

Israel, Turkey should restore ambassadorial links: Foreign policy expert

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ANKARA: Israel and Turkey should restore ambassadorial links as part of efforts to reduce tensions between the two countries, a leading regional foreign policy expert has told Arab News.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently hinted that an impending detente with Israel could be next on his rapprochement agenda with countries in the region, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

Such a move would reflect a general pattern currently being followed in the Middle East with nations trying to de-escalate tensions and diversify relations.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, president and founder of Mitvim, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, said the restoration of ambassadorial-level ties was now a feasible foreign policy goal for Israel and Turkey.

"The leaders of both countries should not let this opportunity go by unfulfilled and should seek to translate the positive vibe in relations into tangible actions," he added.

Earlier this month, an Israeli couple, both bus drivers, were detained for a week in Turkey on political and military espionage charges after being arrested for photographing Erdogan's residence in Istanbul.

Their release and return to Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's public thanks to Erdogan for his personal involvement in resolving the incident were seen as the extension of an olive branch to prevent an escalation of the crisis.

Goren said: "The positive manner in which the incident of the Israeli couple's detention in Istanbul ended creates a window of opportunity beyond the window that already opened up when the new Israeli government took office and after the recent call between Erdogan and (new Israeli President Isaac) Herzog.

"The efforts to resolve the incident exemplified that both countries can work together to resolve tensions. It increased mutual trust, strengthened existing channels, and led to initial and much-needed direct communication between Erdogan and Bennett."

In a recent interview with Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz, Israel's Foreign Ministry Director General Alon Ushpiz, said: "There is potential for a relative improvement in Israel Turkey ties, more than there was two weeks ago, and I think we need to examine it exhaustively."

Dr. Selin Nasi, London representative of the Ankara Policy Center and a respected researcher on Turkish Israeli relations, told Arab News: "Turkey and Israel, as two of the three non-Arab countries in the region, have a lot

to gain from cooperation in various areas, be it trade relations, intelligence sharing, energy cooperation, or defense.

"Indeed, the two countries have succeeded in compartmentalizing bilateral relations and bilateral trade has continued to grow in the last decade despite political disputes."

The foreign trade volume between Turkey and Israel was \$6.2 billion last year.

The looming threat of Iran becoming armed with nuclear weapons had also incentivized the need for security cooperation, Nasi said.

On Nov. 18, Erdogan had a rare phone call with his Israeli counterpart Herzog and emphasized that continued dialogue between the two nations would be "mutually beneficial."

Nasi added: "From Ankara's perspective, anti-Israeli rhetoric might have served its purpose in the domestic political sphere but is no longer deemed useful in mobilizing the constituency."

Instead, she pointed out that a positive narrative based on "Turkey gaining back its soft power through a number of reconciliatory steps taken to mend broken ties with countries in the region" may prove more useful in the upcoming elections.

She noted that improved relations between Turkey and Israel would pave the way for Ankara to get involved, either directly or indirectly, in the US-backed strategic partnership network that had been increasingly consolidated in the Eastern Mediterranean over the last decade.

"Ankara wants to gain back some of the ground lost to her regional competitors – Greece and Egypt – and therefore aims to repudiate multilateral treaties and redraw maritime boundaries according to her strategic interests," Nasi said.

Israel, she added, had always been a significant facilitator for friendly ties between Ankara and Washington.

"Maintaining cordial relations with Israel also enables Turkey to play a more active and constructive role in the Palestinian issue, raising living standards for the Palestinians.

"Because of her unique geopolitical position bordering Syria and Iran, along with her being a NATO member, Turkey will remain as an important actor and an ally for Israel. This explains why Israel has left the door open for dialogue with Ankara, and welcomed reconciliatory steps in this regard, despite having reservations," Nasi said.

Meanwhile, Israel has urged Turkey to close all offices and ban the activities of Hamas in the country after a Nov. 21 terror attack in Jerusalem carried out by a Hamas member affiliated with Turkey.

Nasi pointed out that any progress on the normalization of Turkish Israeli relations would depend on Ankara's sincerity and consistency in seeking reconciliation with Israel.

"There is potential for cooperation, but building mutual trust is essential in moving forward. And in terms of building resilient bilateral ties, the two countries need to develop cooperation on the basis of shared interests in a pragmatic manner, preventing the Palestinian issue solely dominating the agenda," she added.

Goren said: "Senior Israeli ministers still expect Turkey to prove its goodwill and positive intentions, especially by limiting Hamas' activities in Turkey. But a Turkish decision to send an ambassador to Israel, will most

likely be welcomed, and will be reciprocated with a similar Israeli move.” He noted that such an upgrade of ties would enable both countries to launch a strategic dialogue on regional affairs, improve bilateral economic and civilian cooperation, promote Turkish involvement in the Palestinian issue, and increase Israeli engagement with the Muslim world. “If done within a context of a Turkish rapprochement with Egypt and the UAE, the potential will even be bigger. It will soften tensions in the region, broaden the space for dialogue and cooperation, and lessen Israeli concerns that advancing ties with Turkey might jeopardize other regional alliances,” he added.



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Wed, 2021-12-01 23:09

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced on Wednesday the launch of the ration card platform and the emergency social safety net project.

Funded and supported by the World Bank and the UN, the programs are intended to help the most vulnerable in Lebanon.

The ration card platform had faltered after it was announced by Hassan Diab's resigned government on Sept. 9 due to funding issues and objections by the World Bank.

The platform was supposed to be up before subsidies on fuel were lifted to limit protests.

In his announcement, Mikati addressed the obstruction of Cabinet sessions since Oct. 12: "If some people have the right to revolt in the street and get angry, then those who were and still are in power have no right to shirk responsibility and blame those who are currently trying to fight to save the country."

He noted that during the diplomatic meetings he held in the country and overseas, one expression was constantly repeated: "Help yourselves, and we will help you." If anything, this indicates the extent of the responsibility of all Lebanese officials and leaders to cooperate for Lebanon to move forward, he explained.

Mikati noted: "The beneficiaries of the two projects will be selected according to transparent criteria to secure the basic requirements for a decent life. The two-month registration phase will be closely monitored to prevent any exploitation, after which the payment process will begin early next year with a retroactive effect from January 2022."

FASTFACT

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, 25 percent of Lebanese suffer from extreme poverty, while 70 percent are struggling to make ends meet, with the middle class almost becoming extinct amid Lebanon's economic and financial collapse.

The ministry is currently assisting 36,000 families suffering from extreme poverty by giving them a \$25 food card and a further \$15 for each family member. The children of these families are enrolled in public schools and receive free primary healthcare, thanks to EU funding. The ministry aims to start supporting 75,000 families.

"In the first phase, we will start implementing the social safety net program, which covers 150,000 Lebanese families and 87,000 children enrolled in public schools," said Minister of Social Affairs Hector Hajjar.

He added: "These programs are not the solution; they are rather temporary support to help citizens survive until economic recovery is initiated."

Mikati said that he had issued a decision "to form a technical committee to review the security and cyber aspects of the IMPACT platform and its subsidiary webpages, headed by the minister of interior, to prevent any data

manipulation and ensure user privacy.”

Hajjar expected around 20,000 people to register on the platform daily. More families are falling under the poverty line in Lebanon, a World Bank report revealed.

The share of the Lebanese population under the international poverty line is estimated to have risen by 13 percentage points in 2020 and is expected to further increase by as much as 28 percentage points by the end of 2021; amounting to 1.5 million Lebanese.

Meanwhile, 780,000 Syrian refugees are under the poverty line, and their share is estimated to have risen by 39 percentage points in 2020 and 52 percentage points in 2021.

The report also tackled the successive financial crises that have afflicted Lebanon, noting that “the Lebanese government’s hands are tied in terms of providing social assistance to citizens and residents alike.”

International institutions fear further repercussions as Lebanon is being assailed by compounded crises for the third year in a row, which may lead to widespread chaos and disturb the fragile security stability, especially in light of the significant rise in the prices of goods, fuel, transportation, medicine, electricity from generators, and other daily life necessities. “Radical reforms are essential to achieve recovery and social protection programs are very helpful in mitigating the impact of multiple crises,” the World Bank said.



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Lebanon reintroduces some COVID-19 prevention measures Give Lebanon a break, politicians told

Lebanon reintroduces some COVID-19 prevention measures

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BEIRUT: Lebanon will impose a night-time curfew starting Dec. 17 on non-vaccinated people for three weeks.

And full vaccination will be made mandatory for all workers in several sectors due to concerns over the spread of coronavirus, the COVID-19 committee said on Wednesday.

Vaccination will be mandatory for all civil servants and workers in the health, education, tourism and public transport sectors as of Jan. 10, the committee said.

A new coronavirus variant found in South Africa and detected in several countries was determined as a variant of concern by the World Health Organization last week and has led to strengthening COVID-19-related restrictions around the world.



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[Algeria's FLN narrowly wins local polls](#)

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ALGIERS: Algeria's long-dominant National Liberation Front has narrowly won local elections, preliminary results showed Tuesday, in a vote seen as key in efforts to turn the page on late president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rule.

The FLN, which led the country's war of independence from France and was for decades its only party, won 5,978 seats nationwide, followed by its traditional ally the Democratic National Rally (RND) with 4,584, electoral board chief Mohamed Charfi said.

Independents came third with 4,430 seats, Charfi told journalists.

Saturday's vote was an important test for President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, elected in a contentious, widely boycotted 2019 ballot months after Bouteflika stepped down under pressure from the army and the Hirak pro-democracy protest movement.

Bouteflika died in September, aged 84.

In November last year, less than 24 percent of the electorate approved amendments to the constitution, while at parliamentary elections in June, voter participation hit a record low of 23 percent.

Saturday saw 36.6 percent turnout for the local elections and 34.8 percent for regional polls, Charfi said.

He had previously rejected any comparison with local ballots under Bouteflika, which were marked by widespread fraud.

The FLN won absolute majorities in 124 out of the country's 1,541 municipalities, but lost majorities in 479 of the 603 it had controlled.

In 552 municipalities it will have to govern alongside its allies, including the RND, which won absolute majorities in 58 city councils.

Opposition veterans the Front of Socialist forces (FFS) won an absolute majority in 47 municipalities, many of them in the restive Kabylie region.



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[Turkish opposition politician arrested for alleged espionage](#)

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ANKARA: Turkish authorities have arrested a prominent member of an opposition party over accusations that he engaged in "political and military espionage," Turkey's state-run news agency reported.

Anadolu Agency said late Monday that a court in Ankara ordered Metin Gurcan, a retired army officer and founding member of the opposition Democracy and Progress Party, or DEVA, jailed pending the outcome of a trial.

Gurcan, who wrote articles on Turkish foreign policy and defense issues, last year founded the DEVA party together with its leader, Ali Babacan – a former deputy prime minister who broke away from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ruling party.

The politician and defense analyst is accused of selling alleged secret information to foreign diplomats, according to Hurriyet newspaper and other media reports. Gurcan rejected the accusations during his questioning, the reports said.

A trial date is expected to be set after the court approves a prosecutors’ indictment against Gurcan.

Babacan defended Gurcan in a late night television interview saying the analyst had “no means of accessing confidential information considered to be a state secret because he does not work for the state.”

“(Gurcan’s) studies consist of information compiled from open sources,” Babacan said.



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