

Parallel Paths, Divergent Visions: Germany and Turkey's Approaches on the Israel-Palestine Chessboard



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In the contemporary landscape, the right to exist in the Middle East embodies a significance that echoes the historical legacies of white supremacy and colonialism. This context has become particularly poignant since the 7th October when examining the toll on civilian lives from Israel's siege of Gaza. This grim reality highlights the polarised international approach and the insufficient response to the plight of Palestinian lives from the global community by absolving Israel of all responsibility for the ongoing cultural discord in the West. Amidst these challenges, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to the atrocities being committed in Palestine is crucial.

In the wake of these pressing global concerns, the meeting between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Olaf Scholz in Berlin on the 17th Novemberⁱ acquires added weight, representing a microcosm of the complex diplomatic landscape surrounding Israel and Palestine. As we shift our focus to dissect Germany and Turkey's approaches, it becomes essential to unravel the intricacies of their respective positions and how they navigate the persistent challenges in the region.

Haunted by its history, Germany grapples with the shadows of its past through the persistent influence that frames the trajectory of its contemporary existence. In the aftermath of the Nazi regime and the atrocities of the Holocaust, Germany sought redemption and reconciliation; it embarked on a path of rigorous self-examination and moral reckoning. Reparations were paid in the form of commodities and industrial goods to help with Israel's industrialisation,ⁱⁱ depicting symbolic state building for Germany and material state building for Israel. This introspection not only influenced its domestic policies but also cast a significant shadow on its global interactions. The German state is tied to its 'special responsibility,' considering its commitment to Israel not merely as a policy objective but deeply ingrained as a crucial element in its dedication to addressing and transcending the ethical shadows cast by its historical actions. Katrin Göring-Eckardt, the spokesperson for the Green Party, encapsulated the essence of the entire debate by stating, "Israel's right to exist is our own."ⁱⁱⁱ Eckardt depicts that the legitimacy of Germany is intricately linked to its relationship with Israel. For Germany, maintaining this relationship serves as a means to "whitewash its barbaric past,"^{iv} veiled by its marriage to moral reckoning.

In the broader context, Europe overlooks its imperial and colonial transgressions, particularly regarding the level of accountability that warrants reparations. In contrast, Germany's apparent recognition of its historical wrongs allows it to appear more commendable in this regard. However, Germany's 'commendable' acknowledgement of its historical wrongs becomes nuanced when examining its colonial past, notably the Namibian Genocide of the Herero and Namaqua people, resulting in "more than 80,000 deaths,"^v 1904-1908.^{vi} The Herero and Namaqua Genocide laid the foundation for the subsequent events of the Holocaust. "Germany's efforts to atone for the Holocaust

are well known. But it took Germany more than a century to acknowledge Namibia's genocide, which occurred decades before the systematic murder of Europe's Jews.^{vii} Let alone providing any form of sufficient redemptions. Germany's contrasting responses to the Holocaust and the Namibian genocide underscore a profound ingrained racial bias. The stark difference in reparations reveals a troubling pattern where the lives of Jewish victims, deemed more valuable due to their whiteness, receive more recognition compared to the victims of the Namibian genocide. This racially driven approach, reflected in Germany's rhetoric on the Israel-Palestinian issue, perpetuates a disturbing system that not only favours specific lives over others but also actively engages in whitewashing historical atrocities, further entrenching systemic inequalities. Highlighting a pronounced reluctance within Germany to confront its historical intricacies but also signals an alarming tendency towards perpetuating a narrative that obscures the darker chapters of its past.

I want to highlight that German memory culture has its positive attributes, and many other countries, such as Turkey, should be advised to embody this notion. However, it is Germany's self-indulgent nature that needs to be problematised. The German perspective is oblivious to Palestinians and Palestine, depicting prevalent sentiments of Islamophobia within its borders. This perspective serves a utilitarian purpose for the German self-image and the desired public perception it wants. As Deborah Feldman states, "Germany has a Jewish fetish."^{viii} By fostering a close relationship with Israel, Germany sees this as evidence of having effectively addressed and reconciled with its historical past. However, the Palestinian issue introduces complexity to the narrative Germany seeks to construct about itself. Consequently, marginalising the Palestinian cause as they emerge as a significant factor that would complicate the German-Israeli relationship, challenging established notions and ideals within the German self-image and their concept of diplomatic association with Israel.

In contrast, Turkey's contemporary connections to the Middle East are deeply entrenched in the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman era, spanning over centuries, not only solidified Turkey's influence over vast territories but also left an enduring impact on the Middle East's cultural, social, and geopolitical dynamics that we have today. Erdoğan's increasing emphasis on neo-ottomanism, aimed at restoring Turkey's imperial "Golden Age,"^{ix} strategically leverages the Palestinian issue to strengthen sentiments of Islamic solidarity and nationalism, serving as a political tool to garner votes and support. Internally, this narrative resonates with the status quo, portraying Erdoğan as the sole leader challenging Israel and Western powers. Amid the ongoing genocide committed by Israel, Erdoğan's outspoken stance is a positive attribute, especially given the lack of criticism from other nations universally. However, it is essential to approach Erdoğan's authenticity with scrutiny, as his rhetoric aligns with nationalist fantasies of an imperial Turkish homeland reminiscent of the former glory of the Ottoman Empire rather than a genuine call for kinship with Palestinians.

Nevertheless, within the complex tapestry of Turkey's political landscape marked by profound divisions, the Palestinian cause emerges as a unifying force, bridging ideological gaps from political Islamism to secularism in Turkey. Confronted with the crisis of Israel and Palestine, Erdoğan showcases a careful balancing act between catering to his domestic political base, characterised by strong pro-Palestinian sentiments, while maintaining its relationship with Israel behind closed doors.

The limited visibility of Israeli-Turkish relations in mainstream media has allowed Erdoğan to strategically position himself as a pivotal figure in Middle Eastern politics, aspiring to play a mediating role in the Palestinian crisis. Erdoğan carefully navigates each move with both Palestine and Israel separately, at the forefront of a negotiation that anticipates that it will benefit Turkey. Despite Erdoğan's anti-Israel statements and diplomatic manoeuvres, the flourishing trade volume between "Turkey and Israel experienced a 532% surge over the last two decades, reaching \$8.91 billion in 2022. Data from TurkStat, the Turkish Statistical Institute, revealed that in 2002, the year

the AKP came into power, Turkey's exports to Israel were \$861.4 million, and imports from Israel were \$544.5 million.”^x This deliberate emphasis on anti-Israel sentiments acts as a smokescreen, drawing focus away from the nuanced diplomatic engagements between the two nations. Moreover, Erdoğan aims to reinforce his Islamist rhetoric on both domestic and international levels. This calculated move not only conforms to his political objectives with a selective approach to boycotts but also plays a pivotal role in constructing a narrative that enhances Erdoğan’s standing as a champion of Islamic causes, consolidating his influence in both domestic and international arenas.

Significant instances where Israel and Turkey have found common ground are notable in the context of ethnic cleansing. This was particularly evident in Israel and Turkey’s collaborative arms support for Azerbaijan to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh with the rhetoric of the “fight against terrorism,”^{xi} as articulated by Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. Consequently, this joint endeavour led to the displacement of 100,000 Armenians in 2023.^{xii} Erdoğan’s proclamation that “We did not go through the Holocaust process; we don’t have such a situation because our respect for humanity is different,”^{xiii} introduces a paradox in Turkey’s approach. Turkey not only diverts attention from its own involvement in war crimes but also utilises Palestinian suffering to justify attacks on Armenia under the pretext of ethnic cleansing. This raises concerns about the sincerity of Erdoğan’s professed solidarity, which poses the danger of permitting the Palestinian cause to be exploited to cater to Turkey's self-serving domestic and foreign policy objectives.

Genuine solidarity with Palestine necessitates a principled stance against occupation, genocide, and ethnic cleansing; anything less inadvertently supports violence. The German discourse on Israel-Palestine is driven by projection and the preservation of national identity rather than by a genuine engagement with the region's complexities. On the other hand, Turkey employs neo-ottomanism and the Palestinian issue to foster Islamic solidarity domestically but also regionally. However, its collaboration with Israel in other regional conflicts raises questions about Turkey's commitment to the Palestinian cause amid broader geopolitical goals. In the intricate dance of diplomacy, the polished façade of cordiality often conceals ulterior motives and strategic manoeuvres. Behind diplomatic niceties lies a realm where self-interest and geopolitical calculations have taken precedence over ethnic cleansing, rendering the notion of genuine cooperation a mere illusion. The deceptive nature of diplomacy underscores how it serves as a cloak for the pursuit of individual agendas.



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