

ISRAELI-TURKISH TENSIONS AND BEYOND

Surveying the escalation of tensions between Turkey and Israel in recent years, the author argues that the substance and tone of the relationship in the 1990s will likely not be restored, however predicts that both sides will consider it in their respective interests to sustain the present level of diplomatic and economic relations. The author also presents an overview of the policies of the Turkish government in its neighborhood, concluding that balances of power in both the Caucasus and the Middle East are shifting as a result of Turkey's moves, with consequences for the global geopolitical dynamics.

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Turkey is an important country due to its mere size and geographical location. For Israel, a state with a history of conflict with many of its Arab neighbors, good relations with Turkey, a country comprised of 99 percent Muslims, has been one way to break free from regional isolation and to minimize the religious dimension of its conflict with the Arabs. From the creation of the State of Israel, Jerusalem stressed the importance of good relations with Ankara. However, for a variety of political reasons, Turkey kept Israel at arm's length until the post-Cold War era. This dynamic changed after 1991. This piece reviews the rationale for the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership in the 1990s and the first years of this century.

Changes in Turkey's strategic environment and foreign policy in the twenty-first century, reviewed below, led to the current tensions in bilateral relations. Tensions have escalated since Turkey harshly criticized Israel following its invasion of the Gaza Strip in December 2008 (Operation Cast Lead). The operation aimed to halt continuous missile attacks on Israel's civilian population by Hamas. Soon after, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's outburst at Israel's President Shimon Peres in a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos was indicative of further cooling between the two powers (January 2009).¹ In addition, in October 2009 Turkey abruptly canceled Israel's participation in the multinational "Anatolian Eagle" air exercise. This was followed by Turkish political leaders' severe criticism of Israeli policies. Recently, an inflammatory new anti-Israeli drama series on Turkey's state-controlled television station only exacerbated tensions. Unfortunately, attempts by the Israeli and Turkish governments to reduce tensions are not likely to restore the substance and tone that characterized the bilateral relationship in the 1990s. Finally, this essay ends with an assessment of the impact of the changes in Turkish foreign policy on regional politics.

The Israeli-Turkish Strategic Partnership²

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, Kemalist Turkey looked for partners in the Middle East that could help to meet the growing security challenges from Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Israel was the perfect choice, as it shared Turkey's threat assessment and it was a strong pro-Western country with considerable clout in the U.S., the new hegemonic power in the world. Moreover, Jerusalem could

¹ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "Erdogan's Davos Outburst is Nothing New," *Forbes*, 1 January 2009.

² For an elaborate analysis of the reasons for the strategic partnership, its content and its implications, see Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (London: King's College Mediterranean Program, 2001).

provide military technology that the West was reluctant to sell to its NATO ally because of Ankara's controversial war against the Kurdish insurgency. As result of the new perceptions in Ankara of the beneficial role of Israel, Turkey upgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the ambassadorial level in 1992. Furthermore, during the 1990s, Turkey signed numerous bilateral agreements, among them many with strategic significance.

In the mid-1990s, relations with Israel bloomed economically, diplomatically, and militarily. Defense trade during that time was worth several million dollars. Major programs included a 700 million dollar deal to modernize Turkey's aging fleet of F-4 Phantoms and a 688 million dollar deal to upgrade M-60 tanks and an array of other sophisticated weapon systems. The Israeli Air Force was allowed to use Turkish air space to practice complex air operations and there were synergies in the area of counter-terrorism and intelligence. For Jerusalem, the intimacy between the two governments was second only to U.S.-Israel relations. A strategic partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem emerged, which was buttressed by a common strategic agenda and a similar outlook on global affairs. The Israeli-Turkish entente became an important feature of post-Cold War politics in the Middle East.

This seems to no longer be the case. Over time, the bilateral relationship cooled. High level visits decreased, while official Turkish criticism of Israel increased. Significantly, the volume of defense trade was reduced. Israel is even considering withholding export licenses for the sale of defense items and services to Turkey, and to demote the country's standing from "preferred" to one that carries a presumption of denial.³

A New Foreign Policy Orientation

As international circumstances change and national interests are redefined as result of new domestic preferences, cooler relations and even international divorce happens. While Israel has been constant in its desire to maintain strong relations with Turkey, an important regional player, Turkey's international and domestic environment has changed, leading to a new foreign policy orientation. The contours of the new Turkish foreign policy indicate a propensity to distance

³ Barbara Opall-Rome and Vago Muradian, "Israel-Turkey Rift Derails Defense Trade," *Defense News*, 18 October 2009.

itself from the West and a quest for enhanced relations with Muslim countries, particularly those located along Turkey's borders. One clear manifestation of this new policy is the current tensions between Turkey and Israel.

The first indication of change occurred in spring 2003 when Turkey refused the American request to use Turkish territory for opening a northern front against Iraq. The Turkish decision was a great surprise to the U.S., who believed Turkey was a trusted and reliable ally.

The most indicative Turkish behavior demonstrating an Islamic coloration of Turkey's foreign policy and the emerging gap between Turkey and the West is Turkey's new approach to the Iranian Islamic Republic, which was once seen as an anathema in Kemalist circles. In August 2008, Turkey welcomed the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for a formal visit. No Western country has issued such an invitation to the Iranian leader. Additionally, Turkish PM Erdoğan decided to congratulate Ahmadinejad immediately after his re-election in June 2009, despite protests that the vote was rigged and calls from the EU, which Turkey aspires to join, that the election be investigated. In contrast to its NATO allies, Ankara even announced recently that it will not participate in any sanctions aimed at preventing Iran from going nuclear. In fact, in defiance of American attempts to impose harsher sanctions on Iran, particularly in the area of refined oil products, Tehran and Ankara agreed to establish a crude oil refinery in northern Iran in a two billion dollar joint venture project.⁴ The Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan followed by visiting Iran in October 2009, stating that "Regarding settlement of regional issues, we share common views..."⁵ In Tehran, Erdoğan once again stated that pursuit of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is the legitimate right of all world countries, including Iran.⁶ In light of the historic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, the shift in Turkish foreign policy constitutes a drastic change from past preferences.⁷

Ankara also defied American preferences on Syria, a country on the American list of states supporting terrorism. High-level visits and talk about strategic cooperation between Ankara and Damascus irritated the Bush administration. Similarly, Turkey has deviated from the Western consensus by hosting Sudan's

⁴ "Iran, Turkey to Build Oil Refinery in Joint Venture," *Fars News Agency*, 31 October 2009.

⁵ David Bedein, "Improvements Made in Turkish-Iranian Relations," *The Bulletin*, 1 November 2009.

⁶ "Erdoğan Terms Iran's Visit Positive," *Fars News Agency*, 28 October 2009.

⁷ Döndü Sarıışık, "Turkey, Iran Seek Increased Cooperation in Energy, Security," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 29 October 2009.

President, Omar Hassan al-Bashir (August 2008), who was charged with war crimes and genocide in Darfur.⁸

AKP-led Turkey also decided to hold a dialogue with Hamas in the aftermath of the bloody takeover of Gaza (June 2007). This decision was a clear deviation from the Western foreign policy pattern that shuns formal links with terrorist organizations that advocate the destruction of Israel. Western states have been opposed to Hamas' status as a legitimate interlocutor unless it accepts the existence of Israel, the agreements signed between Israel and the PLO, and renounces violence against the Jewish state. Moreover, Turkey sided with Hamas during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. At that time, even the Arab pro-Western states supported Israel's struggle against radical Hamas. Ahead of his recent trip to Iran, the Turkish premier preposterously accused Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of threatening to attack the Gaza Strip with a nuclear weapon in an interview published in the anti-Israeli newspaper, *The Guardian*, on 26 October 2009.⁹

One other manifestation of the change in Turkish foreign policy is its new great activism in the Middle East, an area that was once subject to a "hands off" policy. The growing aspirations for a leading role in the international arena have led Turkey to offer mediation in regional disputes – such as between the U.S. and Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel and Syria, and Israel and the Palestinians – hoping to enhance its international stature. This can be termed "mediation mania", as Turkey's search for "grandeur" with such methods looks a bit ridiculous.

Israel under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert seemed to have disappointed the AKP government for not making enough concessions to Syria in the Turkish mediation effort. Moreover, in September 2009 Jerusalem turned down a request from Turkey's new Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to go to the Gaza Strip from Israel, where he would meet Hamas officials before coming back to the Jewish state.¹⁰ This decision was part of Israel's policy of not meeting with international statesmen who, on the same trip, meet Hamas officials. But Davutoğlu wanted to create exactly the impression of "mediation" that seems to be so important to current Turkey. Israel's refusal to allow this infuriated the Turks, who decided to show their displeasure by cancelling the participation of the Israeli Air Force in

⁸ Emrullah Uslu, "Why Does Turkey Love Omar al-Bashir?" *The Jamestown Foundation*, 6 March 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 6, Issue 44.

⁹ Robert Talt, "'Iran is Our Friend,' says Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *The Guardian*, 26 October 2009.

¹⁰ Herb Keinon, "Turkish FM Cancels Visit Over Gaza Row," *Jerusalem Post*, 8 September 2009.

the international “Anatolian Eagle” exercise in October 2009.¹¹ The differences between Jerusalem and Ankara have gradually increased, dovetailing Turkey’s growing divergence with the West. The Palestinian issue has gained greater resonance, particularly after the AKP came to power and yet, as noted, the tensions with Israel largely reflect issues beyond the bilateral relations, rooted in the reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy.

Explaining the Reorientation

The first factor explaining the change is the improvement in Turkey’s strategic environment. The fears of a war with Greece in the mid-1990s ended as the two countries upgraded their relations and a new positive atmosphere was created in the bilateral relationship. Since the October 1998 Turkish threat to use force against Syria,¹² Damascus has complied with Turkish demands to stop support for the Kurdish insurgency and to cease demands for the Alexandretta province. Similarly, Cyprus was “convinced” not to station S-300 surface-to-air missile systems on its soil, which could have hampered the freedom of action of the Turkish air force. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was eliminated as a threat by the 2003 American conquest, leading to a drastically less threatening regional environment. In such a situation, Turkey’s reliance on Israel and the West decreases.

Generally, Turkey has perceived itself as a great power and a vital energy bridge to the West, which has bestowed Ankara with great international latitude.¹³ However, it still needs access to energy resources that could be transported via Turkey to the energy-hungry West. Iran is of course a prime provider for supplying energy products. Currently, about one-third of Turkey’s gas consumption is provided by Iran (mainly through the Iran-Turkey pipeline commissioned in 2001, which was opposed by the U.S.). The shift toward Iran is also motivated by energy related considerations. Maintaining good relations with Russia, another energy producer, has a similar rationale. Alas, Iran and Russia are Western rivals.

Since the advent of the proto-Islamic AKP in Turkey (November 2002), the new elite has embraced a significantly different perspective on the region and different policy priorities. The AKP finds it important to improve relations with its

¹¹ “Turkey Cancels Air Force Drill Because of Israeli Participation,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 October 2009.

¹² “Tension Continues between Turkey and Syria,” *Arabic News*, 31 October 1998.

¹³ Amanda Akçakoca, “Turkey: An Energy Bridge for Europe,” *Today’s Zaman*, 11 April 2007.

Muslim neighbors, which the Kemalists saw as a burden on Turkey's quest to become part of the West, politically and culturally. After winning two national elections, the AKP gained greater confidence to pursue its foreign policy agenda and along with it a domestic Islamist dimension. Initially, the AKP continued Turkey's good relationship with Israel. Visits from the Turkish leadership, including Prime Minister Erdoğan, continued and business was as usual, even in the strategic field. The latest manifestation was the joint Israel-Turkish naval exercise in August 2009.¹⁴

Turkey's distance from the West was further reinforced by the procrastination of the European Union (EU) to genuinely embark on Turkey's accession process. Several European states expressed serious reservations about Turkey joining the EU and such objections were also reflected in the public's attitudes.¹⁵ In recent years, for reasons ranging from European public opinion to a stall of reforms and the unresolved Cyprus problem, Turkey's EU integration process has lost momentum. France and Germany have proposed plans for a "special relationship" with Turkey, rather than full membership.¹⁶ In response to European Turkish-phobia, support for joining the EU drastically declined among the proud Turks.¹⁷ The AKP also capitalized on a public opinion that was increasingly nationalistic and anti-American to dilute the links to the West.

Finally, the current winter in the Ankara-Jerusalem relationship is also a result of a genuine dislike by the AKP leadership of Israel and Jews. Erdoğan's latest meeting in New York in September 2009 with the leaders of the American Jewish community ended in a fiasco. Moreover, in his October speech at the beginning of the academic school year at the Istanbul University he made unequivocal anti-Semitic remarks.¹⁸

¹⁴ Avi Mizrahi, "Navy to partake in Turkish exercise," *Jerusalem Post*, 12 August 2009.

¹⁵ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey," 20 October 2009, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eplive/expert/shotlistpage/20091019SHL62757/default_en.htm.

¹⁶ "Fears Grow of Sarkozy Initiative to Downgrade Turkey's EU Bid," *Financial Times*, 15 October 2009; Şaban Kardaş, "Merkel and Sarkozy Call for Privileged Partnership Angers Turkey," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 13 May 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; Volume 6, Issue 92.

¹⁷ Central and Eastern European Watch, "Turkey's EU Membership and the Public Opinion," http://www.despiteborders.com/clanky/data/upimages/petkova_turkey_eu_public_opinion.pdf; *EurActiv*, "EU-Turkey Relations," <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-turkey-relations/article-129678>.

¹⁸ Itamar Eichner, "Erdogan: Learn from Jews How to Make Money," *Ynetnews*, 11 October 2009, Israel News section, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3788294,00.html>; Haviv Rettig Gur, "Erdogan's Remarks Aid Anti-Semitism," *Jerusalem Post*, 29 January 2009.

The Regional Ramifications

Turkey carries great regional and international weight. Sliding away from the West has serious consequences for the balance of power in the Greater Middle East and for global politics. Currently, the Middle East is divided between the ascending Islamic Iran and its radical allies, and the pro-Western moderate forces, Israel and most Arab states. Until recently, Turkey seemed to belong to the pro-West camp, but it probably crossed the Rubicon when Erdoğan visited Iran in October 2009.

With Turkey crossing lines, it will be more difficult for the international community to contain Iran and curb its nuclear program. In the absence of Turkish cooperation on economic sanctions against Iran, their problematic value becomes even more questionable. This enhances Iranian power in the region, which probably will prove to become Turkey's largest strategic miscalculation.

Nevertheless, Erdoğan's government views cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran as an important element in regional stability.¹⁹ The three obviously cooperate on the Kurdish issue. Moreover, Turkey's shift in foreign policy will undoubtedly strengthen Iran's grip over Syria and Lebanon. This will allow Iran to establish a "Shiite corridor" to the Mediterranean. Iran will gain an even greater influence in Shiite southern Iraq after the American departure and will strengthen its presence in the Levant by territorially linking via Iraq to Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon. Such a development will enhance Iranian capability to project power in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. Furthermore, it will end any illusions about snatching Syria away from the radical camp in order to strengthen the democratic forces in Lebanon or to facilitate a peace treaty between Syria and Israel.

An Ankara-Tehran axis (the northern tier) will pressure the pro-Western Arab states to the south. Beyond the current tensions between Egypt and Iran, we see growing tensions with Turkey as well. While Turkey's international behavior has gained sympathy on the Arab street, the pro-Western Arab leaders seem less enchanted. They view Turkey's present foreign policy with great concern.

¹⁹ H. Sabbagh, "Erdoğan: Cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran is Important for Peace in the Region," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 27 October 2009.

The rapprochement with Armenia is of course part of the Turkish desire for “zero problems” with its neighbors, but we should not forget that Armenia has been supported by Iran. The geopolitical consequence of better relations between Yerevan and Ankara is problematic. Indeed, the new Turkish-Armenian understandings have put strains on the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership.²⁰ This partnership has been the backbone of the East-West energy corridor, and the geostrategic balance in the region that has allowed for Turkish (or Western) entrance into the Caspian. Without this strategic partnership, the Turkish, EU and U.S. influence in the South Caucasus and further into the Central Asian region is at risk. Baku has feared Iranian influence and hoped that Turkey and the West could balance the proximity of Iran.

Conclusion

Turkey’s foreign policy has changed. It would be very difficult for Israel to swallow the current AKP-led Turkish behavior and continue with business as usual. Jerusalem is unlikely to accept Ankara as a mediator in its disputes with Syria and the Palestinians. The most delicate issue is, of course, arms sales and strategic cooperation. Yet, even if Turkey continues its present line, the diplomatic and economic relations will only marginally be affected. Israel has no interest in deterioration, while Turkey understands that its regional aspirations require correct relations with the Jewish state. Jerusalem wonders why Ankara prefers the dictators of Teheran, Damascus, and Gaza over the democracy of the Jewish state. Unfortunately, Turkey is undergoing an identity crisis where the Islamic roots of the ruling party have become more dominant in domestic politics and foreign affairs. Hopefully, Turkish democracy will be strong enough to choose the progress and prosperity that only a Western anchor can grant. Turkey’s drift to Islamism would be a great strategic loss to Israel and the West. But first and foremost it would be a tragedy for the Turks.

²⁰ Fariz Ismailzade, “Azerbaijan Nervously Watching Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, 11 September 2009, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; Volume 6, Issue 166.
