

Rival American Allies: Turkey and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean



Aliados rivales de Estados Unidos: Turquía e Israel en el Mediterráneo oriental

Aliados americanos rivais: Turquia e Israel no Mediterrâneo Oriental

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary dynamics between Israel and Turkey have been confrontational at recent times though this doesn't seem to affect the relations in other areas as the trade balance advancing towards the \$8 million shows. This article focuses on the relations between Israel and Turkey within the context of the East Mediterranean geopolitics. Reviewing its shift from a quasi-alliance to a stiff geopolitical rivalry in the region, the article explores scenarios for near future.

Keywords: Israel. Turkey. East Mediterranean geopolitics.

RESUMEN

La dinámica contemporánea entre Israel y Turquía ha sido conflictiva en los últimos tiempos, aunque esto no parece afectar las relaciones en otras áreas, ya que la balanza comercial avanza hacia los \$ 8 millones. Este artículo se centra en las relaciones entre Israel y Turquía en el contexto de la geopolítica del Mediterráneo Oriental. Al revisar su cambio de una cuasi-alianza a una dura rivalidad geopolítica en la región, el artículo explora escenarios para el futuro cercano.

Palabras clave: Israel. Turquía. Geopolítica del Mediterráneo Oriental.

RESUMO

A dinâmica contemporânea entre Israel e Turquia tem sido conflituosa recentemente, embora isso não pareça afetar as relações em outras áreas, já que a balança comercial está avançando para US \$ 8 milhões. Este artigo enfoca as relações entre Israel e a Turquia no contexto da geopolítica do Mediterrâneo Oriental. Revendo sua mudança de uma quase aliança para uma rivalidade geopolítica rígida na região, o artigo explora cenários para um futuro próximo.

Palavras-chave: Israel. Turquia. Geopolítica do Mediterrâneo Oriental.

Introduction

“Even if you gave me the gold of the world I would not accept.” (OKE, 1982) answered Sultan Abdulhamid to the request of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement offering 150 million pounds of gold for the permission to settle in Palestine. “While I am alive I would rather push a sword into my body than see the land of Palestine is taken away from the Islamic State. This will never happen. I will not start cutting our bodies while we are alive.” (THE DIARY OF THEODORE HERZL, s/d) Nevertheless, following the meeting between Herzl and the Sultan in 1901, Herzl was convinced that the hope for Palestine lies in the Ottoman capitol. He issued a postcard featuring a picture of himself and the Sultan with a Hebrew blessing above his head. Zionist leaders like Ben Gurion and Yizhak Ben Zvi were convinced that *Ottomanisation* – giving up foreign citizenship and acting as Ottoman citizens– is the preferred strategy for the Zionist movement. Convinced of this idea, Ben Gurion even pursued a law degree in Turkey (ZOHAR, 1986). The contemporary dynamics between Israel and Turkey have been confrontational at recent times though this doesn’t seem to affect the relations in other areas as the trade balance advancing towards the \$8 million shows. (AYDOGAN, 2017) This article focuses on the relations between Israel and Turkey within the context of the East Mediterranean geopolitics. Reviewing its shift from a quasi-alliance to a stiff geopolitical rivalry in the region, the article explores scenarios for near future.

A Fragile Friendship, 1949-1990

Becoming the first Muslim country to do so, Turkey recognized Israel in March 1949 and sent its Ambassador, Seyfullah Esin, as the chief of mission to Tel Aviv in 1950. Being non-Arab allies to the West in the Middle East, Israel and Turkey had common interests such as the water conflict with Syria. Israel, barely surviving its war of independence, aimed to break its isolation in the midst of a hostile Arab environment in the early years of the Cold War period. Turkey, joining NATO in 1952, considered the relations with Israel as a balancing act against the Soviet threat finding footholds in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean . Turkey signed the Baghdad Pact (1955) as a result of this obsession with the Soviet threat. Despite seeing itself as an independent regional player, Turkey understood the necessity to cooperate with Israel to confront with the emerging power balance in the region. However, its public opinion could accept Israel’s conduct only to an extent. Hence it returned its Ambassador to Ankara in 1958, as a response to the Sinai war when Israel conspired with the UK and France against Egypt. It would do so a number of additional times in the future.

The American relationship with Ankara and Tel-Aviv also had a dilemma from the start, as both countries had their own geopolitical interests. Their visions for the region occasionally conflict with the Western priorities. Instead of being America’s proxies in the Middle East, they have searched for being its partners. Their relations have been sensitive to re-

gional power struggle during the Cold War (HALE, 2002). For instance, the crisis of June 1964 when Turkey threatened to intervene in Cyprus to prevent the intercommunal clashes between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots in the island was a watershed in relations. President Johnson sent a letter to the Prime Minister Inonu on 5 June to prevent the intervention and a possible war between Turkey and Greece. Stating that “adhesion to NATO, in its very essence means that NATO countries will not wage war on each other.”, the letter underlines “...a military intervention in Cyprus by Turkey could lead to direct involvement by the Soviet Union” (PRESIDENT JOHNSON, 1964, p. 354). This letter the US conditioned Turkey’s decision to diversify its relations, especially the sources of military equipment in the coming decades (ULUSOY, 2016). Israel also needed military assistance in its wars against Arab neighbors. The same administration delayed it until after election day in 1964 and in 1968 (LITTLE, 1993). Fearing that acquiring atomic weapons would push Arab radicals into Moscow’s line, the American administration expected Israel to drop its nuclear weapons plan and act as conventional deterrent with American hardware. Until the 1970’s Israel struggled to survive in wars with Arab states while Turkey sought to build alliances in the region. The Cyprus issue left Turkey in need to increase its friends to defend its case at the UN. Turkey sided with Egypt in the 1967 war and participated the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969. Disappointed with the American response to its case in Cyprus, Turkey denied the US the use of its airbases to supply Israel in the 1973 war; allowed the Soviet jets to support Syria in the war; and deepened economic relations to offset the effects of the American embargo after its 1974 intervention in Cyprus. Failing to secure aid from the West, Turkey expanded its economic relations with the Gulf countries, Iraq and Iran.

The Golden Era (1990-2002)

The 1990’s marks the beginning of the golden era in Turkey-Israel relations. Israel, confident in its military strength and alliance with the US projected a positive atmosphere in the peace process with Palestinians following the Madrid conference of 1991 (BERELOVICH, 2014). Turkey, freed from the Cold War and now seeking to further position itself as American ally had seen less obstacles in furthering the alliance with Israel. Israel became a natural ally for Turkey facing with Syrian aid to PKK, Iran’s policy of exporting its Islamic revolution- a threat to Turkey’s secular regime- and the EU’s lukewarm attitude to membership. In need of allies with common threat perceptions about Syria, Iran and Islamic radicalism, Israel welcomed Turkey (UZER, 2013). Turkey has never lost its desire to play a role in regional politics. The Oslo agreement was an opportunity to expand influence by playing a mediating role in the Palestinian conflict. Following the appointment of Ambassador to Israel and a tourism agreement in 1992, Turkey and Israel signed a series of agreements including a double-taxation and bilateral investment treaty, university exchange and environmental cooperation (BERELOVICH, 2014). The strategy was to deepen cooperation in low policy areas not to draw reactions from the region.

This positive atmosphere was cultivated by high-level visits between the countries in the early 1990s during which the trade volume increased from more than 90 million dollars in 1989 to more than 600 million dollars in 1997. They signed military cooperation agreements including intelligence-sharing and training. Israel gained access to the Turkish airspace for training and the air force modernization. Already in 1992, the two nations' defense ministers signed a document on cooperation followed by a memorandum on mutual understanding and guidelines (1993), a Security and Secrecy agreement (1994) and a military training and industry cooperation agreement (1996). The deepening military relationship brought a biannual dialogue mechanism in 1997. In 1998, the Israeli arms sales to Turkey since the early 1990s reached to 1 billion dollars including 630 million dollars deal in December 1996 to upgrade Turkey's F4 Phantoms. This turned Turkey into a market for Israeli defense industry and expanding the trade volume to almost 2 billion dollars in 2000 (INBAR, 2001; LEVIN, 2000)

The military-strategic partnership lied at the core of expanding relations between the two countries along the 1990s and the joint maritime maneuvers code-named *Reliant Mermaid* demonstrated the US support for the increasing Turkish-Israeli partnership (BISHKU, 2006). In the 1998 Syria-Turkey crisis over Syria's support of the PKK, Turkey relied on its relations with Israel, sharing information about the PKK's activities (OZCAN, 2011). With the end of the crisis on 20 October, Turkey coerced Assad to agree to its terms. Turkey's ability to impose its will on Syria was the result of its military ties with Israel (MAKOVSKY, 1998). These comprehensive military agreements triggered reactions from the region. Iraq and Egypt protested the Israeli-Turkish alignment as an anti-Arab partnership. Feeling encircled by Turkey and Israel, Syria tried to improve its relations with Turkey through expelling the PKK leader Ocalan, negotiating a provisional agreement about sharing the Euphrates' water and shelving the Hatay question¹. Israel worked to prevent the confrontation between Turkey and Syria, fearing that its peace talks with Syria regarding the Golan Heights could be hampered.

The Turkish-Israeli alignment further benefited from the US brokered Oslo process¹. But, seeds of future conflict were also in sight. Largely disregarding the criticism of the regional states through its active participation in the peace process, Turkey aimed to increase its power and presence in the Middle East through ties with Israel. Despite Turkey's expectation from Israel to confront challenges to its territorial integrity from Iraq and Syria, their diverging perspectives towards the two key issues - the future of Iraq and the Cyprus question- created a backlash in the relations. Israel supported the *status quo*, defending the Kurdish autonomy within Iraq. Turkey's military relations with Israel worried Greece and Cyprus. When Israeli F-16 fighters ventured in the Cypriot space in April 1998, Cypriot media accused Israel of carrying reconnaissance flights for Turkey over the island to photograph the S-300 anti-craft missiles purchased from Russia. Immediately apologizing the incident, Israel did not want to be dragged into another conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean³. It followed a cautious policy towards Greece, a member of the EU. Turkey similarly sought cordial relations with Iran, considered as a primary enemy to Israel.

1. Ocalan was sheltered in Syria since the early 1980s. The Hatay question was the long-lasting border issue between Turkey and Syria since its foundation as an independent country in the 1960s.

2. Turkey supported the process not only with strong diplomatic moves such as financial contribution to the Palestinian Authority, participating the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group of the Madrid process in 1993 and joining temporary international presence in Hebron in 1997 but also with concrete projects such as the large scale water project, namely the peace pipeline to transport the Turkish water to Syria, Israel and Jordan.

3. Israel did not want the deterioration of its relations with Cyprus which had appointed ambassador to Tel-Aviv in 1993. Ekavi Athanassopoulou, Israeli-Turkish security ties: regional reactions, (Jerusalem: The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, 2001), pp. 18-21.

A Period of Change (2002 – 2009)

Turkey's relations with Israel were influenced by regional politics and domestic politics. Both changed in the 2000's. Reshuffling started in the Middle East as a result of developments such as the September 11. The changing American strategy towards the region coupled with the collapse of the peace process and the second intifada (TOCCI; HUBER, 2013). Turkey's politics began to change with the rise of the political Islam, further centering the Palestinian question. The questioning of secularism in domestic politics made difficult to sustain uniform identity in foreign policy. Coming of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002 with a "conservative" project quickly created a different political tone and brought the questioning of Turkey's strategic partnership with Israel (AYATA, 2004). Accusing Israel of committing "genocide" in Jenin in 2002, the Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the three-partite coalition government -the Democratic Left Party (DSP); the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP)- was already a sign of discomfort with close relations with Israel. In 2004, The AKP's head Tayyip Erdogan accused Israel of "state terrorism" due to killings of 60 Palestinians in Gaza. Turkey's pressure continued when Israel (and the West) did not approve of Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections in 2006. When Hamas took over the control over the Gaza strip, Erdogan recognized the legitimacy of the isolated movement and invited its leader-in-exile, Khaled Meshaal, to Ankara⁴. This was part of AKP's long-term strategy for intrusion in the regional politics. By raising the Palestinian card like previously done by Syria, Iran and Egypt, Turkey found a convenient way of intervening Middle Eastern affairs (DURAN, 2006).

There was still hope for a different path. Erdogan visited Israel in May 2005, "offering to serve as a Middle East peace mediator and looking to build on trade and military ties". He told Prime Minister Sharon that anti-Semitism was "a crime against humanity" (MYRE, 2005a). Erdoğan and Sharon decided to establish a hotline for intelligence exchange about security issues in addition to cooperation in areas from education to commerce and science (MYRE, 2005b). In 2006, Turkey began to develop a joint Israeli-Palestinian Industrial park. Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas addressed the Turkish parliament a day apart in November 2007. Peres was the co-panelist of Erdoğan, facing his harsh reactions at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2009⁵. This event was critical to consolidate Erdoğan's power in domestic politics and triggered a different perspective about Turkey's role in the Middle East on the eve of the Arab Spring⁶.

Before Davos, Turkey and Israel had advanced negotiations to connect each other through five pipelines transporting oil, natural gas, water, electricity, and possibly fiber optic cables through the Eastern Mediterranean. The Med-Stream project initiated in 2007 was followed by a decision to construct an oil pipeline from Ceyhan to Ashkelon in 2008 (TURKISH..., 2008). They decided to enter deeper cooperation in defense industry and intelligence sharing. Turkey barred Israel from the NATO led military exercise, Anatolian Eagle, of October 2009. When asked to

4. Defending the electoral victory of Hamas was a matter of political integrity for Erdogan who portrayed the AKP as a conservative democratic party and himself as its leader challenging the secular status quo in a moderate way through using democratic mechanisms.

5. Erdoğan, accusing Israel of crimes against humanity during the Operation Cast Lead and vowing that he would never return to Davos, he stormed out the debate on Israel's Gaza offensive. See, "Recep Erdogan storms out Davos after clash with Israeli president over Gaza", The Guardian, 30 Januar 2009.

6. Receiving a hero's welcome on his return to Istanbul after accusing Israel of "knowing very well how to kill" in Davos, Erdogan's prestige increased in the Turkish public opinion. See, "Turkish PM greeted by cheers after Israel debate clash", The Guardian, 30 January 2009

comment about this decision, the foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, linked it with the Gaza situation, noted that “we hope the situation in Gaza will be improved, that the situation will be back to the diplomatic track. And that will create a new atmosphere in Turkish-Israeli relations as well.” (BORGER, 2009). In response, Israel moved to deepen its relations with Cyprus and Greece in regard to energy interests.

Deterioration of the Relations (2010 – 2020)

The past decade had seen deteriorating relations, a sharper turn of policies and stronger hostile actions and rhetoric. A “reprimanded” diplomatic meeting between the Deputy Foreign Minister Ayalon and the Turkish Ambassador Oguz Çelikkol at the Israeli Foreign Ministry was a prelude to a difficult decade to come. Reports from the meeting done in public format revealed that Deputy Minister refused to shake the Ambassador’s hand and made him sit on a lower chair during a meeting at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ISRAEL..., 2020). This humiliation act opened a decade of confrontation. While Davos marked a turn in relations, the Arab Spring was a watershed for already fragile alliance (MAOZ, 2016). Turkey saw the wave of uprisings as an opportunity to position itself as an influential member of the international community. This was in line with the foreign minister Davutoglu’s broader foreign policy perspective of “strategic depth” going hand in hand with the discourse of “zero problems with neighbors” (YEŞİLTAŞ; BALCI, 2013). For Davutoğlu, the Arab Spring provided a fertile ground for Turkey to be a key foreign policy player. For this, Turkey had to cultivate ties not only with the Middle Eastern states but also with other countries from the Balkans to Black Sea and Caucasus where Turkey had historically important relations due to the Ottoman past (YALVAC, 2012).

The Arab Spring found Turkey and Israel inevitably on opposite sides. Ankara supported the anti-authoritarian drive of the Arab revolts (KÖSE, 2013). Concerned with the instability that could possibly come out, Jerusalem was more comfortable with cautious stance. Israel was encouraged by the pro-Western forces that appeared to have initially gain traction in Syria. In tandem to the AKP’s embrace of Islamic political identity, Turkey encouraged the Islamist groups, such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* or *Ahrar al-Sham* against the Assad regime (STARR, 2014). The ties with Islamists groups including *Hamas* with active base in Turkey made relations with Israel further fragile. The tensions faced another blow on 31 May 2010, when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted at international waters a six-ship flotilla including a Turkish vessel, namely *Mavi Marmara*, trying to break the Gaza blockade. The IDF forces killed eight Turkish citizens and one Turkish American on board. The Turkish passenger ship was carrying humanitarian goods to Gaza under blockade by Israel and Egypt since Hamas’ control of the Strip in 2007. The violence that the IDF soldiers committed was widely condemned and the UN Security Council issued a statement calling for a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent inquiry. The Secretary General Ban Ki-moon urged Israel to lift the blockade. Ankara immediately recalled its Ambassador from Tel Aviv in June 2010⁷.

7. The UN Human Rights Council report issued in September 2010 underlined that Israel’s military broke international laws, that the action by commandos, which left nine dead, was “disproportionate” and “betrayed an unacceptable level of brutality”. Israel rejected the report as “biased” and “one-sided”, See, “Mavi Marmara: Why did Israel stop the Gaza flotilla?”, BBC News, 27 June 2016.

Turkey insisted on an apology from Israel, an international investigation on the flotilla incident and the lifting of the blockade on Gaza. Israel only accepted an international investigation and a marginal easing of the blockade. The investigations about the incident most important of which was the UN Palmer report issued in September 2011 underlined the excessive force that the IDF used but questioned the motivations of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), confirming the Israeli reports of “organized and violent resistance from a group of passengers”. The report accepted Israel’s blockade of Gaza as legal. In response, Turkey expelled Israel’s ambassador. This growing rift did not prevent the two countries to continue in bilateral relations in areas from economy to humanitarian issues and logistics with companies entering bids in construction, mine clearing, pipeline building and diamond trade, the economic relations between the two countries continued to grow⁸. Before the *Mavi Marmara* crisis Israel’s imports from Turkey 154.7 million dollars in May 2010 and reached 210.7 million dollars in January 2013 (DANA, 2017).

While economic relations sustained, political relations continued to deteriorate. Following Erdogan’s statement accusing Israel of the fall of Egyptian President Mohamad Morsi in August 2013, Liberman commented that “Erdogan is Nazi propagandist Goebbels’ successor.” (KENYON, 2013). Responding to a speech by Israeli Minister of Justice as “Ayelet Shaked has same mindset as Hitler,” Erdogan underlined that the ties with Israel will not be normalized as long as Israel continues to “kill innocent children and continue its operations in Gaza.” (LAHAV, 2014). In 2019, addressing senior officials from its party in June, Erdogan stated that “whoever is on the side of Israel, let everyone know that we are against them.” (STAFF, 2019). Responding to Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs who ordered his ministry to adopt measures to “stop Turkey’s incitement and subversion in East Jerusalem”, the Turkish Foreign Ministry commented that Turkey “will never give up supporting our Palestinian brothers and sisters in East Jerusalem, capital of Palestine under occupation and defending the Palestinian cause.” (UGURLU, 2019). In December 2019, Adnan Tanrıverdi, the retired army general and the chief advisor to Erdogan, stated that “the Islamic world should prepare an army for Palestine from outside Palestine.”⁹ Commenting on Israel’s annexation bid, further deteriorating the relations, the Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said that “Israel, encouraged by the support of certain countries, is continuing its aggressive policies that are turning it into a racist, apartheid regime (KALNINS, 2019).

A new area of tension emerged with the East-Med project, an underwater pipeline that would transport natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. The proposed 1,180-mile undersea pipeline would be able to transfer up to 12 billion cubic meters a year from offshore gas reserves between Israel and Cyprus to Greece, and then onto other countries in southeast Europe. An agreement between Israel, Greece and Cyprus was signed in January of 2020 and ratified later that year much to the shagreen of Turkey (DEVECE, 2020). For Israel, the construction of the pipeline could offer great economic advantage, on top of security benefits and a strong alliance with the partnering country. For Turkey, the deal is

8. “Israeli firms in Turkey border mine clearing bids”, www.globes.co.il, 2 June 2009; “At least 10 firms bid for Israel-Turkey gas pipeline: Report”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 25 March 2014; “The Turks Are Back, and They’re Building Half of Tel Aviv’s Towers”, *Haaretz*, 29 April 2016; “Israel Gives Green Light to Six Foreign Construction Companies”, *Haaretz*, 26 October 2016; “Turkish, Israeli companies engage in big diamond trade”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 18 September 2017;

9. Retired Turkish general Adnan Tanrıverdi is founder of Turkish security firm SADAT International Defense Consulting[1] and has been a chief advisor to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since August 2016. See, MEMRI, “Chief Advisor To Turkish President Erdoğan: ‘The Islamic World Should Prepare An Army For Palestine From Outside Palestine,’” in Special Dispatch 8389, 2 December 2019.

perceived as a threat to its core national interests including its own exploration in the area. It was considered as a threat to a recently signed deal with Libya, delimitating maritime jurisdictions in the Mediterranean Sea (BASSIST, 2020). As a cumulative effect of more than a decade of deepening tensions, in 2020 -and for the very first time- the annual threat assessment of Israel's army added Turkey's policies in the region to its list of challenges (GROSS, 2020).

Although AKP's actions and rhetoric toward Israel was negative and uniform dissenting voices could still be observed in the Turkey. Just days following the *Marmara* event, Fethullah Gülen, a chief opponent to Erdogan and controversial U.S. resident who is considered Turkey's most influential religious leader, criticized a Turkish-led flotilla for trying to deliver aid without Israel's consent. He commented that the "failure to seek accord with Israel before attempting to deliver aid was a sign of defying authority, and will not lead to fruitful matters." (LAURIA, 2010). Gülen is a foremost critic and opponent of Erdogan. In fact, otherwise his positions on Israel would not necessarily differ (JAFFE-HOFFMAN, 2020). Commenting on the affair, Ali Aslan from *Today's Zaman* (Gülen affiliate) criticized the Flotilla initiative as it did not help the objective of "zero problems with neighbors" policy". It would also hurt the peace process itself (ASLAN, 2010). Another dissenting voice, though controversial and less main stream, was a TV televangelist Adnan Oktar ¹⁰. Oktar was known to host Israelis and feature Israeli perspectives on his television shows and express very dissenting views. He said "3-5 people may strain the relations with Israel but we are 70 million, on the other side Israel has millions of people... I don't see any problem between us. So we don't have any tension, ...bunch of individual's feud (referring diplomatic tension) is not our concern... whoever drops atom bomb on Israel, we will make their life unbearable"¹¹. Oktar and his inner circle ring were arrested in 2018 (TURKISH, 2018). Other opposition voices to Erdogan- like that of Ali Babacan (former deputy prime minister) and Abdullah Gul (former president) were both former AKP members. They have expressed different voices when it came to Israel. Babacan, during his foreign ministry term, while criticizing, sometimes condemning Israeli actions on Palestinian issue was likewise criticizing Hamas by saying "Hamas should decide, terror or politics? We're in favor of politics." The Former President Gul, though not publicly portraying his different opinions with Erdogan during his office term, appeared to convey somewhat different views behind the closed doors as revealed by WikiLeaks expressing "understanding of Israel's need to take action against terrorist attacks" (WIKILEAKS, 2009). While most of these voices can be framed mainly as opposition to Erdogan, they still point to a more pragmatic camp seeking to see a more constructive relations with Israel.

10. Adnan Oktar was a TV preacher perceived as a cult leader known for giving televised sermons surrounded by young women he refers to as his "kittens".

11. Press event with Oktar and Religious leaders, İsrail'e kim atom bombası atarsa Gökubbeyi başına geçiririz, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH-Dp03jUadk>

The Arab Spring and the Syrian War – an opportunity to Pivot?.....

The Syrian civil war became another point of contention between two countries. Defectors from the Syrian army trained in Turkey paved the way for the creation of the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA), also supported by the West. As the conflict progressed, Turkey, along with Qatar, preferred Isla-

mists rebellion factions such as Hayaat Tahrir Al-Shaam based in Northern Syria (HASSAN, 2017). Turkey emerged as unique in its decision to permit foreign and opposition fighters (as well as its own citizens) to cross its southern border into the Syrian battlefield (STARR, 2014). While Turkey's actions in northern Syria had little direct influence on Israel, the moves which brought Islamist influence to Syria and helped to set an Islamist tone to the rebellion, appeared worrisome to Israel who sought to strengthen the moderate rebels and limit the influence of Islamists operating across its own borders as well under its "good neighbor" program (BOMS, 2018).

Israel's traditional support to the Kurds in the region became another course of tension with Turkey. Following Turkey's Peace Spring operation in November 2019, Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu was quick to denounce, warning an "ethnic cleansing" and offering humanitarian aid to the Kurds¹². The issue was widely covered in Israeli media and triggered additional statements like that of Ministry of Strategic Affairs saying Erdogan is "anti-Semitic racist who supports terrorism – slaughter the Kurds without us making a moral voice heard and calling on the world to stop it. We can't stay indifferent on this." (ADNAN, 2019). Israel was surprised by the American decision to withdraw forces from Syria and could push the American President Trump to change course. Although Israel did not maintain deep relations with the Syrian Kurds, it assisted Kurds in Iraq and, overall, perceived them as a moderate ally for its geopolitical maneuvers in the region. For Israel, the Turkish moves to capture territories in northern Syria were actual evidence of not only Erdogan's regional ambitions but also his strategy of empowering actor's hostile to Israel (GROSS, 2020).

However, the downward spiral of relations was not constant and saw a number of attempts to set relations back at a cordial course. The first sign of improvement came in 2013, when Israel resumed the sale of electronic warfare systems to Turkey (LAPPIN, 2013). Frozen following the *Mavi Marmara* incident, the original deal worth 200 million dollars involved Israel's ELTA Systems Ltd., a subsidiary of Israel Aerospace Industries, delivering electronic systems for four Turkish Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWAC) aircraft. This was followed by Israel's agreement to transfer materials from Turkey to Gaza to build a new hospital in February 2013 (BAR'EL, 2013). Despite deepening of relations, the *Mavi Marmara* deadlock and different perceptions that each side had about the regional developments after the Arab Spring prevented a breakthrough. That began to change when the civil wars in Libya and Syria required American involvement. The US, intensifying the P5+1 negotiation with Tehran on its nuclear file through talks in Istanbul and a high level meeting in Kazakhstan, needed its two key regional allies to cooperate with each other and pushed Israel to offer an apology to Turkey.

Netanyahu placed a call to Erdogan while closeted with Obama in a trailer on the tarmac at Ben Gurion airport before a departure to Jordan. Obama joined the call at one point. The American expectation was that the improvement of relations between Israel and Turkey would be a precursor to a renewed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, especially on territorial issues. This would also be a positive step leading to cooperation on other key issues such as the Syrian conflict (SHERWOOD;

12. Benjamin Netanyahu (tweet) "Israel strongly condemns the Turkish invasion of the Kurdish areas in Syria and warns against the ethnic cleansing of the Kurds by Turkey and its proxies. Israel is prepared to extend humanitarian assistance to the gallant Kurdish people" in Tweeter, 10 October 2019.

MACASKIL, 2013). The Obama administration underlined its displeasure at the Turkish-Israeli crisis despite efforts for reconciliation. Incidents like Erdogan's widely echoed statement regarding Zionism being a "crime against humanity" at a UN Summit made the Obama administration's task difficult as it triggers criticisms from the US Congress attempting to derail what the president saw as urgent, the cooperation over Syria where Turkey expected more American engagement (ISRAEL..., 2013).

Slightly more than a month after to the Israeli apology in May 2013, Erdogan visited Washington and raised many issues from the civil war in Syria to the relations with Iran and the burning situation in Iraq (BALCI, 2013; GÜRSEL, 2013). Obama pressurized Erdogan to ease tension with Iraq as Ankara's direct oil trade with Erbil provoked Baghdad's reactions considering this as a violation of the constitution¹³. Disapproving Ankara's direct contacts to Erbil, Obama was concerned that it might jeopardize Iraqi unity with Baghdad getting closer to Iran. The meeting between Erdogan and Obama provided a roadmap to deal with the Syrian conflict. Agreeing to endorse the Geneva initiative, Turkey decided to increase its support to the opposition, pressurizing Assad with sanctions and closing the door for open-ended negotiations. Seeking a timetable for the transition period for a new government, Turkey and the US decided about a cease fire monitored by international organizations, documenting the regime's human rights violations. Both Erdogan and Obama were against Assad to have power in the transition government. They wanted Syrian refugees to go back. The improvement in Turkey-US relations continued with the US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit on 12 September 2014. Kerry stated Turkey's role in the peace process and its links to Hamas as a key asset.

13. The Iraqi constitution stipulates that all oil trade agreements must be approved by the central government

The US pressures and the regional problems paved the way for a breakthrough between Turkey and Israel. The lack of a serious dialogue left them isolated facing with regional geopolitical and humanitarian problems. Israel needed a regional ally to support its policies towards Iran and against radical groups. Israel's pressures on Iran could become more credible with Turkey's support through permitting again to use airspace. In regard to the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu's policies, perceived as an attempt to consolidate the Israeli grip on the occupied territories, derived reactions from the EU countries. Therefore, reconciliation with Turkey, a valuable goal in itself, would help Netanyahu to correct its relations with Obama with whom he had tense relations. For Turkey, reconciliation with Israel would have both regional and transatlantic implications. Ankara aimed to regain its role as a mediator once provided a leverage over Syria and Israel in the talks on the Golan Heights in December 2008. The deterioration of the relations with Israel prevented Turkey to play a mediating role between Israel and Hamas during the *Pillar of Defense* strike on Gaza in December 2012 (ALTUNIŞIK; ÇUHADAR, 2010).

Reconciliation with Israel became crucial after the military takeover in Egypt on 3 July 2013. Egypt tried to block almost all mediating efforts by Turkey between Israel and Hamas. It blocked the American attempts to relaunch the peace process due to Turkey's support of the Morsi government and criticism of the coup by General Sisi (YEGIN, 2016). However, an unexpected economic factor came into place. The Syrian war resulted

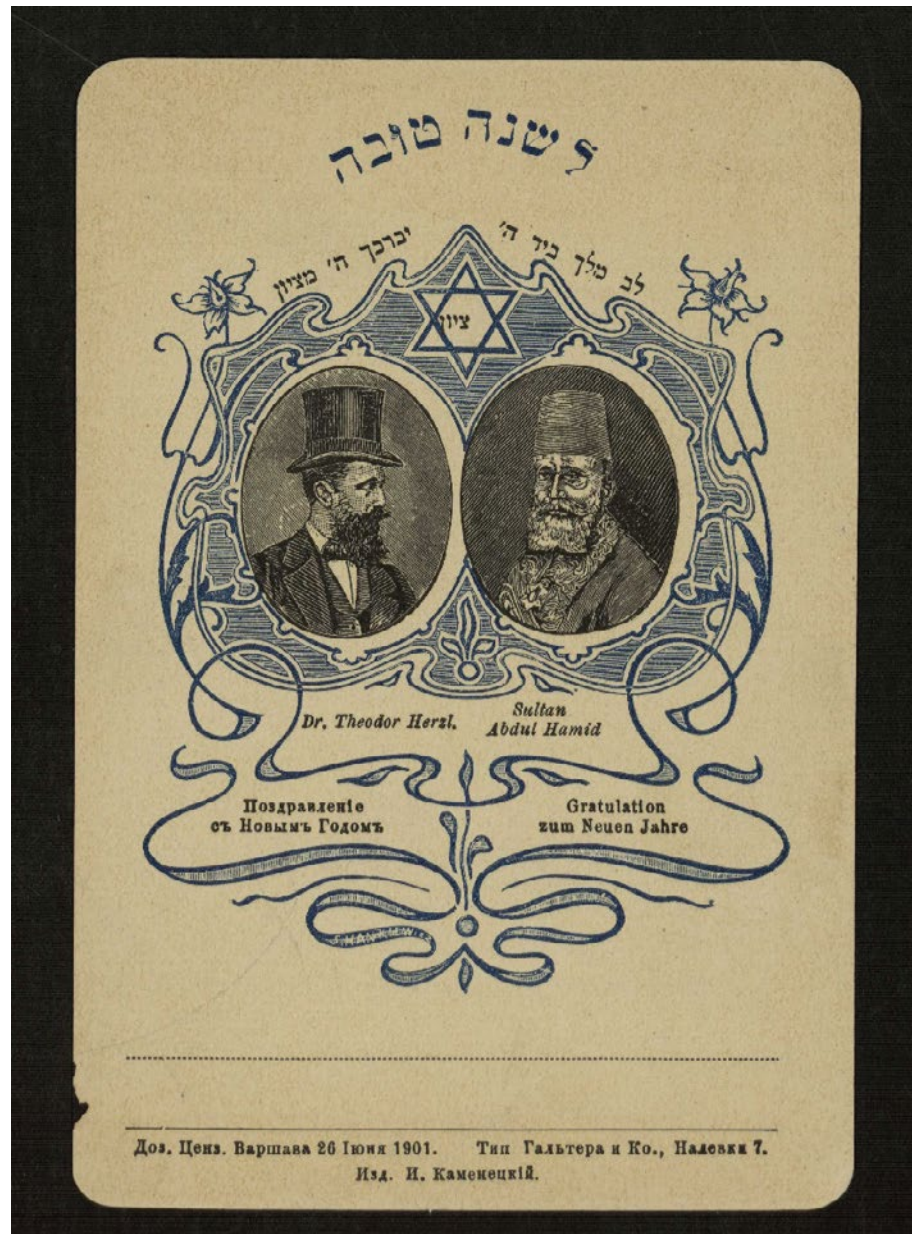
in the closure of many trade routes as Syria became unsafe for trucks. Turkey and Israel found themselves in an important juncture, enabling thousands of trucks to cross from Europe to Turkey – from Istanbul by sea to Haifa – and further via the Sheikh Hussein Bridge, to Jordan and beyond. Over 10,000 trucks had crossed in 2014 (RABINOVITCH; COHEN , 2014) with an average of 30-40 trucks a week in the subsequent years (PERETZ, 2018). Furthermore, the *Open Skies* policy, coming into effect in 2021, incentivized many Israelis to use Turkey as a travel hub and a tourist destination. In 2012, before *Open Skies* went into effect, 686 thousand people traveled to Turkey from Israel on 4,706 flights. In 2017, nearly 2 million did on 12,400 flights (PERETZ, 2018). This significant volume, decreasing in times of political tensions, remained an incentive to keep relations intact.

Conclusion

This article reviews the relations between Israel and Turkey. Currently captured at a very low point, the relations continuously deteriorated over the past two decades. During this period Turkey has been governed by the AKP led by Erdogan and Israel has been governed by governments led by Netanyahu. Some argue that the uncompromising character of the leaders played a significant role in the deterioration of relations. However, with harsh rhetoric, confrontational actions, active support of enemy factions by both sides (Hamas, the Islamists by Turkey / FSA and the Kurds by Israel), it might be surprising to observe that some key fundamentals. Diplomatic relations, growing trade relations, limited security cooperation and a very high volume of business and tourism are still maintained despite the complex character of relations particularly affected by the geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. As underlined above, since 1948 and throughout the 20th century, the Israeli Turkish relations rested on a few pillars: their secular, “non-Arab” identity; a strong Western alliance; common enemies and security cooperation. Growing trade and tourism relations cemented these pillars and lasted a number of crisis points. The bilateral relations had their own slopes and turning points. Despite its secular identity Turkey saw itself as a Muslim country and maintained active membership in international Muslim forums. It could not ignore major events like the 1956 Sinai campaign, the events of 1967 or of 1973. Nevertheless, shared interests in relations reached a climax in the 1990’s in parallel to the growing optimism surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Jordanian peace process.

The relations began to deteriorate in 2002, especially following the rise of the AKP aiming to change the Turkish geopolitical outlook. Turkey’s gravitation toward more Islamists agendas and partners, its renewed activities in Jerusalem on the Palestinian file and its positions on key issues such as Iran and terrorism have deepened a path of confrontation with Israel who began to get closer with moderate Arab states and intensify its campaign against Iran and the Muslim Brothers. Only fewer commonalties are now shared between the two countries and those – like the mediated limited collaboration on the Syrian front – were triggered by foreign players (the American influence on Israel and on Turkey as a

NATO member). The remaining pillars: trade, limited security cooperation and tourism (which diminished to nothing during the Covid period) are limited in scope but nevertheless significant and helped, for example, Turkey to be one of the very first countries to renew flight to Israel on July 1st, 2020 (RAZ-CHAIMOVICH, 2020). The trajectory of deteriorating relations appears to hold at the end of 2020 as Turkey appears to further distance itself from the EU and NATO (including a confrontation with France navy) (IRISH, 2020) in parallel to its increasing involvement in Libya. The noticeable turning of the Hagia Sophia to an active Mosque already drew parallels in Israel. Erdogan tweeted that “the revival of Hagia Sophia announces the restoration of freedom to Al Aksa” and triggered headlines like “After Hagia Sophia, Erdogan points to the Temple Mount.” (INET, 2020) This trajectory will likely not change as long as Erdogan remains in power. However, the opposition to AKP and the alternative direction it offers regarding both, domestic and foreign policy may influence a changing course in the future.



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