

What Does the Escalating Israeli Rhetoric Against Ankara Signal?



From early signs of cautious rapprochement to the specter of an open political confrontation, relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv have rapidly slipped toward a deepening rift since the outbreak of the Gaza war in 2023. Not long after the two sides restored ambassadorial relations and Israel's president visited Ankara in 2022, that brief period of reconciliation quickly gave way to a political rupture when Turkey adopted an explicit and public stance against what it described as Israel's genocidal actions in the Gaza Strip.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not limit himself to condemnation. Instead, he delivered a direct political rebuke to Benjamin Netanyahu, declaring that "humanity and conscience have erased his name and cast him aside." Israel responded by withdrawing its diplomatic mission and freezing contacts.

The tension soon moved beyond rhetorical sparring as an increasingly hardline Israeli discourse emerged, elevating Turkey to the level of a strategic threat sometimes ranked just behind Iran. This dramatic shift represents a striking turn in a narrative that had long balanced security pragmatism with regional rivalry.

A Potential Enemy

In the aftermath of the Gaza war, political and military rhetoric in Israel increasingly portrayed Turkey as an emerging regional adversary and a strategic threat comparable to Iran.

Striking remarks came from senior figures, most notably former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who warned last Wednesday that Ankara must “choose its position,” adding in a tone that suggested escalation: “If they try to encircle us, we will not stand idly by... After Iran, Turkey.” Although the statement appeared truncated, it was widely interpreted as a signal that Turkey could become the next target after Tehran.

The hardline discourse has not been limited to Bennett. In October 2023, Israel recalled its ambassador from Ankara after Erdoğan accused Israel of committing war crimes in Gaza. Israel’s subsequent foreign minister, Israel Katz, went further by calling for Turkey’s expulsion from NATO, accusing it of aligning with the “Iranian axis of evil” alongside Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. His remarks came after Erdoğan suggested that Turkey might intervene militarily in Israel, much as it had in Libya and Azerbaijan.

Within Israeli research and media circles, this perception has also taken hold. In the newspaper Israel Hayom, analyst Shai Gal argued that Turkey has effectively become “the new Iran” for Israel, warning of Ankara’s military plans, its open support for Hamas, and its potential ambitions to develop nuclear capabilities.

Taken together, such statements suggest the crystallization of a new strategic outlook in Israel one that sees Turkey as a rising regional rival requiring vigilance and possibly confrontation, if not militarily then through multidimensional political and security containment.

A Differentiated Threat

Despite the growing tone of alarm in Israel regarding Turkey, labeling it a strategic threat has sparked broad internal debate about the hierarchy of adversaries and whether Ankara truly deserves to be placed alongside Tehran.

For many experts and former diplomats, the comparison appears exaggerated and somewhat misleading. Unlike Iran, Turkey does not deny Israel’s existence nor call for its eradication. Despite their disagreements, Ankara remains a player within the Western camp and a member of NATO.

Former Israeli consul general in New York Alon Pinkas described the comparison between Ankara and Tehran as “almost laughable,” stressing that Turkey has never adopted genocidal rhetoric or called for Israel’s destruction, as Iran’s leadership has repeatedly done.

Similarly, regional affairs researcher Gallia Lindenstrauss warned that equating

the two weakens the seriousness of the genuine Iranian threat, which remains rooted in Tehran's nuclear program and its network of regional proxies.

Analyst Yossi Mekelberg likewise argued that the inflated rhetoric surrounding the "Turkish threat" amounts to little more than political noise intended to distract from the fundamental challenge posed by Iran.

Yet within some security and strategic circles, a different conviction is gaining traction: that the Turkish threat while distinct in nature from Iran's should not be underestimated. Ankara is expanding cross-border influence in conflict zones while promoting a populist Islamist discourse that grants it considerable influence across the Sunni sphere arguably surpassing Iran's reach in the Shiite world.

Bennett went even further, warning that "Erdoğan and Qatar are working to build a hardline Sunni axis that could surpass the power of Iran's Shiite axis."

Between these two perspectives, debate within Israel's strategic establishment remains divided: one camp prioritizes containing Iran as the traditional existential adversary, while another urges taking Turkey's emerging challenge seriously a complex blend of regional ambition, media influence, military presence, and ideological reach that cannot be ignored in long-term security calculations.

Intertwined Motives

To understand the sudden shift in Israel's rhetoric toward Ankara, it is necessary to examine several intertwined motivations behind the escalation.

The first relates to domestic mobilization and shaping Israeli public opinion. Since October 2023, Israel has been engaged in a multi-front war, prompting political leaders to maintain a constant sense of external threat.

As former Israeli diplomat Alon Pinkas put it: "Leaders like Netanyahu and Bennett need a permanent enemy. If it is not Iran or Hezbollah, then let it be Turkey." In this context, the rush by some politicians to amplify the "Turkish threat" can be interpreted as calculated political positioning aimed at reinforcing a narrative of danger and mobilizing domestic support.

The second motive involves efforts to curb Turkey's regional expansion. From Tel Aviv's perspective, Ankara's ambitions in Syria and Gaza intersect with Israel's security interests. Turkish influence in northern Syria, for instance, restricts the operational freedom of the Israeli Air Force, while Ankara's explicit support for Hamas is viewed as a direct threat.

Bennett expressed this approach openly, calling for efforts to "thwart Erdoğan's project of building a Sunni axis led from Ankara," arguing that containing Turkey

has become a strategic priority. In this sense, the media demonization of Turkey cannot be separated from a broader preemptive containment strategy through which Israel seeks to forge counter-alliances and activate political and diplomatic pressure tools.

A third driver lies in electoral considerations and domestic political tactics. Israel's right-wing government already facing unprecedented internal challenges before the war, including the judicial reform crisis and deep social divisions has found that adopting a confrontational tone toward Ankara helps redirect attention and restore a measure of domestic cohesion, particularly amid growing international criticism of its conduct in Gaza.

Finally, the regional and international dimension of this rhetoric should not be overlooked. Israel is seeking to shape a regional axis against what it describes as "hardline Sunni expansion." In late 2025, Netanyahu's government floated the idea of a six-party alliance including India, Greece, and Cyprus alongside Arab and African states implicitly aimed at counterbalancing Turkey and Qatar.

Within this framework, portraying Ankara as an adversary serves to strengthen security partnerships with actors wary of Turkey's growing influence, including Greece, Cyprus, and even some Gulf capitals.

The hardening Israeli discourse thus functions as a political instrument used simultaneously to manage domestic politics, shape regional dynamics, and redraw alliance structures in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey Between Deterrence and Preparation

Turkey has rejected Israel's portrayal of it as a regional threat and responded with a combination of political escalation and carefully calibrated moves on the ground. Ankara's approach can be understood along two parallel tracks: a diplomatic-political track and a security-military one, reflecting its determination not to retreat while avoiding an uncontrolled confrontation.

Politically, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has adopted an uncompromising tone, accusing Israel of committing war crimes and acts of genocide in Gaza. His statements have also included clear deterrent messages, warning Israel against infringing on Turkish sovereignty and asserting that anyone who attempts to do so would "pay a very heavy price."

Ankara has also activated its diplomatic tools. Turkey recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and spearheaded diplomatic initiatives within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations to rally support for the Palestinian cause.

It hosted meetings of foreign ministers from Muslim-majority countries to

discuss post-war arrangements in Gaza and insisted that any reconstruction initiative or international deployment cannot ignore Turkey's role.

Within this framework, Ankara appointed a coordinator for humanitarian aid to Palestine and circulated images of Turkish relief teams raising the Turkish flag while clearing rubble in Gaza messages intended to demonstrate support for Palestinians and underscore Turkey's presence in the regional equation.

On the military front, Turkey has exercised measured caution while preparing for potential contingencies. Although it has not engaged Israel directly, Ankara has accelerated efforts to modernize its armed forces. In late 2025, Turkey concluded an agreement with the United Kingdom to purchase 20 Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets and began negotiations to acquire additional aircraft from the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

In parallel, it launched a defense project to develop a domestic missile interception system known as the "Steel Dome" and began constructing fortified shelters in major cities in preparation for possible missile attacks.

Amid rising regional tensions especially following last year's 12-day confrontation between Israel and Iran Erdoğan renewed calls for Turkey to develop medium- and long-range ballistic missiles. Reports have also surfaced about plans to establish a missile testing facility in Somalia.

Turkey has thus pursued a dual strategy: calibrated escalation combined with quiet preparation. It signals deterrence without taking reckless risks, raises its voice and mobilizes alliances while keeping channels for de-escalation open.

Through this balancing act, Ankara seeks to assert itself as an indispensable regional actor one that cannot be sidelined in the Palestinian question or in shaping the post-war order.

Calculated De-escalation or Open Escalation?

As rhetorical escalation intensifies between Ankara and Tel Aviv, pressing questions are emerging about the future of relations and whether tensions will remain confined to harsh statements or spill into real confrontation.

In a scenario of escalation, the environment appears primed for further deterioration particularly as Israel's right-wing government continues to use Turkey as a tool for domestic mobilization and amplifies anti-Ankara rhetoric. Analysts warn that persistent "demonization" of Turkey could produce unintended consequences, including pushing Ankara closer to Israel's traditional adversaries such as Iran or the Palestinian resistance, or prompting it to expand defense partnerships with actors like Russia or Pakistan moves that would further complicate the region's security calculations.

Moreover, overlapping interests in sensitive arenas such as Syria, Jerusalem, and even eastern Mediterranean energy resources raise the possibility of indirect friction. For instance, tensions could escalate through third parties if Turkey were to contribute forces to an international mission in Gaza or intensify maritime operations aimed at breaking the blockade steps Israel might perceive as direct threats and respond to militarily.

Such scenarios would not necessarily point to full-scale war but would keep the risk of limited confrontation alive within a fragile regional framework.

At the same time, there are strong indications of a pragmatic current on both sides seeking to manage tensions and prevent uncontrolled escalation. Turkey remains a foundational member of NATO, and a military clash with Ankara could trigger international repercussions that Israel already engaged on multiple fronts would likely prefer to avoid.

Likewise, Ankara understands that an open confrontation with Israel, given the extensive US support it enjoys, would not serve Turkey's strategic interests.

For this reason, relations in the medium term are likely to remain within a framework of tense détente or uneasy coexistence where fiery rhetoric is deployed for domestic and diplomatic purposes without translating into reckless military action. The United States and its Western partners will likely play a central role through behind-the-scenes mediation and open security communication channels aimed at preventing accidental escalation.

Over the longer term, the trajectory of relations will remain tied to domestic shifts in both countries. The removal of Israel's current right-wing government or a shift in Turkey's rhetoric under economic or electoral pressures could open the door to gradual normalization or at least a return to what might be described as "cold calm."

Turkish-Israeli relations have entered a new phase characterized by structural tension and persistent chill neither the complete rupture of the past nor a sign of imminent reconciliation. The most probable near-term trajectory lies in a gray zone between fiery rhetoric, calculated maneuvering, and cautiously forming regional counter-alliances.