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Turkish-Israeli Relations in a post-Arab Spring*: A Historical Perspective

Arap Baharı Sonrası Dönemde Türk-İsrail İlişkileri: Tarihi Bir Bakış Açısı

Louis FISHMAN

Özet

Bu makale tarihsel bağlamda Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerine odaklanıyor. Türkiye 1949 yılında Yahudi Devleti'nin varlığını kabul eden ilk müslüman devletti. Bu noktadan sonra Türkiye, İsrail ve Arap Devletleri ile arasında kurduğu ilişkiyi dengelemeye devam etti. 90'ların sonuna doğru ise Türkiye ve İsrail arasındaki ilişki daha da kuvvetlendi. Ancak İkinci İntifada'nın gerçekleşmesiyle ilişkiler zedelenmeye başlayarak son dört yılda kopma noktasına geldi. İsrail'deki son seçimler göz önünde bulundurulduğunda İsrail'in Türkiye ile ilişkilerin düzeltilmesi gerektiği görülüyor. İki ülkenin ilişkileri düzeltilmesi, Arap Baharı'nın getirdiği zorluklara karşı göğüs germeye olanak sağlayacaktır.

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Abstract

This article focuses on Turkish-Israeli relations, placing them in a historical context. Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize the Jewish state in 1949; following this, Turkey balanced its relations between Israel and the Arab states. In the post-1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations became warmer, once Israel and the Palestinians started to work towards a comprehensive peace agreement. However, following the Second Intifada, these relations became strained and during the last four years, have hit a all time low. Following the recent Israeli elections, the time has come for Israel to fix relations with Turkey, which is also important in order to face the challenges of the Arab Spring.

Keywords: *Turkey, Israel, Arab Spring, Turkish-Israeli relations, Israeli elections, Foreign Policy*

With Israeli elections just over, and while we are waiting for the formation of the next government, there is a strong chance that Benjamin Netanyahu will succeed in once again becoming Prime Minister. There is no doubt that whichever government is formed, all eyes will be on Israel to see if they offer Turkey an apology for the killing of nine of its citizens during the Israeli raid on the Gaza Flotilla. With so much at stake for Israel, the fact that the Israeli government has not reconciled their differences with Turkey remains a diplomatic failure. While the strained relations have taken a toll on both countries, as a result of the Arab spring, Israel is in need of good relations with Turkey now more than ever.

While in Israel the souring of relations is often attributed to the coming to power of the religiously conservative AK Party in 2002 and the tenure of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the divide between the two countries actually started two years before Erdoğan took office. In fact, during Erdoğan's first term, Turkey took serious steps at securing better relations. However, with the Second Lebanon war, and Israeli operations, such as Cast Lead, it is hard to imagine that any Turkish government would have acted differently.

In this essay, I will provide a survey of Turkish-Israeli relations, paying special attention to the late nineties until the present. The point of this essay is not to provide a detailed account of the major events which have occurred between the two states. Rather, it will highlight greater trends, and work to place events in a context which will allow us to understand how relations have transformed over the last six decades. Hopefully, this will allow us to better grasp what is needed for these two countries to settle their differences and find common ground in order to face the new challenges in the Middle East.

A brief history until the 1990s

Skimming over articles on Turkish-Israeli relations, much emphasis is placed on the historical relationship between the Turkish and Jewish people, justifiably highlighting the fact that a great number of Sephardic Jews found refuge in the Ottoman Empire in 1492. Further, once compared to the fate of the Jews of Europe, the Ottoman case stands out as one of the few safe havens Jews had.

What is less known however is that even if Israel was established in 1948, the roots of the Jewish nation-state date back to late Ottoman times, with its first leaders, such as David Ben-Gurion, studying law in Istanbul in the years before World War One, and some even serving in the Ottoman army during the war, such as Israel's second Prime Minister, Moshe Sharett. Palestine was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, and few Palestinians and Jews could imagine that Britain would occupy Palestine in 1917-1918, and that the Ottoman Empire would collapse.

Four decades later, in 1958, during a secret visit, it is highly likely that Israel's Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, spoke Turkish to his counterpart, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. When placed in this context, it is not hard to understand how it came about that Turkey was the first Muslim state to recognize Israel in 1949, and that it was not simply due to Cold War politics, which placed them both in the American camp. Geographically, historically, and culturally, the first leaders of Turkey and Israel most likely had much more in common than might be presumed at first glance.

The historical connection is important but it should not blur our vision. Turkey recognized the Jewish state, just as numerous negotiations were taking place between the Arab states and Israel; in other words, similar to the 1990s, when Israel and Turkish ties would take off, the fact that Israel was negotiating with both Syria and Jordan, most likely made it easier for Turkey to recognize Israel. In fact, we see that since the 1950s, a paradigm was put in place where Turkey had to balance itself between having ties with Israel while retaining relations with the Arab countries of the region. For example, in 1954, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Fuat Köprülü, sent out a message to a concerned Israel that Turkish-Arab rapprochement would hurt its relations with the newly founded Jewish state. According to Köprülü, "it would be erroneous," to propose that the new ties between Turkey and the Arabs "could entail a change in the nature of Turkish policy toward Israel."¹ Another important aspect

of their relations was that early on, the two countries became major trade partners, with Turkey quickly becoming the third largest importer of Israeli goods; likewise, Israel was also dependent on imports from Turkey, especially for wheat.²

New challenges facing relations in the 1970s

With the rise of ideological movements, such as anti-colonial and Marxist revolutionary groups and political Islam, Israel also became a source of domestic controversy in Turkey. The radical leftist movement, inspired by world movements, challenged the Turkish state's strong ties with the United States and NATO, and sympathized with the Palestinian cause. In fact, in the late 1960s, hundreds of Turkish leftists who were set on revolution, trained in the Palestine Liberation Organization's camps in Jordan.³ And, in 1971, leftists kidnapped and killed Istanbul's Israeli consul-general Efraim Elrom, who was targeted for revealing to the Turkish state the names of Turkish leftists who were active in the PLO camps.⁴

The growing anti-Israeli sentiments also were attributed to the rise of political Islam in Turkey, with the founding of the National Order Party in 1970, and their introduction to the parliament in 1973. Despite receiving only a small percentage of the vote, their charismatic leader, Necmettin Erbakan became Deputy Prime Minister, and consistently introduced anti-Israeli rhetoric into the public sphere. This had an overall effect where relations with Israel were challenged, and brought Turkey closer to countries such as Saudi Arabia. Much more than leftist movements, Erbakan succeeded in promoting an anti-Israeli rhetoric tainted with anti-Semitism.⁵

The 1990s: Age of alliance

Following the first Gulf war, the Israeli and Arab states were forced to sit together at the Madrid Peace conference in 1991. While this did not produce any breakthroughs, it led to the Oslo Accords in 1993, and direct talks between Israel and Syria. It seemed as if Israel had within

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a few years shifted its national priority to making peace with its neighbors, which sent a strong signal to Turkey.

The Oslo Accords was a major challenge to Turkish-Israeli relations, proving to what extent the conflict between Israel and Arab nations is actually an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Obviously, if Israel was able to negotiate with the Palestinians, then why would other countries refrain? For example, in 1994 Jordan signed a peace deal with Israel, despite the fact that the two countries only held unofficial relations, while other countries like Tunisia started low level talks with Israel, and important Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, were warming up to the Jewish state.

In what some described as a surprise move, in December 1991, Turkey upgraded its relations with Israel back to ambassadorial level, after it had last been downgraded in 1980.⁶ Within the next decade, the traffic going back and forth increased each year. By the beginning of 1997, the two states had secured numerous civil and military agreements, which gave rise to a genuine feeling of a common identity and a mutual future.⁷ Turkey was interested in securing relations with Israel as a way to secure a new source of arms in its fight against the PKK in the South-east of Turkey, particularly since the US had become more reluctant to sell arms due to Turkey's human rights violations. Further, Turkey found Israel to be a partner with which to create an alliance against Syria, a country that had exhibited a growing hostility to Turkey. Lastly, with new pressures coming from the (perceived) threat of

US recognition of the Armenian genocide, Turkey's closer relations with Israel made for an important partner in the US, the Jewish lobby.⁸

This is not to say anti-Israel sentiment disappeared; the irony is that during the same years, the previously mentioned Necmettin Erbakan was Prime Minister and was staunchly against improved ties with Israel. Due to the parliamentary system, Erbakan's Islamist Welfare party, even if not a majority, was able to take the reins of the state in a coalition with Tansu Çiller's True Path Party. In fact, the strengthening of Turkish ties with Israel was reflective of a growing rift between the secular state bureaucracy and the military on one side, and the Islamists on the other. This divide would lead to the "post-Modern Coup," when the Turkish military forced PM Erbakan to resign – a move that marked the fourth military intervention in Turkish politics, beginning in 1960, 1971, 1980, and subsequently in 1997. Certainly the Turkish military had reasons other than the Israeli issue to intervene in the government; however, the forced resignation came just between two state visits to Israel, and followed a protest in the district of Ankara, when on 31 December 1996, the mayor of Sincan organized the "Quds Night" (Jerusalem Night), which was a massive protest held against Israel, and was attended by the ambassador of Iran. In reaction, the Turkish army sent tanks to the town, a clear precursor of the events which were about to unfold. For Israel, this should have sent out the signal that future relations with Turkey were greatly dependent on the success of ideological secular elements in society.



Turkey's demand that Israel formally apologize and compensate the families of those killed on the Mavi Marmara, also is not an unfathomable request.

The 1999 Earthquake and football diplomacy

Following the 1990s, trade between Turkey and Israel grew at a steady rate, and Israeli companies set up factories in Turkey, in such sectors as textiles, and at the same time, tourism between the two countries grew rapidly. Also, due to the secular bureaucracy's strong relations, academic ties began to increase; for example, Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center started the Süleyman Demirel Scholarship, together with the Council of Higher Education of the Republic of Turkey.⁹

The challenge for Israel however was how to change the average Turkish citizen's perception

of Israel, which as we saw earlier remained negative among many leftists and conservative Muslims. The turning point was undoubtedly following the tragic earthquake of 1999, when Israeli aid played a crucial role in rescue and rehabilitation. In fact, with Israelis also injured in the huge quake, there was a joint sense of urgency in saving victims from the rubble. Clearly, following the quake, it was the best time to be an Israeli in Turkey. In Ankara, three universities began offering Hebrew as an elective and courses were being taught on Israeli history, with student enrollment from all backgrounds and religious orientation. Unfortunately for Israel, these programs, taught by individual Israelis and the Israeli Foreign Ministry, did not manage to establish long-term education programs.

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While it might seem strange, one of Israel's greatest assets in Turkey during the early part of the first decade of this century, was football player Haim Revivo. After being signed by Fenerbahçe, Revivo's fame grew, and he was featured on many afternoon TV paparazzi shows speaking Turkish. While there is a growing research on "football diplomacy," one does not need to be an expert to understand the significance of an Israeli flag being proudly unfurled at a Fenerbahçe match. Examples like this can explain how Turkish perceptions of Israel can quickly change. This stands as a concrete case of ties between Turkish and Israeli peoples, which were starting to develop, not remaining only in the higher echelons of the state.

While the strengthening of Turkish-Israeli ties was a point of contention in Turkey, for Israelis it was the closest they came to some sort of normalization in the region. Even if Israel has had peace with Egypt for over three decades, and with Jordan since 1994, relations remain cold. Turkey was and has remains the only country in the region where Israel has been able to maintain an exchange of culture, sports, and education. Furthermore, parallel to this period, Israeli tourists flooded Turkey, which included quick jumps to holiday villages, and trekking trips across the Kackar Mountains in Turkey's Northeast. In short, Turkey became a regular household word among Israelis, and when relations turned cold, the disappointment was great.

Turkish-Israeli relations in the AK Party era

After the 2002 elections, with the rise of the AK Party, under the premiership of PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey would enter a dynamic stage where old taboos were exchanged with a government and population that started to challenge the previous status quo of the Turkish state. With support for the AK Party growing with each election, it was clear that most Turkish citizens were pleased to leave behind the staunch secularists and military intervention in civil politics. This would cost Israel a great deal, since it was with these groups that ties were originally solidified.

In terms of Turkish-Israeli relations, the AK Party started their tenure two years after the breakout of the Second Intifada, in September 2000. During this period, as violence between Palestinians and Israelis spiraled out of control, Turkish-Israeli ties were once again being contested in the Turkish public sphere. The breaking point was right after Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister, and Israel embarked on Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank; as news of massacres were coming in from the Jenin refugee camp, a range of Turkish political parties and NGOs in unison condemned Israeli actions. This led then-PM Bülent Ecevit to declare that what had happened in Jenin was "genocide."¹⁰ One only needed to look at the anti-Israeli signs

lining the city squares in Ankara and Istanbul to understand that Turkish-Israeli ties were contingent on peace with the Palestinians.

Just a little over six months later, the AK Party scored a major victory in elections, leading to PM Erdoğan's first term. From the outset it was clear that Erdoğan had made a clean break with the leader of his former party, Necmettin Erbakan, and was willing to give Israel a chance. In fact, even with ups and downs in relations, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict becoming bloodier (not to mention the Second Lebanon war), Erdoğan walked a tightrope doing his utmost to balance between the warring factions. Despite the growing tensions in 2004, during the following year, both the Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, and PM Erdoğan made official state visits to Israel.

With good relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis (even if tense at times), it seemed as if Turkey was in an ideal position to act as a negotiator between the two sides. While this did not happen, Turkey did become the key to brokering a possible deal between Syria and Israel, with PM Erdoğan acting as a go-between for Israeli PM Ehud Olmert and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to most reports, the two sides were close to reaching an agreement, but with the Israeli launching of Operation Cast Lead in December 2008, this agreement became another missed opportunity for peace.

Operation Cast Lead, the Mavi Marmara, and the downgrading of relations

The Israeli offensive on Gaza in late 2008, set to bring an end to Palestinian rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, was seen by Turkey as crossing a red line. The disproportionate amount of force not only shocked Turkey, but the world at large. Just weeks following the campaign, PM Netanyahu was elected as Prime Minister, and he appointed as his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who can best be described as an unruly, far-right politician – one who often promoted his own party politics in foreign relations.

During the next four years, Turkish-Israeli relations hit rock bottom. While some can place the blame on PM Erdoğan's "short fuse," such as during the Davos conference when he got in a public spat with the Israeli President Shimon Peres; or blame it on the fact that the Turkish government turned their cheek, allowing the IHH Mavi Marmara/Gaza Flotilla to set sail, which led to an Israeli operation in which nine Turkish citizens were killed (even if Israel is at fault, there was clear provocation on behalf of the Turkish contingent); nonetheless, we need to look further to find the answer to why Turkish-Israeli relations have reached this stage.

If we place the relations between the two countries in a larger context, we will see that Turkish-Israeli relations actually reflect a greater trend. During the last four years, Israel has found itself completely isolated, with PM Netanyahu and FM Lieberman's tenure bringing Israel to a point of international isolation. During the recent UN vote on the recognition of Palestine, we saw how true this was, where Turkish FM Davutoğlu spoke on the Palestinians' behalf and the countries supporting Israel's attempt to block recognition could be counted on one hand.¹¹ Clearly then, if placed in this context, the Turkish reactions to Israel do not seem out of sync.

Turkey's demand that Israel formally apologize and compensate the families of those killed on the Mavi Marmara, also is not an unfathomable request. In fact, there are quite a few Israeli politicians who support an Israeli apology, eager to get relations back on track. Turkey should understand that such a move by Israel would have to be met with Israel receiving a clean slate, which would include the suspension of the civil court case against the Israeli officers who took part in the botched operation.

Conclusion

Israel is in need of reconciling with Turkey now more than ever. With the coming of the Arab spring, Israel lost one of its strongest allies in the region, Egypt. The former president, Hosni

Mubarak, provided Israel with support against Hamas, and was also a partner in the blockade of Gaza. In fact, PM Erdoğan never saw eye-to-eye with Mubarak, and now Turkey seems to be on track to have good relations with Egypt, with the coming to power of Mohammed Morsi. With Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, working endlessly at strengthening relations with the post-Arab Spring states, the Israelis should be even more eager to make up with Turkey. In contrast to what we saw between the 1950s and 1990s, Turkey is now in a state to have strong relations with both the Arab countries and Israel simultaneously. If placed in this context it seems that, for Israel, an apology is a small price to pay.

After more than six-decades of relations, it is time to get the relations between Turkey and Israel back on track. However, for relations to flourish again, Israelis will need to take serious steps at reaching a comprehensive peace agreement, which includes fixing their image internationally; something which may be possible with a new surge in center political parties during the latest elections. Turkey will also have to take into consideration Israeli concerns, and realize that peace is not only dependent on them, but also on the Palestinians. Good relations with both sides, Israelis and Palestinians, will place Turkey in a key role to advance regional peace, even if not serving as the main negotiator.

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- 7 Joshua Walker, "Turkey and Israel's Relationship in the Middle East," in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (Fall 2006), pp. 60-90; pg. 75.
- 8 Tur, pg. 47. While Tur does not mention the issue of genocide recognition, it also played a role in terms of Turkish relations with Jewish lobbies.
- 9 <http://www.dayan.org/s%C3%BCleyman-demirel-scholarship>
- 10 For the UN Report on Jenin, see: <http://www.un.org/peace/jenin/>
- 11 The countries which objected were Israel, United States, Canada, Panama, and the Czech Republic. In addition there was the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau.