

Before and Beyond the “Freedom Flotilla”: Understanding Turkish–Israeli Relations

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The recent crisis in Turkish–Israeli relations emerging out of the “Freedom Flotilla” incident has surprised even those closely familiar with the course of Turkish–Israeli relations. In recent years, beginning with the rise to power in Turkey of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), and especially after Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, there has been a marked deterioration in these relations. It was manifest, however, not so much in changes in the content and scope of bilateral relations themselves, but in the adoption by the Turkish government, headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of a clear anti-Israeli posture in matters related to the Arab–Israeli (particularly the Palestinian–Israeli) conflict. The new dimension produced by the crisis is that although having its roots in these differences of approach toward the conflict, it led Turkey and Israel, for the first time in the history of their relations, to a serious and even violent confrontation.¹

Background

It is well to remember that Turkish–Israeli relations have already been through serious ups and downs. As is well known, in 1949 Turkey was the first Muslim and Middle Eastern country to recognize Israel and was quick to establish diplomatic relations with it. Relations developed steadily and took the form of a growing volume of trade, the establishment of sea and air links between the two countries, the involvement of Israeli companies in development projects in Turkey, and the advancement of technical and cultural cooperation. To a large degree, the relationship was the outcome of post-war Turkey’s decision, taken in response to the Soviet threat, to join the West. Ankara joined the Western system of alliances created to contain the Soviet Union, such as NATO (1952) and the Balkan Pact (1953), and established close military and economic cooperation with Washington. Efforts by Turkey and Western powers to also establish a regional pact in the

Middle East met with only partial success: Aside from Turkey, the signatories to the Baghdad Pact, concluded in 1955, included Iran, Pakistan, Great Britain, and, among the Arab countries, only Iraq. To be sure, Baghdad's participation had the effect of cooling Ankara's relations with Jerusalem. However, with the growing Soviet influence on such countries as Egypt and Syria, and with further inroads made by the Soviets in the region, Turkey's fears for its security were considerably heightened. In 1958, after Egypt and Syria combined to form the United Arab Republic and the pro-Western regime in Iraq was overthrown, Turkey, feeling encircled by hostile neighbors, was ready to take bolder steps. This was the basis of the secret "Periphery Pact," which seems to have been concluded the same year, linking Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Ethiopia in an alliance against the Soviet-Communist threat.²

There was a gradual turnabout in Turkish foreign policy from the mid-1960s, when the more threatening aspects of the Cold War had already lessened. Turkey became disillusioned with the position taken by the United States and other countries toward the Cyprus question, and at the same time experienced increasing financial difficulties. This induced Ankara to "open up" toward both the Soviet bloc and the bloc of the Non-Aligned countries, hoping to muster support for its cause in Cyprus and to diversify its economic partners. Consequently, Turkey adopted a more flexible approach in its international relations, distancing itself from close identification with Western interests. In the Middle East, Ankara worked to rebuild relations with Arab countries and from 1969 attended the meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), later becoming a full-fledged member. A tilt toward Arab positions in their conflict with Israel became manifest especially after the Six-Day War in June 1967.

The rise in oil prices in 1973-74 brought about an even more dramatic change. In need of energy sources and dependent as it was on the supply of oil from such countries as Iraq and Libya, in 1975, Turkey recognized the PLO and voted for the adoption of the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism. In 1979, Turkey allowed the PLO to open an office in Ankara. In protest of Israel's unification of East and West Jerusalem the following year, Ankara downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary (as *chargé d'affaires*). All modes of cooperation, save transport, communications, and minimal trade, were suspended. This anti-Israeli line was reinforced by the desperate need Turkey felt, in view of its acute shortage of hard currency, to seek financial support from partners in the Arab world, and was to persist for a number of years. It is noteworthy that although an Islamic-oriented party (the Welfare Party) began to play a growing role in Turkish politics and was even a member of several coalition governments, the actual policies were formulated by governments led by the familiar secular parties. While in power, even the Turkish military, which took

over from the civilian parties in 1980 and was later to prove a bastion of close relations with Israel, continued the line followed by the former governments.

Relations between Turkey and Israel warmed up once again in the late 1980s, when the energy crisis had passed and when some movement had already been made toward a settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict, as exemplified by the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty in 1982 (followed later by the Oslo Agreement of 1993 and the Jordanian–Israeli Peace Treaty of 1994). Symbolizing the improvement in Turkish–Israeli ties was the appointment in 1986 of a senior diplomat to the Turkish delegation in Tel Aviv and the official upgrading of relations to the ambassadorial level in 1991. The alliance developed by leaps and bounds, reaching a peak in the 1990s. Exchanges of high-ranking leaders and officials, including presidents and prime ministers, followed each other in quick succession. Trade expanded continuously and reached unprecedented levels. Turkish and Israeli companies found ample business opportunities in each other’s countries and hundreds of thousands of Israeli tourists and vacationers made Turkey their preferred holiday destination.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of relations was military cooperation. A comprehensive agreement was signed in 1996 and a variety of specific contracts from then on stipulated the sale by Israel to Turkey of missiles, drones and other sophisticated military equipment; Israeli cooperation in the upgrading of Turkish F4 and F5 planes and M60 tanks; joint military exercises; and a license given to the Israeli air force to use Turkish skies for training. There were other modes of cooperation, as well, including the exchange of intelligence. Military and defense cooperation was obviously in the interest of both armies, due to threats from such countries as Iran, Syria, and Iraq, and because they shared the common goal of fighting extremism and terrorism in the region. This high-level cooperation withstood even the year-long term of office (1996–97) of the government headed by the Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, as well as ongoing pressure emanating from popular sympathies toward the plight of the Palestinians.

Enter the AKP

It was at this high point in the developing relations, which seemed to rest on the most solid and enduring of foundations, that the climate changed once again for the worse with the rise to power of the Islamist AKP in 2002. The signs of change were slow to appear and, for a while at least, the old forms of cooperation seemed to continue unaffected. Exchanges of high-level visits continued and trade and tourism flourished.⁵ In 2008, Israel even agreed to Turkish mediation in talks with Syria, first secretly and then openly. As time passed, however, Turkey’s positions vis-à-vis Israel became more and more critical, particularly with regard to the

Palestinian issue. After the seizure of control of the Gaza Strip by the Islamist and terrorist Hamas organization in 2007 and its escalating confrontation with Israel, Turkish spokesmen began to habitually denounce Israel for its “state terrorism” and for “turning Gaza into a prison.”

Operation Cast Lead in 2008–09 brought matters to a head. It was branded by Turkey as a show of the most “inhuman atrocities,” and accounted for an unusually harsh verbal encounter, much publicized, between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009. Many other manifestations of hostility followed. In October that year, Turkey excluded Israel from an annual multinational air force exercise, and early in January 2010, the Turkish official TV network broadcast an episode of a series entitled “Valley of the Wolves,” showing Israeli soldiers kidnapping children and shooting old men. Relations between the two countries had by then reached such a low point that it seemed as if nothing could happen to further inflame tensions. The freedom flotilla incident proved that this was not the case.

Much has already been said and written by observers of the Turkish–Israeli scene, whether scholars or commentators, on this new phase in the Turkish–Israeli relationship.⁴ Generally speaking, most of them have shared the view that the deterioration was largely Turkey’s doing and that it resulted from a new approach to Turkey’s foreign relations adopted by the party in power, the AKP. This new approach went hand in hand with the party’s ideology, which called for a reorientation of Turkish foreign policy toward Muslim countries, particularly those that were Turkey’s close neighbors in the Middle East. Its main points were outlined by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in his writings and were designed (in a way reminiscent of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s theory of Egypt’s “circles” in his *Philosophy of the Revolution*) to lay the basis for enhancing Turkey’s stature in the world.⁵ Turkey, it said, resting on both its geopolitical position and Ottoman heritage, had to resume a leading role in the Middle East and the Muslim world at large. It also had to place special emphasis on establishing positive and beneficial relations with its neighbors, with whom it sought to reach a state of “zero problems.” Where necessary, Turkey could solve problems between its partners by mediation. In this way, it could also gain more acceptance in the world and enhance its standing with Europe and the US. It is worth noting that the idea of establishing closer links with neighboring Middle Eastern countries (referred to sometimes as “neo-Ottomanism”) was, as we have seen, nothing new in Turkish foreign relations, nor was the idea of using the unique Turkish geopolitical and historical position as a “bridge” linking East and West. Turkish foreign policy was now placed, however, within a comprehensive ideological framework.

The AKP's rise to power was mostly attributable to internal Turkish issues. The AKP's platform was based, first of all, on the widespread piety, or traditionalism, common to most Turks and on what has been seen as a "return to Islam," not only in Turkey, but in the Muslim world at large. But it was also a consequence of the failure of the old parties to advance socioeconomic reforms, as well as of their failure to establish a regime free of corruption. In the face of the general disaffection with those parties, the AKP promised to bring about a more socially compassionate and honest political system, and it had a proven record of success in achieving those goals in the municipalities in which it had previously governed. The reorientation in foreign policy, as such, was not due to popular pressure of any sort, but it did stem from a general disillusionment felt by many Turks with the West. In the Turkish perception, their natural place lay within the Western family of nations, but Turks felt they were maltreated and discriminated against by Westerners. The main problem was not so much the US, with which the Turks did have occasional differences, but Europe, which seemed to reject them altogether. This was manifest, above all, in the way the Turkish application for membership in the European Union was being handled: While other nations in Europe seemed to be readily accepted (because they were Christian, the Turks would say), the EU was dragging its feet in negotiations with Turkey. Most disturbing to the Turks were statements coming out of France and Germany proposing a "privileged status" for Turkey rather than full membership in the EU. For Turks, this was not only unsatisfactory but downright insulting. Many concluded that the chances of integration into Europe had become extremely slim and that some "other path" had to be tried. A reorientation toward Middle Eastern and Muslim nations would place Turkey within its "natural" family, where it could feel more comfortable, and in the end, some thought, this might even help convince Europe to reconsider its policy.

The change of policy toward Israel was, therefore, a clear reflection of the new winds that were blowing in Ankara. Turkey was now willing to adopt positions that were not in line with those of either the US or Europe and which, at times, were clearly contrary to Western policies and interests. The developing relations with countries such as Syria and Iran, previously considered by Turkey as serious threats to its security, are cases in point. These two countries were acting in ways that clearly contravened Western interests, forming what has been called the "Axis of Evil," but this did not prevent Turkey from reaching out to them in search of closer cooperation. Agreements signed with Syria provided for military cooperation and joint military exercises. The agreements with Iran, on which Turkey depended for much of its energy, included understandings related to Iran's nuclear development plans. Turkey, in this matter, diverged from Western positions and, expressing the view that Iran had the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, refused to support the Western policy of sanctions. In May

2010, Turkey surprised the US and its partners by reaching a deal in talks with Brazilian leaders on a nuclear fuel swap plan in which Iran would ship most of its enriched uranium to Turkey, thus forestalling Western attempts to approve the extended sanctions in the UN Security Council. Turkish willingness to establish direct channels with Hamas in Gaza was of a similar nature and further proof of its readiness to ignore the Western policy of fighting terrorism.

The “Freedom Flotilla” Incident

This, then, was the reality of the Turkish–Israeli relationship when, on May 31, 2010, the “Freedom Flotilla” incident took place, leading to a real crisis between the two countries. There were some new elements in this crisis that had never existed before and that made it extremely acute. Turkey, to be sure, maintained that it had not been involved in this venture, which was organized by an independent Islamic charity foundation, *İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*, (IHH) [The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief]. Plenty of indications existed, however, that there were links between the organizers of the flotilla and Turkish official circles and that Turkey, in keeping with its already evident sympathy toward Hamas, had at least cooperated with the initiative and given it its blessing. The requests of Israel to Turkey, as well as other foreign countries, to desist from supporting the venture went unheeded by the Turkish government. So were Israel’s strong warnings that it could not allow any ships free access to Gaza and that it reserved the right to search them for any items not allowed by the terms of the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Turkey’s conduct could, therefore, not have been seen by Israel as anything but a challenge to its best interests and an outright provocation, and it could have been expected that the Israeli response to any attempt to bypass the blockade would be resolute and tough. As noted earlier, for the first time in the history of Turkish–Israeli relations, it was not matters of policy toward third parties (the Arabs) that drew the two countries apart, but a real test of wills with grave potential consequences.

Looking at the incident from the Turkish point of view, the overpowering of the *Mavi [Blue] Marmara* constituted not only a disruption of the organizers’ plans, but a case of national humiliation. In the months preceding the incident, Turkey had already experienced incidents that could be interpreted as Israeli infringements upon its sovereignty or honor. One such case was the Israeli air raid on a secret installation in Northern Syria in 2007, in which Israeli planes apparently used Turkish air space without Turkish knowledge or permission. Another was the meeting held in January 2010 between Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon and the Turkish ambassador, Oğuz Çelikkol, to protest the broadcast of the offensive “Valley of the Wolves” TV series in Turkey. The Israeli official, who later apologized for his action, appeared to show disrespect to his guest by seating

him, in front of TV cameras, on a lower sofa, not shaking his hand, and by not placing a Turkish flag on the table between them.

In the case of the *Mavi Marmara*, however, the incident seemed to go even further. The sight of the Turkish vessel, decorated with a huge Turkish flag, being seized by Israeli troops, and the reported killing of nine Turks were difficult for the Turkish government and public to bear. It was taken as a direct assault on their honor and pride, matters of grave importance in shaping attitudes and positions. The manifestations of protest in Turkey were thus grounded in nationalist as well as religious feelings. While criticism of government conduct existed in opposition circles, the condemnation of the Israeli operation was loud and clear and engulfed not only Islamist supporters of the AKP, but much broader sectors of the population.

This public reaction to the Israeli operation—expressed mostly in popular demonstrations—was genuine and was an important factor in determining the statements and actions of the government, which went on to inflame matters even further. Perhaps, some observers thought, the AKP government was also hoping to utilize the crisis to mobilize more popular support for itself in the approaching referendum on constitutional reform in September 2010 and in the general elections scheduled for 2011. There were, in addition, other factors accounting for the harsh Turkish reaction, mostly connected with common perceptions of Israel. Frequent stories in the media about the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, accurate or not, have gone a long way to damage the traditionally good image Israel had enjoyed among Turks. Within government circles, there was also a growing anger with Israel for not “delivering the goods” that Turkey had expected. As previously explained, Turkish mediation in conflicts was an important instrument envisaged by the AKP in its effort to enhance the country’s stature, and Turkey had repeatedly offered to mediate in the conflicts between Israel and Syria, as well as in Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians. It appeared to Turkey that Israel was slow in responding to these offers, and if and when it did accept them, as in the talks with Syria in 2008, it did not appear to be flexible enough.

The same feelings of disappointment with Israel also extended to other areas and other players. Expecting vigorous support from Israel for Turkish causes in the US and Europe, Turkey appeared to have come to the conclusion that Israel did not, and perhaps could not, give it the assistance it required. It appeared also that what seemed like Israel’s mythical ability to influence Western policies was substantially eroded by recent developments, or at least exaggerated. President Obama’s much publicized new orientation toward the Muslim world showed that Israel might have lost leverage even in the US.

Whatever the reasons for the Turkish reaction to the flotilla incident, it was extremely severe, in both word and deed. Turkey recalled its ambassador in Tel Aviv, and, aside from demanding the immediate return of all Turkish nationals and the ships participating in the flotilla, put forth demands for an official Israeli apology, an international investigation committee, and compensation to be paid to the families of the Turkish victims. These demands were accompanied by threats of more extreme measures, hinting at the possible severing of relations between the two countries. Some facets of military and defense cooperation (including Israeli military flights over Turkish territory) were, in fact, suspended, and President Abdullah Gül expressed his view that relations between Turkey and Israel could never be the same again. The language used by Turkish spokesmen was strong and far from the accepted norms of style used in contacts between countries. Prime Minister Erdoğan, who seems to have taken the lead among his colleagues in being relentless in his attacks on Israel, expressed himself in the harshest of terms, accusing Israelis of engaging in murder, thus violating one of their own sacred ten commandments. He was fed up, he said, with Israeli leaders lying to him time and again. Israel had, in his view, committed crimes worse than those in Darfur and was the main threat to security in the region.

What Next?

The picture received in the days following the incident was indeed very bleak and watching the unfolding crisis, some observers did, in fact, agree with Gül's prediction that good relations between Turkey and Israel could not be restored. And yet, in an attempt to reach a more balanced and sober evaluation of the future, it would be of use to consider some important factors that have historically had, and are likely to continue to have, a strong impact on the relationship. In this context, it is important, for example, to consider not only the steps taken by Turkey so far, but also those that Turkey has not taken in reaction to the flotilla incident. As these words are being written, several months after the incident, Turkey has not entirely put an end to military cooperation and has demonstrated a readiness to fully implement at least some of the agreements already signed. Turkey, conforming to its general free-market policy, has likewise not interfered in civil trade relations. Whatever decline in commerce that did take place was due to the stance taken by the companies directly involved and not due to any national policy. Transport and communication between the two countries have not been interrupted either, and the sharp decline in the number of Israeli tourists was mostly the result of fears for their safety. Turkey has not cut off diplomatic relations or even asked the Israelis to recall their own ambassador in Ankara. All this has demonstrated that Turkey was not prepared to downgrade relations even to the level reached in the 1970s. It seems, therefore, that there were still some "red lines" that even Erdoğan's Turkey was not able or willing to cross. In fact,

with the passage of time, there has been a marked “toning down” in verbal attacks against Israel, and Turkey has even ceased to insist on all the demands previously made.

Some other “hard facts” that have a bearing on Turkish foreign policy and on relations with Israel must also be considered within this context. These point to a more positive direction, and away from a deterioration in, or “freezing” of, relations. First, Ankara is likely to realize that in the process of denouncing Israel in such harsh terms, it stands to lose the trust and goodwill of a friend from whom it has derived significant benefits in the past—economic, military, and otherwise. Moreover, it might also lose its capacity to serve as a mediator between Israel and its Arab adversaries. It has been the Turkish experience that relations with one party to the Arab–Israeli conflict did not necessarily damage relations with the other, but an overly one-sided commitment, as has been demonstrated recently, might yet upset the balance and cost Turkey its much coveted role as a liaison in the region.

Second, existing rivalries in the Middle East, even those outside the Arab–Israeli conflict, must not be ignored. In the past, they have already made it difficult for Turkey to reach a unity of understanding and collaboration with all the parties concerned. The agreements Turkey concluded with Iran, for example, were clearly against the interests of many Arab countries, particularly those of the Persian Gulf, who were ever suspicious of Iran’s long-term aims. On a different level, Turkey’s collaboration with Hamas cannot be easily accepted by the Palestinian Authority, of which Hamas is a bitter enemy. Ankara cannot, therefore, afford to fully commit itself to the positions of any one of the parties.

Third, Turkey’s Western orientation has, for decades, served as the most important guideline in determining Turkish foreign policy and is likely to remain so, in spite of disappointments and frustrations with the West. There have already been signs that the relations Turkey has developed with its radical neighbors Syria and Iran have not been favorably accepted by the West, and its support for the Iranian nuclear bid, in particular, has been regarded as a serious blow to Western interests. Turkish “special relations” with Hamas have similarly been suspect in Western eyes, which are as watchful as ever of the threat of terrorism in the world. Turkey is likely to realize, as well, that in spite of all the criticism that has been directed toward Israel, the latter is still considered a staunch ally of the West in the Middle East.

Fourth, special consideration has to be given to the still-strong forces of opposition in Turkey to the shift toward Islamism in society and state brought about by the AKP. It is true that, thus far, Erdoğan and his party have exhibited growing

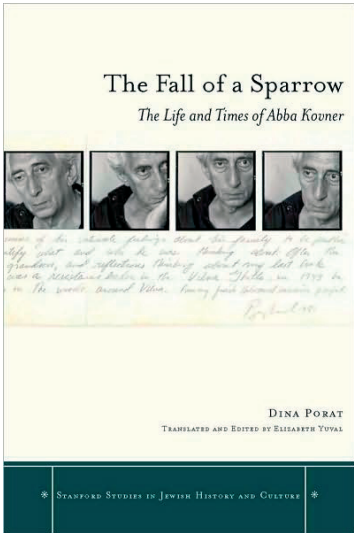
confidence in their bold handling of such groups as the army, the civil bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the academics, considered bastions of the old Kemalist ideology developed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The constitutional and democratic order that the AKP upholds guarantees, however, that they will remain forces to be reckoned with. Moreover, no less important than the influence of these social groups, the AKP faces the challenge posed by the very image most Turks have of their country. It is a product of all the modern movements that have had their impact on the Turks in the last two centuries—Westernization, nationalism, secularization, and democratization. The values implanted by these movements in the Turks are most difficult to eradicate, and it is almost impossible to see present-day Turks going the way of such regimes as those represented by Syria and Iran. It is significant that the AKP itself has claimed all along that it adheres to the principles of the constitution, including that of secularism.⁶

It is for all these reasons that the conclusion of this article is a positive one. Chances for improvement in Turkish–Israeli relations are no doubt best if the Islamists are removed from power, because in view of ideological differences and all that has happened between AKP’s Turkey and Israel, it is most difficult to envisage a restoration of trust and intimacy between them. But even if the Islamists are successful in remaining in power, the factors listed above, along with the lessons of history, demonstrate that an eventual accommodation between the two countries is both possible and probable.

Notes

- ¹ For reasons of space, I have, with a few exceptions, avoided using references. The development of relations with Israel is discussed in all scholarly books on Turkish foreign policy, as well as in many specific works, both books and articles, too numerous to list. The same applies to more recent events.
- ² William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy 1774–2000* (London, 2000), p. 129.
- ³ Turkish exports to Israel in 2008 reached \$1.9 billion, while imports stood at \$1.4 billion, making for a total volume of \$3.3 billion, up from \$1.4 billion in 2002. *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 21, 2010. The number of Israelis visiting Turkey that year was 560,000. *The Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2010.
- ⁴ Good examples are Ofra Bengio, “Turkey’s Quiet Revolution and Its Impact on Israel,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* IV:1 (2010), 15–21; Alon Liel, “Israeli–Turkish Relations under Strain,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* IV:1 (2010), 23–26; and Efraim Inbar, “Israeli–Turkish Tensions and Beyond,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* IV:1 (2010), 27–35.
- ⁵ Reference is particularly made to his book *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye’nin uluslararası konumu* [Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position], published in 2001.

- ⁶ Secularism is an unchangeable principle of the Turkish constitution and the party argued that it was secularist and not “Islamist,” as its adversaries claimed. It had its own interpretation of secularism, however, one that provided for less interference by the state and more freedom for religious expression by individuals.



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