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Erdogan Calls for Israel's Destruction

Executive Summary

"May Allah make Zionist Israel destroyed and devastated," Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [prayed](#) on March 30. This invocation was not simply a rhetorical flourish, an aberration, or simple political posturing—it was an authentic expression of Erdogan's longstanding antagonism towards Israel. Since taking office more than 22 years ago, Erdogan has not only heaped verbal abuse on Israel but supported terrorist groups, like Hamas, actively working for its destruction. Yet, he has only grown more bellicose since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack and, in particular, once the United States approved the sale of upgraded F-16s to Turkey in January 2024. There are three good reasons to worry that these might be more than just words.

First, almost everything Erdogan does, including this threat against Israel, is geared towards maintaining his now two-decade-old grip on power. Being tough on Israel might be just what he needs as his popularity sags, including among the Islamist base he once easily won.

Second, Erdogan is highly pragmatic. He tones down his antisemitism when he thinks it might impede him from getting something he wants from the United States. Recent positive comments by President Donald Trump about Erdogan, however, mean that the Turkish leader feels no such constraint currently.


Third, and most troubling, Turkey and Israel now not only effectively share a border in Syria but are militarily operating in the same space. This raises the real possibility of, if not outright hostilities, then accidents, misunderstanding, and friction that, fueled by Erdogan's hateful pronouncements, could easily escalate.

Background: Erdogan's Anti-Israel Hostility and Hamas Support

Erdogan has long held militantly anti-Israel views. Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials, AKP) has its roots in the Islamist ideology of the *Milli Görüş* movement—led by Erdogan’s onetime mentor, former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. *Milli Görüş* theorists like Erbakan [repudiated](#) Western thought and viewed the world as dominated by Jewish influence. Early on, Erdogan repeatedly [espoused](#) deeply antisemitic views, and in 1974, rose to fame by [directing](#), and starring in, an explicitly antisemitic play called “MasKomYa”—meaning “Mason, Communist, Jew”—which portrayed Judaism as evil. In 1998, as mayor of Istanbul, he reportedly [stated](#), “the image of the Jews is no different from that of the Nazis.”

Soon after Erdogan became prime minister in 2003, Turkey began cultivating close ties with Hamas. In 2006, Turkey [hosted](#) then-Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal weeks after Hamas won legislative elections in Gaza. Turkey thereafter became one of Hamas’s primary [benefactors](#), reportedly [pledging](#) in 2012 to provide Hamas over \$300 million annually. Turkey has long [hosted](#) Hamas leaders, with whom Erdogan has repeatedly met, and Hamas has used Turkish soil to [plot](#) terrorist attacks against Israel.

Turkey has also permitted material support for terrorism to flow through its financial system, despite repeated [warnings](#) from American officials and lawmakers. Turkey has allowed Hamas front companies—including investment firms, real-estate brokerages, and securities companies—to [operate](#) on its soil with impunity, and Western officials [estimate](#) that Turkey holds a large portion of Hamas’s approximately \$500 million worth of assets outside Gaza. That is why Turkish-based Hamas financiers and top operatives have been the subject of at least seven rounds of U.S. sanctions in the last three years. However, some Hamas front groups in Turkey reportedly continued [yielding](#) large profits after being sanctioned, as Turkey—in its dealings with Russia and others—has proven [adept](#) at evading U.S. sanctions.

| Hamas-Related U.S. Sanctions on Turkish-Based Individuals and Groups  | |
|---|--|
| <i>2022 - Present</i> | |
| Date Announced | Sanctions Details |
| 5/24/22 | <p align="center">Turkish-based Hamas financier and front company Trend GYO</p> <p>Treasury reveals Hamas holds roughly 75 percent of Turkish-based Trend GYO’s issued capital, planned to issue additional \$15mn in shares to Hamas leaders</p> |
| 10/18/23 | <p align="center">Three Turkish-based Hamas financiers</p> <p>Hamas financiers revealed to be board members of several Turkish investment portfolio companies, including Trend</p> |
| 10/27/23 | <p align="center">Three Turkish-based Hamas financiers</p> <p>Trend’s three primary shareholders sanctioned; Trend revealed to be key component of Hamas’s global assets</p> |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 12/13/23 | Two Turkish-based Hamas political leaders and financial operatives Turkish-based financier who funded Hamas's West Bank terrorism, including operations at Hamas's West Bank command center, sanctioned |
| 1/22/24 | Two Turkish-based front organizations used by Hamas financier in Gaza Turkish-based front company Al Markaziya revealed to have facilitated over \$20mn in Iranian funding to Hamas |
| 10/7/24 | Turkish-based Hamas financier and Turkish-based three front organizations Turkish-based leader of Hamas's investment portfolio, which managed approx. \$500mn for Hamas, sanctioned along with three Turkish-based front companies |
| 11/19/24 | Three Turkish-based Hamas officials and financial operatives Turkish-based senior Hamas terror operative and two Turkish-backed senior Hamas financial operatives sanctioned, including one directly involved in sending Hamas funds from Turkey to Gaza and the West Bank |

Note: List is not intended to be comprehensive.

Erdogan has also serially used Israel's campaigns against Hamas as a pretext to criticize and threaten Israel. He [called](#) Israel's 2004 killing of Hamas founder Ahmed Yassin an act of "terrorism." However, under the pretense of criticizing Israel's military operations in Gaza after Hamas's October 7 massacre, Turkey's hostility hit new levels.

| Erdogan's Anti-Israel Threats During Israel's Self-Defense Operations | | JINSA |
|---|--|--|
| <u>Date</u> | <u>Campaign</u> | <u>Hostile Rhetoric</u> |
| December 2008 – January 2009 | Operation Cast Lead | December 2008: Erdogan accuses Israel of orchestrating "a serious crime against humanity," and "killing innocent people" while dealing a "blow to world peace" January 2009: Erdogan reprimands Israel's then-President Shimon Peres during the World Economic Forum and accuses Israel of war crimes |
| July 2014 – August 2014 | Operation Protective Edge | July 2014: Erdogan states Israel has "surpassed Hitler in barbarism" July 2014: Erdogan declares Israel is "terrorizing the region" and promises to hold it accountable |
| March 2018 – December 2019 | Hamas's "Great March of Return" Border Clashes | July 2018: Erdogan asserts that Israel's leaders are imbued with "Hitler spirit" July 2018: Erdogan claims Israel is the most "fascist, racist state" in the world May 2018: Erdogan states Turkey must take a "physical stance" against Israel |
| May 2021 | Operation Guardian of the Walls | May 2021: Erdogan calls Israel a "terrorist state" May 2021: Erdogan states Israel must be taught a "strong and deterrent lesson" |

Note: List is not intended to be comprehensive.

Recent Hostile Anti-Israel Turkish Statements/Actions

| Date | Description |
|--------------------------|--|
| 4/10/25 | Foreign Minister Fidan says “we will not sit and watch” Israel’s “expansionist” actions in Syria |
| 3/30/25 | President Erdogan calls for Israel to be “destroyed and devastated” |
| 2/13/25 | Erdogan asserts that Israel is dragging the Middle East “toward blood and tears again” |
| 1/15/25 | Erdogan says Israel must end aggressive actions in Syria or “there will be negative consequences” |
| 1/2/25 | Erdogan’s son Bilal tells tens of thousands of rallygoers “Gaza will emerge victorious” |
| 12/15/24 | Fidan says Turkey considering “other measures” vs. Israel if it doesn’t “respect Syrian sovereignty” |
| 11/19/24 | Turkey refuses to allow Israel’s President Isaac Herzog to use its airspace while flying to Azerbaijan |
| 11/11/24 | Erdogan calls upon Islamic countries to “impose an arms embargo on Israel, end trade with Israel, and isolate Israel internationally unless its aggression ends” |
| 9/7/24 | Erdogan calls for “alliance of Islamic countries” vs. “Israeli banditry and Israeli state terrorism” |
| 8/6/24 | Turkey joins South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice |
| 8/3/24 | Erdogan’s son Bilal states that “Israel is currently driven by a deviant ideology” and has been “condemned by Allah” |
| 7/28/24 | Erdogan implies that Turkey would invade Israel: “Just as we entered Karabakh, just like we entered Libya, we might do [something] similar to [Israel]” |
| 7/12/24 | Turkey unilaterally blocks all NATO-Israel collaboration, including joint meetings and exercises |
| 5/29/24 | Erdogan calls Prime Minister Netanyahu a “psychopath” and “vampire” who “feeds on blood” |
| 5/13/24 | Erdogan reveals over 1,000 Hamas members are receiving medical treatment in Turkey |
| 5/2/24 | Turkey announces the suspension of all trade with Israel |
| 4/17/24 | Erdogan states Israel is committing genocide and Prime Minister Netanyahu “surpassed Hitler long ago” |
| 4/12/24 | Erdogan vows Israel will “pay” a price for its actions in Gaza |
| 4/12/24 | Communications Minister Fahrettin Altun says that “Israel needs to be fought with full solidarity” |
| 3/9/24 | Erdogan states that Turkey “firmly backs” Hamas |
| 2/29/24 | U.S. Senate votes down resolution to block F-16 sale from proceeding |
| 1/27/24 | U.S. State Department approves F-16 sale to Turkey |
| 1/1/24 | Erdogan’s son Bilal says “breaking the fetters of Hagia Sophia ... was the first step towards freedom for Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa” |
| 11/15/23 | Erdogan labels Israel a “terror state,” accuses it of “employing state terrorism,” and calls Hamas “resistance fighters” |
| 10/26/23 | Erdogan says “Hamas is not a terrorist organization” and threatens Israel “we may suddenly knock on your door one night” |

Note: List is not intended to be comprehensive.

Domestic Politics of Erdogan's Israel Threats

Whatever Erdogan's ideological proclivities and ambitions, he has always been a pragmatic, and particularly effective, politician. He has stayed in power for more than 22 years by taking expedient positions and forging useful political partnerships. For the last ten years, that has meant turning on some of his previous Islamist allies and working with Turkish nationalists. That strategy might now be running its course as his popularity dips.

As Erdogan looks to another possible term in office, which would require amending the constitution, he is cracking down on potential adversaries, looking for new political allies, and trying to regain support among a core constituency that has recently turned away from him—Islamists. This strategy has led him to [arrest](#) Istanbul major Ekrem Imamoglu, considered the most likely opposition candidate for president, [seek](#) a new peace opening with Turkey's Kurdish population, and lash out at Israel.

A clear indication of Erdogan's eroding support among the Islamist voters that have traditionally supported him was his party's historically [poor showing](#) in Turkey's March 2024 nationwide local elections. The AKP outright [lost](#) to the opposition, center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), which won 35 provincial mayorships—including Turkey's five largest cities—compared to the AKP's 24. However, as Turkey expert Alan Makovsky, former Turkish affairs analyst at the State Department and a member of JINSA's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project, [observed](#) in a JINSA webinar, this outcome—representing the AKP's [worst showing](#) in 17 consecutive nationwide, local, and presidential elections—was because the AKP “suffered at the polls for the fractionalization of the right.” Makovsky [noted](#) that more fervently Islamist parties were “instrumental in siphoning off some votes. ... If every vote that went to [Yeniden Rafah] and Huda-Par, these two very extreme Islamist parties, [went] to Erdogan's party instead, [the AKP] would have won five more provincial mayorships.”

| Results of Turkey's Countrywide Local Elections – March 2024 | | JINSA |
|--|-----------------|-------|
| Political Party | Percent of Vote | |
| CHP (Center-Left) | 37.77 | |
| AKP (Erdogan's Party) | 35.49 | |
| Yeniden Rafah (Islamist) | 6.19 | |
| DEM Party (Left) | 5.70 | |
| MHP (Nationalist) | 4.99 | |
| Huda-Par (Islamist) | 0.55 | |
| Other Parties | 9.31 | |

Additionally, in a vicious cycle, two decades of Erdogan's anti-Israel rhetoric has negatively influenced Turkish society's view of Israel, in turn making his tirades more popular. A March 2025 Turkish [poll](#) found that 84 percent of Turks view Israel as an enemy. An Anti-Defamation League

survey from January 2025 [found](#) that just 47 percent of Turkish citizens favor having diplomatic relations with Israel; 45 percent hold favorable views of Hamas; and just 5 percent have a favorable view of Israel.

The need to placate Turkey's Islamist base and Turks' increasingly unfavorable views of Israel make it likely that, in the lead-up to the next election, expected in 2028, Erdogan may adopt yet more extreme anti-Israel stances.

The Washington Factor

Erdogan's pragmatism extends not just to domestic politics, but to the world stage as well. He has savvily downplayed antipathy for Israel to curry favor with the United States. Turkey-Israel relations warmed substantially following Ankara's October 2021 [request](#) to buy 40 new F-16 fighters, and upgrade 79 of its existing F-16s, from the United States. In August 2022, Turkey [restored](#) full diplomatic ties with Israel. The following month, Erdogan [met](#) with Israel's then-Prime Minister Yair Lapid in the first bilateral head-of-state meeting since 2008. With the F-16 sale still not yet approved, in September 2023, Turkey [announced](#) plans for a joint energy exploration venture with Israel and proposed creating a forum for bilateral energy and technology efforts.

Conversely, after the State Department approved, and Congress voted down a resolution to block Turkey's F-16 purchase in January and February 2024, respectively, Erdogan's hostility towards Israel dramatically ramped up. Between May and August 2024, Turkey announced it was unilaterally, and indefinitely, [blocking](#) all NATO-Israel cooperation including meetings and joint exercises; announced it was [severing](#) bilateral trade with Israel; and [joined](#) the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) genocide case against Israel. This period of hostility hit an apex when Erdogan seemingly [threatened](#), in July 2024, to invade Israel—stating Turkey was willing to “enter” the Israel-Hamas conflict as it did in Libya and the South Caucasus.



Now, Turkey is reportedly asking the United States to be [readmitted](#) into the U.S. military's F-35 acquisition program. This could once again provide Washington with a source of leverage to, at least in the near term, seek friendlier Turkish behavior toward Israel.

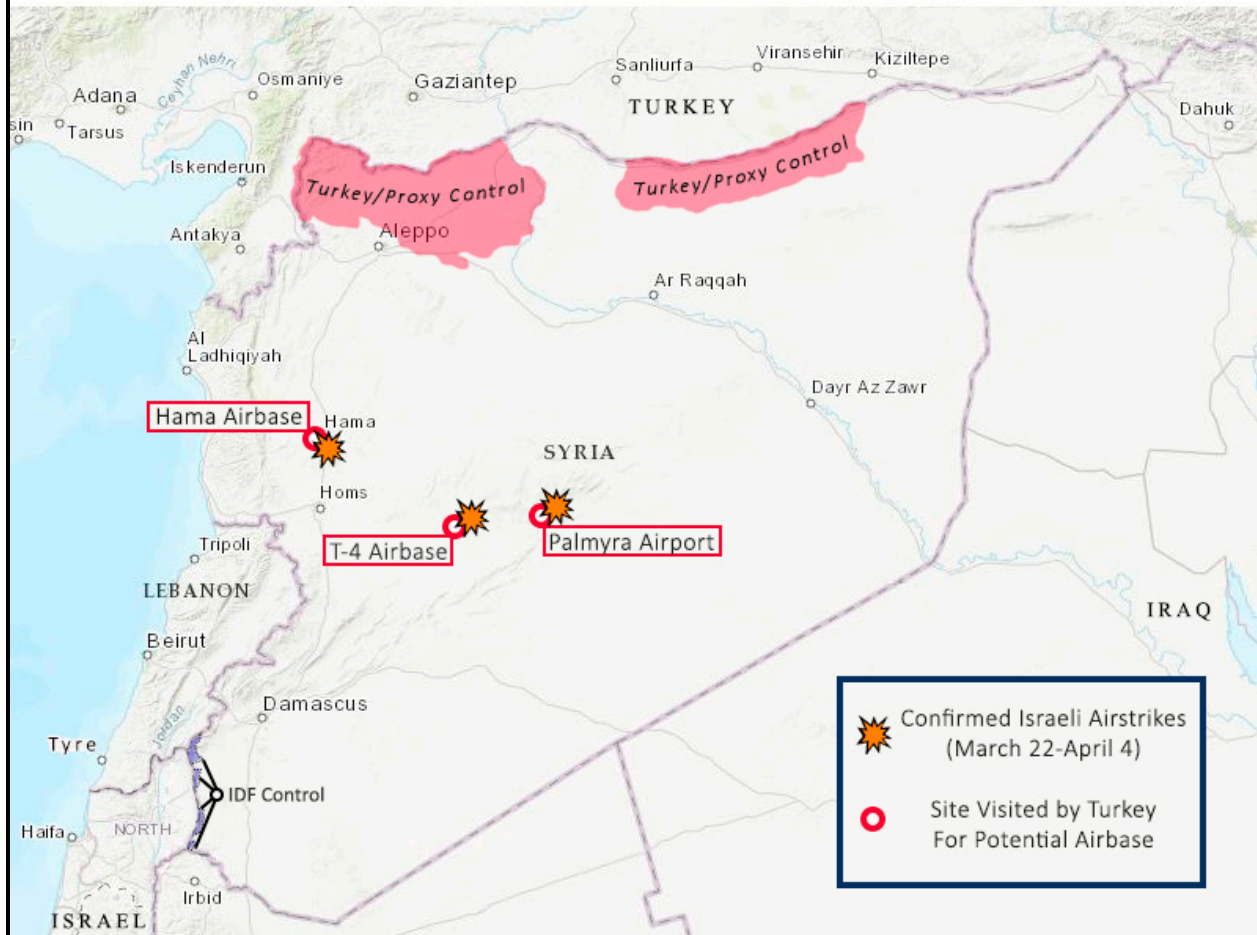
However, with the Trump administration seemingly well-disposed toward Erdogan he has, so far, felt no need to moderate his hostile rhetoric against Israel. The Trump administration is reportedly seriously [considering](#) Turkey's F-35 ask and may [loosen](#) other restrictions on U.S.-Turkey defense trade. U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff [described](#) a March 16 phone call between Erdogan and President Trump as "transformational," adding, "a lot of good, positive news [is] coming out of Turkey right now as a result of that conversation ... I think you'll see that in the reporting in the coming days." Recent American goodwill gestures also include Trump [praising](#) Erdogan on March 26 as a "good" leader. In addition, speaking alongside Prime Minister Netanyahu on April 7, after being asked about Israel's opposition to Turkish influence in Syria, Trump [stated](#), "I have great relations [with President Erdogan] ... and I happen to like him," continuing that "any problem that you have with Turkey, I think I can solve. I mean, as long as [Prime Minister Netanyahu is] reasonable."

Increasing Potential for Friction in Syria

Turkey's barrage of recent anti-Israel threats is especially troubling since December's regime change in Syria created an effective Turkish sphere of influence—including Turkey's [growing](#) military presence—in Israel's backyard, raising the potential for friction. Prime Minister Netanyahu, while speaking at the White House on April 7, [stated](#), "we don't want to see Syria being used by anyone, including Turkey, as a base for attack on Israel." In January, Israel's Commission to Evaluate Force Buildup and the Security Budget—a panel of nine retired Israeli generals, including two former national security advisors to the prime minister—[warned](#) that the presence of Turkish forces in Syria "could intensify the danger of a direct Turkish-Israeli confrontation," and that Turkey's military footprint in Syria could become a "greater [threat to Israel] than that of Iran."

Raising the likelihood of Turkish-Israeli conflict, Syria reportedly agreed in early April to allow Turkey to [establish](#) several bases inside Syrian territory, including at two key strategic sites, the T4 airbase near Palmyra and the Menagh airbase—the latter of which Turkish forces are reportedly already [stationed](#) at—in Syria's north. Turkey is reportedly contemplating [deploying](#) advanced air defense systems at these new bases, and is also working towards a defense pact with Syria's new government, reportedly [involving](#) Turkey constructing and operating more bases in Syria, training the new Syrian military, and using Syrian airspace indefinitely for unspecified military purposes.

Turkish Efforts to Expand in Syria After the Fall of Bashar al-Assad



Source: Israel Defense Forces, Reuters

In response, Israel [conducted](#) several airstrikes in late March and early April targeting multiple Syrian airbases Turkey planned to take over. Reportedly, Israeli officials recently [warned](#) Turkish counterparts that Turkey's military deployment in the Palmyra region is a "red line" for Israel.

Turkey can intentionally or mistakenly interfere with Israeli Air Force (IAF) military operations against Iranian proxies in Lebanon, as well as Syria. This represents a real threat to Israel's freedom of action in this critical arena. IAF operations in Lebanon and Syria serve both Israeli and U.S. national security interests by: eliminating weapons platforms that Syrian jihadist groups, or Syria's current or future leadership, could employ against Israel; preventing Iran's smuggling of funds and munitions to Hezbollah; neutralizing Hezbollah threats as they arise; forestalling the return of Iranian advisors—and attendant expertise—following their [precipitous](#) departure; and preserving Israel's freedom of action over Syrian airspace in potential operations targeting Iran's nuclear program.

Tragic precedent shows Syria's airspace can become dangerously contested, particularly given the added complications posed by electronic warfare and hard-to-detect stealth fighters. In 2015, Turkey accidentally [downed](#) a Russian jet over Syria, among other [mishaps](#) in Syria's skies. This issue alone should give U.S. leaders pause about providing Turkey F-35s, or even the yet-to-be-delivered F-16 fighter jets absent restrictions on their geographic use.

Though Turkey and Israel [began](#) deconfliction talks on April 9, such talks may not be fruitful and could involve Turkish attempts to strong-arm Israel, particularly without active U.S. engagement. On April 10, Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [blustered](#), "it is unacceptable for Israel to try to provoke in Syria by using its expansionist ambitions in the region" and threatened that "we won't just sit and watch."