

From trade to airspace: Erdogan's gambit demands a firm reply

written by Noa Lazimi | 04.09.2025

Last Friday, Turkey's foreign minister announced that Ankara would sever its economic ties with Israel and close its airspace to Israeli aircraft. A dramatic statement but one that is hardly surprising. Since October 7, Turkey has steadily escalated its rhetoric against Jerusalem, taking a series of confrontational steps: adopting a distinctly pro-Hamas stance, joining South Africa's case at The Hague, vetoing Israeli participation in a NATO emergency drill, and threatening an economic boycott.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is determined to isolate Israel on the international stage. Yet even he understands that the rope cannot be pulled indefinitely. Overly drastic moves risk harming Turkey's fragile economy more than Israel's. In fact, while bilateral trade has declined, the data show no acute disruption.

Ankara has been careful to circumvent its own proclamations, whether by redirecting goods through third countries or labeling them as destined for the Palestinian Authority. The truth is that Turkish exporters would be the real losers from a full trade cutoff. Energy supplies from Azerbaijan to Israel, routed through Turkey, have also continued without interruption.

So when Turkey announced the closure of its airspace, Israel was hardly rattled. Similar declarations have been made before, without concrete impact. Indeed, Israeli military aircraft are barred from Turkish skies, but civilian airlines have continued flying through its airspace to destinations such as Georgia, Eastern Europe, and the Far East, maintaining regular coordination with Turkish authorities. Within days, Turkish officials clarified that the ban applied only to official government flights and weapons shipments, not commercial traffic.

Still, Israel cannot afford to dance to the tune of a mercurial Turkish president. Strategic steps are needed, first and foremost, to diversify sources of imports and reduce dependency on Ankara.

At the same time, Israel must look northward: Turkey's deepening presence in Syria and its growing influence over Damascus's security and governance mechanisms may soon pose new constraints. Until now, Israel has largely maintained freedom of action in Syrian skies. In the near future, Erdogan may

well try to tighten the rope there as well.

In light of the friendly ties between US President Donald Trump and Erdogan, it is crucial for Israel to engage in dialogue with the US administration to curb Turkey and its regional ambitions. Washington must be made to understand that Ankara's moves, though they may appear relatively harmless and, at times, be dismissed as Erdogan's characteristic rhetoric, could foreshadow more troubling developments and must therefore be contained before it is too late.

This need becomes even more urgent in light of Turkey's growing efforts to undermine Israel's strategic position. Ankara has attempted to erode Jerusalem's competitive edge by pressing Washington for access to F-35 fighter jets, meddled in the war in Gaza while seeking to shape the "day after," and has been quietly pushing to reduce Israel's military presence required for safeguarding its vital interests.

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