

Tensions between Israel and Türkiye escalate

Jean Shaoul
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Israeli and Turkish leaders have launched the most extraordinary rhetorical attacks on social media against each other.

On April 11, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on X of “massacring his own Kurdish citizens”, “accommodating Iran’s terror regime and its proxies” and undermining regional stability.

Erdogan had earlier warned that “provocations” could derail the US–Iran ceasefire and criticized Israel’s actions in the region. Turkish officials described Netanyahu as the “Hitler of our time”, citing Israel’s military actions in Gaza and across the region, and stating that Israel was manufacturing Türkiye as its next enemy. They accused him of destabilising the region for his own political survival. Presidential advisor Burhanettin Duran accused Netanyahu of committing genocide in Gaza and dragging the region into chaos.

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz called Erdogan a “Muslim Brotherhood man, who massacred Kurds”. He criticised the Turkish president for failing to respond to Iranian missiles fired into Türkiye, calling him a “paper tiger”, accusing him of antisemitism and declaring “field trials in Türkiye against Israel’s political and military leadership”. The fascist National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir tweeted in Hebrew, “Erdogan, do you understand English?” before adding, in English: “F*** You.”

Several Israeli politicians, within the government and the opposition, including former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, have publicly described Türkiye as a new regional threat, comparable to Iran. These were references to Erdogan’s earlier threats against Israel when he said that Türkiye could “enter Israel” just as it had intervened in Libya and Karabakh—Türkiye’s interventions to support Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia and in the Libyan civil war.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan accused Israel of deliberately trying to portray Türkiye as its next enemy. Netanyahu was trying to “undermine peace negotiations” in the region as he continues “his expansionist policies”.

Erdogan insisted that “Israel will resort to all avenues to sabotage the slightest hope for peace, just as it has repeatedly done before. As the front of humanity seeks to put out the fire in our region, the gang of massacre will add more fuel to it. While doing this, they will obviously continue to impudently target the countries, especially Türkiye and Spain, which raise their voices for peace.”

Turkish criticisms of Netanyahu function largely as an attempt to channel rising domestic anger over soaring living costs and intensifying state repression toward an external rival. Recent surveys in Türkiye show most of the population opposes the Iran war. Yet Ankara cannot afford a direct confrontation with the United States. It joined the Riyadh Declaration in condemning Iran and redirected much of its public response on the war against Israel, drawing on domestic opposition to the war to reinforce the narrative that Israel provoked the conflict.

Escalating Israeli Turkish tensions

These latest rhetorical attacks followed an announcement that caused uproar in Tel Aviv: Istanbul’s chief prosecutor filed indictments against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and 34 other Israeli officials—including Defence Minister Israel Katz, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, and former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen. The charges relate to Israel’s naval interception of dozens of vessels in the Global Sumud Flotilla, seeking to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza in late September and early October 2025.

Israel detained and later deported all activists aboard the 39 boats, including Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and 24 Turkish citizens. Ankara condemned the interception as “an act of terror” that endangered civilians. The indictments include allegations of crimes against humanity, genocide, torture, and unlawful deprivation of liberty—charges that, if upheld, would carry cumulative sentences amounting to thousands of years.

Ankara has consistently criticised the mass civilian deaths in Gaza since October 2023, yet it has maintained significant economic and logistical ties with Israel. Azerbaijan’s oil exports still transit the pipeline running through Türkiye, and US bases in Türkiye have remained available for military intelligence-gathering operations that benefit Israel.

Erdogan was also a signatory to the rotten agreement at Sharm el-Sheikh last October advanced by the Trump administration for Gaza. The plan envisaged Gaza being administered by a “Peace Council” chaired by the US president, without recognising any political rights for the Palestinians in the territory, while granting Israel a permanent security role controlling borders.

The agreement required Hamas to disarm and relinquish authority in Gaza. Türkiye—which has hosted exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, with which Hamas is affiliated—joined other signatories in urging Hamas to accept these terms. Ankara even agreed in principle to contribute troops to an international stabilisation force for Gaza, though Israel rejected the offer.

Today’s rapid escalation in Israel–Türkiye tensions reflects a long-running rivalry that has now transformed into open hostility, driven by developments in Gaza, Syria, Iran, and domestic politics in both countries.

The rivalry between two allies of US imperialism in the region primarily concerns their shares in the carve-up of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. While both governments support aspects of Washington’s drive for dominance in the Middle East, Ankara has grown increasingly concerned about Israel’s expanding partnerships, particularly in Cyprus and Syria.

Israel–Türkiye tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

In December, Israel hosted a summit in Jerusalem with Greece and Cyprus—states with longstanding disputes with Türkiye. Their leaders

agreed to deepen trilateral cooperation on “security, defence and military matters” to protect “critical regional infrastructure” in the Mediterranean. This referred to plans for linking their electrical grids via what would be the world’s longest and deepest underwater electricity cable, as well as collaboration on offshore natural gas development.

In Syria, Türkiye’s ally Ahmed al-Sharaa and his Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have ruled since toppling President Bashar al-Assad’s regime in December 2024. Israel had supported a decentralised political structure in Syria, including Kurdish autonomy in the northeast and Druze autonomy in the southwest, which would allow it to maintain influence in those areas and weaken Damascus and its backer in Ankara. But last December, the US administration backed al-Sharaa’s efforts to integrate the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian army and bring SDF-controlled territory back under the authority of Damascus.

In January, the Nagel Commission, tasked with making recommendations for Israel’s security strategy and budget for the next decade, stated in its report that “Türkiye has become the most influential power in Damascus and that the Sunni-Turkish axis has replaced Iran’s Shiite axis.” It added, “Türkiye’s interests in turning Syria into a client state and thereby increasing its regional influence are clear. It [Israel] should be prepared for actions on the ground and potential threats that could escalate rapidly,” arguing that military capabilities should be strengthened in preparation for a possible conflict with Turkey.

US-Israel war on Iran

It is above all the criminal US-Israel attacks on Iran that have provoked consternation among Türkiye’s ruling circles. They fear that, as a NATO member hosting US bases and providing intelligence for US-Israeli forces that have been targeted by missiles, possibly as false flag operations, Türkiye could be drawn into the war. The global rise in oil and natural gas prices caused by the conflict will exacerbate the already severe cost-of-living crisis, intensifying class tensions.

While Erdogan declared the attacks on Iran were illegal and called for a ceasefire and negotiations, Türkiye’s military, economic and financial dependence upon its alliance with Washington means aligning with President Donald Trump’s “new Middle East” policy. To do otherwise would invite a coup against him, as the 2016 NATO-backed coup attempt demonstrated. For this reason, he refrained from condemning the US under the leadership of his “friend” Trump.

Instead, he targeted Israel, holding it responsible for the war, and describing Iran’s targeting of US bases in the region, a legitimate act of self-defence, as an attack on the sovereignty of other countries. Ankara fears that the war, which has spread to Lebanon, could lead to the collapse of the Iranian regime and its subjugation to Washington, increasing Israel’s influence on its own borders and precipitating a new wave of migrants fleeing the wars and separatist initiatives by Kurdish nationalist forces allied with the US and Israel.

Israeli Turkish rivalry in the Horn of Africa

Tensions between Israel and Türkiye are also rising in the Horn of Africa, a vital strategic area for the Middle East powers. The region’s ports, military bases, and political alliances shape access to the Bab el-Mandeb straits—the southern gateway to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal—which functions both as Israel’s maritime lifeline via the

Eilat–Ashdod corridor and as Türkiye’s access point to the Indian Ocean.

Over the past decade, the two states have cultivated opposing regional blocs: a Türkiye–Qatar–Somalia axis on one side and an Israel–UAE–Eritrea/Ethiopia axis on the other.

Somalia is the most visible front in this rivalry. Türkiye has become Mogadishu’s primary political patron, military trainer, and economic partner. It operates its largest overseas military base in the capital, trains Somali forces, and controls key infrastructure including the port. Ankara has dispatched the *Çağrı* vessel and supporting ships to begin deep-sea drilling at the Curad-1 well, 250 miles off Somalia’s coast, a move that signals its long-term geostrategic interests in the region.

Israel, by contrast, has sought influence through Somaliland. Last December, it became the first and only UN member state to formally recognise Somaliland as a sovereign state, a step widely interpreted as an effort to secure access to the port of Berbera and one that antagonised both Ankara and Mogadishu.

In Sudan, Türkiye had secured a long-term lease on Suakin Island—viewed by some analysts as a potential naval foothold on the Red Sea—before the Sudanese army ousted President Omar al-Bashir in a pre-emptive coup amid a mass uprising. In Djibouti, Ankara has expanded its diplomatic and commercial presence as part of its broader Red Sea strategy.

Israel’s footprint in the Horn is older and more discreet. It has long maintained intelligence and security ties with Ethiopia, including around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Egypt and Sudan fear could reduce Nile flows during a drought. Israel has reportedly used Eritrean ports and islands for intelligence gathering in the Red Sea. Its partnership with the UAE—a major actor in Eritrea, Somaliland, and southern Yemen, and a backer of the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan’s civil war—has extended its reach.

The Iran-aligned Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping linked to Israel, carried out in support of the Palestinians, have forced vessels to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, underscoring the strategic value of the Red Sea corridor. This has become more pronounced as Iran threatens to close the Red Sea if the US continues to block the Strait of Hormuz.

Tel Aviv has watched with unease Ankara’s warming relations with Riyadh, Cairo and Islamabad. Erdoğan had refused for years to recognise Egypt’s post-Morsi leadership and continued to host senior Muslim Brotherhood figures in Türkiye, positioning himself in direct opposition to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—whose ambassador in Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, once characterised Türkiye as “an enemy more dangerous than Iran”—have begun funnelling billions of dollars into the Turkish economy. From Tel Aviv’s perspective, this convergence between Ankara, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi risks hardening into a Sunni political axis hostile to Israel’s regional interests.

On Friday, Türkiye held a three-day Diplomacy Forum in Antalya, which more than 150 countries were expected to attend, including more than 20 heads of state and government, among them Syrian President al-Sharaa and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The foreign ministers of Türkiye, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were to meet on the sidelines of the forum to discuss the war and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.



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