

TURKEY-ISRAEL RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to summarize and discuss Turkey-Israel relations in the post-Cold War era. The study starts with a brief summary of the two countries' Cold War relations, followed by a detailed summary and analysis of the post-Cold War ones. In this respect, the dynamics and development process of the relations, as well as strengths and problematic areas in them, are addressed in detail. In the end, the direction and future of the relations are stressed to depend on the countries' ability to cope with current problems and enhance cooperation between themselves.

Keywords: Turkey-Israel Relations, Turkish Foreign Policy, Israeli Foreign Policy, Turkey, Israel.

ÖZET

Bu makale, Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerini Soğuk Savaş sonrası döneme odaklanarak özetlemeyi ve tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, Soğuk Savaş dönemine ilişkin iki ülke arası ilişkilerin kısa bir özeti ile başlamakta, bunu izleyerek Soğuk Savaş sonrası ilişkiler detaylı bir biçimde özetlenmekte ve analiz edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, ikili ilişkilerin gelişme dinamikleri, gelişim süreci, ilişkilerin güçlü yanları ve ilişkilerdeki sorunlu alanlar ayrıntılı olarak irdelemektedir. Sonuçta Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerinin gelecekte nasıl bir seyir izleyeceğini iki ülkenin mevcut sorunlarını çözme ve aralarındaki işbirliği potansiyelini daha da geliştirme kapasitelerine bağlı olacağı vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk-İsrail İlişkileri, Türk Dış Politikası, İsrail Dış Politikası, Türkiye, İsrail.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, one of the greatest changes in Turkish foreign policy manifested itself in Turkey-Israel relations and bilateral relations enhanced to a great extent. This trend appears to be holding.

From a historic perspective, throughout the Cold War, Turkey-Israel relations could generally be said to be "cold". Actually, the Turkish government officially recognized the state of Israel as the first Muslim country on March 28, 1949, about ten months after its establishment on May 14, 1948. The government also allowed, even encouraged, Turkish citizens with Jewish origin to migrate to Israel. Turkey, indeed, did all these to gain the sympathy of the Jewish people in the United States, and the government of the United States, in turn, so that it can become integrated to the West to meet the security threat posed by the Soviet Union after the Second

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World War.

In the 1950s, Turkey actively participated in the Western bloc, becoming a NATO member in 1952 as well. Throughout the 1950s, Turkey-Israel relations progressed generally smoothly, but without close relations between the two countries.

Yet some visible changes occurred in Turkish foreign policy in the 1960s. A military coup on May 27, 1960 overthrew the ruling political party (Democratic Party) and a new constitution entered into force a year after, in 1961. The much more liberal new constitution created a fertile ground in which civil society started to flourish and democratic institutions began to work better. Under this atmosphere, although Turkey's position in the Western bloc did change, the traditional pro-Western Turkish foreign policy became subject to severe domestic criticisms, led particularly by some left-wing parties, such as the Turkish Labor Party, universities, and many publications, like *Yön* and *Forum* (Sönmezoglu 2006: 208-212).

The Turkey-Israel relations were affected by this general change. Turkey's efforts to enhance its relations with neighboring Arab countries resulted in a decline in Turkish-Israeli relations. Further, an event occurring on June 5, 1964 deeply affected Turkey's perception toward the West. That was a letter sent by the United States President L. Johnson to Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, preventing Turkey from intervening the Cyprus conflict to protect the Turkish minority there (see, <http://sozluk.sourtimes.org/show.asp?t=johnson+mektubu>). Afterwards, the West, in general, lost credibility in the eyes of Turkish intellectuals and political elite. As a result, Turkish foreign policy visibly shifted from pro-Israeli to pro-Arab/Palestinian. Later on, Turkey allowed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to open a bureau in Ankara in 1976 and even officially started diplomatic relations with PLO in 1979. Turkey also condemned Israel's decision to make Jerusalem as its capital in 1980. Overall, Turkey-Israel relations generally went "cold" throughout the 1980s.

But this began to change radically in the 1990s and Israel became a very important economic, political and military partner for Turkey in the region of Middle East. This article aims to discuss the dynamics of the development of the relations between the two countries in the post-Cold War era and summarize this process. In this regard, strengths and weaknesses of the two countries' relations are addressed in detail as well.

II. THE DYNAMICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF TURKEY-ISRAEL RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

The development process of Turkey-Israel relations after the Cold War began, first of all, with the Gulf Crisis of 1990. During the crisis, both Turkey and Israel were in the same coalition formed against the Iraqi government. At the same time, the United States, mediating the Middle East peace process that had started in October 1991 in Madrid, supported the development of the relations between the two countries, hoping that Turkey might contribute to the peace process in many ways. Accordingly, Israel and Turkey started to exchange intelligence first with

respect to terrorist organizations active in their countries.

Second, in view of Turkey, PLO was actively supporting the Kurdish separatist movement, and PKK terrorists were being trained in PLO camps in Lebanon and northern Iraq. Since the Palestinians were struggling for independence, they, for Turkey, were giving support to ethnically-driven separatist movements elsewhere to gain legitimacy for their actions. Further, when the Gulf Crisis of 1990 occurred, PLO leader Yasser Arafat made a disturbing comparison for Turkey by classing with Iraqi occupation of Kuwait to Turkish intervention to Cyprus, which undermined the credits of Turkey at the international level (Aykan, 1993: 93).

That aside, Turkey had problems with Bulgaria with respect to the Turkish minority living in that country in the 1980s. The Bulgarian government's attempt to assimilate the Turkish minority was condemned and severely criticized by Turkey. Turkey tried to push the Bulgarian government to stop the assimilation policy but its efforts could not produce any positive results. Then, Turkey took the issue to international platforms, such as the United Nations and Organization of the Islamic Conference (see, Lütem, 2006). In this regard, Turkey hoped the Arabs to support its thesis against Bulgaria due to religious ties, but its expectation did not turn into a reality. Disappointed with that, Turkey began to search for a new and reliable partner in the Middle East and the best alternative it found was Israel.

Third, the fact that both Israel and Turkey had common enemies in the post-Cold War era made the two countries become closer allies. First of all, both countries were struggling against separatist movements within their countries and they had to exchange intelligence to be successful. That aside, the Iraqi government led by Saddam Hussein was seeking expansion, as exemplified by the invasion of Kuwait, threatening the security of both countries. Saddam openly declared Israel as his enemy several times. The threat posed by Saddam toward Turkey was not that evident, but Saddam's desire to become the leader of pan-Arabism and his support of separatist Kurdish groups were bothering Turkey.

Aside from Iraq, Syria was another particular threat to both Israel and Turkey. Israel occupied Golan Heights during the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and has kept them since then. On the other hand, Syria and Turkey had many unresolved problems. One was, and still is, the water issue. Contending ideas on the sharing of the River *Firat* has long been a serious source of conflict between the two countries. While Turkey wants to keep full control over *Firat* and rejects to see the river as an international river, Syria insists on the idea that *Firat* is an international river, thus, it needs to be equally shared. Another issue, from the perspective of Turkey, is Syria's support of the separatist Kurdish movement and PKK. Indeed, this issue is tied with the water conflict mentioned above in that as Turkey does not change its position over *Firat*, Syria tends to support PKK to retaliate. Finally, Syria has not accepted the city of Hatay as part of Turkey since 1939 when the city assembly decided to join Turkey.

Even though Turkey-Syria relations have made progress after the death of Hafiz Esad in 2000, the ongoing issues between the two countries prevent them

enjoying a lasting peace. The fragility of the relations makes both Turkey and Syria to seek external allies to increase power capacity against each other. In this respect, while Syria got closer to Iran, Armenia, and Russia, Turkey improved its ties with Israel.

A fourth reason for Turkey to seek the partnership of Israel was to balance the Armenian lobby, very effective in the United States and in Western countries, in general, with the Jewish lobby. Throughout the 1980s, the Armenians put great efforts to make the so-called Armenian genocide to be widely recognized. To that end, they even succeeded in making the European Parliament to produce a resolution on the “Armenian issue” (see, European Parliament, Resolution on a Political Solution to the Armenian Question, Doc. A2–33/87, June 18, 1987). That aside, some Armenians were also active in forming an underground organization, *ASALA*, to engage in violent actions against Turkish diplomats and citizens abroad. Hence, in the face of these threats posed by the Armenian *Diaspora*, Turkey felt a need to rely on another powerful community abroad, the Jews, through gaining the sympathy of Israel.

Finally, and perhaps more important, due to the military embargos imposed by the United States and European Union countries in the post-Cold War era, Turkey was in need of finding an alternative to find what it needed. The reason for the embargos was the Turkish policy towards the separatist Kurdish movement in Eastern Anatolia. US and European Union were uncomfortable with the Turkish way of struggling against terrorists, claiming that there were serious human rights violations (Sönmezoglu, 2006: 505). They also believed that the Turkish government was suppressing the Kurdish minority living in the country, even blaming it for not being open to inter-communal dialogue (Sönmezoglu, 2006: 505). Under this atmosphere, Turkey needed an external partner to buy military equipment and the country it found was Israel that did not want any specific conditions to give weapons Turkey needed to combat terrorists.

III. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

All these created conditions for the development of Turkey-Israel relations and the process began with an official visit by Israel. The President of Israel, Chaim Herzog, came to Turkey in June 1992 for the 500. anniversary of the acceptance of the Jews to the Ottoman Empire exiled from Spain. This is followed by a visit to Israel by the Turkish Minister of Tourism, during which a bilateral agreement was signed regarding the development of tourism activities between Turkey and Israel.

When the Middle East peace process, officially starting in Madrid in October 1991, resulted in historic Oslo Agreements in September 1993, Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin made an official visit to Israel on November 14, 1993 to deliver the message of Turkey’s support of the peace process. In turn, Israeli President Ezer Weizman, Foreign Minister Simon Perez, and Economics and Planning Minister Simon Shavit visited Turkey

However, despite these mutual visits and developing economic ties, both

countries were hesitant to cooperate in military affairs due to mutual suspicions, as well as lack of experience. But when Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller made a visit to Israel in November 1994, the two countries decided to develop military ties as well. In this regard, an agreement was signed with respect to the modernization of some Turkish war planes, *Fantoms*, by Israeli firms (Gruen, 1995).

A more comprehensive agreement signed on February 23, 1996 was Military Training and Cooperation Treaty. According to the treaty, Turkey and Israel agreed on organizing military maneuvers, producing and maintaining military equipment, and using air space in pilot training. Besides, it was decided to form a consulting mechanism between the sides, which was planned to hold meetings twice a year. The sides also agreed on exchange of intelligence with respect to terrorist organizations active in their countries (see Akyol, 1988: 80-87).

Right after the agreement, both countries arranged a press conference, mentioning that the agreement was not signed to imply an alliance against any third party, underlining that it was about military cooperation only (Aksiyon, May 18, 1996). Yet while the treaty was welcomed by the United States and Western countries, in general, Arab countries, especially the Palestinians, found it disappointing (Elekdağ, 2005). The treaty was even subject to severe criticisms by some segments of the Turkish society. Especially people with strong religious affiliation and the Welfare Party criticized the treaty, complying that it was against the spirit of Muslim brotherhood.

In March 1996, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel went to Jerusalem and that was the first visit to Israel at the presidential level. During the visit, a free trade agreement and some complementary protocols were signed. In turn, the President of Israel, Ezer Weizman, made an official visit to Turkey, whereby the sides agreed on enhancing cooperation further.

After the establishment of the *RefahYol* coalition government in Turkey on June 28, 1996, it was believed that Turkey-Israel relations were negatively affected, as the Welfare Party was widely known as its anti-Semitic discourses. Besides, the Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan was frequently emphasizing Muslim brotherhood and he had some unique projects to realize some sort of Muslim unity, such as "Muslim-countries United Nations", Muslim-countries common market, D-8 project, and so on.

But despite contrary expectations, no decline occurred in Turkey-Israel relations. On the contrary, the two countries' relations were further enhanced during the *RefahYol* government. For example, the Free Trade Agreement was approved during this period. Likewise, an agreement regarding the modernizations of *F-4 Fantom* war planes by Israeli firms was signed by Erbakan himself. These were followed by several other bilateral agreements with respect to economical, technical and cultural cooperation, as well as promotion of mutual investments.

The *RefahYol* government ended in mid-1997 and it was followed by the form of *Anasol-D* coalition government. The new government did not cause a visible change in Turkey-Israel relations. As before, mutual visits and efforts to develop common goals continued.

The most important event of the year 1998 was that Turkish, Israeli and United States naval forces organized a common maneuver in the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, this maneuver symbolized the top level of the Turkish-Israeli closeness. Afterwards, Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz visited Israel and an economic cooperation agreement was signed during that visit. In October 1998, Turkey was in a crisis situation with Syria with respect to Syria's protection of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. During the crisis, Israel's reduction of armed forces on the Syria-Israel border caused resentment on the Turkish side. In response, Turkey canceled a maneuver, *Güvenilir Denizkızı*, planned to be done with Israel in the same year.

However, the chilly relations were quickly overcome with the August 1999 earthquake in Turkey. Right after the earthquake, Israel was one of the first to send a significant amount of humanitarian aid to Turkey. In addition, an expert crew composed of 270 Israelis actively helped the needy, providing particularly medical assistance. The Israelis also built a village, consisting of a total of 312 houses, near Adapazarı for the needy and it was formally opened by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak himself. In response, Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit presented his special thanks to Barak during his visit of İstanbul, stating that "you gave a great humanitarian lesson. The Turkish people will not forget that" (Milliyet, November 18, 1999).

Yet the well progressing Turkey-Israel relations came to a halt in September 2000 with Ariel Sharon's visit of *Haremönüşserif* (or *Mescid-i Aksa*), which triggered the second mass movement, *intifada*, on the Palestinian side. This event caused some problems with respect to Turkey-Israel relations at the diplomatic level in the following years. For instance, Turkey voted for condemnation of Israel for the excessive use of force against Palestinians at the United Nations General Assembly. Likewise, former President Süleyman Demirel participated in a fact-finding commission (the Mitchell Commission) internationally formed to investigate the events and the commission found the Israeli side guilty (Sönmezoglu, 2006: 584). Similarly, Ecevit defined Sharon's harsh attitudes as genocide in 2002, which led to a temporary crisis between Turkey and Israel to the extent that Ecevit later on had to express his apologies (Hürriyet, April 2, 2002). Finally, in 2004, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as some government officers, openly condemned the Israeli government for using "state terror" against Palestinians, particularly upon the death of *HAMAS* leader Ahmed Yasin. All these resulted in an observable decline in Turkey-Israel relations.

But interestingly, while the diplomatic relations between the two countries were not going well, military and especially economic relations were not affected by the negative events. To give some examples, in June 2001, Turkish and Israeli naval forces realized a joint maneuver in the Mediterranean Sea, and air forces another maneuver, named *Anadolu Kartalı*, in Konya. In August 2001, Sharon made an official visit to Turkey, during which an agreement was signed to produce *Arrow-2* antimissile system. In the same year, the modernization project of about 900 tanks belonging to Turkish army was given to Israeli IMI firm. In July 2002, 300 helicopters belonging to Turkish air force were also given to the same firm to

be modernized.

The commercial relations between the two countries also visibly increased with the start of the new millennium. While in the year 1993, the volume of economic activities was approximately 137 USD and in 1999, 891, the figure reached about 1 billion USD in 2007 (see http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%BCrkkiye-%C4%B0srail_il%C5%9Fkileri).

That aside, Turkey and Israel seem to be eager to develop common projects with respect to the sphere of energy. The most important project, in this regard, is the delivery of Russian natural gas, brought to Turkey in 2003, to Israel through a pipeline proposed to take place at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Albeit not realized yet, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan has emphasized his support to the project many times.

IV. THE PROBLEMATIC AREAS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

As summarized above, Turkey and Israel have developed much closer relations in the post-Cold War era in many areas, displaying both “high politics” and “low politics” cooperation examples. Particularly important was the development of military relations, which symbolized a high level of eagerness for bilateral cooperations, though it caused a certain degree of disappointment for the Arab world.

However, Turkey-Israel relations are not away from any problem. Indeed, there are some problematic areas and unresolved issues in the two countries’ relations. These can be summarized as follows:

First of all, with respect to the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Turkish public generally supports the Palestinian side, due, mainly, to religious ties, as well as negative stereotypes against the Jews. The image of Jews in the eyes of Turkish people deserves a particular attention. As Gencer Özcan astutely observes, anti-Semitism is tolerated to a great extent in the Turkish society. Undesirable events in the country, as well as in the world, are often tied to “Jewish conspiracy”. The Jews, in general, and Israelis, in particular, are believed to “govern” the whole world behind the scene. By extension, the Israelis making investments in Turkey are viewed with great suspicions as if they were trying to “invade” the country with their money to realize their dream of “greater Israel”. Of course, this view discouraged Israelis to make investment in Turkey. As a matter of fact, in comparison with other foreign investments, the Israeli investments are in small amounts (Özcan, 2005: 116-120).

Yet beyond the stereotypes affecting the attitudes of Turkish people toward the Israelis, it was, and to some extent still is, the reality that the Israeli army intermittently used excessive force in their struggle against the Palestinians, causing death or injury of many innocent civilians. Especially during Ariel Sharon’s administration, the reactions of Turkish people against the Israelis visibly increased. The latest events in Gaza further exacerbated Israel’s negative image, in this regard. Actually, in 2005, Israel officially withdrew from the Gaza Strip it had occupied

since 1967. However, the withdrawal did not end Israel's effective control of the Palestinian territory in all vital regards, thus inflaming Palestinian resentment rather than diffusing it. Under this atmosphere, in January 2006, Hamas swept parliamentary elections, winning a majority. Soon after, Hamas and Israel began to clash, as Israel viewed Hamas basically a terrorist organization, aimed at destroying Israeli existence in the region. Hostilities quickly escalated. Many shootings from both sides eventually turned into a massive violence. To stop "Hamas terror", Israel decided to use military force and began an invasion of the Gaza Strip on January 3, 2009. Although Israel unilaterally declared a cease-fire on January 18, the cease-fire did not end the Israeli siege and military existence in the region. At present, the conflict and intermittent violence continue.

With Israel's recent bombardment and invasion of Gaza, described by Amnesty International as "wanton destruction and collective punishment", the Turkish public has been making great pressure on the government to cut all relations with Israel. But for the Turkish government, it does not seem easy to give up economic, military, and diplomatic ties with Israel, developed in nearly two decades. On the other hand, it is not easy to ignore public pressure either. Nevertheless, the dilemma the Turkish government faces today is likely to result in some changes in the Turkish foreign policy in favor of the Palestinians in the long term.

Another problematic area in Turkey-Israel relations is the two countries' approach to the Kurdish question. Israel tends to view the Kurdish uprising as an element of balance against the Arabs. That is why, it is tolerant, even supportive of the Kurdish ethnopoliitical movement. In this respect, Israel did not visibly show a negative attitude toward the PPK terror organization in Turkey. Only during Benjamin Netanyahu's term, Israel declared PPK as a terrorist organization and provided Turkey with some intelligence, but that was just aimed to alleviate Turkey's frustration (Ari, 2005: 639).

Yet on the other hand, Turkey has been very sensitive about the Kurdish issue. Viewing it as a domestic problem, Turkey is greatly concerned about any kind of external support to PPK. After the invasion of Iraq by the United States, the Kurds have become even stronger in their ethnic mobilization, demanding stronger autonomy, some even an independent state, in Iraq and elsewhere. While such developments severely disturb Turkey, they are usually welcomed by the Israelis, since, as mentioned before, Israel's policy is not to keep Iraq unified, but to divide it so that the Kurds can counter-balance the threat posed by the Arabs against Israel. Finally, with respect to the water conflict between Turkey and Syria, Israel tends to lean toward Syria's viewpoint, supporting the idea that Turkey ought to share *Fırat* equally, since it is an international river. Actually, Israel's intention is not to support Syria *per se*, but to decrease this country's pressure on Golan Heights. As known, Israel took over Golan Heights from Syria in 1967 and has kept them since then. Because Golan Heights are a good source of water for the Israelis, Israel is not willing to give up them. Instead, it gives support to Syria's thesis of sharing *Fırat*, hoping that if Syria satisfies with water, it would be less insisting on taking

back Golan Heights (Sönmezoglu, 2006: 589). However, Turkey has shown no intention to change its position on *Firat*, arguing that the use of it is within its own sovereignty.

V. CONCLUSION

The development of Turkey-Israel relations in the post-Cold War era symbolizes an important change for both Turkey and Israel that had to shape their own foreign policy, especially within their region, after the disappearance of the bipolar international system dominating the Cold War. In this development, as addressed above, both common threats and expectations for common gains played a major role.

However, again as discussed above, the relations between the two countries are not away from problems. There are serious issues in bilateral relations, indeed, including negative stereotypes against the Jews in the Turkish society, Turkey and Israel's different approaches to the Kurdish question, as well as different views on the water conflict between Turkey and Syria. Particularly the latest event, Israel's occupation of Gaza, obviously exacerbated anti-Semitism in the Turkish society, exemplified by days of protests. Even though the Turkish government has been very careful to pursuit balance of power politics, officially not even condemning Israel, the pressure of the public will likely to change Turkish foreign policy in the long run if Israel continues to "solve" the Palestinian problem by means of military force. Thus, the direction and future of the relations between Turkey and Israel seem to depend not only on the countries' ability to successfully cope with political problems or material issues, but also on a radical change of Israeli image in the Turkish society, which requires Israel's avoidance of excessive use of force in combating terrorism and more constructive approach to the Middle East peace process.

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