

Israeli-Turkish Relations under Strain

Alon Liel

Alon Liel is a former director-general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2000–2001). His diplomatic postings include stints as ambassador to South Africa (1992–1994) and chargé d'affaires in Turkey during the 1980s. Dr. Liel is a lecturer at the Laufer School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at IDC Herzliya and the chairman of the Israel–Syria Peace Society. This article is adapted from his talk at an ICFR seminar on “Israel and Turkey: Where to From Here?” in November 2009.

Diplomacy can sometimes resemble physics: just as every substance, even the most resilient, can only withstand a certain amount of pressure, so too can bilateral relations. In recent months, the Israeli–Turkish relationship, so meaningful and stable during the 1990s, has been placed under very severe pressure — and it seems that unless there is a reversal of the current state of affairs, we might soon see Turkey closer to Tehran and Damascus than to Jerusalem. When it comes to the Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, we can already say with certitude that he feels much more comfortable in the company of his neighboring Muslim leaders than he does with the leaders of Israel.

Background

The 1990s was an unprecedented and unusual decade in the history of Israeli–Turkish relations. A new era began with the 1991 Madrid peace conference that led to the upgrading of the ties between Ankara and Jerusalem to the ambassadorial level. That was followed by the 1993 Oslo Declaration of Principles that completely broke the ice between the two countries and triggered high-level visits on both sides, and which resulted in a series of military and economic agreements. In early 1996, both countries signed a free-trade agreement that was followed by a decision to grant Israel a contract to upgrade 170 Turkish tanks. The 1990s also witnessed a steady increase in the volume of Israeli tourism to Turkey and a meaningful increase in bilateral trade. After the horrific earthquake in the Istanbul region in August 1999, Israel was quick to dispatch effective help on a large scale.

By the end of the 1990s, Turkish public sympathy toward Israel reached its peak. Turkey offered to sell Israel water from its Manavgat river. The Turkish Riviera, and especially Antalya and its environs, had become a favored tourist destination for Israeli vacationers, and the warm reception by the Turks indicated that the two nations had moved closer than ever before. Whenever someone climbed into a

taxi in one of Turkey's cities or resorts and told the driver that he or she was from Israel, the Turk would immediately respond by praising Haim Revivo—the Israeli football player who became a Turkish national hero, leading the Fenerbahçe team to the Turkish football championship.

The first decade of the twenty-first century is marked by a very different ambience in relations between Turkey and Israel. It started with the Israeli minister of education, Yossi Sarid, promising (in April 2000) to teach the children of Israel about the “Armenian genocide”; soon after, the al-Aqsa intifada erupted and with it, a great wave of Israeli–Palestinian violence, which upset Turkey. In November 2002, an Islamic leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won an overwhelming victory in the Turkish elections. A year after his nomination as prime minister, deeply annoyed by the Israeli killing of the two senior Hamas leaders, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantisi (in March and April 2004, respectively), Erdogan started describing the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians as “state terrorism.”

Things continued to go from bad to worse. In 2004, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected an offer by Erdogan to mediate between Israel and Syria; the Turkish project to ship water to Israel was rejected by the Israeli treasury; and large water projects that were granted to Israeli companies in Southeast Turkey collapsed. The next two years also witnessed an unremitting tide of stories in the Turkish media about Israeli companies granting military assistance to the Kurds in northern Iraq.

During the months of July and August 2007, things continued to deteriorate. This period was dominated by tension between Ankara and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and several other major American Jewish groups. The ADL decided to change its approach toward the Armenian tragedy in World War I, defining it for the first time as genocide and in so doing, triggering Turkish protests to Jerusalem, which was unjustly seen as responsible for the Jewish organization's behavior.

To make matters worse still, on September 8–9, 2007, a grave incident took place that heightened tensions. Not only had Israel (in unexplained circumstances) attacked Syria, Turkey's friendly neighbor, but on their way back, at least according to Turkey, Israeli aircraft had violated Turkish airspace without any notification and without any reasonable explanation. The new Turkish foreign minister, Ali Babacan, branded the Israeli attack “unacceptable.” One of his senior diplomats called the Israeli behavior “unprofessional.” It seemed as if Israel had forgotten that to a great extent, Turkish–Israeli relations were based on military ties between the two countries, and that losing that special military link could have an existential impact on ties between Jerusalem and Ankara.

If there was a good reason for the attack on Syria, why was Turkey, Israel's best friend in the Middle East (at least at the time), not speedily informed of it? Israel had not internalized the fact that since July 2007 (with the election of Abdullah Gül as president of Turkey), the Islamist Justice and Development party had gained full and exclusive control over the Turkish political scene as well as Turkey's foreign policy.

Still, the Israeli attack in Syria did not meaningfully harm Israeli–Turkish ties. In 2007, Turkey was already secretly mediating between Syria and Israel. News of those talks was made public in a joint Syrian–Israeli–Turkish statement on May 18, 2008, revealing that teams representing the three countries were meeting for negotiations in Turkey. The negotiations only lasted about six months. During the second half of 2008, Israel was in the throes of an internal political crisis and the days of the tenure of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who initiated the talks with Syria, looked numbered.

Operation Cast Lead

The last week of December 2008 was a critical one, at least in terms of the well-being of the Turkish–Israeli friendship. Prime Minister Olmert made a short visit to Ankara in an attempt to conclude the draft of the Syrian–Israeli talks. To Prime Minister Erdogan and to Syrian President Bashir Assad (who was on the telephone from Damascus), it appeared to be a productive exchange. Only three days later, on December 27, 2008, Israel attacked Gaza. It was a massive attack that triggered a harsh reaction from Ankara and brought about an instant collapse of the Syrian–Israeli track, and spelled the end of Turkey's position as a mediator. Shortly thereafter, in the Swiss city of Davos, Erdogan rudely stomped off a panel he had shared with Israel's President Peres, accusing Israel of committing infanticide in Gaza.

This “one-minute incident,” as it is called in Turkey today, marked the beginning of a serious political crisis between the two countries. Erdogan launched a series of verbal attacks on Israel and its policies: he suggested, for instance, that Israel should be expelled from the UN and that Israeli nuclear capabilities should be examined parallel to the inspections that Iran was undergoing. None of these verbal attacks created a meaningful bilateral crisis. It was only very recently, when Israel was not allowed to participate in an international military exercise in Turkey (after being invited), that the volcano erupted. The climax was a TV series on Turkish State Television (TRT) depicting Israeli soldiers intentionally shooting Palestinian civilians, especially children.

Have recent events delivered a mortal blow to the fifteen-year-old Israeli–Turkish alliance?

In order to be able to answer that question, we must attempt to find out if the crisis is mostly a result of an overall change in Turkey’s foreign policy, or if it mainly stems from Ankara’s wish to enhance the momentum of the Israeli–Arab peace process through growing pressure on the government of Israel.

These two alternatives are not mutually exclusive, of course. We can easily trace a movement eastward in Turkey’s foreign policy that has brought the country much closer to the Islamic world and especially to its newfound ally in the region—Syria. However, this eastward trend by itself would probably not cause a major crisis in relations with Israel. Israel has never demanded exclusivity regarding its special relations with Turkey, and Turkey, for its part, never intended to harm its relations with the Arab world as a consequence of its warm relations with the Jewish state.

Turkey’s disenchantment (whether justified or not) with Israel’s policy is another major reason for the crisis. The derailing of the peace process with the Palestinians, the September 2007 Israeli attack on Syria and the collapse of the Turkish-mediated Syrian–Israeli talks helped convince Ankara that the time had come to teach Jerusalem a lesson.

Turkey has completely linked the level of its bilateral relations with Israel to progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process, and the fact that the process is now frozen is at the core of the deterioration of bilateral ties.

In order to prevent further deterioration, Israel has to make a special effort to regain Ankara’s confidence. Losing Turkey’s friendship could have devastating regional consequences—for Israel and even for the Americans. As it looks now, the only way to bring about a positive change in the atmosphere would be to re-launch peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians or the Syrians, and to reignite a meaningful momentum toward peace. Nothing less will convince the current government in Ankara to renew the Turkish–Israeli friendship.