

US-Turkey ties: How Trump and Erdogan's new and old problems may impact Israel

written by Noa Lazimi | 18.02.2025

Despite past claims of a strong working relationship and personal rapport, several contentious issues strained ties between President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during Trump's first term. Now, as the US president embarks on his second term, many of these key disputes remain unresolved, while new frictions have emerged – some of which could significantly impact Israel.

Turkey's support of Hamas and opposition to Gaza relocation plan

The most pressing issue at present is Trump's vision for relocating Gaza's population and reconstructing the enclave as the "Riviera of the Middle East." Predictably, Turkey's fierce opposition was swift. Erdogan dismissed the proposal as "unworthy of discussion," asserting that "no one has the authority to uproot the Palestinians from their homeland."

A staunch supporter of Hamas, Erdogan may leverage Turkey's NATO membership to pressure US officials into dropping the plan. Given the widespread opposition to Trump's Gaza statements among even moderate Arab states – alongside German-Turkish efforts to revive the two-state solution – Israel must highlight Turkey's deep ties to Hamas and ensure these pressures do not cause Trump to abandon his initiative, reducing it to a mere rhetorical threat against the terrorist group.

Trump's potential pullout of Syria

FOR NEARLY A decade, America has supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition led by the People's Protection Units (YPG) – an offshoot of Ankara's arch-enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In 2019, as Turkey prepared to invade Syria, Trump initially refrained from intervention, ordering the

withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria, only to later reverse course.

Today, however, Trump appears far less hesitant on the matter. Pentagon officials are reportedly drafting plans for a complete US withdrawal from Syria, a process expected to take up to three months.

For Israel, this development is deeply concerning. An American pullout would facilitate the expansion of pro-Turkish Islamist forces and other hostile actors in neighboring Jordan – a country already threatened by Iran's ambitions to destabilize the monarchy and launch attacks on Israel from the east bank of the Jordan River.

In light of this, Israel must insist on maintaining at least a partial US military presence in the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border triangle.

Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system

Another major point of friction between Washington and Ankara has been Turkey's controversial purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system. Following the delivery of the first batch in July 2019, Washington expelled Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet production program and canceled the planned sale of 100 F-35s to Ankara.

Erdogan further antagonized NATO by obstructing Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance for an extended period, only relenting after securing what appears to be an American concession – a deal to upgrade Turkey's air force with 40 new F-16 fighter jets.

IN LIGHT OF these developments, Israel would be well advised to urge the US to curtail Turkey's increasingly destabilizing behavior – both in its backing of Hamas and in the Syrian theater, where Erdogan is spearheading a radical Sunni Muslim Brotherhood axis, supported by Qatar.

One potential pressure point would be reinstating high tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel imports, a measure Trump previously implemented. Given Turkey's fragile economic recovery from a prolonged financial crisis, such a move could serve as a significant leverage tool.

Additionally, Israel and the US must closely monitor Turkey's evolving relationship with Iran. Despite their historic rivalry, particularly in light of the recent weakening of the Shi'ite axis in Syria, Ankara and Tehran have demonstrated their ability to set aside differences and collaborate when mutual interests align.

Published in The Jerusalem Post, February 23, 2025.