

TPQ ROUNDTABLE: THE EVOLVING RELATIONS OF TURKEY AND ISRAEL*

On 2 July 2013, Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty (FNF) hosted a roundtable discussion titled “The Evolving Relations of Turkey and Israel”. The roundtable aimed to foster debate from diverse perspectives on the evolution of bilateral relations and the prospects of cooperation in the “post-apology” period. This analysis reviews the main arguments and points made by the speakers and participants.



* This overview was put together by TPQ’s editorial staff. We particularly would like to thank Ali Cihan Sarkaya, editorial assistant of TPQ, for his contributions.

On 2 July 2013, Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty (FNF) hosted a roundtable discussion in Istanbul titled: “The Evolving Relations of Turkey and Israel”.¹ This event brought together policy makers, diplomats, pundits, academics, and members of the media. The panel of speakers, moderated by op-ed Editor of *Hürriyet Daily News (HDN)* Barçın Yınanç, featured Prof. Efraim Inbar, professor in Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA); Dr. Nimrod Goren, founder and chairman of Mitvim, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies; and Kadri Gürsel, columnist for *Milliyet*.

The Honeymoon as a Post-Cold War Phenomenon

The first issue discussed by our panelists concerned the 1990s, an era termed the “honeymoon period” of Turkish-Israeli relations. Although Turkey was the first state with a predominantly Muslim population to recognize the State of Israel in 1949, a “honeymoon” per se did not occur until this decade.

An “alliance of necessity” took shape within the framework of the “periphery doctrine”, an Israeli foreign policy concept advanced by Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. This concept was based on the exigency of developing strategic alliances with non-Arab states of the periphery –primarily Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia– in order to secure Israel’s national security.²

According to Inbar, Israel –through a *realpolitik* lens– has always desired good relations with Turkey, especially “to dilute the religious dimension of its conflict with the Arab World.” He also underlined that “the fluctuations in Turkish-Israeli relations are always primarily the decisions of the Turks rather than the Israelis.” Goren confirmed the importance of the Arab dimension for Turkish-Israeli relations: “the relations between Israel and Turkey had their ups and downs throughout their history. Many of these ups and downs were linked to the Israeli-Arab conflict.”

This honeymoon period was actually a product of post-Cold War realities. As Inbar explained, “as a result of the change in the international system, important countries in the world upgraded their relations with Israel.” According to Inbar, regional developments also played a major role in this regard: “[the] Oslo agreement with the

1 See the press release of the roundtable: “TPQ/FNF Roundtable on Turkish-Israeli Relations,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, July 2013, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/907/tpqfnf-roundtable-on-turkish-israeli-relations/>; Complete video of the roundtable can also be accessed at TPQ’s website: <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/906/the-evolving-relations-of-turkey-and-israel/>

2 Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), p. 21.

Palestinians basically proved Israel's status into the region and, seeing that Arabs were developing relations with Israel, made it easier for many countries to have better relations with Israel too."

At that time, Turkey also had many incentives for establishing better relations with Israel. During the Cold War, Turkey's goals and reservations were clear; its main security threat was the Soviet Union. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as Inbar notes, Turkey "was thrown back to the

Middle East." Significant regional developments including the rise of Iran's Islamist regime, Iraq's expansionist ambitions, and disputes with Syria over territory, water, and terrorism emerged as Turkey's primary security concerns. Inbar suggested that improved Turkish-Israeli relations were a result of these shared strategic vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, Turkey's position in NATO was ambiguous in the post-Cold War period. Having relied on NATO for its security for almost forty years, the end of the Cold War brought about new geopolitical realities for Turkey, one of which was the search for potential allies in the region. Due to the aforementioned reasons, Israel emerged as the most likely candidate.

Israel also had the potential to support Turkey's international lobbying efforts in the 1990s. Turkey traditionally faced various challenges in Washington D.C., mainly from Greek and Armenian lobbies. "Turks have always understood that having good relations with Israel could be useful in Washington," Inbar emphasized. He explained Israel's efforts to this end: "[in the honeymoon period] Israel was educating American Jewry about the importance of Turkey. All the various missions of Jewish organizations that come on a regular basis to Israel were diverted to meet Turks, Turkish government officials, and think-tank professors, in order to sensitize them to the strategic importance of Turkey. [As a result of this], there was a big change in [the views about Turkey among] the American Jewry."

Military cooperation was one of the main pillars of bilateral relations during the honeymoon period. Turkey was having difficulty accessing contemporary military technology during the 1990s, and Israeli assistance proved to be invaluable in this

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regard. The benefits were mutual; the Israeli Air Force’s access to the Turkish aerospace was important for its training exercises. In addition to military cooperation, trade relations also flourished in this period.

However since the beginning of the decade, as a result of changes in global and regional power dynamics, various incidents regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rise of the AKP, and subsequent domestic political changes in

Turkey, Turkish-Israeli relations have deteriorated. The following sections briefly summarize the events that led to the breakdown of bilateral relations and present the speakers’ remarks on the dynamics of this change.

The Downward Spiral

Between 2008 and 2011, there was a series of events that led to the current impasse in Turkish-Israeli relations, among which Operation Cast Lead –Israel’s three week offensive into Gaza– in 2008 is generally considered to be the first. Prior to this operation, Ankara had been mediating a peace accord between Israel and Syria. After the operation, Erdoğan condemned Israel’s operation in Gaza as a “serious crime against humanity” and declared that he had frozen his contacts with Israel’s Prime Minister Olmert.³

In January 2009, during a debate session with Israeli President Shimon Peres in the World Economic Forum in Davos, Erdoğan used harsh words to criticize Peres’ remarks concerning the operation in Gaza and then stormed off the stage. These developments, along with increasingly anti-Israeli remarks in the Turkish media brought criticisms from the Israeli government, subsequently leading to the “low chair crisis.” In January 2010, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon had summoned Turkey’s ambassador to Israel, Oğuz Çelikkol, over an anti-Israeli TV show aired in Turkey. During that meeting Çelikkol was deliberately seated in a chair lower than the Israeli diplomats, causing uproar within the Turkish public. Even though President Peres described the incident as the “mistake of one man” and Ayalon later

3 “In Protest of Gaza Attacks, Syria Halts Indirect Talks with Israel,” *Haaretz*, 28 December 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/in-protest-of-gaza-attacks-syria-halts-indirect-talks-with-israel-1.260392>

issued an apology, the incident widened the gap in bilateral relations even further.⁴

The most critical development in these series of events was the *Mavi Marmara* incident. In May 2010, Israeli soldiers boarded a vessel named *Mavi Marmara*, one of six vessels in a convoy aiming to break through the Israeli blockade on Gaza. Israeli soldiers killed nine Turkish passengers onboard the vessel. Following the incident, Erdoğan named

Israel a “terrorist state” and Turkey recalled its ambassador. Turkey also demanded that Israel apologize and pay compensation. In September 2011, following the UN Palmer Commission’s report on the incident, Ankara expelled Israel’s ambassador Gabby Levy, thus severing diplomatic ties with Israel. Additionally, in the same month, Ankara added a third precondition for normalization of relations, the revoking of the blockade of Gaza, thus connecting the process of normalization to a much more complex issue – the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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The comments of the speakers revealed many facets of Turkey’s approach towards Israel. Since the establishment of bilateral relations in 1949, as Goren explained, the major shifts in Turkish-Israeli relations have been related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He stated, “the link between the Israeli-Arab conflict and Israeli-Turkish relations was evident even before AKP came to power in [November] 2002.” He reminded the audience that the prior coalition government of Turkey had made very harsh statements regarding Israel’s operations in the West Bank during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* in early 2002.

Goren pointed out that the Israeli public was initially concerned about AKP’s rise to power. There were fears that Turkey would transform itself into an Islamic state similar to Iran and that it would sever its ties with Israel. Nevertheless, according to Goren, these concerns proved to be unrealistic, at least at the beginning, since Erdoğan’s first six years as Prime Minister showed that bilateral relations could continue to prosper. Furthermore, high-level visits, including Erdoğan’s visit to Jerusalem, demonstrated that despite differences over the Arab-Israeli conflict, cooperation between the two countries could continue.

4 “Peres: Humiliation of Turkey Envoy Does not Reflect Israel’s Diplomacy,” *Haaretz*, 13 January 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/peres-humiliation-of-turkey-envoy-does-not-reflect-israel-s-diplomacy-1.261381>

“Both sides refused to make a move toward normalization in 2011; in 2013, however, regional developments—especially the ongoing struggle in Syria—forced both sides to ease up on their hardline approaches.”

Another misperception from the Israeli side regarded the evolution of Turkish domestic politics. According to Goren, “during [the first six years of AKP rule] the contact between Israel and Turkey remained between the old elites.” Israeli elites did not invest enough effort to create ties with the new rising conservative elite in Turkey, Goren claimed, “maybe out of the notion that Erdoğan will not stay [in power] for long.” As a result, he emphasized, when relations started to show clear signs of deterioration in 2008, “there was no societal basis [to prop up bilateral relations].”

However, in contrast to the deterioration of relations on the political level, trade relations—one of the principal gains of the honeymoon period—remained intact. Goren addressed this phenomenon:

The cooperation that was built in the 1990s was so strong and the ties between the business persons was so immense that when the political level clashed, the business level unlike the civil society level managed to go on to reach new heights, and the trade between the countries was at its highest point, when the political relations between the two countries were at their lowest point.

Inbar pointed out the importance of Turkey for Israel by stating: “the loss of Turkey is a huge strategic loss that cannot be compensated by [establishing] relations with other countries.” He added that, “the deterioration of bilateral relations is the result of the change in the strategic environment and Turkey’s domestic politics.” Inbar elaborated on this point by stating, “this relationship [between Turkey and Israel] is connected to shifts in Turkish foreign policy, which under the current leadership of AKP means distancing Turkey from the West” in accordance with its goal of establishing hegemony in the Muslim world.

The Apology and Beyond

The apology for the *Mavi Marmara* incident first came onto Israel’s agenda in 2011 but it “crumbled in June because of Avigdor Lieberman’s opposition,” Gürsel

explained. Additionally, the introduction of the third precondition for normalization by Ankara created another barrier towards normalization. According to Gürsel, “the reason behind [the third condition] was to make a political investment in the shaky waters of post-Arab Spring climate in the Middle East.” Both sides refused to make a move toward normalization in 2011; in 2013, however, regional developments—especially the ongoing struggle in Syria—forced both sides to ease up on their hardline approaches. Gürsel underlined Turkey’s concerns in this regard and later on elaborated this point in his article in *Al-Monitor*:

Here, we must underline that there was no more need in the turbulent waters of the Arab Spring for a “cold war with Israel” anchor that Turkey’s Islamist rulers relied on to preserve their presumed justified positions with the Arab people. This loss of function had become more evident after it became clear that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was not going anywhere in the foreseeable future. To this, we must add the rich “political capital” they thought they had amassed by being anti-Israel, and that turned out to be inadequate in competing with Cairo and Doha when it came to influencing Hamas. Finally, we must also remember that the cold war format with Israel was becoming too expensive politically for Erdoğan in his relations with the Obama administration and U.S. Congress.⁵

Goren pointed out a similar concern on the Israeli side:

In 2013, the same form [of apology that was drafted in 2011] was adopted by Israel; it symbolizes a change in how Israel acts with the Arab Spring. [Israeli reaction was] very resistant to change in the Middle East in 2011; it tried to go out and to look for allies elsewhere – in Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Greece. Israel understands now that it has to get back to the region to form [at least] *ad-hoc* strategic partnerships.

Goren also explained Israel’s expectations from the apology. He stated that Israel’s incentive for apologizing to Turkey was based on the exigency of reestablishing diplomatic ties more so than it was based on the hopes of reviving the honeymoon period of the 1990s. “I think Israel believed in the necessity of mending the ties but did not see themselves as going back to Turkey or having the same friendship they used to have.”

A major turning point in the normalization process occurred in March 2013 during Obama’s visit to Israel, when Prime Minister Netanyahu apologized to Erdoğan for

⁵ Kadri Gürsel, “Turkey’s Israel Problem,” *Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/turkey-israel-normalization-threat-gezi.html>

the loss of lives in the *Mavi Marmara* incident. Despite this first step, the speakers of the discussion concurred that the normalization of relations has failed to advance. Currently the process is stuck on the second condition: the compensation issue. According to Gürsel, “there is a gap in numbers. Turkey is asking for one million dollars per person killed and Israel is offering 100,000 dollars with the argument that this is the compensation paid in the international practices.”

The current impasse in the negotiation process over the *Mavi Marmara* incident not only generated a serious backlash from the Israeli public, but also has cast a shadow over the future of Turkish-Israeli relations. There are skeptical parties in Israel claiming that even if Israel complies with Turkey’s conditions, relations would still not improve. Inbar’s following statement addresses this problem: “what Israel does or does not do is much less important. The apology is basically irrelevant to the future of Turkish-Israeli relations as long as Turkey maintains its foreign policy [trajectory]. Israel-bashing brings Turkey popularity in the Arab and Muslim world.” He stated that there will be no change in bilateral relations as long as the Turkish government believes that sour relations with Israel serves its foreign policy goals.

This concern is reflected in the changing attitude of the Israeli public. According to a poll released by MITVIM in September 2012, 79 percent of Israelis supported an apology to Turkey in order to mend bilateral relations.⁶ However, a recent poll released in June 2013 by the BESA Center revealed a major discrepancy. According to this poll, 71 percent of Israelis believe that the apology was a mistake.⁷ This result is connected to the backlash caused by the deadlock in the normalization process. Goren stated that:

The doubts in Israel are that Turkey is not sincere enough, meaning that Israel paid the price and is willing to go the extra mile yet they don’t get anything in return. (...) Now the Israeli party becomes more skeptical and wants to see something [tangible]. Whether it is high level meetings, visits to Israel, Israeli journalists interviewing top leaders in Turkey, or exchange of ambassadors –[which] can be a big sign– something that will happen to show the Israeli public that [they] will have something positive for the future... The essential basic is a positive one but if nothing happens then they will say; “why did we do that?”

6 “A Majority of Israelis Support an Israeli Apology to Turkey as Part of an Agreement to Mend Relations,” *MITVIM* (September 2012), http://www.mitvim.org.il/images/Israel-Turkey_Poll_September_2012.pdf

7 “71% of Israelis: Apologizing to Turkey was a Mistake,” *BESA Center* (7 July 2013), <http://besacenter.org/new-at-the-besa-center/71-of-israelis-apologizing-to-turkey-was-a-mistake/>

Following this roundtable discussion, *The Jerusalem Post* published an article on this subject further clarifying the Israeli public's expectations for the future of Turkish-Israeli relations. "According to the survey, only 28 percent of Israelis believe that Israeli-Turkish ties will improve in the coming years under Erdoğan. While 42 percent of the respondents said they expected the relations to stay the same, 30 percent predicted they would further deteriorate."⁸

It is also important to note that there is an Israeli condition that has contributed to the current deadlock. Israel has demanded that the legal processes in Turkey against four Israeli commanders put on trial *in absentia* in relation to the *Mavi Marmara* incident is to be stopped, as moderator Barçın Yinanç commented, "the normalization process is not only about disagreement over the numbers, but to my knowledge, they [Israelis] are more concerned with the legal processes and the families of the Turkish casualties are adamant on [not stopping] the legal processes."

"There are skeptical parties in Israel claiming that even if Israel complies with Turkey's conditions, relations would still not improve."

The Arab-Israeli peace process plays a central role in Turkish-Israeli relations. The Palestinian issue is a priority for large segments of the Turkish public. To this end, any progress made towards a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict will ease Ankara's hand in the normalization process.

According to Goren, if Israel could "develop ties with actors of the Arab world, Turkey could play a bridge role." This argument leads to the question of whether Turkey could be a viable mediator.

Interpretations of Ankara's ties with Hamas differed among the participants of the TPQ discussion. Inbar commented on Turkey's close relations with Hamas as an act of hostility towards Israel. This approach was later criticized by Akiva Eldar in his article published by *Al-Monitor*. Eldar stated: "Inbar's lecture represents a Lieberman-style foreign policy, based on militancy and national honor. The objection to Israel's apology and suggestion to adopt punitive measures against Turkey are additional attempts to turn back the wheel toward the Lieberman discourse."⁹

8 "Most Israelis don't Believe Netanyahu's Apology to Turkey was Justified," *The Jerusalem Post*, 8 July 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Most-Israelis-dont-believe-Netanyahus-apology-to-Turkey-was-justified-319093>

9 "Israeli Challenges in Reconciliation with Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, 11 July 2013,

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/divergence-israel-rebuilding-relations-turkey.html>

Contrary to Inbar, Goren explained that Turkey's connections with Hamas could be useful. He stated that at most Turkey has leverage over Hamas, and what it can contribute to the peace process is to encourage Hamas to adopt a more moderate platform, as well as to facilitate an inter-Palestinian consolidation process between itself and Fatah.

“By taking the side of Hamas, the AKP undermines its aspiration to be a mediator between Arabs and Israelis, as well as between the fragmented Palestinian government.”

Kemal Köprülü, publisher of TPQ, questioned Ankara's influence over Hamas in the question and answer portion of the conference, noting that Turkey's mediation efforts in the Middle East are “over-rated”: “ever since Hamas won the elections, there is an expectation that AKP will use its political clout to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with Hamas. In the seven years since the elections, have there been substantial results that reflect this stance?”

The ensuing discussion highlighted the following point: fostering a close relationship with the Turkish government affords Hamas political legitimacy and international recognition. The invitation of Hamas' leader Khaled Mashal to the AKP's congress in 2012 is an example to this end. AKP's strong relationship with Hamas also weakens its hand in its dealings with Fatah, while empowering Hamas politically. Mediation requires distance from the parties involved for the sake of neutrality. By taking the side of Hamas, the AKP undermines its aspiration to be a mediator between Arabs and Israelis, as well as between the fragmented Palestinian government.

Erdoğan's potential Gaza visit—which has been postponed indefinitely because of the *coup* in Egypt—was also discussed in the roundtable, and Gürsel described this visit as a “false option” or a “non-option,” adding that “this is the worst time for a Turkish Prime Minister to go to Gaza.”

Gürsel furthermore claimed such a visit would be a huge loss of political capital for Ankara, particularly in Washington D.C. He explained this point further in *Al-Monitor*:

The single concrete outcome that will be attributed to Erdogan by stalling the normalization process with Israel at this phase will be the considerable

damage to the cooperation base that he had built with Obama. Therefore, the biggest share of the ostentatious red carpet welcome given to Erdogan in Washington is his commitment to the normalization process. (...) If Erdogan had gone to Gaza, it would have been at the cost of breaching the accord with Obama – if there is going to be a visit to Gaza, a stopover in Ramallah is necessary. At the moment, it is impossible for Erdogan to go to Ramallah without first exchanging ambassadors with Israel. It is not physically possible to go to Ramallah *via* Amman, Jordan. It is a strange twist of history that requires the Turkish Prime Minister to normalize relations with Israel before he can visit Gaza and Ramallah. It is not possible to be optimistic about this.¹⁰

Gürsel underlined that the window of opportunity for improving relations will not remain open forever. He also noted that AKP government officials' anti-Semitic implications, especially after the *Gezi Park* protests in Turkey negatively affects the normalization process, as he later explained in his article:

Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay, who until now was recognized for his moderate profile, blamed the *Gezi Park* protests on the “Jewish Diaspora” [which] is a basic indicator of the government's attitude. (...) This naturally leads us to another question: How and with what moral authority will an Islamist government that has produced so much anti-Semitic conspiracy theories following the *Gezi Park* protests now be able to manage the normalization process with Israel?¹¹

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Through an examination of past cooperation between Turkey and Israel in the 1990s, it is possible to view the current enmity between the two states as a stage that can be overcome on the basis of common interests and political pragmatism. Some of the ideas voiced during the TPQ discussion about how to find common ground in the future were the following:

- Both states should be careful to avoid another incident like *Mavi Marmara*. These incidents have a large impact on the collective memories of both societies. Another incident like this might render the normalization process between two states nearly impossible, even if there is a change in government.

¹⁰ Kadri Gürsel, (9 July 2013).

¹¹ Kadri Gürsel, (9 July 2013).

- Ankara needs to show the Israeli public that its commitment to the normalization process is genuine. For example, Erdoğan's amped up anti-Israeli rhetoric only strengthens the arguments of skeptics in Israel, which further impedes the success of the normalization process. An exchange of ambassadors would be a positive first step.
- Ankara should establish a balance in its dealings with Palestinian authorities if the end goal is the conclusion of Arab-Israeli peace process. Ankara should use its leverage over Hamas to facilitate the reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas that began with the Cairo agreement in 2011.
- Israel should show positive intentions regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process. Any constructive steps from the Israeli side will have positive reflections in the attitude of the Turkish public, which will increase the likelihood that Ankara moves the normalization process forward.



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