

# Israeli–Turkish Tensions and Beyond

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## Introduction

Turkey is an important country if for no other reason than its size (783,000 square kilometers and 75 million people) and its geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. For Israel, a state with a long history of conflict with many of its Arab neighbors, good relations with Turkey, a country in which Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population, have been one way to break free from regional isolation and to reduce the religious dimension of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Since the beginning of the existence of the State of Israel, Jerusalem has assigned great importance to good relations with Ankara. However, for a variety of political reasons, until the post-Cold War era Turkey kept Israel at arm’s length. This dynamic changed after 1991.

Changes in Turkey’s strategic environment and in its foreign policy in the twenty-first century, reviewed below, led to the current strains in bilateral relations. Tensions have escalated since Turkey harshly criticized Israel immediately following the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip (Operation Cast Lead), an operation that aimed to halt the unremitting Hamas missile attacks on Israel’s civilian population. Soon after, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s outburst at Israel’s President Shimon Peres in a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2009) was indicative of a further cooling of relations between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in October 2009, Turkey abruptly canceled Israel’s participation in the multinational “Anatolian Eagle” air exercise, an act that was followed by angry censure of Israeli policies by Turkish political leaders.

In addition, the inflammatory new anti-Israeli drama series on Turkey's state-controlled television only served to further exacerbate tensions. Unfortunately, attempts by the two governments to reduce tensions are not likely to restore the tone that characterized the bilateral relationship in the 1990s.

### **The Israeli–Turkish Strategic Partnership<sup>2</sup>**

In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, Kemalist Turkey looked for partners in the Middle East that could help it meet the growing security challenges from Iran, Iraq and Syria. Israel was the ideal choice, as it shared Turkey's threat assessment and it was a strong pro-Western country with considerable clout in Washington, the new hegemonic power in the world. Moreover, Jerusalem could provide military technology that the West was reluctant to sell its NATO ally because of Ankara's controversial war against the Kurdish insurgency. As a result of the new perceptions in Ankara of the beneficial role of Israel, in 1992, Turkey upgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the ambassadorial level. During the 1990s, Turkey signed numerous bilateral agreements, among them some of genuine strategic significance.

From the mid-1990s, relations with Israel bloomed economically, diplomatically and militarily. In the past decade, defense contracts alone worth hundreds of million of dollars have been signed. Major programs included a \$700-million deal to modernize Turkey's aging fleet of F-4 Phantoms, and a \$688-million 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 its relations with Washington. A strategic partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem emerged, 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 no longer seems to be the case. Over time, the bilateral relationship has cooled. High-level visits have become rarer, and official Turkish censure of Israel has occurred with increasing frequency. 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.<sup>3</sup>

## **A New Foreign Policy Orientation**

As international circumstances change and national interests are redefined as a result of new domestic preferences, cooler relations and even international “divorce” takes place. While Israel has been constant in its desire to maintain strong relations with Turkey, an important regional player, the latter’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 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.

In 2002, the AKP [Justice and Development Party], came to power, marking the end of Kemalist rule. The first indication of change occurred in the spring of 2003 when Turkey rejected the American request to use Turkish territory for opening a northern front against Iraq. The Turkish decision was a great surprise to the US, which believed Turkey was a trusted and reliable ally.

Probably, the most indicative manifestation of this change—one which unmistakably demonstrated the new Islamic coloration of Turkey’s foreign policy and the emerging gap between Turkey and the West—was Turkey’s new approach to the Iranian Islamic Republic, which in Kemalist circles had been seen as an anathema. 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 that despicable leader. Additionally, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan decided to congratulate Ahmadinejad immediately after his re-election in June 2009. This was despite overwhelming evidence that the vote had been rigged and calls from the European Union, which Turkey aspires to join, that the election process be investigated. In contrast to its NATO allies, Ankara recently announced 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 \$2-billion joint venture project.<sup>4</sup> Erdogan even visited Iran in October 2009, stating that “regarding the settlement of regional issues, we share common views....”<sup>5</sup> In Tehran, Erdogan once again stated that pursuance of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is the legitimate right of all the countries in the world, including Iran.<sup>6</sup> In light of the historic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, the shift in Turkish foreign policy seems to constitute a drastic change from past preferences.<sup>7</sup>

Ankara also defied the American attitude toward Syria, which was on Washington’s list of states supporting terrorism. High-level visits and talks about strategic

cooperation between Ankara and Damascus irritated the Bush administration. Similarly, Turkey has deviated from the Western consensus by hosting Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir (August 2008), who was charged with war crimes and genocide in Darfur.<sup>8</sup>

Turkey also decided to hold a dialogue with Hamas in the aftermath of that movement's 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 regarding Hamas 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. For its part, 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. On October 26, 2009, ahead of his recent trip to Iran, the Turkish prime minister, in an interview in the notoriously anti-Israeli newspaper, *The Guardian*, preposterously accused Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, of threatening to attack the Gaza Strip with a nuclear weapon.<sup>9</sup>

Another telling manifestation of the change in Turkish foreign policy is its new great activism in the Middle East, which stands in stark contrast to its former "hands off" policy. Ankara's growing aspirations to play a leading role in the international arena have led Turkey to offer to act as a mediator in regional disputes—such as between the US and Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel and Syria, and Israel and the Palestinians. In so doing, Turkey's leaders hope to enhance their country's international stature. This phenomenon amounts to a kind of "mediation mania," and Turkey's search for "grandeur" and prestige using such methods is actually quite ridiculous.

Israel, under Ehud Olmert, seemed to have disappointed the AKP government for not making enough concessions to Syria via the Turkish mediators. Moreover, in September 2009 Jerusalem turned down a request from Turkey's new foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, to go to the Gaza Strip from Israel, where he would meet Hamas officials before coming back to the Jewish state.<sup>10</sup> This decision was part of Israel's policy of not meeting with international statesmen who, on the same trip, meet Hamas officials. What Davutoglu really wanted was to create the impression of a "mediation" effort between the two sides. Jerusalem's refusal took the wind out of his sails and infuriated the Turks, who decided to show their displeasure by cancelling the participation of the Israeli Air Force in the "Anatolian Eagle" exercise in October 2009.<sup>11</sup> The differences between Jerusalem and Ankara have gradually increased, dovetailing with Turkey's growing divergence with the West. Meanwhile, the Palestinian issue has gained greater resonance, particularly

after the AKP came to power. However, as noted, the tensions with Israel largely reflect issues beyond the scope of Israeli–Turkish bilateral relations; rather, they are rooted in the reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy.

### **Explaining the Reorientation**

The first factor behind 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,<sup>12</sup> Damascus has complied with Turkish demands to halt 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. Concomitant with these developments was the elimination of Saddam Hussein as a threat by the 2003 American conquest—which led to a regional environment drastically less threatening. In such a situation, Turkey needs Israel and the West far less than it once did.

Generally, Turkey perceives itself as a great power and a vital energy bridge to the West, which has bestowed Ankara with great international latitude.<sup>13</sup> 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 of energy products. Currently, about a third of Turkey’s gas consumption is provided by Iran (mainly through the Iran–Turkey pipeline commissioned in 2001, which was opposed by the US). 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, 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 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 the domestic Islamist dimension became more dominant in its pursuit. Initially, the AKP continued Turkey’s good relationship with Israel. Visits from the Turkish leadership, including Prime Minister Erdogan, continued and business was as usual, even in the strategic field. The latest manifestation was the joint Israeli–Turkish naval exercise in August 2009.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey's distance from the West was further reinforced by the procrastination of the European Union to genuinely embark on Turkey's accession process. Several European states expressed serious reservations about Turkey joining the EU and such objections were reflected also in the attitudes of the public.<sup>15</sup> Turkey's bid for EU membership was administered a heavy blow in 2008 when the possibility for a quick accession was delayed. At that time, two of the most important states in the EU, France and Germany, came out with plans for a "special relationship" with Turkey, rather than full membership.<sup>16</sup> In response to European Turkey-phobia, the support for joining the EU drastically declined among the proud Turks.<sup>17</sup> The AKP also capitalized on a public opinion that was increasingly anti-American and nationalistic to dilute Turkey's 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. Erdogan's latest meeting in New York in September 2009 with the leaders of the American Jewish community ended in fiasco. Moreover, in his October speech at the beginning of the academic school year at Istanbul University he made unequivocal antisemitic remarks.<sup>18</sup>

### **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 Erdogan visited Iran in October 2009.

With Turkey crossing lines, it will become much 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. All this leads to the enhancement of the Iranian power in the region, which probably will prove to become a huge Turkish strategic miscalculation.

Nevertheless, Erdogan's government seems intent to see cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran as an important element in regional stability.<sup>19</sup> The three obviously cooperate on the Kurdish issue. Moreover, Turkey's new foreign policy will undoubtedly strengthen Iran's grip over Syria and Lebanon. This will allow Iran to establish a "Shi'ite corridor" to the Mediterranean. Iran will probably gain even greater influence in Shi'ite southern Iraq after the American departure

and will be able to strengthen its presence in the Levant by linking territorially via Iraq to Syria and Hizbullah 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 put great pressure on 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 it more sympathy on the Arab street, the pro-Western Arab ruling leaders seem less enchanted. They view Turkey’s present foreign policy with great concern.

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 also been supported by Iran. The geopolitical consequence of the better relations between Yerevan and Ankara is problematic. Indeed, the new Turkish–Armenian understandings have put strains on the Turkish–Azerbaijani strategic partnership. 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 region. Without this strategic partnership,<sup>20</sup> the Turkish, EU and US influence in the South Caucasus and further into the Central Asian region is at risk. Baku fears Iranian influence and hopes 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. 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 be marginally 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 Tehran, 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 gained predominance 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 themselves.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, "Erdogan's Davos Outburst Is Nothing New," *Forbes*, January 1, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> 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).
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- <sup>5</sup> David Bedein, "Improvements made in Turkish-Iranian Relations," *The Bulletin*, November 1, 2009.
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- <sup>7</sup> Dondu Sariisik, "Turkey, Iran seek increased cooperation in energy, security," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 29, 2009.
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- <sup>11</sup> "Turkey cancels air force drill because of Israeli participation," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 11, 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> "Tension continues between Turkey and Syria," *Arabic News*, October 31, 1998.
- <sup>13</sup> Amanda Akcakoca, "Turkey: An energy bridge for Europe," *Today's Zaman*, April 11, 2007.
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- <sup>15</sup> European Parliament, "EU-Turkey", October 20, 2009, [www.europarl.europa.eu/eplive/expert/shotlist\\_page/20091019SHL62757/default\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eplive/expert/shotlist_page/20091019SHL62757/default_en.htm).
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- <sup>17</sup> Central and Eastern European Watch, "Turkey's EU Membership and the Public Opinion," [www.despiteborders.com/clanky/data/upimages/petkova\\_turkey\\_eu\\_public\\_opinion.pdf](http://www.despiteborders.com/clanky/data/upimages/petkova_turkey_eu_public_opinion.pdf); EurActiv, "EU-Turkey relations," [www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-turkey-relations/article-129678](http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/eu-turkey-relations/article-129678).
- <sup>18</sup> Itamar Eichner, "Erdogan: Learn from Jews how to make money," *Ynetnews*, October 11, 2009, [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3788294,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3788294,00.html); Haviv Rettig Gur, "Erdogan's remarks aid anti-Semitism," *Jerusalem Post*, January 29, 2009.

- <sup>19</sup> H. Sabbagh, "Erdogan: Cooperation between Syria, Turkey and Iran is Important for Peace in the Region," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, October 27, 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> Fariz Ismailzade, "Azerbaijan Nervously Watching Turkish–Armenian Rapprochement," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, V:166 (2009).

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