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Turkey's harsh response to the conflict in Gaza

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The crisis over the Gaza Strip has sparked immense political and social unrest in Turkey. Since 7 October, the Turkish government has been hardening its stance, resorting to a wide range of measures: from calls for de-escalation, through criticism of the actions taken by Israel (and the US as a factor escalating the conflict), to condemning Israel in connection with the accusations that it bombed a hospital in Gaza. In addition to the president's harsh statements, an unprecedented declaration condemning Israel for its alleged attack on the hospital was signed by all the country's parliamentary political forces. Turkey also announced three days of national mourning and received a delegation from Hamas in parliament. At the same time, a wave of pro-Palestinian demonstrations swept across the country; people also demonstrated in front of the embassies and consulates of Israel and the United States, as well as the American military bases in İncirlik and Malatya. Following the protests, Israel withdrew its diplomatic staff from Turkey for security reasons, and called on its citizens to leave the country (the US closed its consulate in Adana and advised its citizens to take precautions).

At the same time, Turkey launched an intensive diplomatic campaign: the foreign minister held numerous talks with his counterparts in the United States, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Lebanon, and took part in a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah. In turn, the president has held talks with the President of Russia, the Chancellor of Germany and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom amongst others. Ankara has been consistently appealing, primarily to Israel, for a de-escalation of the conflict. It has offered mediation, especially regarding the release of the foreign hostages held by Hamas, and called for a comprehensive solution to the dispute on the basis of the UN resolutions calling for the creation of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem.

Commentary

- The Palestinian issue has always been a hot topic in Turkey among both the political class and the general public. In recent decades, Turkey's sympathies have gravitated towards the Palestinians, emphasising the two nations' cultural proximity (religious and historical), criticising the policy of force adopted by Israel and the US towards the region, and also manifesting its ambitions for informal leadership in the Islamic world (and in the Global South more broadly). Ankara maintains contacts with Hamas and does not recognise it as a terrorist organisation. Turkey's controversial attempt to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza in 2010 which Israel thwarted (eight Turkish citizens died), resulted in diplomatic relations between the two countries being frozen for many years. However, numerous initiatives to improve relations have been made in recent years. For

Ankara, these were a step towards normalising relations with the Middle East, an essential element to improving relations with Washington, and opened up a space for energy cooperation with Israel. In 2022, the Israeli ambassador returned to Ankara, and Israel's Prime Minister had been scheduled to visit Turkey this autumn before the latest attack by Hamas. In recent months, Turkey has also made many moves towards rapprochement with the United States, although the current crisis means that relations between Turkey and all these countries will again come under strain.

- Turkey's initial reactions to this new phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the way they have subsequently evolved are typical of Ankara's course in recent years. As in the case of the Ukraine war, it is making efforts to be viewed as an influential mediator representing the interests of the wider world, concerned as much about the potential effects of the crisis caused by the superpowers as (in this case) by the unilateral policy of Israel and the US, which *de facto* supports the Israeli operation. What also triggered Turkey's criticism of the US policy, in addition to the popularity of the Palestinian issue in Turkey, was the deterioration of Turkish-American relations after a Turkish drone was shot down over Syria on 5 October. At the same time, Ankara is realistically concerned about a possible escalation of the crisis throughout the Middle East, as this would adversely affect the ongoing improvement of its political and economic cooperation with the countries of the region (while the economic crisis in Turkey continues). The threat that the dispute over Iran could expand in the face of the simmering crisis in Syria and tensions in the South Caucasus is surely of particular concern. As for the South Caucasus, Turkey is afraid of a conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan, its key partner. At the same time Baku has been closely cooperating with Israel against Iran, and has taken an ostentatiously pro-Israeli position regarding the situation in the Gaza Strip.
- The public sentiment and the attitude of the local elites are an important point of reference for Ankara's policy. Some of them, including supporters of Islamic parties who have parliamentary seats representing both the AKP and opposition, base their views on their strong sense of religious and historical community with the Palestinians. The opinion of most Turks is determined by deeply rooted fears of Western (in current conditions, American) neo-imperialism. As is usual here, the moral and humanitarian dimension of the crisis has been strongly emphasised, including in the media. The strength of these sentiments was reflected in an unprecedented joint declaration by all parliamentary forces (conservative, nationalist and the Kurdish left), the harsh statements from the leaders of opposition parties accusing Israel of crimes against humanity (Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the CHP) or comparing Israel's prime minister to Hitler (Meral Akşener, leader of the İYİ), as well as the ostentatious participation of the president's son in the demonstrations, and the publicity given to the need to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza by Erdoğan's son-in-law, Selçuk Bayraktar. The Turkish public have taken to the streets *en masse* to express their attitude. During these protests, attempts were made to take over the Israeli consulate in Istanbul and blockade American military installations (the Kürecik radar station near Malatya).
- In the near future, the following current trends are expected to continue: growing criticism of Israel, highlighting attempts at mediation, calls for de-escalation, and emphasising the humanitarian dimension of the conflict and the need for a political

solution assuming the creation of an independent Palestinian state. All this will probably cause a significant cooling of Turkey's relations with Israel and the US (albeit probably without intending to bring them into a serious crisis), and lead to intensive efforts to build a united front with the countries of the Middle East, primarily Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Turkey will be faced with a very serious challenge if the conflict in Gaza spills out into the wider region, especially if Iran becomes directly involved in it, mainly due to the potential consequences for the South Caucasus.