it to compromise to win majority support for its preferred candidates for speaker and for prime minister. However, its efforts to build a coalition with several rival parties have so far come to nothing and Tunisia continues with a caretaker government under the existing prime minister, Youssef Chahed.

Wednesday's election for speaker represented a big test for Ennahda, which was banned before Tunisia's 2011 revolution but has since played a big role in several coalition governments.

Its veteran leader Ghannouchi, 78, had faced competition from two rival politicians for the post of speaker. It is his first official post since he returned to Tunisia from exile in London after the 2011 revolution.

It was not immediately clear what price, if any, Heart of Tunisia asked for supporting Ghannouchi as speaker but the party led by media magnate Nabil Karoui now appears likely to join a coalition government with Ennahda.

"The party decided to vote for Ennahda after an agreement," said Ridha Charfeddine, a Heart of Tunisia lawmaker.

It and Ennahda have presented themselves as ideological rivals and have both previously ruled out entering into coalition.

The Attayar and Achaab parties, which had previously been in negotiations with Ennahda over Ghannouchi's candidacy, did not back in Wednesday's vote.

Ennahda, as the biggest party in parliament, has until Friday to name its nominee for prime minister, starting the clock on a two-month process for that person to form a government. It is not yet known whom it will nominate. Tunisia's post-revolution constitution splits power between the newly elected President Kais Saied and a government that passes legislation through the parliament.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Tunisia](#)

[elections](#)

[Parliament Speaker](#)

[Ennahda](#)

Tunisia's Islamist-inspired party wants leader to be house speaker
New Tunisia president sworn in after upstart poll win

[Turkish policy sees Erdogan playing a dangerous diplomatic double game](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 18:38

MISSOURI: The vast majority of US policymakers, legislators, officials and even American citizens do not look favorably upon Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's official state visit on Wednesday. The honor of the White House invitation strikes many in the US as inappropriate and badly timed.

This, along with US President Donald Trump's Oct. 6 capitulation to Erdogan

and his surprise announcement of an immediate withdrawal of US troops from the Syrian border, stands out as perhaps the only major issue to cause bipartisan opposition to Trump.

Even as Erdogan meets with Trump on Wednesday, the US Congress is pushing forward with more sanctions against Turkey for its invasion of Syria disguised as a military operation – “Operation Peace Spring” – against “Kurdish terrorists.”

In recent years, Turkey has helped solidify Russian influence over large expanses of the war-torn Middle East at the expense of its traditional NATO allies, from whom it has steadily drifted away.

Assuming that Trump’s America (if not Europe) does not care so much about democracy or human rights norms, other recent Turkish policies make the collision with Washington and the Europeans abundantly clear.



Turkey helped Iran evade US sanctions for many years, leading to indictments against some of its officials and top bank executives.

Last summer, Turkey purchased the S-400 air defense system from Russia, which is not inter-operable with NATO systems and could allow Russian technicians to gain valuable intelligence about American-made fighter aircraft.

Throughout most of the civil war in Syria, Turkey backed various extremist groups fighting Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. It allowed tens of thousands of militants to transit through its territory en route to Syria, without lifting a finger as they established their “caliphate” right over the border.

After also denying the Americans the use of the NATO airbase at Incirlik for anti-Daesh operations, Washington found its Syrian Kurdish allies to help them against Daesh. As soon as the Kurds had liberated the last of Daesh-held territories in Syria, Turkey insisted that it had to move against main Kurdish fighting force.

With its "Operation Peace Spring," Turkey and its Syrian proxies successfully pushed the Americans out of most of Syria and forced the Kurds to turn to Russia and the Assad regime for protection.

As European leaders criticized the offensive, which many describe as a program of ethnic cleansing, Turkey threatened to unleash millions of Syrian refugees into Europe.

The ongoing fighting, chaos and displacement in northern Syria is also allowing Daesh captives held by the Kurds to escape, reinvigorating a movement that was on its deathbed just a few weeks ago.

Small wonder then, talk of expelling Turkey from NATO is now a mainstay in American and European media. Despite fierce Turkish opposition and lobbying, Congress on Oct. 29 finally passed a resolution recognizing the Armenian genocide.



American attitudes towards Turkey were not always like this.

In the halls of US government and particularly in the State Department, there was a time when one could not overemphasize Turkey's importance or praise Ankara enough.

In the early days of the previous Democratic administration, President Obama often spoke of Turkey as “a model” for the rest of the Muslim world.

What happened?

President Erdogan and his Sunni nationalist Justice and Development Party (AKP) happened.

At the beginning of the AKP’s takeover of Turkey, the changes seemed too slow or subtle to draw much attention. Following the AKP’s first electoral victory in 2002, Turkey’s military and secular old guard (known as “Kemalists”) continued to wield a great deal of political power behind the scenes.



This Western-leaning old guard placed a great deal of value on Turkey’s NATO membership, its relations with Washington and a general policy of not becoming too entangled in the myriad problems of the Middle East.

The first sign of change came just before America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. While few expected Turkey to participate in that war, top Turkish leaders and the military had promised the Americans they could pass through their territory to attack Saddam Hussein’s Iraq from the north as well as the south.

AKP parliamentarians surprised the old guard by voting not to allow American troops to transit through Turkey, effectively denying America its northern front against Saddam’s regime.

The move proved extremely popular with the Turkish public, which despite a long relationship with NATO and the US, was never known for much pro-American sentiment.

In the following years, Erdogan managed to completely purge the Kemalist old guard and military from politics. He did so through his own charisma and a series of mostly fabricated conspiracy charges against his political opponents, aided by a growing economy and an increasingly strident anti-American, Islamist-sounding rhetoric.



The change in Turkey became most apparent by 2011, when the Turkish chief of army staff, the head of the air force, the head of the navy and the head of the land forces all resigned on the same day.

Once the Kemalist old guard was purged and the military forced back into its barracks, Erdogan and his inner circle could freely pursue their own foreign policy instincts.

These instincts seemed to call for Turkey to become more involved in the Middle East, to aspire towards regaining some of the stature and importance of its Ottoman forebears, to distance itself from American and European policies, and even to lean more towards the East and Russia.

These new foreign-policy goals put Turkey on a collision course with America's interests and those of other American allies.

When the Arab Spring began in 2011, Erdogan's new Turkey supported Islamists in every Arab country rocked by protests. Erdogan himself reveled in the prospect of a new Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Middle East, envisioning himself as the neo-Ottoman leader of the new trend.

He bought currency for his ambition to lead the Arab and Sunni Islamist world by projecting himself as the Palestinians' indispensable defender, wrecking Turkey's delicate relationship with Israel in the process.

The mainstays of Islamist discourse include not only exploiting the Palestinian issue but anti-Western (especially anti-American) and anti-Semitic rhetoric, a promise to return to a “golden age” of Muslim ascendance, and a penchant for authoritarianism at home.

Erdogan and his inner circle proved no exception to this rule. Erdogan and his party members continually accused the American ambassador in Ankara of innumerable plots against Turkey. They used dog whistle anti-Semitic language wherein the “interest-rate lobby” and a “higher mind” sought to undermine Erdogan and his quest for a strong Turkey.

They spoke of “liberating Jerusalem” and insisted that any “friend of Zionism” is an enemy of Turkey (which might include Washington, many wondered).

The Turkish minister of defense in October even posted a map online which showed northern Syria, northern Iraq, Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, parts of the Balkans and Greece, and all of Cyprus as part of Turkey – with the message: “We have no eyes on anyone’s soil. We will only take what’s ours.”

The discourse fit very well with Erdogan’s constant glorification of the Ottoman Empire.

Erdogan even built himself a \$615 million, 1,100-room Ottoman-style palace in 2014, dubbed the “White Palace” (AK Saray). The palace includes a costumed honor guard of 16 warriors dressed in period garb from various Turkic empires of the last 2,000 years.

At the same time, Turkey under Erdogan became increasingly authoritarian after 2011, to the point that many wonder if the country can remain in a NATO alliance whose preamble states that members “... are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.”

All of which makes many wonder what Erdogan and Trump will discuss at the White House on Wednesday.

Will the conversation include any talk of how Turkey damaged American interests in the Middle East; assisted Russia, Iran and Assad’s designs on northeastern Syria; and provided Daesh and other militant groups there a new lease on life?

Do Turkey and America even share any strategic interests?











Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Russia](#)

[Syria](#)

[US](#)

[Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)

[President Donald Trump](#)

[President Vladimir Putin](#)

Turkey's Erdogan called out for endangering 'US national security' Turkey plays the Daesh card over potential EU sanctions

[Turkey's Erdogan called out for endangering 'US national security'](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 00:25

ERBIL, DUBAI: In a humiliating rebuke to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the lead-up to his visit to Washington, members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives have written a strong

letter urging US President Donald Trump to withdraw the White House invitation.

The letter says Erdogan's "decision to invade northern Syria on Oct. 9 has had disastrous consequences for US national security, has led to deep divisions in the NATO alliance, and caused a humanitarian crisis on the ground."

The Congress members said: "Turkish forces have killed civilians and members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a critical US partner in the fight against (Daesh), and displaced over one hundred thousand people from their homes in northern Syria."

The committee's concerns are well founded. After weeks of instability and violence following the Turkish incursion, the situation in northeastern Syria remains tense despite the implementation of a ceasefire and an agreement between Russia and Turkey that compelled Kurdish-led SDF troops to withdraw from the border.

According to multiple sources, residents of this part of Syria are fearful for their future and the humanitarian situation is a cause for concern.

Since Turkey launched its assault, shortly after the US troop withdrawal from the border, approximately 180,000 Syrian civilians, primarily Kurds, have been displaced from their homes.

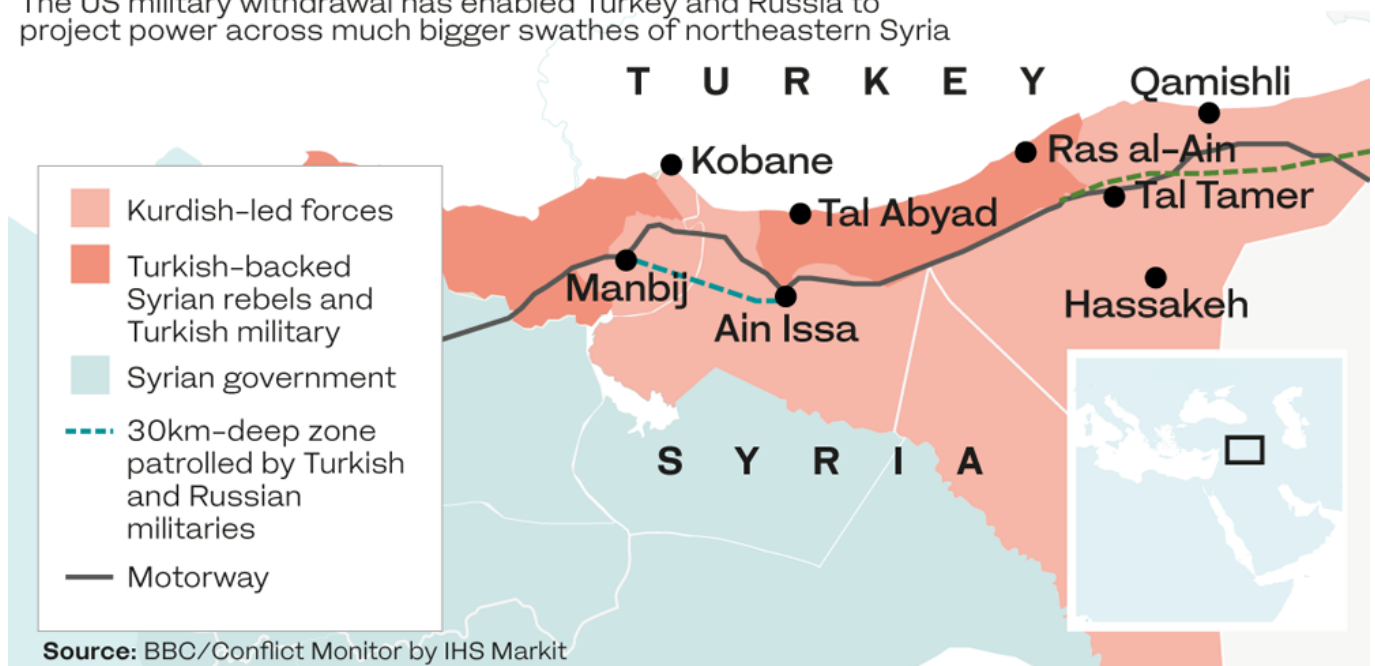
Turkey, with the help of its Syrian militia proxies, has carved out a large swath of territory – about 120 kilometers wide – that extends from Tal Abyad to Ras Al-Ayn (known by Kurds as Serekaniye).

On Oct. 31 at a gathering in Istanbul, Erdogan boasted that the "safe zones" were the most peaceful and livable places in Syria today. "We did not provide all these services with any expectation, but as our human and moral responsibilities," he said, adding "when we look around, we see only humans, souls and life."

Most Kurds of northeastern Syria see the situation very differently. In their view, what Erdogan has undertaken in the name of resettling millions of Syrian refugees in the so-called safe zone is a giant demographic-engineering exercise.

ZONES OF CONTROL

The US military withdrawal has enabled Turkey and Russia to project power across much bigger swathes of northeastern Syria



What has reinforced their suspicions have been incidents of Turkish-backed Syrian militias looting civilian homes and businesses, clips of which have flooded social media since the first days of the Turkish invasion.

Sounding a direct warning via Twitter, Mazloun Abdi, the SDF's general commander, said: "There are efforts by Turkey to achieve its demographic-change goals in Northeast Syria through international organizations. The UN head's willingness to form a team to study the proposal and engage in discussions with Turkish authorities on the issue is deeply worrying and dangerous."

Dr. Nemam Ghafouri heads the charity Joint Help for Kurdistan, which is distributing humanitarian aid in the region, and said the humanitarian situation could not be worse.

She said that because northeastern Syria has been practically under an embargo for years: "It's very hard to find even the most basic items in significant quantities. Even finding and buying simple clothing for the displaced is very difficult and expensive."

Ghafouri has talked to many people displaced from different areas. Some spoke of how they tried to return to their homes but the presence of the militias, whose roadside executions of Kurds have been filmed and posted on the web, acted as a deterrent.

Among the displaced Syrians Ghafouri spoke to were a pharmacist and a doctor from Ras Al-Ayn who tried to return to their homes.

"They told me about another pharmacist they knew who was arrested along with his son by these militias, who demanded a large ransom for their release," she said. After being detained for eight hours, both were released without the ransom being paid. Instead, the militiamen "stole everything they could find in their home and their pharmacy."

The general atmosphere, as inferred by Ghafouri, is one of “suffering and hopelessness.”

Alluding to the resettlement of Arabs on confiscated Kurdish land by Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad back in the mid-1970s, she said: “This is not the first time efforts have been made to change demographics.”

Ghafouri said that even today, on the road from Hasakah to Derik, “you can see where Arab villages have been built on the best agricultural lands in the region.”

On Oct. 24, in an interview to Turkey’s state broadcaster TRT, Erdogan came close to making the case for ethnic cleansing. “What is important is to prepare a controlled life in this enormous area, and the most suitable people for it are Arabs,” he said. “These areas are not suitable for the lifestyle of Kurds ... because these areas are virtually desert.”

In actual fact, northeastern Syria, where the country’s largest Kurdish-majority areas are located, is also where Syria’s best agricultural lands happen to be. The region is often referred to as the country’s “breadbasket.”

Ghafouri believes the events of the past several weeks are “all about destroying the landscape and demography of the Kurdish regions for good,” adding: “It has been partially accomplished already.”

Besides Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime have also sent troops to the Turkey-Syria border, but locals Ghafouri spoke to “don’t see the Russian deployment as a cause for hope.”

She said: “Despite feeling betrayed by America, people I’ve talked to there trust Russia even less. It seems that with Russian support, the Syrian regime has achieved what it wants – namely the ‘Arabization’ of predominantly Kurdish areas with the help of Turkey.”

In recent weeks, more than 14,000 Syrians have fled the conflict in the country’s northeast to neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan, which already hosts a huge refugee population.

Jotiar Adil, a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), said the KRG “does not have the capacity to handle and care for a new wave of refugees coming across the border on its own.



"Therefore, we ask the international community to take a serious stance on this and assist us in sheltering and providing for these refugees."

While the Russian-Syrian deployment along the border in northeastern Syria is expected to lessen the likelihood of a total Turkish takeover, the agreement with Russia permits Turkey to retain forces in Syrian territories under its control and states: "Joint efforts will be launched to facilitate the return of refugees in a safe and voluntary manner."

Nevertheless, Joshua Landis, a Syria expert and head of the Middle East department at the University of Oklahoma, believes: "Erdogan's resettlement plan is dead. The Russians will fight it and so will the Syrians. There may be some resettlement around Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn, but beyond that, it is hard to imagine that right now. Even in this area, it is doubtful there will be any large-scale refugee resettlement."

"The situation will not be like in Afrin, where the Kurdish population could be chased out to make way for Arab refugees."

However, the US lawmakers who have called on the White House to disinvite Erdogan believe "his calamitous actions in Syria follow a long list of disconcerting steps".

Reminding Trump about the resolutions passed last month by the House warning of sanctions against Turkey, the statement said: "Given this situation, we believe that now is a particularly inappropriate time for President Erdogan to visit the US, and we urge you to rescind this invitation."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Turkey](#)

[Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)

Erdogan to tell Trump: US has not met Syria cease-fire obligations
Erdogan to meet Trump in Washington on Nov. 13

[Turkey plays the Daesh card over potential EU sanctions](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 00:24

ANKARA: With Turkey beginning the deportation process of Daesh captives held in its prisons back to Europe on Monday, the issue is brought back to the bilateral agenda between Ankara and EU, whose relations have been strained since the recent military incursion in northern Syria. The policy of deportation is likely to result in a new diplomatic fault line with Ankara's allies in Europe.

On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan weaponized Daesh and the refugee issue again over the draft plans in Brussels to sanction Turkey over its drilling activities in the Mediterranean.

Erdogan implicitly threatened to release all Daesh prisoners it holds and send them back to Europe.

"Beware EU, we have 4 million refugees, we have Daesh terrorists in custody

in Turkey and Syria. We can even stop the accession negotiations suddenly. EU should be careful," he warned, adding: "Some countries have started panicking after we began the repatriation process of foreign Daesh terrorists. Turkey has been worrying about this issue for years, let others worry now." The EU's sanction package intends "to sanction individuals or entities responsible for, or involved in, unauthorized drilling activities of hydrocarbons."

The deportation wave from Turkey began with three Daesh prisoners, a German, a Dane and an American. The 28-year-old Dane citizen had been arrested on his arrival in Copenhagen, while the German ex-fighter had been also expelled. The American member has been stuck in no-man's land between Turkish and Greek borders since Monday as Greek authorities refused him entry.

Dozens of others who fought in the militant group are also expected to be deported in the coming days. Among them are French, German and Irish ex-fighters.

The fate of foreign fighters from Daesh has been a controversial issue since the defeat of the group in Syria and Iraq. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday called for further international cooperation to resolve the issues related to foreign fighters.

Turkey has some 2,500 militants in its prisons. According to international standards, Ankara should repatriate Daesh members who were seized in Turkish territories, while those who were captured in Syria in territories beyond Assad control pose judicial problems.

However, Ankara put the blame on European countries of being too slow to reclaim their citizens who had joined Daesh.

FASTFACTS

- According to international standards, Ankara should repatriate Daesh members who were seized in Turkish territories, while those who were captured in Syria in territories beyond Assad control pose judicial problems.
- The deportation process marks another rupture in Brussels-Ankara relations.

Although some European countries like Germany, Denmark and the UK have stripped citizenship from their nationals who joined Daesh to prevent their return, Ankara is determined to send even those Daesh suspects who have had their citizenships revoked.

Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu recently said that "Turkey was not a hotel for foreign jihadis" even if they are legally stateless.

Ankara and Paris have strict bilateral protocols for deportation procedures, which allows the French authorities to repatriate terrorists.

However, Nihat Ali Ozcan, a retired major now serving as a security analyst at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, said: "It is usually challenging to prove in a trial that Daesh members committed any crimes because convictions do not usually have supporting evidence."

The average sentence for fighters returning to European countries has been about five years of imprisonment, which generates serious domestic security threats if the returned European nationals cannot go through an efficient

rehabilitation process.

The irony of Turkey's partial invasion of northeastern Syria is that Ankara now finds itself in the same situation as the very Syrian Kurdish YPG militia that it has been fighting.

Paul T. Levin, Director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies

In recent weeks, Turkey arrested many people close to the former Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who recently died during a US raid.

Erdogan is expected to discuss the fate of Daesh fighters during his meeting with his US counterpart Donald Trump in Washington on Wednesday.

The deportation process marks another rupture in Brussels-Ankara relations as last month some European countries launched an arms sales embargo to Turkey over its military incursion into northern Syria.

"The irony of Turkey's partial invasion of northeastern Syria is that Turkey now finds itself in the same situation as the very Syrian Kurdish YPG militia that it has been fighting. Now both are stuck with a number of Daesh fighters and their families in custody, calling for Europe and countries elsewhere to take their citizens back," Paul T. Levin, director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, told Arab News.

Levin said Turkey has an understandable concern over the refusal of European states to take responsibility for "their" Daesh fighters.

"Since these countries have not been willing to do much to help either Turkey or, more acutely, the YPG, there is a legitimate need to press the issue. And Turkey has some support in international law to demand that sender states take their citizens back," he said.

Levin added that it is also especially problematic that the threat to send Daesh fighters to Europe comes as a response to EU sanctions against Turkey on an entirely separate issue.

"It suggests that he may be less interested in a joint solution to the problem of captured Daesh fighters than in being able to use them as leverage in foreign policy disputes," he said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[EU-Turkey](#)

[Daesh](#)

[Israel](#)

Israeli public opinion warms toward Turkey, shows survey
Turkey and Qatar on course to clash over Levant basin drilling

[Israeli public opinion warms toward Turkey, shows survey](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 00:18

ANKARA: Despite the decline in Turkish-Israeli relations over the past decade, Israeli public opinion is increasingly supportive of an improvement in ties between the two countries.

According to the 2019 Israeli Foreign Policy Index by the Mitvim Institute of Israel, 53 percent of Israelis believe that Israel should try to improve relations with Turkey, compared to 32 percent who disagree.

This points to an almost 10 percent increase compared to the previous year, in which 42 percent of respondents said that Israel should work to improve its relationship with Turkey and 45 percent said it should not.

The respondents were also asked whether Israel should prioritize developing relations with democratic countries or should not take regime type as a

criterion; both choices were indicated by 40 percent of participants. It is the seventh edition of the survey.

In an exclusive interview with Arab News, Nimrod Goren, head of the Mitvim Institute, said the fact that a majority of Israelis stated in the annual poll that they would like it to improve relations with Turkey is in contrast to the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and the rhetoric of his main opposition party.

"This is surprising, as the poll findings reveal that on most issues the public accepts the framing provided by the Israeli leadership on foreign policy issues," he said.

According to Goren, the findings may reflect a "realpolitik" tendency by the Israeli public to seek better relations with countries that project power and influence in the region, even if there are differences in values and policies.

"The finding also reflects the resilience of Israel-Turkey ties. Despite deep political tensions and public grievances, there is still a basic positive attitude toward Turkey as a country, which can be leveraged," he said.

HIGHLIGHT

The respondents were asked whether Israel should prioritize developing relations with democratic countries or should not take regime type as a criterion; both choices were indicated by 40 percent of participants.

Historically, bilateral relations between the two countries have been at their peak when they perceived a common threat or had a common ally – such as in the 1990s over similar concerns about the existential threat from Iran, when Turkey and Israel cooperated in joint military exercises and training of officers. But ties hit a low in May 2010 after a raid on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in international waters by Israeli Defense Forces commandos, which killed 10 Turkish citizens.

A reconciliation followed after Netanyahu apologized for the incident. Although diplomatic relations were restored in 2016 to the ambassadorial level, Turkey dismissed Israeli's ambassador after its security forces killed dozens of Palestinian protesters in Gaza in May 2018. But, for Goren, relations between Israel and Turkey should not be viewed only through the prism of relations between their current leaders.

"The business community and civil society also play a role, and a more positive one than the political level. It is noteworthy that among the Israeli public, the largest support for improving ties with Turkey is found among Israel's Arab citizens," he said.

Accordingly, 68 percent are in favor of improving ties with Turkey, while 10 percent are against, compared to 50 percent in favor and 37 percent against among Israel's Jewish population.

Despite the diplomatic stalemate, trade between the two countries exceeded \$8 billion in 2018. Turkish Airlines operates 10 daily flights on the Tel Aviv-Istanbul route, with growing demands for tourist destinations in Turkey such as Antalya.

Esra Cuhadar, an expert on conflict resolution and political psychology from

Bilkent University in Ankara, said that social and cultural bonds develop independently from bilateral diplomatic relations, and can sometimes trigger grassroots change in perceptions about another country.

“Israel and Turkey are located in the same geographic region, and the people from two countries have various avenues for social contact which decreases inevitably the stereotypes and the bias,” she told Arab News.

Cuhadar, however, said that any improvement in bilateral relations is closely connected with who is ruling in both countries.

To have social rapprochement translated into improving diplomatic channels, it is necessary that the governments in both countries do not use bilateral disagreements to whip up nationalistic sentiment and consolidate its national constituencies.

The picture is less rosy on Turkish side. In a survey conducted last year by Istanbul Bilgi University, “Dimensions of Polarization in Turkey,” 14 percent of Turkish respondents considered Israel as the second largest threat after the US (54.3 percent).



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[Turkey](#)

Court says EU states must label Israeli settlement products
Egypt working to calm Israel-Gaza fighting
EU sanction on Turkey over Cyprus drilling may disrupt talks: Erdogan