

# Selling Out: Why Did American Jewish Leaders Meet With Turkey's Authoritarian President Erdogan?

His government violates human rights on a massive scale, closes down media critical of his actions, and has openly sanctioned anti-Semitism. Is Erdogan trying to co-opt U.S. Jewish leaders to launder his reputation?

Louis Fishman | Apr 05, 2016 10:16 AM



A police officer separates a supporter of Erdogan, center, from Kurdish protesters against Erdogan and the Turkish government during a rally in Washington on March 31, 2016. Credit: AP

- [Erdogan: Turkey will cooperate with Israel in fight against terrorism](#)
- [Top Israeli general: As long as Erdogan is in power, Israel will face problems](#)
- [Erdogan meets with U.S. Jewish leaders on sidelines of Washington nuclear summit](#)

Last week, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his way to Washington DC to take part in the Nuclear Security Summit. Unlike during the early years of his career, when Erdogan was met with fanfare in the U.S. capital, this time he received at most a lukewarm welcome from the White House and DC's politicians and pundits alike, which was reflected in the media. Upon his arrival, the New Yorker published an article "[Erdogan's March to Dictatorship in Turkey](#)," and in the New York Times, Thomas Friedman wrote that Erdogan is converting Turkey from a "democracy into a dictatorship."

Despite the bad press, Erdogan and his team struggled to promote an atmosphere of "business as usual." This perhaps could have been sustained had it not been for the spectacle his security guards made – precisely demonstrating the turn to authoritarianism described by senior American commentators – by attacking journalists and protesters outside the Brookings Institute where he was due to give

journalists and protesters outside the Brookings Institute where he was due to give a speech.

And, after much speculation that U.S. President Barack Obama might snub Erdogan, in the end a private meeting was held, providing Erdogan with an important photo op for domestic consumption. However, just a day later, in a press conference, Obama rained on Erdogan's parade by publicly voicing his deep concern for the "troubling" path taken by Erdogan for his country.

Despite all the bad publicity, which also included a scathing open letter presented to Erdogan by U.S. foreign policy experts, the Turkish president received a very warm welcome from a coalition of U.S. Jewish groups and lobbies. Present at the meeting were the Anti-Defamation League, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, B'nai B'rith International, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

In fact, this is the second meeting to take place between Jewish leaders and Erdogan during the last two months, in which they have been discussing renewing ties between Turkey and Israel, in addition to issues related to Turkish Jews, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The first meeting took place on February 9 at Erdogan's presidential palace in Ankara, also behind closed doors, and present at this one were also AIPAC and the ADL.

Needless to say, the Jewish leaders showed little discretion in holding such a high-level meeting just as the Turkish leader was being grilled for the authoritarian steps his government is taking. There is no doubt that Jewish organizations have serious issues to bring up with the Turkish government, which until recently openly sanctioned anti-Semitism. However, didn't they talk about these issues just a month ago? Was another meeting that critical?

True, since the first meeting an Israeli tourist group was the subject of an ISIS attack in Istanbul and there are reports that Istanbul's Jewish community was being specifically targeted by ISIS. However, it is highly unlikely that these American Jewish organizations can contribute much to this conversation. And if the meeting was designed to help smooth the path toward Israeli-Turkish reconciliation – does Israel really need their help in reaching an agreement with Turkey?

By meeting with Erdogan at such a low point, the Jewish organizations put out a strong message that they are willing to take sides in Turkey's polarized political world and that the major clampdown on Turkish freedoms is not on the top of their agenda.

This comes as a slap in the face to the NGOs and Turkish citizens trying to combat anti-Semitism in Turkey, who – with or without American Jewish solidarity – will continue to wage their battles for freedom and liberalism in Turkey. The struggle

against anti-Semitism in Turkey does not exist in isolation: anti-Semitism goes hand in hand with other forms of xenophobia and other acts of hate and that only an open and free society can take real steps to combat.

Indeed, if anti-Semitism in Turkey really was a burning issue for those U.S. Jewish groups, it's ironic they sat down to meet the president who's shutting down and sanctioning precisely those critical media outlets who speak out against hate crimes, while the pro-government press is still free to spread anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry.

The other question that begs asking: What's the new-found interest by Erdogan and his AKP ruling party toward American Jewish organizations? It seems like the engagement with the Jewish community serves Erdogan's purposes well. The meeting occurred at a point where, for some in the AKP, the time seems ripe to sacrifice the anti-Semitism card (that has played out well domestically from time to time) for the much needed public relations boost such a meeting could provide, not to mention the chance that Erdogan, having absorbed one conspiracy theory too many, may have hoped to impact influential Jewish figures in the hope they might provide a quiet form of pro-Turkish lobbying in the corridors of DC power. There is no evidence to support or refute this contention yet.

Of course, what seems to be a growing bond between American Jewish groups and the Turkish government bears striking resemblance to the 1990s. Turkey then was in desperate need of a friend: a war with the PKK in its southeastern regions led to rampant human rights violations against its civilian population and international criticism. Turkey tacitly appealed to U.S. Jewish organizations, suggesting a kind of immoral tradeoff: in exchange for Turkey bolstering ties with Israel, those Jewish groups would lobby on behalf of Turkey, one permutation being a pointed silence about the suffering of Turkey's Kurds. Some U.S. Jewish groups went as far as to act behind the scenes against the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

Now, two decades later, Turkey is once again embroiled in a war with the PKK, and once again we see a tsunami of human rights violations executed by the Turkish government, with whole neighborhoods in the Southeastern cities of Cizre and Sur (among others) being utterly devastated.

I hope I am wrong. I hope that last week's meeting between American Jewish organizations and Erdogan won't become a repeat of the ethical iniquity of the 1990s which until today this remains a moral stain, when we witnessed how the recognition of acts of genocide was trivialized in the name of Turkish-Israeli arms deals that in the end themselves only led to more death.

Only time will tell if these American Jewish groups soon will be back in the halls of the U.S. Congress lobbying for a government that's increasingly and justifiably isolated in world opinion.