

# Changes in Turkish-Israeli Relations:

## Implications for the Regional Security Environment

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**Abstract** *This work looks at how changes to global, regional and national political landscapes played a role in shaping Turkish-Israeli relations and how this, in turn, affected regional security and development in the Middle East. Specifically, I illustrate how Turkish political actors from the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) have responded to structural changes taking place in the Middle East, a region that has witnessed a decrease in US hegemony and a major political reshuffle caused by the Arab revolutions. While Turkey safeguarded Western and NATO interests in the Middle East until recently and maintained a close alliance with Israel, it changed its attitude towards the latter after a series of ill-fated events such as the Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara flotilla carrying humanitarian assistance to Gaza which resulted in the loss of life. Recent rapprochement between Turkey and Israel is explained by both actors' re-discovering common security interests in their neighbourhood, namely peace in Syria and energy interdependence.*

Keywords: Turkey, Israel, Mavi Marmara, Davos, AKP, Neo-Ottomanism, Zero Problems with Neighbours

### Introduction

Turkey has puzzled many Western observers by improving its foreign relations with Muslim countries to what has been perceived as being detrimental to the country's pro-Western orientation. Articles abound

in both the media and academic circles which attempt to gauge this new Turkish foreign policy orientation, with some suggesting that Turkey has “left the West,” a point attributed to the victory of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 elections. Others are more analytically nuanced and point to Turkey’s continuing efforts to secure membership in the EU or allowing the NATO anti-missile radar system to be placed on its territory, thus professing Turkey’s aim to be part of the Western security architecture. This article focuses on changes to Turkish-Israeli relations, which are regarded as symptomatic of the changes to Turkish foreign policy more generally.

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Turkey’s so called ‘shift of axis,’ reducing its alliance with Israel in favour of enhanced relations with other Muslim states in the region, is accounted for. However, before doing so, a proper context needs to be developed. This work proceeds as follows. First, an examination of the rationale behind the creation of the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership in the 1990’s takes place. This will assist in explaining the gradual – and eventual degradation of their alliance since many of the seeds of discord were already present before the election of the AKP. This work also addresses the implications this crisis in bilateral relations is likely to produce on the general security of the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Finally, this work analyses the motivations behind recent diplomatic rapprochement between the two estranged allies and impacts it may have on the economy of the region. In short, this work should read as an analytical examination of nearly three decades of Turkish-Israeli relations in an ever-evolving and dynamic region.

### **The Origins of the Turkish-Israeli Strategic Partnership**

Turkey recognised Israel in 1948 and was, for many decades, the only Muslim country to have formal and friendly relations with the Jewish state. Despite strategic cooperation throughout the Cold War, the transformation of Turkish-Israeli relationship into a distinct strategic alliance occurred in 1996 with the penning of a comprehensive agreement on military cooperation.<sup>1</sup> While there are certainly a variety of explanations for such changes, two themes stand out as being of higher priority. Firstly, Turkey was interested in safeguarding its Western credentials – it had been trying to do so since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923<sup>2</sup> – and, as Nachmani argued,

Turkey's repeated rejection by the West and Europe provides the context for Turkey's interaction with Israel [...] both countries, in defiance of their geographical location, nurse Western aspirations and rule out integration into an Islamic Middle East. They find that their Western character and their usefulness to Western ends have both been placed in doubt by termination of the Cold War; they collaborate so as to survive as Western societies.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the Turkish-Israeli alliance was meant for the former's domestic political consumption. It was the Turkish military that negotiated and ultimately signed the alliance protocols to demonstrate to the Islamic government of the time [under the premiership of Necmettin Erbakan] that it was them who had the upper hand in deciding Turkish policy matters, not the religious politicians. Additionally, Jung noted that Israel provided military technology for Turkey's ambitious national defence industry needed to protect itself against pending and perceived internal and external threats from radical Islam and Kurdish separatists.<sup>4</sup> As Benli Altunışık pointed out,

During most of the Cold War, Turkey had a limited influence in the Middle East. Turkish foreign and security elites defined the region as unstable and conflict-ridden and thus tried not to get drawn into the Middle Eastern swamp.<sup>5</sup>

The only opening Turkey made towards its regional neighbours was Israel. According to Bir, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces from 1995 to 1998 who negotiated several landmark Turkish-Israeli military agreements, establishing formal ties with Israel sent a message to the international community about Turkey's plan to align itself with the West.<sup>6</sup> According to Inbar, the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership in the 1990s was mainly based on cooperation in the national security sphere, common perception of the region as hostile and a shared sense of otherness. Both Turkey and Israel, Inbar notes, were status-quo powers in the region who aimed at enhancing their deterrence capability *vis-à-vis* Arab countries in the region by creating a synergy of military might which, at the same time, 'enhanced each country's defensive posture.'<sup>7</sup> Both countries felt it necessary to combine their forces to fight regional isolation and to deter potential war-making directed against them, be it from irredentist groups seeking secession and creation of their own state (e.g. Kurds and Palestinians) or from states such as Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Turkish-Israeli cooperation was also based on sharing intelligence, participating in joint military exercises and securing deals in the defence industry.<sup>8</sup> However, as Minasian argued, these military trainings were conducted to indicate that the alliance was to serve as a deterrent against making war against each of them since both Turkey and Israel possessed enough military power to provide for their own security.<sup>9</sup> For Turkey, the alliance with Israel had the additional plus in that the Jewish lobby in the United States supported Turkey against the Armenian lobby, which tried to push the US Congress to adopt a law on the Armenian genocide.<sup>10</sup> As for Israel, securing friendship with a Muslim country decreased its feeling of loneliness and vulnerability in the region. Inbar further notes that ties between Israel and Turkey reinforced the perception of Israeli military might, which mitigated Arab ambitions to remove Israel from the map.<sup>11</sup> For Israel, the alliance with Turkey also meant that it could train on a territory with similar geography to Iran and could thus prepare itself for an eventual war. The alliance kept other Muslim countries, in the region, in check and preserved the regional status quo, which in turn, served the American interests of preserving stability in the region. Turkish-Israeli alliance in the 1990s should therefore be seen as a continuation of Turkey's role during the Cold War.

### Changes to the Definition of Threats

1999 was a landmark in Turkey's history for several reasons. First, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrilla leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured in Kenya after being extradited from Syria, which had been providing aid and sanctuary to PKK since 1984.<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that the military alliance between Turkey and Israel helped resolve the Turkish-Syrian crisis<sup>13</sup> in that Syria became more responsive towards Turkey.<sup>14</sup> On the domestic front, the Turkish-Israeli alliance was justified as being useful and necessary for Turkey's domestic security. However, after the Kurdish leader was put in jail, Turkish threat perceptions began to change.<sup>15</sup>

Second, in that same year, a 7.6 magnitude earthquake hit the Izmit region in the northwestern part of Turkey. It came as a surprise to many that Greece, Turkey's enemy since the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), offered Turkey rescue and relief support. In the aftermath of the earthquake, Greece stopped blocking the EU accession process with Turkey, which eventually paved the way for Turkey's EU candidate sta-

tus at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999. This decision sparked enthusiasm for political, economic and social transformations in Turkey. Part of this political transformation required that the military's role in Turkish politics be limited. The 1990s, coined as the decade of the Turkish military, thus came to an end as the officers' weight in shaping the foreign and security agenda of the country became severely restricted. Also, the role of the National Security Council (NSC), the military's arm in politics, was limited by legislative changes introduced by the AKP in 2003. The decrease in the role of the military in Turkish domestic and foreign policy has largely been driven by Turkey's will to conform to EU reforms. Larrabee (rightly) pointed out that the fall in generals' power in Turkey has led to both broadening and softening of Turkish foreign policy:<sup>16</sup> softening in a sense of using more diplomatic and soft power in its relations with neighbours, in line with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's doctrine of 'zero problems with neighbours,'<sup>17</sup> and broadening in a sense that the Turkish policy-making is now open to other actors from the sphere of civil society and/or business organisations who are able to demand a more human rights-based foreign policy or more trade-oriented foreign policy, respectively. Kösebalaban has called this as the 'privatisation of Turkish foreign policy,'<sup>18</sup> when the traditional state actors, such as the political elite and the military, had to make space for civil society and business representatives who began to assert themselves as new actors in both domestic and foreign policy decision-making.

### The Second Gulf War - the First Sign of Turkish-Israeli Estrangement

While Turkey, under President Turgut Özal, supported the First Gulf War (1991), mostly because of the country's efforts to secure a role for itself in the post-Cold War era,<sup>19</sup> the country refused to support the US in 2003. Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, there were massive anti-war demonstrations in Turkey and the Parliament decided not to allow American troops to use Turkish bases for launching attacks against Saddam Hussein's regime forces. This decision signalled that Turkey was on a strategic quest to strike a more autonomous foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> Since Israel supported the 2003 War in Iraq, the first signs of the Turkish-Israeli friction can thus be traced to this period.

According to Kösebalaban, the Iraq War negatively affected relations between Turkey and Israel because Turkey perceived Israel as close to

Iraqi Kurdish groups, hence to PKK terrorists.<sup>21</sup> Kibaroğlu argued, in a similar vein, that while Turkey has been wary of any sign of independent Kurdish state formed in northern Iraq for repercussions it could have on its territorial integrity, Israel favoured such an autonomous entity, which would enhance its security by keeping a check on Iran. He further argued that Turkish-Israeli relations have suffered from Israel's trying to befriend Kurds of Northern Iraq in its search for allies among non-Arabs in the region.<sup>22</sup> Inbar disagrees with this notion that Israel has been promoting Kurdish independence for its own interest, as both Jerusalem and Ankara need a stable Iraq to serve as a counterbalance to Iran.<sup>23</sup> However, Turkey itself is now enjoying rather close political and economic relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq (mostly to secure oil contracts and build infrastructure there), not seen since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire some 100 years ago.<sup>24</sup> Relations with Iran have also improved due to trade and Turkey's energy needs.

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### The End of the Turkish-Israeli "Remarkable Tie"<sup>25</sup>

Besides different Turkish and Israeli approach to the second Gulf War, Kardaş and Balcı have also made a direct link between the limited role of the Turkish military and the strained Turkey-Israel relations:

It is not surprising that we are seeing the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations to an all-time low, simultaneously with the recent fall of the military tutelage in Turkey, which was the architect of the alliance in mid-1990s.<sup>26</sup>

However, the first open crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations appeared when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stormed out of the January 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos after criticising Israeli President Shimon Peres for Israeli operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Erdoğan's outburst in Davos sprang, apparently, not only from his pro-Palestinian sentiments but more importantly, from the feeling of injured honour<sup>27</sup> since Ankara was not informed about the planned Israeli attack on Gaza although Israel had been conducting peace talks in Ankara only a week before. Erdoğan claimed that Israel was 'very good at killing people,' while the Israeli right wing press likened Erdoğan to a 'hypocritical neo-Ottoman pasha, irresponsible and dangerous.'<sup>28</sup>

The second major rift occurred between the two countries in the aftermath of the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident when several Turkish citizens, travelling on a convoy of ships with humanitarian aid to

Gaza, were killed by Israeli soldiers. The subsequent Palmer Report, which justified the Israeli action as self-defence, and Israel's refusal to apologise to Turkey and pay compensation to families of dead victims, sent Turkish-Israeli relations down the drain. According to Goren, the Turkish demand for apology was perceived in Israel as humiliating. He notes that

The Israelis did not understand the significance of the flotilla event for Turks. While Davutoğlu labelled the incident as Turkey's 9/11, Israel dismissed the incident as an event used by Erdoğan to humiliate Israel and to improve Turkey's standing in the Arab and Muslim world.<sup>29</sup>

As a countermove, Turkey suspended joint military exercises and senior Israeli diplomats had to leave Turkey. After four years of strained relations between the two formal allies in the Middle East, a new sign of normalisation of relations could be perceived. On 22 March 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to apologise for the deaths of Turkish citizens during the raid on the Mavi Marmara flotilla. A month later, on 21 April 2014, the first round of rapprochement talks began in Ankara, focusing on compensation Israel is to pay to families of nine Turks killed during the incident.<sup>30</sup> Davutoğlu went so far as to call the Israeli apology 'a historic step, a historic success.'<sup>31</sup> According to Netanyahu, Israel's efforts to ease the relations were motivated by concerns over Syria's chemical weapons. He said that the two countries should resume communication as both border Syria, now in the midst of a civil war.<sup>32</sup>

Rubin has not shared this new optimism, though.<sup>33</sup> He argued that Turkey's hostility towards Israel was likely to remain in place as long as the ruling AKP, which has allied itself with other Islamic forces in the region, remained in power. Szymański also opined that due to divisions in the Israeli government, a coherent policy towards Turkey will be hard to implement, which, in turn, will make improvements in Turkey-Israel relations more difficult to achieve.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, bilateral economic relations, especially in the energy sector, seem to have ignored this political standoff. Israel is considering building a 500-kilometre long pipeline to carry natural gas from its newly found Leviathan gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean via Turkey to global markets. In the words of Turcas CEO Batu Aksoy,

Turkey remains the safest energy corridor for Israel to sell its gas to global markets...we are talking about something that is

more than a pipeline, something that can be a remedy for lingering political clashes with Israel and its neighbours.<sup>35</sup>

In a similar vein, Oxford energy expert Sara Hassan noted that these new gas reserves found in the region could become a means for future cooperation, including Egypt and Palestine, which Turkey may want to play a role in.<sup>36</sup> In view of another energy expert from the London-based Global Resources Corporation consultancy Mehmet Ögütçü, Turkey knows that should the gas project go on without its involvement, it will be very difficult to play a significant role in the Eastern Mediterranean energy trade.<sup>37</sup>

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### Turkey's New Neighbourhood Policy: 'Neo-Ottomanism'?

Turkey has recently wielded an increasingly strong regional power status in the Middle East. This has largely been due to its active economic and diplomatic policy but also due to a power vacuum resulting from an incoherent European strategy towards the Arab Spring countries and a discredited American policy in the region following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Bengio, Turkey is trying to fill the vacuum for regional leadership left by the Arab revolutions.<sup>38</sup> As Popp noted,

Erdoğan is showing the West that Turkey currently dictates the rules of the play in the Middle East....he is pursuing a strategy that observers are describing as 'Neo-Ottomanism', making his influence felt far beyond Turkey's own borders....in the crisis-riddled region, Erdoğan, like a sultan, is increasingly setting the agenda.<sup>39</sup>

Davutoğlu, in articulating Turkey's foreign policy approach, emphasised the concept of 'strategic depth,' which endows Turkey with a historical and geographical identity that predisposes it to play an active role in the region previously under the domain of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, Turkey sees itself as morally responsible to act on the region's behalf.<sup>40</sup>

In view of the above, Schleifer explained the reasons behind the stalemate in Turkey-Israel relations in the following way:

The paths have diverged. What you have left is two countries with different visions currently for their position in the region. Turkey wants to build a more unified region with more open borders that ultimately helps trade and ultimately helps Turkey see itself as a regional leader. Israel sees itself as iso-



lated in the region, increasingly threatened and increasingly concerned with security issues... The outsider status that once drew Turkey and Israel together into an alliance during the 1990s has changed as Turkey has grown economically and established closer political ties with Arab neighbours.<sup>41</sup>

If one adds the limited role the Turkish military now plays in domestic and/or foreign policy, mainly as a result of the EU-driven democratisation process, there is little wonder that the alliance between Israel and Turkey has deteriorated. Furthermore, the current political elites no longer define the region as hostile and dangerous; a view previous Kemalist elites used to share with their Israeli counterparts. Instead, they perceive the region as full of economic and political opportunities, which they believe will help Turkey increase its regional power status. However, Turkey's close relations with regional Islamists, be it the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or the Palestinian Hamas, as well as its support to various Sunni-linked jihadist groups operating in Syria, has somewhat tarnished the country's political clout in the region.

Other observers have ascribed the downfall in Turkish-Israeli relationship to the orientation of Turkish foreign policy towards Islamic countries. Lapidot-Firilla has, for instance, argued that Turkey's shifting away from Israel should be seen in the context of Turkey's changing self-perception *vis-à-vis* its neighbours and the rest of the Muslim world and due to its self-proclaimed responsibility to serve as a protector of Palestinians, if not of all Muslims.<sup>42</sup> This resonates with a claim that Turkey is pursuing a 'Neo-Ottoman' foreign policy in the region. It is true that the electoral victory of political Islam in Turkey in 2002 has contributed to Turkey's quest for regional influence. According to Aras and Polat,

Turkey's immediate neighbourhood is now perceived as an area of opportunity. This outlook has been made possible by the new geographic imaginary, which represents Turkey's new regional profile as a civil-economic power. The new policy attitude put an end to the need for internal and external enemies...it marks a remarkable break from the old imagination and it is now on trial in regional politics.<sup>43</sup>

While Israel continues to view its neighbourhood as hostile, Turkey, at least until the Arab Spring, has approached the region as a place of economic and diplomatic opportunities where it could pursue its, now somewhat defunct, 'zero problems with neighbours' policy.

As part of this new foreign policy, Turkey has established closer economic links with Iran and Syria and distanced itself from the Western sanctions on Iran which aimed to punish the country for trying to acquire a nuclear weapon. At the same time though, Turkey, as a member of NATO, has agreed to host an early-warning radar system in Kürecik near the city of Malatya in the south-eastern part of the country, much to Iran's displeasure. While Turkey and the US experienced a cooling of relations in the aftermath of the 2003 War in Iraq and Turkey felt uncertain about its role in the Western security architecture once the Soviet threat disappeared, it has been suggested that Turkey's value to NATO security has increased as Middle Eastern states with anti-Western stance, such as Iran, have started developing missile capabilities.<sup>44</sup> This, together with Turkey's anchor in Western organisations such as the OECD and the Customs Union, should suffice to counter arguments claiming that Turkey has abandoned the West in favour of the East. For instance, a high-ranking Israeli officer reasoned that behind Turkey's 'axis shift' has been, among others, Ankara's failure to secure EU membership.<sup>45</sup> There are also voices from within Turkey which blame the current Econo-Islamism<sup>46</sup>, a doctrine based on mixing business and religion, on Ankara's move towards Islamic countries.

In Szymański's view, although the Islamic-ideological profile of the ruling AKP is not negligible when it comes to its anti-Israeli stance, it is noteworthy that previous governments reacted to Israel's Middle Eastern policies in a similar manner and that AKP's critical position on Gaza intervention is shared by the opposition.<sup>47</sup> Kösebalaban shares Szymański's view, saying it would be wrong to blame AKP for the anti-Israeli mood in the country. The fact is that Turkish public opinion is even more critical of Israel than the government would like it to be.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP) voice stronger criticism against Israel than the Islamic AKP. Kösebalaban illustrates how Erdoğan had to rebuke critical voices in a parliamentary debate on border de-mining project between Turkey and Syria that was to be given to an Israeli company.<sup>49</sup> This should serve as an indication that it is not the Islamic party which is leading the anti-Israeli rhetoric though it is well aware of its potential to gain popularity at home as well as among Arabs.

It should be emphasised that although Turkey has changed its attitude and policies towards the Middle East, it would not be able to pursue such an active policy in the region were it not for the change of

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perception of the Arab countries towards their former rulers. A survey conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Association (TESEV) in 2011 confirmed that Arab perceptions towards Turkey have changed. The survey on “The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East” indicated that 78 per cent of people in the Middle East believed Turkey should play a greater role in the region and 75 per cent thought that Turkey should play a mediating role between Israel and Palestine.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Israel was perceived as the biggest threat to regional security by 47 per cent of respondents.<sup>51</sup>

In the new Arab discourse, Turkey is no longer perceived as the ‘violent suppresser of Arab nationalism’ or ‘the cruel and despotic power addict devoid of any cultural refinement.’<sup>52</sup> The Turkish image in the Arab neighbourhood improved after AKP came to power in 2002, especially when the Turkish Grand National Assembly refused to allow Turkish soil for deployment of US army to launch an offensive against Iraq.<sup>53</sup> Turkey’s EU membership bid also improved Turkey’s image among the Arab peoples in that they never believed that a Muslim country could become part of the EU and they came to see Turkey as a country whose synthesis of liberal economy, religious government and democracy should be emulated.

However, as Turkey’s “European destiny” remains uncertain, the country has decided to put its stake in an ambitious and uncertain project of integration with its Eastern neighbours and pragmatic reasons might have been behind, too. The Middle East holds one of the world’s largest proven resources of natural gas and oil. Since Turkey wants to establish itself as an energy corridor between the Middle Eastern producers and European consumers, it will have to re-build economic and political ties with countries where energy stocks are located, and that means re-establishing good relations with Israel.

### Economic Foundations of the New Turkish Foreign Policy

It is perhaps unquestionable that one of the most significant reasons behind AKP’s electoral victories, the last one being in the local elections on March 30, 2014, could be attributed to its economic success. After overcoming the 2000-2001 banking crisis, the country’s average growth rate was at 6% in 2002-2010, reaching 9.2% in 2010 and 8.5% in 2011. Per capita income rose from \$3,500 in 2002 to \$10,500 in 2011. Turkey is now the 17<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world.<sup>54</sup> Jim O’Neill of Goldman Sachs, who coined the acronym BRIC to denote the big

emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China, has included Turkey in MIST, a second tier of economic rising stars, alongside Mexico, Indonesia and South Korea.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the EU markets stagnate due to the protracted economic and financial crisis. Turkey, which has been oriented mostly towards the EU and whose economy is growing, now needs to find new markets to export its goods. At the same time, Turkey needs energy resources to feed its booming industry, which means that Turkey cannot afford to jeopardise relations with such countries such as Iran, Russia or Israel, for that matter, who are Turkey's (current and future) primary importers of natural gas and oil.

It seems a misjudgement to claim that Turkey has turned away from the West (i.e. Israel) in favour of the East due to the Islamisation of its foreign policy. Proponents of international political economic approaches to Turkish foreign policy have pointed out that since the global economy has shifted from North-West to South-East and that BRIC countries have become "the global trade game-setters after the Cold War,"<sup>56</sup> Turkey has logically re-aligned its economy along the South-East nexus as well, without, however, abandoning its pro-Western axis.<sup>57</sup> What that means is that Turkey has succeeded in getting its foot in the Middle East where it now has significant economic interests. The country signed a number of free trade agreements with Iran, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>58</sup> Turkish companies have moved production to the region, invested in the local infrastructure<sup>59</sup> and regional markets are flooded with Turkish goods ranging from textiles, food, chemical, automotive and agricultural products. Cooperation in the economic sphere has also been made possible due to transformation of Turkey from a military-security state to a trading state.<sup>60</sup> Due to this new self-understanding, Turkey is now able to imagine other than military solutions to regional problems by focusing on bilateral trade, for instance. Still, Germany (i.e., the EU) remains a key trading partner for Turkey, which gives support to Oğuzlu's observation that 'the AKP adopted an ideology-free approach towards Turkey's economic policies at home and abroad.'<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Cockburn opined that

Iraq is Turkey's biggest export market after Germany but the EU's relationship with Turkey remains crucial. It is by far Turkey's largest trading partner and the main source of its foreign investment. Turkish options in the Middle East are deceptively alluring, but not necessarily very rewarding.<sup>62</sup>

Cockburn further claims that Turkey might be feeling a bit too over

self-confident about a region that is highly unstable, as the on-going civil war in neighbouring Syria demonstrates, which is why it should not abandon its EU anchor.

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### **Regional Implications of the Turkish-Israeli Crisis**

It has been suggested that Turkey and Israel have a different reading of the opportunities and risks associated with the Arab Spring. While Israel perceives it as a threat posed by rising Islamisation of the region, Turkey sees it as an opportunity to play a central role in the region by showcasing that Islam and democracy can co-exist. Turkey has tried to project a soft power image based on economic cooperation and diplomacy by engaging in third-party mediation (i.e. trying to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria in 2010). Despite severe disruptions in economic and political relations with some Arab countries such as Syria, whose refugees in the aftermath of the civil war fled to Turkey and cross-border trade came to a halt, Turkish ruling elites continue to view trade and economic cooperation as panacea for peace and security in the region. In their foreign policy, they seem to be applying a neo-functional approach based on the expectations that economic cooperation will eventually spill over into the political realm and that integration of states in the region will prevent a conflict among them.

Given the current state of affairs in the region, it is a big question mark whether such a model can actually work. As Cook said, 'in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is the king,'<sup>63</sup> meaning that given the lack of a coherent EU or US policy towards solving the Mid-East crises, Turkey is left to its own wits to deal with the situation, and its meddling in the Syrian civil war by siding with the jihadist Sunni forces against the Alawite-led government of President Assad is, frankly, no wise choice for a country which once prided itself on 'zero problems with neighbours' and which wanted to serve as a model for the Arab countries.

Among the examples of Turkey's efforts to promote security in the region, Aras mentions the initiative of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) to establish an industrial zone on the border between Israel and Gaza. According to Aras, the so-called 'Industry for Peace' initiative is an example of new geographic imagination on the part of the Turkish political elites who view trade as solution to all problems in the region and who expect that the wealth

ensuing from such initiatives will eventually lead to peace in the region.<sup>64</sup> As noted by Inbar, Peres shares the same liberal economic approach to international relations, i.e. that economic trade rather than military force should shape relations among states. According to Inbar, Peres shares the same vision of an economically integrated region.<sup>65</sup> It is therefore optimistic to believe that with such a leader at the helm of Israeli politics, Turkey and Israel could find a common language regarding their approach towards security in the region.

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Strong criticism of Israeli policy towards Palestinians, which is able to earn Turkish policy-makers applause both at home and in the Arab neighbourhood, may in the long run seem counterproductive to the efforts of civil society taken towards rapprochement between Israel and Palestine. As Ahmedi remarked, 'Israel is certainly a useful punching bag for Turkey in its pursuit of domestic and regional popularity.'<sup>66</sup> However, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is unthinkable if Turkey does not keep Palestinian and Israeli leaders on equal footing, so to speak, and does not refrain from such diplomatic mishaps as extending a warm welcome to leaders of Hamas.<sup>67</sup> Without disregarding the AKP's sense of solidarity with the people in Gaza, it seems as if the Palestinian issue was a useful instrument in gaining popularity for the party. Many authors have emphasised that improvement in relations between Turkey and Israel will depend on the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is therefore in Turkey's best interest to try to tune down its criticism of Israel to be able to play an effective and efficient role as a regional peacemaker, if indeed, it still has such aspirations. In a similar vein, Turkey should act wisely and try to adopt a neutral standing between Israel and Iran and try to urge both Tehran and Jerusalem to downplay the nuclear threat discourse they like to engage in. In a similar vein, Turkey should refrain from meddling in the internal Syrian affairs and from pursuing sectarian politics in the region, which could very well turn against its own interests.

As Bengio argued, 'given Iran's and Hamas' unflinching opposition to Israel's existence, Turkey's support for them cancels out, in effect, its alignment with Israel.'<sup>68</sup> The feeling of deepening isolation since relations with Turkey got strained may have also corroborated Israel's perception of the Iranian nuclear threat. Szymański rightly pointed out that the dissolution of trust between the two former allies has negatively impacted on the Middle Eastern stabilisation efforts. The limitation of Turkey's role of a facilitator in talks between opposing sides had

the effect of reducing the already small group of countries capable of playing such a role.<sup>69</sup> According to a senior Israeli government official, 'Israel does not want to see a further deterioration in the relationship with Turkey as deterioration in the relationship serves neither side's interests.'<sup>70</sup> Consequently, if Turkey wants to present itself as a credible conflict broker, it has to make an effort and have, if not cordial, then at least a working relationship with Israel in order to resume peace talks to resolve the Palestinian issue. If Turkey keeps antagonising Israel and *vice-versa*, the result will not be peace and security in the region (a win-win scenario) but more of a Cold War situation where two regional powers are trying to yield more power at the expense of one another (a zero-sum game). This is not the approach either Turkey or Israel should follow if peace and security is truly on their minds rather than ideological or economic self-interests.

## Conclusion

This article addressed changes in Turkish-Israeli relations from the perspective of changing Turkish foreign policy, which was also seen as a response to international as well as domestic political and economic transformations. It has been shown that the post-Cold War era has presented Turkish decision-makers with new opportunities, namely expanding to Middle Eastern markets and playing third-party arbiters in regional disputes. Democratisation of state-society relations in Turkey in the late 1990s inspired by Turkish motivations to become a member of the EU has led to opening of the foreign policy agenda to other than state actors, i.e. to civil society and business organisations at the expense of the military. Scholars have thus spoken about 'the privatisation of Turkish foreign policy,' which resulted in broadening of the foreign policy agenda not solely along the military security objectives but also along economic needs and human rights.

The political rhetoric of common threats used by the military elites in charge of Turkish foreign policy in the mid-1990's as a legitimisation strategy to justify a strategic alliance with Israel disappeared due to a new geographical imagination, which led Turkish political elites to re-integrate their country into its Muslim neighbourhood. In other words, once the rhetoric of common regional threats was found to be counter-productive to Turkey's economic interests, Israeli alliance seemed unnecessary. Combined with the uncertain membership in the EU, with a discredited Western policy in the Middle East and with

Turkish economy boosting, Ankara felt it no longer needed to align its foreign policy solely along Western lines and tried to strike a more independent and autonomous course of action.

In a hopeful tone, Bengio suggested that regional uncertainties created by the Arab Spring could prove to “be a catalyst for renewed rapprochement”<sup>71</sup> between Turkey and Israel as both have been negatively affected by the instability and economic losses in Libya, Egypt and Syria. However, there have not been any significant steps taken by either Turkey or Israel to try to mend fences or engage in a more friendly political rhetoric towards each other until very recently, when Israel promised compensation to Turkish families whose members died in the Mavi Marmara incident. The pipeline diplomacy can also be attributed to this recent rapprochement as Israel will soon need to start extracting and exporting its natural gas to European markets via Turkish territory. Turkey, to sustain its economic growth, will need to diversify its natural gas imports in order to lessen its dependence on Iranian and Russian gas. Also, Turkey’s rhetoric of being a bridge between East and West, which has been put on the back burner for a while, is now being invoked again by references to Turkey’s pivotal role in the energy trade between Europe and the Middle East.

Furthermore, if Turkey is to play any meaningful role in brokering peace between Palestinians and Israelis, it must approach both sides on a neutral basis. The anti-Israeli card, which appeals to regional popular sentiments, is a short-sighted strategy. Israel should not be seen as a liability but as an asset to Turkey, which strives to act as a crisis-manager in the region. Turkey should capitalise on the strategic partnership it enjoyed with Israel in the 1990s and on closer ties it now enjoys with Iran and try to tune down the Cold War deterrence rhetoric since nuclear escalation between Israel and Iran would certainly benefit no one.

Lastly, AKP’s increasingly authoritarian style of governing that sparked a country-wide domestic protest movement in summer 2013 has shown that the Turkish model, once hailed for its ability to successfully combine Islam, democracy and capitalism, has also somewhat eroded. If Turkey does not want to lose its regional clout altogether, it may do well to remember its soft power policy practiced prior to the Arab revolutions when it tried to broker local skirmishes and promote regional economic integration and this will require, among others, mending fences with its estranged former allies.



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## Notes

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- 2 For a more detailed account see: Ali Balcı and Tuncay Kardaş (2012), 'The Changing Dynamics of Turkey's Relations with Israel: An Analysis of Securitization', *Insight Turkey*, 14:2 and Dietrich Jung and Wolfgang Piccoli (2000), 'The Turkish-Israeli Alignment. Paranoia or Pragmatism?', *Security Dialogue*, 31:1.
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- 5 Altunışık (2008), p. 42.
- 6 Çevik Bir and Martin Sherman (2002), 'Formula for Stability: Turkey Plus Israel', *The Middle East Quarterly*, 9:4, p. 23.
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- 9 Sergey Minasian (2003), 'The Turkish-Israeli Military and Political Co-operation and Regional Security Issues', *Iran and the Caucasus*, 17:1/2, pp. 316-317.
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- 11 Inbar (2001), p. 10.
- 12 Idris Ahmedi (2011), 'Why Turkey No Longer Needs Israel' available at: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10095/why-turkey-no-longer-needs-israel> (accessed 12 April 2012).
- 13 In Turkey's view, Syria harboured PKK terrorists; in Syria's view, Turkey was responsible for Syria's loss of the Hatay province and for building dams on the Tigris-Euphrates Rivers, which resulted in water shortage.
- 14 Minasian cites Çevik Bir (2003), pp. 317-318.
- 15 The Turkish military-bureaucratic establishment had until then suffered from the so-called Sèvres syndrome, i.e. 'the perception of being encircled by enemies attempting the destruction of the Turkish state.' See Dietrich Jung: 'Turkish Foreign Policy and Its Historical Legacies', available at: <

- [http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives\\_roll/2003\\_07-09/jung\\_sevres/jung\\_sevres.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives_roll/2003_07-09/jung_sevres/jung_sevres.html)), (accessed March 24 2012). The Treaty of Sèvres was signed between Turkey and the Allies in the aftermath of the First World War, which delineated the borders of the modern Turkish Republic.
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