BETWEEN CRISSES AND FRAGILE STABILITY: TÜRKİYE-ISRAEL AFFAIRS

Since the establishment of Israel, the Turkish-Israeli relations have been marked by continuous periods of swings – from crises to cooperation and back. This article aims to shed light on the turbulent bilateral ties by focusing on the role of the current Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule in Türkiye. In doing so, it firstly provides a background on the two countries’ relations, covering the period between their foundational years and 2002. Secondly, it explores a series of significant crises against which the Turkish-Israeli relations reached an all-time low starting with the Operation Cast Lead in 2008. Given the recent developments unfolding in Türkiye’s domestic sphere and its close geography, this work lastly assesses the impact of the Abraham Accords in 2020 on bilateral relations and speculates about the future trajectories.

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Türkiye became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel a year after its creation. This move was followed by Ankara’s opening of a diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv in 1950. Although the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 provoked short-term diplomatic tension between both countries, bilateral relations progressed relatively well throughout the 1950s. During this period, the two states signed trade and construction agreements, while agreeing to cooperate on military intelligence. This was primarily because both countries were observing the regional and global developments with deep concerns, especially after the rise of pan-Arabism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt and the growing Soviet expansionism.

However, a sequence of events unfolding in the 1960s interrupted this cooperative impetus. First, after U.S. President L. Johnson prevented Türkiye from involving in the Cyprus conflict in 1964, Türkiye aimed to garner support from the Arab countries. Türkiye’s rapprochement with the Arab actors continued during the Arab-Israeli Wars in 1967 and 1973. During these wars, for example, Türkiye did not permit the U.S. forces to transfer military supplies to Israel by using NATO bases. It also opposed Israel’s land accusations over the West Bank and Gaza following these wars. Türkiye voted for UN Resolution 3379, associating Israel’s foundational paradigm, i.e., political Zionism, with racial discrimination. These moves later prepared the sociopolitical background for Türkiye’s recognition of the PLO in 1974. It even permitted the PLO to open a political bureau in Ankara in 1979. In the same vein, these developments went parallel with Türkiye’s downgrading of its diplomatic relations with Israel in 1980 after it declared Jerusalem its capital.

After the end of the Cold War, the Turkish-Israeli relations gained another momentum, particularly following the eruption of the first Gulf War, during which both states were in the same coalition against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Akin to the episode in the 1950s, the two states found themselves on the same page again, being watchful against the post-Cold War security threats in the region with the rise of Islamic extremism and international terrorism. These theoretical concerns intersected with the close events that sought to bring stability to the region by the U.S.-brokered treaties, i.e., the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty. In the same year of the Madrid Peace Conference, Türkiye upgraded its relations to the ambassadorial level with Israel.

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1 Yet, Türkiye, India, Greece, and other major Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Iran, voted against the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state in 1947.
The Turkish leadership perceived these reconciliatory developments as unique opportunities on two dimensions. As briefly mentioned, Türkiye had adopted a sympathetic position towards the Palestinian issue since the 1940s. Thus, closely observing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would first provide a space for Türkiye to scale up its regional profile and become an active player working towards regional peace and stability. It would second help the country to strengthen its developing relations with Israel, mainly based on strategic lines. In this sense, furthering bilateral relations would support the two countries’ efforts to weaken the PLO-PKK linkage and balance Syria, which imposed a security threat to both Israel and Türkiye considering, among others, the Golan Heights issue and Hafez Assad’s assistance to the PKK and ASALA. Echoing this rationale, bilateral relations reached their zenith in the 1990s. They not only extended their security cooperation in this decade, such as organizing joint military trainings but also initiated free trade agreements and cultural and educational programs.

Having said this, the Turkish-Israeli relations were severely damaged, almost hitting rock bottom, under the JDP rule (2002-present). The following section first sheds light on the JDP elites’ sociopolitical background, which traces back to the mid-1990s. It analyzes the critical events that have left significant imprints on bilateral relations under the JDP rule.

**Türkiye-Israel Relations During the JDP Rule**

The JDP elites, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Bülent Arınç, have begun their political careers in the ranks of the Virtue Party, founded by the self-proclaimed Islamist Prime Minister (1996-1997) of Türkiye, Necmettin Erbakan. Although he did not serve long in office, Türkiye established strong relations with

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7 Arınç was also a member of Erbakan’s former party, National Salvation Party (1972-1981), but did not take any prominent role.
political Islamists in the region, such as Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine, under the Erbakan rule. In a short time, he also visited Libya, Egypt, and Malaysia and even proposed the establishment of “the Muslim Eight” as an alternative to the West’s G-8.8

The JDP came to power after the 2002 general elections. The party has acted as the leader of the Islamist movement in Türkiye, resuming Erbakan’s foreign policy route to enhance Türkiye’s ties with the Muslim Arab world. In advancing this goal, however, the JDP has increasingly adhered to religious narratives and conservative-traditionalist ethos at the expense of Türkiye’s alignment with the West, which was criticized as being a top-down agenda imposed by the old military-bureaucratic elites who had no genuine connection with the country’s sociopolitical fabric. This identity-based contestation went hand in hand with the JDP cadres’ selective reading of the country’s imperial past. Ottoman rule was not only imagined to be multicultural and multiethnic by the party elites; it was also portrayed as the peak point of the Islamic civilization.9 Since Türkiye was seen as the natural inheritor of this Ottoman legacy, it was attributed to a historical mission to “unify the elements of the fragmented nation [referring to the former Ottoman societies]”.10 This ideology would justify the JDP’s efforts in developing stronger relations with the Muslim Arab actors along the pro-Islamic lines.

Frequently coined as neo-Ottomanism, this proactive foreign policy agenda was not powerfully materialized until the JDP’s second term (2007-2011).11 It was primarily because the party was concerned with consolidating its capacity to weaken the influence of the secular state intelligentsia and military over the state bureaucracy. Thus, the developing Turkish-Israeli relations did not witness a radical detour until 2008. For example, even though Türkiye denounced Israel’s harsh management of the Second Intifada, the highest-level official visits continued between the two countries. This era also witnessed the continuation of strategic and economic cooperation. For example, Israel participated again in the Anatolian Eagle training in Konya, while the two countries’ trade volumes reached their records in each

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8 It should be noted that although Erbakan adopted strong Islamic stance at home and sought to articulate this self-image abroad, he personally signed the free trade and military cooperation agreements with Israel. The main reason behind this move was the strong influence of secular state bureaucracy and military over the government that restrained the expansion of Erbakan’s Islamic vision.


11 Having that said, Turkey established strong links with the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamist groups. It also strengthened its relationship with Iraq, Iran, and Syria following the resurgence of the PKK threat after the Iraqi War in 2003.
consecutive year between 2002 and 2007. Nonetheless, the 2008 Operation Cast Lead marked a turning point in bilateral relations. This rupture was followed by two major crises that unfolded between 2009 and 2010: the One Minute crisis and the Blue Marmara flotilla crisis.

"With these pressing issues in mind, the Turkish leadership has been closely observing the shifting regional relations in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, being fostered by the Abraham Accords in 2020."

The first rupture arrived in 2008 when Israel initiated a military operation against Hamas in Gaza. Referring to the former’s disproportionate use of coercive power, Prime Minister Erdogan criticized Israel and even described its actions as state terrorism. Following his condemnation, he visited significant Arab actors in the region, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, seeking to establish a joint platform that would pressure Israel. This was followed by Türkiye’s suspension of its military cooperation with Israel. A related watershed, known as the One Minute crisis, was revealed a year after at the World Economic Forum in Davos. At the 2009 summit, Prime Minister Erdogan criticized Israel’s harsh handling of the Palestinian issue and said Israel’s President Shimon Peres, who was sitting next to him, that “...the loudness of your voice has to do with a guilty conscience...when it comes to killing, you know well how to kill”. Following his speech, Erdogan stormed out of the summit, shocking the speakers and audience alike.

These bold moves had threefold outcomes. First, they prepared a fertile background for the JDP to enhance its regional profile along the party’s contours shaped and spurred by then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Second, they deteriorated the Turkish-Israeli relations further, being the Lower Seat crisis as a paragon. Accompanied by

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12 “Turkey Exports to Israel”, *Trading Economies*, (15 November 2022). https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/exports/israel#:~:text=Türkiye%20Exports%20to%20Israel%20was,updated%20on%20November%202022


17 It occurred following the airing of a TV series in Türkiye that was argued to be anti-semitic by the Israeli officials. Türkiye’s ambassador to Israel, Oğuz Çelikkol, was called for a meeting on this matter. However, he was offered a lower sofa during the meeting, creating a humiliating setting which was closely monitored by the Israeli media.
the JDP’s populist appeal, they third helped the party to draw electoral support from the nationalist-conservative enclaves for the 2009 municipality elections. Against this turbulent background, the Blue Marmara flotilla incident erupted in 2010 – the most profound crisis in the history of bilateral relations, where it hit rock bottom.

As a part of the Operation Cast Lead, Israel imposed a naval blockade on Gaza, isolating the territory from the international sphere. Then, the Turkish NGO called Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) planned to deliver massive humanitarian aid to Gaza via flotilla, which would use international waters in the Mediterranean Sea. It, however, raised significant concerns among the Israeli leadership as the IHH was believed to share links with extremist Islamist groups. Echoing this alarmist mindset, the flotilla was intercepted and onboarded by the Israeli commandos during its course in international waters in May 2010, killing ten Turkish nationals. The immediate impact of this incident was far-reaching. For example, the Turkish leadership downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel and sought an emergency gathering in the UN Security Council, which concluded with the council’s condemnation of Israel. Türkiye did not invite any NATO members (and Israel) to its annual Anatolian Eagle drills held in the same year. It also refused Israel’s access to radar intelligence collected in Malatya and designated Israel as a “major threat”, while removing Iran from its threat list.

The Foreign Minister Davutoğlu even compared the Blue Marmara crisis with the 9/11 attacks, indicating that its traumatic impact would be a watershed for Türkiye’s relations with the West in general and with Israel more specifically. Yet, bilateral economic relations had not seemed to be negatively affected by the escalating tensions their trade volume increased by 12 percent between 2010 and 2012.

In this sense, the flotilla crisis was the most destabilizing incident in the Turkish-Israeli relations. It, however, intersected with the Arab Spring protests, preparing another platform for the two states to resolve their issues along national interests, albeit marked by ups and downs. In this sense, after U.S. President Barrack Obama’s visit to Israel in 2013, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to apologize for the Blue Marmara incident and pay reparations to the families who lost their

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22 Cohen, _Türkiye and Israel_, “Turkish Document cites Israel as major threat”, Ynetnews, (30 October 2010). https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3976899,00.html. This was particularly important as the data gathered in Malatya was primarily used to watch Iran’s possible aerial threats against Israel.
24 “Turkey Exports to Israel”.
relatives during the raid. He also granted Türkiye to construct a hospital in Gaza. Nevertheless, Netanyahu hesitated to deepen bilateral relations as Türkiye demanded Israel lift its naval blockade on Gaza. Subsequently, Türkiye halted its trade, military, and defense ties with Israel, while downgrading its diplomatic relations to the second-secretary level. This was accompanied by Türkiye’s growing connections with the Hamas regime, which another military campaign of Israel would soon hit in 2014, Operation Protective Edge. That being said, a series of focal developments unfolding both at external and internal space have directly influenced the trajectory of bilateral relations, driving the JDP elites to normalize its relations with Israel based on strategic calculations. The following section sheds light on this chain of events, starting with the Arab Spring protests.

**Failed Regional Expectations, Domestic Struggles, and the Abraham Accords**

The JDP elites initially perceived the Arab Spring protests as positive developments as these popular movements facilitated the transition of power from decades-old autocratic governments to the Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups, whom they had close links, in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt. These major regional changes would help Türkiye expand its sphere of influence and promote itself as a major geopolitical player in line with the JDP’s agenda. In fact, the JDP leadership emotionally invested in this project at a scale that blinded their capability to bring a democratic regime change in Syria following the massive demonstrations against Bashar Assad. As the conflict in Syria quickly turned into a civil war (2011-present), Türkiye carried out frequent cross-border operations in North Syria, especially after 2016, such as the Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield, seeking to protect its territories from the attacks of the ISIS and the YPG, the PKK’s Syrian branch. In this period, Türkiye also trained Sunni opposition groups against Assad regime, the most prominent example being the Free Syrian Army. However, these extensive efforts did not instigate a regime change in Syria since Türkiye overestimated its military capacity, while ignoring Assad’s international alliances. Along with the toppling of Egypt’s Mohamed Mursi in 2013 by general Abdel Sisi, the case in Syria heralded the gradual downfall of the so-called neo-Ottomanist foreign policy in theory and practice even though the JDP elites did not let it disappear entirely at a discursive level, e.g., Erdogan criticizing Israel’s increasing security measures around the al-Aqsa mosque.

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25 “Netanyahu apologises to Turkish PM for Israeli role in Gaza flotilla raid”, *The Guardian*, (22 March 2013).


While these critical events were disclosed in its close region, Türkiye experienced a turbulent development at home. In July 2016, an Islamist group called Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü organized a coup attempt to overthrow the JDP government. This traumatic event resurrected Türkiye’s old separation anxieties, i.e., Sèvresphobia, under which the state leadership has increasingly adhered to the survivalist rhetoric that nurtures nationalist and nativist sentiments. As a result, an ever-resonant Western skepticism in Turkish politics and society came to the surface again. Coupled with Türkiye’s unilateral moves and militaristic turn in foreign policy, these major developments culminated in Türkiye’s regional isolationism and sparked international criticism. In the nexus of the Turkish-Israeli relations, for example, the latter accused the former of following a neo-imperialist agenda and thus portrayed Türkiye as being a major source of regional instability in 2019.

It would not be misleading to argue that Türkiye still suffers from regional ostracism to some degree and has sought to rationalize this case as “precious loneliness” for a long time. It has, however, come with missed opportunities in bilateral relations, such as the natural gas research in the East Mediterranean, where Israel has been cooperating with Greece, and Cyprus (and later Egypt) left Türkiye outside this crucial regional partnership. This loneliness in the foreign sphere becomes even more challenging for the JDP leadership considering the country’s poor economic performance, hammered by debt crisis and high inflation. With these pressing issues in mind, the Turkish leadership has been closely observing the shifting regional relations in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, being fostered by the Abraham Accords in 2020. Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed the U.S.-brokered agreement in 2020 to enhance their bilateral relations on the topics of, among others, energy and agriculture. Following this reproachment with the major Arab actor, Israel also signed normalization treaties with Morocco, Bahrain, and lastly with Saudi Arabia. This was the most striking opening of Israel to the Arab powers since 1948, that was facilitated by the de-escalating atmosphere in the region. In parallel to this, the Accords diminished the impact of the Palestinian question in developing relations with Israel.

Against this backdrop, the UAE’s Crown Prince Mohammed Nahyan visited Türkiye to normalize bilateral relations as the UAE was among Türkiye’s actors

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29 Umut Can Adısönmez and Recep Onursal, “‘Strong, but Anxious State’: The Fantasmatic Narratives on Ontological Insecurity and Anxiety in Turkey,” Uluslararası İlişkiler, Vol. 19, No. 73 (2022), pp. 61-75.
30 “Israel’s UN envoy: Erdogan has turned Türkiye into a ‘regional hub for terror’, Times of Israel, (29 October 2019). https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-un-envoy-erdogan-has-turned-turkey-into-a-regional-hub-for-terror/
32 Oğul Tuna and Gökhan Çinkara, “The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations” https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/potential-azerbaijani-mediation-turkish-israeli-relations
accused of supporting the July 2016 coup attempt. In the same vein, President Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia in 2022. It was seen as another critical move in light of Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in Istanbul. These efforts were lastly followed by the Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s visit to Türkiye in March 2022, marking another historical turning point in the two countries’ relations. Taken together with the recent normalization wave in the region, Herzog’s visit was evaluated as the end of Türkiye’s “precious loneliness”, which was backed by Israel’s readiness to work with Türkiye on the East Mediterranean gas.33

Nonetheless, the continuation of this promising path in the Turkish-Israeli relations will be determined by various factors, particularly by the domestic politics in both countries. On the one hand, the former Prime Minister of Israel and the leader of the right-wing party Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, was recently invited to form a new government after the collapse of the coalition government. Considering it would be the first time that the far-right “Religious Zionism/Jewish Power bloc” could have a powerful presentation at the state level,34 Netanyahu’s approach towards the Palestinian question would be a critical parameter for the trajectory of bilateral relations. On the other hand, Türkiye will hold national elections in June 2023. Similarly to its Israeli counterpart, the JDP’s election campaign gains gravity at this critical juncture. Thus, whether the party would stick to nationalistic-polarizing discourse towards the internal and external ‘Others’ would be a key indicator to test the sustainability of the Turkish-Israeli relations.

33 Sinem Cengiz, “The end of Turkey’s ‘precious loneliness’ may be on the horizon” https://www.arabnews.com/node/1824506