

# Turkish-Israeli Relations in a Changing Strategic Environment

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Turkish-Israeli relations have been at a historic low since the killing of eight Turkish nationals and one Turkish American by the Israeli Defence Forces during the Gaza Flotilla raid in May 2010. While a return to the privileged partnership of the 1990s is unlikely, pragmatic cooperation might re-emerge as a result of the Arab Spring and in particular the Syrian crisis, which are substantially transforming Turkey's and Israel's strategic environment and are thus creating common interests between the two countries. Insofar as Ankara can also play an important stabilizing role with respect to Israeli-Iranian frictions and Israeli-Egyptian relations, Brussels should coordinate its foreign policy in the region more closely with Turkey's.

## *Relations during the Cold War and its aftermath*

Turkish-Israeli relations go back to the time of the Ottoman Empire, when Jewish immigration to the land of Palestine commenced. Historically speaking, the Ottomans provided a 'shelter' for the Jews, but when immigration started to grow, the Ottomans and later also the Young Turks began to perceive this as a dangerous development for the local balance and sought to curtail it. In 1949, Turkey was the first Muslim majority state to recognize the State of Israel, signalling its alignment with the West in the unfolding Cold War. In 1958, as a countermove to the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) between Egypt and Syria, Turkey even embarked on a secret "peripheral alliance" with Israel.<sup>1</sup> This was abandoned, however, in the 1960s when Ankara turned to a more balanced course between the Western and Arab 'worlds' for various reasons related to energy, the economy, and the Cyprus conflict. Turkey became more supportive of the Palestinian cause, albeit in the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which acknowledges

<sup>1</sup> Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship. Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

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the right of every state in the area, including Israel, to live in security.<sup>2</sup> In 1979, the PLO was allowed to establish an office in Ankara, but – again as part of Turkey's balancing strategy – at the level of chargé d'affaires like its Israeli counterpart. At about the same time as relations with Israel started to become denser again, Turkey recognized the Palestinian state (1988). In 1991, both sides reached ambassadorial level.

In the aftermath of the Cold War and with the commencement of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, Turkey felt freed of the constraints of narrow balancing between the two sides. The open intensification of relations with Israel was now socially more acceptable in Turkey, as well as in parts of the Arab world. Thus, the peace process was a necessary condition for the open and significant upgrade of relations in the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> even though not a sufficient one. Several factors pushed Turkey to go for deepened relations with Israel. First, Turkey was interested in Israeli military technology which Western actors were unwilling to provide it with in light of the Turkish human rights record. Second, the Turkish-Israeli alliance was directed against Syria (and Iran), which at the time supported the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). And third, Islamism was perceived as an increasing threat in Turkey,<sup>4</sup> and the alliance was meant to keep Turkey anchored in a Western, secular framework.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Palestinian Question in Turkish Foreign Policy from the 1950s to the 1990s", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (February 1993), p. 91-110.

<sup>3</sup> In 1996, Turkey and Israel signed agreements on free trade and military cooperation including military technology, joint military trainings, and the mutual opening of air bases and airspaces.

<sup>4</sup> The military agreement was signed during the Refah-Yol government under strong pressure of the Turkish military which was suspicious of the Refah Party's Islamist agenda.

<sup>5</sup> Meliha Altunsik, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the Post-Cold War Era", in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 2000), p. 172-191; Tarik Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations: A Structural Realist Account", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (March 2010), p. 273-288; Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship. Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders*, cit.

By the early 2000s, much had changed. The peace process had broken down and with Israeli-Palestinian violence escalating, cooperation with Israel became more difficult to justify in Turkey, especially to the conservative constituency of the AKP for whom relations with Israel are the single most significant foreign policy issue. The role of the Turkish military in politics started to decline, leading to political rather than securitized approaches to Turkey's interests in the region. The AKP government developed its "zero problems with neighbours" policy, which was based on a very different perception of the region than Israel's. Turkey came to terms with Syria and Iran, and started viewing American interventionism and the deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the main source of instability in the region.

Israel, in contrast, increasingly focused on Iran as the main danger to its security or even existence. It divided the region into the "radical axis" of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, which it sought to contain, and the "moderate axis" of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, with which cooperation was seen as possible. The threat presented by Iran's growing power led to the quasi alignment of Israel and the US with the "moderate axis", making the status quo sufficiently 'comfortable' for Israel not to move forward in the peace process. Thus, foreign policy objectives between Turkey and Israel diverged substantially. But while no longer a privileged partner already under the first years of AKP rule, Israel remained one of Turkey's 'neighbours' with whom to seek 'zero problems'. The AKP also inherited Turkey's role as a regional interlocutor. It acted as a mediator between Israel and Syria, as well as between Israel and Hamas. Turkish troops also participated in UNIFIL after the 2006 Lebanon War.

The caesura in Turkish-Israeli relations came with the Gaza War/Israeli Operation Cast Lead in December 2008/January 2009, as well as the 2010 Gaza Flotilla raid, both perceived in Turkey as improper acts of aggression. With general elections approaching in 2011, the AKP used its outspoken opposition to the Gaza War and the Flotilla incident to steer Turkish public opinion in its favour. Ankara requested an apology from Israel, which chose to express regret instead. In September 2011, after the leaking of the UN Palmer Report,<sup>6</sup> Ankara downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel, which in turn interpreted this as a move to garner support from the Arab street and to boost Turkey's soft power in the region at Israel's expense. Since the break in relations was perceived as a strategic move by Turkey, an apology was seen as unhelpful in repairing relations. Instead, Israel improved military relations with Greece and cooperated with Cyprus in exploring gas fields in the Levant basin, giving rise to a worrying new geopolitical dynamic in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup>

In light of the Syrian crisis and with common security interests between the countries seemingly increasing, the US and UK have intensified their efforts to mediate between Turkey and Israel. However, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan still insists



on an apology so as not to lose face vis-à-vis the Turkish public, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is reluctant to do so, fearing it might open a 'pandora's box' of apologies and compensations for other Israeli military operations.<sup>8</sup> As the Arab Spring unfolds, this deadlock might be broken. In the new strategic environment it has created, it might end up being in Israel's interest to apologize, since Turkey remains a key actor in the region for Israel, as well as the West. Indeed, a recent public opinion poll of the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies (MITVIM) has found that for the first time a majority of Israelis supports an apology as part of a broader agreement between the two countries.<sup>9</sup>

#### *The impact of the Arab Spring on Turkish-Israeli relations*

The Arab Spring represents the biggest transformation of the Middle East since decolonization and is substantially changing the status quo that emerged in the late 1970s with the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the Iranian revolution. Three areas of change are specifically significant for Turkish-Israeli relations: the Syrian crisis, increased Israeli-Iranian frictions, and regime change in Egypt.

The Syrian crisis has partially shattered the AKP's "zero problems with neighbours" approach, which turned a blind eye to the political nature of the regimes with which Ankara cooperated. Shortly after the civil war commenced, Turkey abandoned its friendly posture towards the Assad regime, and tensions increased even more when a Turkish jet was downed by Syria in July 2012. Turkey has augmented its military presence at the Syrian border and confrontation with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the border area is increasing. Ankara is facing the influx of tens of thousands of refugees and is considering the establishment of buffer zones (no-fly zones are also being discussed) in Syria with US and European backing.

Indeed, the Syrian crisis is increasingly spilling over into the whole Levant. In Lebanon, clashes have erupted between Sunni groups and Hezbollah forces, evoking shadows of the destructive civil wars of the past. Israel is watching the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal closely. Israeli Minister of Defence Ehud Barak has threatened a military strike on Syria should

6 The Palmer Report was commissioned by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to settle legal issues and help the two sides reach a compromise. It found that the Israeli Defence Force's use of force against the flotilla was excessive, but that the naval blockade of Gaza is legal. Turkey rejected the latter position and was angered by the leaking of the report to the press, since the parties were supposed to agree together on its publication date.

7 Michael Emerson, "Fishing for Gas and More in Cypriot Waters", in *Global Turkey in Europe Policy Brief*, No. 2 (July 2012), [http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE\\_PB\\_02.pdf](http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_PB_02.pdf).

8 Nava Löwenheim, "The Question of an Israeli Apology to Turkey for the Flotilla Episode", in *INSS Insight*, No. 232 (December 2010), <http://www.inss.org.il/research.php?cat=398&incat=&read=4680>. Gökan Bacik, "Apology: When? How?", in *Today's Zaman*, 3 September 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-291178-apology-how-when.html>.

9 MITVIM, "A Majority of Israelis Support an Israeli Apology to Turkey as Part of an Agreement to Mend Relations," MITVIM Public Opinion Poll (September 2012).

the weapons fall into the hands of radical Sunni forces or be transferred by a falling Assad regime to Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syrian opposition forces have recently also intruded into the demilitarized, UN-controlled border area between Israel and Syria. Thus, at least in the short and medium terms, Turkey and Israel have an interest in cooperating in a pragmatic manner on security issues surrounding the Syrian quagmire, seeking to avoid a further destabilization of the wider region.

In addition, the Syrian crisis has also accelerated Israeli-Iranian tensions. Iran perceives the civil war in Syria as a Western/Gulf-orchestrated disempowerment of its most important ally in the region, spurring its drive for nuclear weapons to prevent a similar fate for its own regime. Tensions with Israel through proxy warfare such as cyber and terror attacks have also increased, and Israel is threatening an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Israel uses this threat not only to deter Iran but, perhaps more importantly, to oblige the international community to deal with the issue. Indeed, sanctions have been sharpened to pressure Iran into negotiations, but without concrete results so far. Turkey, as Alcaro has pointed out in this series,<sup>10</sup> could have been an important facilitator for these talks, as well as part of a potential solution. Should a diplomatic solution be reached, it is likely that Israel would refrain from a strike.

Finally, regional constellations have altered with regime change in Egypt. President Mohamed Morsi, engaged in a power struggle with the army, is departing from the close alignment with the US that characterized the foreign policy of the Mubarak era and is now developing a more independent and balanced foreign policy vision. While he has improved relations with Iran, he has also positioned himself against Syrian President Bashar Assad, notably at an international conference in Teheran where he - as an elected leader of an Arab Spring state - called it an "ethical duty" to support the Syrian people in their fight against suppression,<sup>11</sup> thereby undermining the legitimacy of Iran's continuing support for Assad. He stressed that nuclear programmes should be peaceful only and should adhere to international protocols, and indicated repeatedly that he will respect the peace treaty with Israel. Egypt has also upgraded relations with Turkey. While this move was initially perceived in Israel as an alliance against it, Lindenstrauss has pointed out that Turkey can actually have a moderating influence as a "counterweight to possible Iranian influence on Egypt."<sup>12</sup> Turkey can also serve as a model for Egypt internally, as well as in foreign policy. Indeed, some of President Morsi's foreign policy rhetoric is reminiscent of the AKP's foreign policy vision. Imbued with confidence as elected leaderships, both are assuming more responsibility for their region and advocate regional solutions for crises in the area. They have been displaying similar role identities as regional intermediaries, for example in brokering between Israel and Hamas, while at the same time not questioning their alliances and partnerships with the West.<sup>13</sup>

10 Riccardo Alcaro, "A Tale of Wasted Opportunities: The EU, Turkey and Iran's Nuclear Issue", in *Global Turkey in Europe Commentary*, No. 1 (July 2012), [http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE\\_C\\_01.pdf](http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_C_01.pdf).

11 "Morsi criticises Syria at Tehran meeting", in *Al Jazeera*, 30 August 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/08/20128308579560767.html>.

12 Galia Lindenstrauss, "The Palmer Report: Significance and Ramifications", in *INSS Insight*, No. 280 (September 2011), <http://www.inss.org.il/research.php?cat=398&incat=&read=5469>.

13 Hamas on its part - and this is an additional outcome of Syrian crisis and the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt - has changed its political priorities. Its leadership has moved from Syria to Qatar in February this year, signalling

## Conclusions

The Arab Spring is not only transforming polities, but is also decisively changing the strategic landscape of the Middle East. This analysis has shown that with Egypt embarking on a more balanced foreign policy course instead of the close alignment with the US, with the Syrian civil war increasingly spilling over into the whole Levant and with escalating Israeli-Iranian tensions, it is in Israel's interest to mend fences with Turkey. Ankara, on its part, has an interest in cooperating with Israel on security issues arising from the Syrian crisis. Thus, it is likely that an Israeli apology would be welcomed in Ankara, and the US and EU should urge the Netanyahu government to provide it. Such an apology would also have the positive side-effect of projecting a more conciliatory image of Israel in this highly sensitive region. Turkey could then re-assume its regional brokering role, which is precisely what makes it so precious to the EU and US, especially now. Thus, they could do more to enhance this role, by relying on Ankara more concretely in negotiations with Iran, by cooperating more closely with Turkey and Israel on solving the crisis in Syria in the framework of international law, and by backing Turkey as a role model for emerging regional powers like Egypt.

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that Hamas is turning away from Iran, as well.