

# **NO LONGER NEWLYWEDS: THE EVOLUTION OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL**

*This article discusses the domestic and regional circumstances that influenced Turkish attitudes toward Israel, from the beginning of their relationship in the 1950s, through the present. Acknowledging recent strains, the author illustrates that although the military strategic interests that initially motivated bilateral relations are no longer of primary concern to Turkey or to Israel, the relationship has since evolved into one that reaches beyond the bonds of its initial inception and remains mutually beneficial to both parties.*

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Geographically situated in a region marked by constant interstate and intrastate conflict, Turkey has continually struggled with how to define its own identity in the context of its history, neighborhood, and national aspirations. Turkish policy-making has been guided by an interest in separating Turkey from the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, securing Turkey amidst volatile regional politics, and steering Turkey according to the Kemalist ideals that define many of its national interests. Thus, domestic and regional influences have had a strong hand in shaping Turkish foreign relations. While Turkey's relations with many of its neighbors have recently improved, given tumultuous regional and domestic factors, circumstances continue to change rapidly. This article seeks to address an element of Turkish foreign policy that, while it has evolved and changed often, has been sustained since its inception: Turkish foreign policy toward Israel.

Turkey and Israel have mutually benefited from bilateral relations for almost half a century, but only since the 1990s have these relations become widely publicized. According to Oxford scholar, Dr. Philip Robins, whereas in the 1950s Turkey treated Israel as a mistress, "by 1993 the two countries were engaged; by 1996 they were wed."<sup>1</sup> While neither country is Arab, both Israel and Turkey are geographically located in the Middle East, the center of the Arab world, and both have a history of contention within the region. They are both democracies with parliamentary governments, and both share a strong relationship and identification with the West. Both countries share values and history with Europe, but have intentionally been kept at a distance. Moreover, both states currently face domestic situations that demand consideration of the balance between religion and secularism in their national political identities.

Despite the aforementioned similarities, the development of bilateral relations was not primarily motivated by shared values, but rather, by complementary strategic interests: Turkish interests initially lay in developing close ties with the West based on Kemalist ideals, and later in bolstering a defense against the rising threats of Kurdish separatism; for Israel, the interest was in validating its position in an otherwise unfriendly neighborhood. This article will discuss the domestic and regional circumstances that influenced Turkish attitudes toward Israel, from the beginning of their relationship in the 1950s, through the present, and how the aforementioned interests led to the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement. It will illustrate that although the initial military strategic interests that necessitated the bilateral relations are no longer of primary concern to Turkey or to Israel, the relationship has since evolved into one that reaches beyond the bonds of its initial inception, and remains mutually beneficial to both parties.

### ***Kemalist traditions and Westward aims***

In accordance with the Kemalist ideal that Turkey should be solidly rooted in the West, developing relations with the United States and with Europe has been a focus of Turkish foreign policy since the founding of the Republic. While this does not constitute the only motivation for relations with Israel, it has been cited as a significant incentive.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the execution of this

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> An example of this opinion: William Hale, Professor of Turkish Politics, School for Oriental and African Studies, London, England. Personal Interview, 06 January 2005.

interest has been complicated by the Turkish efforts to maintain an independent foreign policy and tolerable relations with all – often hostile – sides. Certain leaders decided that to pursue relations with Israel would help Turkey remain in the favor of the United States, while others shied away from Israel, hoping that deeper relations between Turkey and the Arab world would be of more strategic value to the United States. Historically, when leaders failed to guard Kemalist principles, the military intervened and brought the government back on track; however, this has not always translated into support for relations with Israel. Although their commitment to Kemalist ideals would suggest otherwise, at times the Turkish military has been far less supportive of relations with Israel than other political leaders.

To this day, many Turks believe that Europe, if not the entire West, stands against them in ultimately attempting to re-create the 1920 Treaty of Sevres<sup>3</sup>. This paranoia commonly referred to as “Sevres Syndrome,” or “Sevres-phobia,” has contributed to a Turkish leadership that has historically favored the status quo and been generally suspicious of change, and maintained a focused interest in Turkish national security. Sevres-phobia contributed to Turkish sensitivity to regional developments, such as the 2003 War in Iraq, Syrian support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)<sup>4</sup>, and alleged Israeli involvement with Iraqi Kurds. Turks fear that although Western countries such as the United States claim to be allies of Turkey, these countries would not come to Turkey’s aid in the face of threats to its sovereignty.

In addition to the already heightened sensitivity of the Turks over recognition of the Kurdish people, Turks fear that Israel would be secretly conspiring with other Western countries, or aiding Kurdish separatist efforts in northern Iraq – as alleged previously – to diminish Turkish sovereignty. Between Turkish concern of the West, Arab hostility toward Israel, and Turkey’s own historically tentative relations with its Arab neighbors, it has had to carefully balance relations with each, focusing on whichever is expected to be most beneficial to its own national interests at any given time. As such, Turkish policies toward Israel have at times seemed inconsistent; however, they have usually been motivated by the same long-held interests in upholding Kemalist traditions and ensuring Turkish national security.

### ***Turkey and Israel: Suitors***

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Israel was far more desirous of relations with Turkey than vice versa. For Israel, relations with Turkey constituted a way to improve relations with other countries in the Middle East and to engage in the region. Given Turkey’s interest in direct relations with the West, namely with the United States and Europe, Turkish officials focused on foreign policy initiatives that guided them in that direction, rather than toward the Middle East. However, to the extent that Israel was a Western country supported by Europe and the U.S., and

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<sup>3</sup> In 1920, the Great Powers gathered to create the post-World War I Treaty of Sevres, by which they dismembered the Ottoman Empire, offering parts of the land to different European powers. While the Ottoman Sultan reluctantly accepted the Treaty, Mustafa Kemal refused to comply and rose up his nationalist army to liberate Turkish territory.

<sup>4</sup> The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) developed from a leftist student organization in the 1960s, but was officially founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978. Its aim was to create an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. The majority of its activities have been carried out from the Bekaa Valley and northern Iraq. While the PKK traditionally employed violence and insurgency as its primary means to achieve their aims, it has recently tended towards primarily political means. The PKK considers itself a separatist group, but the United States officially recognizes it as a terrorist group.

like Turkey, was of significant strategic value to the U.S. during the Cold War, Turkish relations with Israel proved beneficial for their Western motivated aims.<sup>5</sup>

The first establishment of formal ties with Israel occurred in 1950 under the leadership of Adnan Menderes. Menderes' ideas for foreign policy differed from his predecessors; he was willing to veer from the status quo, was interested in international engagement, and saw broad strategic value in pursuing relations with regional actors.<sup>6</sup> Exemplifying a shift away from Turkey's traditional isolationist attitude, the establishment of relations with Israel sent a strong message to its neighbors about Turkey's priorities and international orientation. From the perspective of the Arab world, Turkish recognition of Israel marked a direct move against its interests; however, from the Turkish perspective, this was simply one step closer to the West.

Despite his initial sentiment, shortly after Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952, Menderes calculated that pursuing relations with the Arab world, rather than with Israel, was a better means by which to increase the value of Turkey for the United States.<sup>7</sup> In the interest of such, Menderes subsequently rejected invitations from Israel to develop bilateral agreements, and in 1955 signed onto the Baghdad Pact with Britain, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. However, between 1955 and 1958, Turkey became increasingly suspicious of some of the alliances and alignments that were being formed around it between its neighbors, and by 1958, in another shift of foreign policy orientation, Turkish officials instead engaged in a secret alignment with Israel in the form of the Peripheral Pact, otherwise known as the Periphery Act, or Peripheral Alliance.<sup>8</sup>

The events of these three years are representative of the tenacity of Turkish relations with the Middle East during this period, toward both Israel and the Arab world.<sup>9</sup> According to Israeli scholar Ofra Bengio, the policy shift toward Israel resulted from a number of developments in the Arab world, including Iraq's vote at the UN against Turkey over the Cyprus conflict in 1957, and the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in July 1958.<sup>10</sup> Ankara's alarm at developments in Baghdad led it to reconsider its alignment with Iraq and its rejection of Israel. Turkey feared that a new Iraqi regime would not adhere to the Baghdad Pact and that it would find itself encircled by hostile powers to the North and the South.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Israel was offering relations with Turkey as per the peripheral alignment strategy, to break Israeli isolation in the region, create a counter balance to the Arab powers, and develop strategic relations with the West. As the latter justifications were also in Turkish interest, Menderes put aside their differences and signed a number of agreements with Israel.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Malik Mufti, "From Swamp to Backyard: The Middle East in Turkish Foreign Policy," in Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East Enters the 21st Century*, (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Deitrich Jung, and Wolfgang Piccoli, *Turkey at a Crossroads: Ottoman Legacies and a Greater Middle East*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, conceived the Peripheral Pact in an effort to improve Israel's relations with countries on the periphery of the Arab world, including Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Robins, *Turkey and the Middle East*, (New York: The Royal Institute of International Affairs Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 40.

Despite the incongruence in Turkish and Israeli interests, and in their respective regional positions at the time, the mere development of such relations pointed to the capacity, and perhaps even to the necessity, for cooperation between Turkey and Israel in times of mutual threat. The alignment offered each country more assurance and confidence in dealing with the rest of their neighbors in the region, something they would appreciate a few decades later, as well.

In 1960, the Menderes government was overthrown by a military coup, following which Turkey experienced a period of domestic political chaos, marked by ineffective leadership and significant military involvement in politics. The Turkish-Israeli relationship began to break down shortly thereafter. In 1966, the Turkish Director of Military Intelligence, Sezai Orkunt, told the Israeli military that Turkey was going to freeze bilateral relations on account of American support for the Greek Orthodox Church's claims over their historical ties to Constantinople, Istanbul.<sup>13</sup> The reasons cited for freezing relations with Israel were not directly related to Israeli policies or statements, but the military perceived that it would be strategically valuable to use its relations with Israel as a point of leverage for negotiation with the United States. This was neither the first nor last time such tactics were employed. Bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel were nonetheless maintained, but there was no further development until approximately two decades later.

Before there was time to discuss the renewal of relations, the 1967 Six Day War began and Israel was at war with its Arab neighbors. Turkey did not actively engage in the war, but it refused to support Israel in any way; through impressive diplomacy, Turkey was able to remain neutral. It balanced its reactions to Israel and to the Arab world by expressing sympathy with the Arab states and supporting United Nations Resolution 242, demanding that Israel withdraw from the territories, but by also emphasizing the important right for all states to live in secure and recognized boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

However, during the 1970s, Turkey's previous policy of neutrality with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict virtually disappeared. In 1973, Turkey recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people, in 1975 Turkey voted in favor of a UN resolution that equated Zionism with racism, and in 1979 Turkey allowed the PLO to open an office in Istanbul. According to Robins, this shift in Turkish foreign policy was motivated by the 1973 oil crisis and the realization that not only could control of oil be used as a dangerous weapon against states in need of it, such as Turkey, but also that there were significant commercial opportunities available in the oil markets of the Arab world that Turkey should utilize.

Justified as a direct response to Israeli declaration of Jerusalem as its unified capital in 1980, Turkey further downgraded its relations with Israel in 1981.<sup>15</sup> It would seem that the secular military and Kemalist elite should not be concerned with an Israeli declaration of Jerusalem as its capital. However, as the military was effectively governing the country during this time, it needed to establish legitimacy and support for its authority; because the majority of Turkish citizens are Muslim, the military cleverly responded to the Israeli declaration in a way that would

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<sup>13</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Robins (1991), p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 74.

please their operative constituency, the Turkish public. Furthermore, this was thought to be a necessary move in order not to unnecessarily alienate the Arab world and thereby disrupt Turkish capacity to maintain some level of relations with all sides.

The period of prolonged political instability in Turkey came to a temporary end in 1983, with the election of Turgut Özal as Prime Minister, and of his Motherland Party to the government. Özal served as Prime Minister from 1983-1989, and as President until his death in 1993.<sup>16</sup> Similar to Menderes, Özal felt that there were more effective ways to contend with Turkish interests than following the Kemalist tradition of conservative foreign policy. With the end of the Cold War in sight, Özal perceived Turkish relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds to be a constructive way to prove Turkey's status as a bridge between East and West, and reinforce its strategic value for the West, separate from Cold War concerns.<sup>17</sup>

In the interest of combining moderate domestic Islamization with strong support for Western oriented foreign policy, Özal mobilized business interests in the Middle East, and established bilateral relations with a number of conservative Arab Gulf countries, as well as with Libya, Iraq, and Iran.<sup>18</sup> Turkey's trade with Arab and Muslim countries increased fivefold during the first half of the 1980s, but at the expense of trade relations with Israel, which became virtually irrelevant.<sup>19</sup> It was only with regard to his desire to establish a base of support within the United States, and more specifically, one with the ear of the U.S. Congress, that Özal found reason to actively engage in relations with Israel.

At the outbreak of the first Palestinian *intifada* in 1987, Turkey decided to increase its sympathy and attention for the Palestinian cause, again at the expense of Israel, but it was able to execute diplomacy in a way that enabled it to maintain relations with Israel nonetheless. Israel expressed disappointment when Turkey recognized the self-declared Palestinian state in 1988, but as Turkey continued to emphasize its position that all states, including the State of Israel, have the right to live in peaceful and secure borders, Israel elected to uphold relations, too. In 1989, when a number of Eastern European countries, including two of Turkey's traditional rivals, Greece and Bulgaria, moved to upgrade relations with Israel, Turkey became concerned that it should do the same in order to maintain its leverage with Israel and with America.<sup>20</sup> Once again, Turkey began to assume a more positive attitude toward Israel.

### ***Engaged and wed***

Although the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 assuaged any doubt of Turkey's strategic importance to the West, Turkey was faced with increased concern over the threats of Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism to internal stability. Domestically, the 1990s marked the return of the Turkish military to the center of domestic political power, and externally, Israel and Turkey again found reason to come together in the face of threats to their national security. In

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<sup>16</sup> Robins (2003), p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, "The Future of Turkish Policy Toward the Middle East," in: Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişçi (eds.) *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Piccoli, "Alliance Theory: the Case of Turkey and Israel," Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, (August 1999), ([www.ciaonet.org/wps/pic10/#txt120](http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/pic10/#txt120)).

<sup>20</sup> Robins (1991), p. 81.

1958, their mutual concerns had been over the threat of the Soviet Union and the United Arab Republic<sup>21</sup>, and the fall of the Iraqi regime, but in the 1990s, these concerns had shifted to the capabilities and intentions of Iraq, Iran, and Syria.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, with the Cold War over and the Arab world severely shaken by Saddam Hussein's attack against Kuwait, significant taboos were shattered across the Middle East, first by Saddam Hussein's attack against another Arab nation – and the subsequent Gulf War, and second by the beginning of a peace process between Israelis and Palestinians: initially with the Madrid Conference and shortly thereafter with the Oslo Accords in 1993. Both of these developments – especially the latter – facilitated Turkey's public pursuit of relations with Israel, and in the meantime, a number of security concerns that arose for Turkey during the first half of the decade made a strategic alignment with Israel all but necessary.

By 1996, Turkish officials identified the primary threats to the Republic to be Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism, but across its borders, Turkey had problems with nearly all its neighbors, too.<sup>23</sup> Turkey was experiencing significant civil unrest within its borders, the leader of the PKK was being given asylum in Damascus, and the PKK was operating against Turkey from the Bekaa valley and northern Iraq. Relations with Iran were strained, Turkey had nearly gone to war with Greece over the Aegean islets, and there were renewed tensions over Cyprus. Furthermore, relations with Europe were at an all-time low. Individually, neither the impact of the Greek and Armenian lobbies in Washington DC, nor the threats of Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism were new challenges for Turkey, but these threats compounded with the aforementioned developments, as well as the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union, created cause for greater trepidation.

In 1996, Necmettin Erbakan was elected Prime Minister of Turkey, marking the first time an Islamist oriented official and an Islamist based party, the Refah (Welfare) Party, were elected to political power in Turkey. This development caused some alarm among the Kemalists, but Erbakan's power was significantly restrained by the military and he had little effect on domestic or foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> In 1997, the generals successfully carried out the first post-modern coup in Turkish history; Erbakan was stripped of his power, the coalition government resigned, and new elections were held. One year later, the Refah (Welfare) Party was banned from government.

Ironically, the year during which Erbakan took office: 1996, is cited by Philip Robins as the year when Turkey and Israel “were wed”; the subsequent years of Erbakan's term were then the honeymoon period.<sup>25</sup> It was two months after Erbakan was sworn into office that the series of Turkish-Israeli military agreements, which are cited as marking the beginning of Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, were signed into effect. Erbakan's attempts to prevent these agreements were insignificant and ignored.

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<sup>21</sup> A political union between Egypt and Syria established in 1958, which lasted until 1961.

<sup>22</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Olson Robert, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000: The Kurdish and Islamist Question*, (California: Mazda Publishers, 2001), p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Gencer Özcan, Professor of International Relations, Yıldız Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey. Personal Interview, 04 January 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Robins (2003), p. 249.

The military, the primary political actor during this time, realized that strategic relations with Israel could provide Turkey with the military support it needed to contend with and defend itself against rising threats. A demonstration of Turkish loyalty to Israel would encourage the American pro-Israel lobby to sympathize with Turkey and voice their interests to the policy-makers in Washington, while closer to home, Turkish forces would be able to learn from Israeli experience and capabilities in the realm of defensive military action, specifically against insurgency. Furthermore, an alignment with Israel would effectively put an end to Turkey's perceived isolation. According to Bilgi University Professor Soli Özel, the formation of a Turkish-Israeli military defense alignment fundamentally changed the general strategic framework of the region.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Kurdish Threat***

After the 1991 Gulf War, Turkish officials identified Kurdish separatism as the foremost growing internal security threat to Turkey.<sup>27</sup> However, the increasing number of incursions that Turkish officials carried out against the Kurdish minority in fact drew more attention from the West than Turkish fears.<sup>28</sup> The Turkish military justified the attacks as security operations, arguing that once terrorism was eliminated they could begin to implement economic and social development reforms that would mitigate the problem of poverty in these areas, and potentially prevent tendencies toward violence.<sup>29</sup> However, other countries did not see the Turkish military attacks as justified security operations; rather, they accused Turkey of committing human rights violations and many European countries, as well as the United States, denied arms sales to Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s, the Kurdish question significantly influenced Turkish domestic policy-making and foreign relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors, including Israel. Iran, Iraq, and Syria were each accused of harboring and supporting the PKK and their separatist efforts, causing tension between Turkey and each respective country. Turkey condemned Iran numerous times for supporting PKK efforts against them, and perpetually fears the incursion of Islamic fundamentalism on Turkish territory. Turkish fear of Kurdish separatism originating from within Iraq has contributed to their course of involvement, or lack thereof, in both US wars on Iraq.

The perceived need for a strategic alignment to protect and strengthen Turkey against Syria was an important incentive for the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, and the current lack of this incentive one of the reasons why Turkey no longer has the same need for strategic relations with Israel. The Turkish military hoped to use an alliance with Israel to pressure Syria to comply with Turkish demands; they rightfully expected that Syria would be more likely to comply with Turkish demands if it felt threatened by both Turkey and Israel. The Turkish military also

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<sup>26</sup> Soli Özel, Professor of International Relations, Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey. Personal Interview, 31 December 2004.

<sup>27</sup> William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1774-2000*, (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> In 1993, in response to suspicions that the PKK was preparing a large popular uprising, the Turkish army executed military force that substantially weakened Kurdish PKK fighters in Southeastern and Eastern Turkey, as well as in northern Iraq.

<sup>29</sup> Amikam Nachmani, *Turkey Facing a New Millennium, Coping with Intertwined Conflicts*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 40.



foresaw being able to learn from Israel's experience warding off insurgency in order to contend with the PKK, and hoped to gain weapons for its defense, as well as much needed support for its efforts against the PKK mutiny. There were also hopes that the pro-Israel lobby in Washington, DC might persuade America to soften its criticism of Turkish treatment of the Kurds.<sup>30</sup>

In 1997, in the face of the PKK insurgency, Turkey demanded that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan be extradited from Syria into the hands of Turkish authorities. In 1998, under pressure from Israel and Turkey at their borders, and threat of military invasion into Syrian territory if it did not comply, Syria acquiesced. However, Öcalan fled Syria and was only later found in Kenya in February 1999, where he was captured by Turkish authorities and brought back to Turkey. It is questionable whether Syria would have released Öcalan had it not been pressured by threats from Israel and Turkey together.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, relations between Syria and Turkey have been significantly better since this incident and continue to improve. Israel and Turkey, too, have remained wed.

### ***Recent Confrontations***

The Turkish-Israeli relationship has recently withstood a number of challenges to its stability, including the election of a second Islamist-backed party to government, a second Palestinian intifada, the American-led War on Iraq, and accusations against Israel for alleged engagement with the Kurds in northern Iraq. However, none of these challenges has seriously disrupted the bilateral alignment. All tensions have seemingly been assuaged with relatively low costs to the relationship, as marked by the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Gül to Israel in January 2005, and subsequent diplomatic exchanges since, including Turkish facilitation of a historic meeting between Pakistani and Israeli foreign ministers in Istanbul in September 2005.

The diversification of relations with Israel, from a primarily military-strategic relationship to include significant trade, business partnerships, and other civil society initiatives, has made Turkish-Israeli relations increasingly valuable for Turkey and significantly disadvantageous to disturb.

### ***Domestic Politics: Enter Erdoğan***

Expectations that the election of a second Islamist-based political party to power in Turkey would derail the Turkish-Israeli relationship have yet proved unfounded. Taking a lesson from recent history, Erdoğan and the AKP government<sup>32</sup> have been cautious in their approach to promoting Islam and religious values, in order to avoid receiving negative attention from the military and also being banned. Although Erdoğan caters to a very Islamic-oriented, anti-Israeli constituency, the majority of AKP leadership wants to distance itself from being publicly associated with Islamic fundamentalism in order to protect its position in politics.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Olson (2001), p. 150.

<sup>31</sup> Hale, Personal Interview, 06 January 2005.

<sup>32</sup> The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was formed during Erbakan's tenure, as a splinter group of the Welfare Party interested in pursuing an approach to politics different from its predecessor. It is a young party with young members, which comes from an Islamic-oriented background. Interestingly, Prime Minister Erdoğan, the leader of the party, has made Turkish accession to the European Union the primary goal of his government.

<sup>33</sup> Hale, Personal Interview, 06 January 2005.

Erdoğan has spoken out against Israeli policies, and subscribes to a personal ideology that does not necessarily support Israel, but he has not indicated or acted on intentions to dissolve Turkish relations with Israel. Erdoğan is surely concerned with the welfare of his country, and recognizes that to cease relations with Israel would be more harmful than advantageous. It would not only eliminate the benefits of the bilateral relationship, but also likely have implications for the Turkish-U.S. relationship, given the close friendship between America and Israel. Furthermore, Erdoğan must be very cautious of any policy decisions that evidence his personal religious ideology, as the previous two Islamist-based political parties were banned from the government and Erdoğan is currently trying to gain favor with the European Union.

### ***Turkey and the European Union***

There are those in Israel who fear that Turkish accession to the European Union would have negative consequences for Israel, both with the military being forced to relinquish significant amounts of its political power and, and with Turkish policies aligning with those of the EU; whether or not these fears are worth concern is debatable. Israeli officials have expressed concern that the decreased role of the military in political affairs as a result of EU demands, may have a negative impact on Turkish foreign policy toward Israel, especially in the case of an Islamist-based party holding power, because the military will no longer be able to protect against the Islamization of the Republic or against deepening of relations with the Muslim and Arab worlds.

However, it seems that Turkey is now facing a situation where it is exchanging the military for the EU as the guarantors of secularism; whether the EU can fulfill this position is yet to be seen. Regardless, it is important to note that while the military was the driving force behind the 1996 alignment, whether to legitimize itself in the eyes of the public or in the eyes of the West, historically, the military has not consistently supported relations with Israel. Given the diversification of relations between Turkey and Israel, a decrease in military integration between the two countries has little risk of derailing the entire association.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the marginalization of the military from the political sphere should not be of concern to Israel.

Israeli officials have also expressed fear that Turkey will assume a more European attitude toward Israel if admitted to the EU, which could be detrimental to Israel because Europe tends to be very critical of Israel. There is further concern that Turkey will grow closer to Europe as an alternative to their alliance with the United States, which could further lessen their incentive for commitment to Israel. However, if Turkey is not admitted to the EU, there is some likelihood that they will instead align themselves with their Arab and Muslim neighbors. Soli Özel raises the question: even if Turkish policy does become more aligned with the European attitude toward Israel than with the American attitude toward Israel, is it not more beneficial that Turkey be firmly anchored in the Western world as an EU member, than excluded from the EU and radicalized and Islamized, with only tenuous ties to the West?<sup>35</sup> According to Israeli Vice Consul to Istanbul Moshe Kanfi, Israel would certainly prefer that Turkey align itself with Europe than with the Arab states.

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<sup>34</sup> Özel, Personal Interview, 31 December 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Bilkent University Professor Mustafa Kibaroglu points out that Turkish accession to the EU would not necessarily impose a change in Turkish policy toward Israel, as individual EU countries can maintain their own national foreign policies.<sup>36</sup> However, because Turkey wants to gain as much EU favor as possible, there is incentive for the government to adhere to EU policies on certain matters, even if the policies are slightly different from their own. The development of recent arms deals between Turkey and European countries with which they did not previously have military agreements is an example of Turkey pursuing policies to gain favor with Europe. In some cases these new agreements replace deals that Turkey had previously had with Israel. However, according to Kanfi, Israel understands Turkish incentives for establishing these agreements with European countries, and has not let it affect the broader scope of its relationship with Turkey. Rather than expressing offense, Israel too has successfully pursued other markets in which to sell its own equipment.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey has now begun EU accession negotiations, which Israel officially supports, and relations between Israel and the EU seem to be moving in a positive direction, with the EU recently agreeing to monitor the Gaza border passage at the Rafah crossing. For the time being, Israel should have few concerns that the EU will give reason for Turkey to derail their bilateral relations.

### ***The Arab-Israeli conflict: a second intifada***

The second *intifada* has been a test to the Turkish-Israeli relationship since its eruption in September 2000. According to William Hale, the status of the Turkish-Israeli relationship always depended on the assumption that “to some extent, there was a light at the end of the tunnel in the Arab-Israeli conflict.”<sup>38</sup> The development of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process in 1993 made it far easier for Turkey to publicize its relations with Israel, but after the collapse of Camp David II, the election of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Israel, and the beginning of the second *intifada*, that light seemed to be disappearing. However, unlike the first *intifada* in 1987, which led to the blocking of a military agreement, the second *intifada* has had only fleeting consequences.<sup>39</sup>

Erdoğan lobbed harsh criticism at the Israeli government for their policies and actions toward the Palestinians, and has gone as far as calling the Sharon government a sponsor of state terrorism, but business and policies have remained virtually undisturbed. While Israel was deeply offended by this statement, especially considering their assistance to Turkey in the face of PKK terrorism only a short few years ago, they relieved tensions relatively quietly.<sup>40</sup> Erdoğan’s criticism was likely more aimed at pleasing his public than disturbing relations with Israel. Given his constituency, for Erdoğan to ignore the Palestinians would be a serious political liability;

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<sup>36</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. Personal Interview, 13 November 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Moshe Kanfi, Vice Consul, Israeli Consulate to Istanbul, Turkey. Personal Interview, 04 January 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Hale, Personal Interview, 06 January 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Bengio (2004), p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> Hale, Personal Interview, 06 January 2005.

speaking out in their defense lends him and his government credibility among the local public, even if behind the scenes he continues to uphold bilateral agreements and positive relations.<sup>41</sup>

Foreign Minister Gül's visit to Israel in January 2005, and subsequent diplomatic exchanges, are evidence that tensions have subsided and relations have not been seriously harmed. According to Kanfi, statements were made that Gül's visit to Israel coincided with the beginning of a new era in the region, which is the best one since Camp David.<sup>42</sup> The sustainability of the Turkish-Israeli relationship in light of the challenges presented by nearly five years of intense violence between Israelis and Palestinians is representative of its strength.

### ***War on Iraq and concerns over the Kurds***

The 2003 War on Iraq caused tensions between Turkey and the United States, and for different reasons, posed a significant challenge to Turkey's relations with Israel. Ironically, the same fears of Kurdish separatism that motivated the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement in the 1990s contributed to the greatest threat to bilateral relations that the countries have experienced yet.

An article written by Seymour Hersh and published in *The New Yorker* magazine in June 2004 accused Israel of aiding the Kurds in northern Iraq, training their armed forces, and supporting them in their fight for an independent Kurdish state.<sup>43</sup> Israel immediately denied all such accusations, expressing its commitment to Turkish interests, but according to Kibaroglu, many people in the Turkish military arena were not so quick to trust Israeli claims and were very much concerned by the possibility that Israel would be supporting Kurdish separatist efforts, in order to gain Kurdish support for Israeli strategic interests in the future. Turkey called off a military training exercise due to take place that summer in response to these accusations. Israel has supported Kurdish efforts in the past as part of their repeated efforts to build up their relationships with non-Arab entities in the Middle East, especially with those on the periphery of the Arab world. In the 1970s, when Israel and Iran still had close relations, Israel provided training, weapons, funds, and other resources to support the Kurdish rebellion against Saddam Hussein through Iranian channels. Shortly thereafter, Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish leader of the rebellion and of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), returned the Israeli support by helping hundreds of Iraqi Jews escape persecution in Iraq. Barzani was invited to Israel, where he met with Israeli President, Zalman Shazar, and Israeli defense minister, Moshe Dayan.<sup>44</sup> However, Israel maintains that historical circumstances are not representative of relations today.

In 1975, an agreement made between Baghdad and Tehran to end Iranian support for the Kurdish rebellion caused the Kurds to keep their distance from Israel. They feared that associating with Israel would threaten their status among their Arab neighbors, even within Iraq, and would be more harmful than helpful to their cause. However, many Kurds are still pro-U.S. and pro-Israel, to an extent, but they must be careful not to gain enemies as a result.

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<sup>41</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, Professor of International Relations, Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey. Personal Interview, 29 December 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Moshe Kanfi, Personal Interview, 04 January 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Seymour Hersh, "As June 30 approaches, Israel looks to the Kurds," *The New Yorker*, (28 June 2004). ([http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040628fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040628fa_fact)).

<sup>44</sup> Gregory A. Burris, "Turkey-Israel: Speed Bumps," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. X, No.4, (Fall 2003). (<http://www.meforum.org/article/569>).

Kibaroglu recognizes that whether the presence of a Kurdish state in Iraq would even be in Israeli interest is debatable. He argues that it could be strategically advantageous for Israel to have a friendly Kurdish neighbor as an alternative to Turkey, in case the Turkish-Israeli relationship goes bad, but others, including Israeli Vice Consul to Istanbul Moshe Kanfi, claim that there is no reason why Israel would want to have another sovereign power in its neighborhood, which could easily be influenced by Iran to join its efforts in advocating for Israel's extinction.<sup>45</sup> According to Özel, Turkish politicians and much of the Turkish public have come to trust Israel's assurances that they are not secretly helping the Kurds, and that the accusations of such were a result of misinformation.<sup>46</sup> Kibaroglu asserts that the Turkish-Israeli relationship constitutes a win-win situation for both countries, and disruption would only lead to a lose-lose result.

Thus far, the Turkish-Israeli relationship has sustained the challenges posed by these allegations. The Turkish public and Turkish officials recognize that while there are some Israelis who would support a Kurdish state, the establishment of one in northern Iraq would not be in Israeli national interest, and would not present enough incentive for Israel to risk its relationship with Turkey.<sup>47</sup> Albeit such, according to an article published in Israeli newspaper *Yediot Achronot* on 1 December 2005, a few dozen Israeli citizens have been engaged in private business ventures with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq, training them in counter-terrorism measures and helping to create infrastructure – including an international airport – for a future independent state. The Israeli government has denied any sponsorship of, or responsibility for, these affairs, which Turkish officials seem to accept, albeit suspiciously. The matter is under investigation and any broader implications have yet to be seen.<sup>48</sup>

If it is indeed only private citizens who are actively aiding Kurdish factions in northern Iraq, the Israeli government cannot be completely blamed; however, if it is found that there has been any State sponsorship or intelligence involved, there will be serious consequences for Turkish-Israeli relations. In the meantime, it seems that both Turkish and Israeli officials are trying to keep the political ramifications of these allegations fairly quiet as it is further investigated; even Kurdish leaders denied any formal involvement with Israeli citizens. The impact of these and past allegations against Israel represents the weight of the issue for Turkey and the influence it has on Turkish foreign policy, specifically toward Israel; it is one of very few concerns that poses a serious threat to Turkish-Israeli relations, even today.

### ***Conclusion: Past, Present, and Future***

During the initial stages of rapprochement in the 1990s, relations with Israel were unique for Turkey, both because of the benefits they provided, and because Turkey did not have positive relations with many of its neighbors. At the time, relations with Israel marked a drastic shift in Turkey's foreign policy-making agenda and provided Turkey with much needed defense against

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<sup>45</sup> Kanfi, Personal Interview, 04 January 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Özel, Personal Interview, 31 December 2004.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Anat Tal-Shir, "Israelis Train Kurds in Northern Iraq," *Yediot Achronot*, (1 Dec 2005). (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/1,7340,L-3177712,00.html>).

rising threats to its national security. The years that followed constituted a honeymoon period for the two countries. Turkish-Israeli relations have recently been characterized as more “normal”<sup>49</sup> than they have been in the past, and “relativized” in accordance with other foreign policy developments.<sup>50</sup>

In following with Philip Robin’s analogy, the excitement of the marriage that was consummated in 1996 has abated and the two countries have experienced some tensions, but Turkey and Israel have learned to live together. Israel no longer occupies the center of Turkish foreign policy-making agendas, as it did in the mid-1990s, because the bilateral relationship no longer requires the same attention. Turkey is now engaged in other exciting foreign policy initiatives, such as its dealings with the EU, and with Syria, which Israel understands and appreciates. However, despite recent challenges, bilateral relations still provide mutual advantages to both Turkey and Israel, including benefits from bilateral trade, joint defense and military training, technology sharing, educational exchange, and cooperative business ventures. Turkey recently hosted a historic meeting between Pakistani and Israeli foreign ministers and has offered to mediate between Syria and Israel, when the parties are interested. While Turkey is not yet in a confident or influential enough position to fulfill this role, it continues to execute impressive diplomacy and assert its value as a bridge between East and West.

Although the enthusiasm over Turkish-Israeli engagement that was evident during the mid-1990s is no longer present, and there are still external factors which pose some threat to the level of bilateral relations – such as the question of Israeli involvement with Kurds in northern Iraq, the state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a potential involving Iran – ten years after being “wed,” Turkey and Israel have a fairly stable, mutually beneficial relationship that neither country should have any strong incentive to disturb.

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<sup>49</sup> An example of this: Gencer Özcan, Professor of International Relations, Yıldız Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey. Personal Interview, 05 January 2005

<sup>50</sup> Özel, Personal Interview, 31 December 2004.