

# TPQ ROUNDTABLE: TURKEY AND ISRAEL - OLD FRIENDS, NEW ENEMIES?

*This article reviews the roundtable discussion organized by Turkish Policy Quarterly and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on Turkish-Israeli relations, which took place on 11 March 2010 in Istanbul. In light of the discussions, the author evaluates the current state of affairs between Turkey and Israel from three different perspectives: the constitutive role of fear in relations, the emphasis on change, and problems with conceptualization. Due to Chatham House rules, the names of the participants whose words have been cited or paraphrased will remain undisclosed.*

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**O**n 11 March 2010, prominent academics, journalists, civil society activists and decision makers from Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan among others gathered in Istanbul for a *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ) roundtable discussion organized jointly with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Written in response to this discussion in which Chatham House rules applied, the aim of this article is to sum up some of the debated points and analyze the current dynamics shaping Turkish-Israeli relations. The issue, which without a doubt exceeds the limits of any brief analysis, will be illustrated through three prisms: the constitutive role of fears in Turkish-Israeli relations, the ambiguity of defining change in politics and lastly, problems with the conceptualization of anti-Semitism and pluralism.

### ***The Constitutive Role of Fears***

The current state of affairs between Israel and Turkey is considered by certain academics and journalists as one of the worst moments in the history of relations between the two nations. Questions on where Turkish-Israeli affairs are heading and whether resentment is temporary or whether relations will sink further are raised in almost every discussion. Unfortunately, in responding to these questions, pessimism pervades. Rather than hoping for the promotion of relations, the arguments brought forth worries of a total collapse. In evaluating the current state of affairs, and anticipating how future relations will take shape, fears and distrust play a constitutive role. And such skepticism is not ungrounded. In light of recent actions by the representatives of the two states in the international arena (such as Prime Minister Erdoğan's scolding of Shimon Perez at the DAVOS Summit in 2009 or Daniel Ayalon's insult of the Turkish Ambassador, Oğuz Çelikkol), and considering the lack of reciprocal public support in both Israel and Turkey (also displayed through anti-Israeli demonstrations in Istanbul), we could argue that the heyday of relations is long gone.

Going only a decade back to the aftermath of a devastating earthquake that struck Turkey (in 1999, in which Israel has supported Turkey by sending a 250-member rescue and recovery team and a field hospital<sup>1</sup>), it is clear that there has been a dramatic downfall in the level of cooperation and mutual understanding between the two countries. The strong bond which brought the two nations closer and reached its peak in the aftermath of the traumatic earthquake is now dissolving. Yet, in order for the two nations to get closer again, do we need another traumatic

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<sup>1</sup> "Israeli Aid for Turkish Earthquake Victims," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il), 18 August 1999.

encounter? According to some critics, even such an encounter would not transform the relations. In fact, following another earthquake that struck southeastern Turkey in early March 2010, Turkey has, this time, turned down Israel's offer for aid, which, from a skeptical point of view, can be interpreted as an outcome of the current state of relations.

Despite this discouraging scenario, ways to overcome such a breakdown can be found. As much as fears (of further collapse of relations between the two states) exist, from a realpolitik perspective, they can also be used to plaster the broken pieces, especially when they merge. In line with Davutoğlu's renowned "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkish foreign policy has shifted from a more critical approach to an amiable one in its handling of relations with Iran, and compared with a decade ago, Israeli authorities fear Turkey's Islamization under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. As far as their national and foreign policy preferences are concerned, Turkey and Israel may seem to be drifting away from each other. However, Iranian long range (Shahab) missiles and ambitions for going nuclear indisputably disrupt regional peace and prosperity, which will inevitably necessitate Turkey to reshape its policies on Iran. Nevertheless, for regional stability, countries in the region may accordingly (re-)discover their mutual interests, and overcome their confrontations or antagonisms. Unfortunately, in this geography, it is often hard to make clear distinctions between fears and interests and ironically, mutuality of fears (for a nuclear Iran) can provide a collective means to establish a common, interest-based ground between Israel and Turkey to get relations back on track. Within the context of Turkish-Israeli relations, what needs to be done is for the Turkish and Israeli authorities to sit down (probably within the organizational framework of an international agency, such as the United Nations, or its establishment on nuclear energy, International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA) and find a meeting point; and emphasize upon mutual gains to overcome collective losses.

Should there be a third partner, an "adhesive" so to speak, to mediate talks between the two nations? Considering that the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations does not only affect the cooperation between the two states, but also disturbs regional stability in the wider region and even affects transatlantic relations,<sup>2</sup> could we argue that the introduction of an outside actor to facilitate relations

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the waning of Israeli support for Turkey in the Armenian Genocide resolution passed by the U.S House of Representatives ended up with Prime Minister Erdogan calling Israel the "principle threat" to peace in the Middle East. After the resolution, Turkish businessmen, following an advice by Erdogan, postponed their business trip to the United States. Another example to how a breakdown of relations between Turkey and Israel could affect regional cooperation can be observed in joint military exercises between Turkey, Israel and Azerbaijan.

between Turkey and Israel would make sense? Certainly! Yet, the problem which then arrives is whether the introduction of new actors will enable the establishment of a deliberative platform to solve problems or a platform where new problems will be formulated. In order for such talks to succeed, what is needed from all participating actors is more enthusiasm and optimism, and less arrogance and overconfidence; which means, transforming our state-level, realpolitik approach to a more cooperation-based approach. It is easy for the Israelis to criticize Turkey for further Islamization or Turkish authorities to criticize Israel for its intervention in Palestine. (One of the criticisms raised by the participants is thought provoking in this regard: “Turkey is allowed to criticize Israel, but Israel is not allowed to criticize Turkey and this is a major problem in this relationship). In other words, it is easy to blame the other for its “mistakes” without taking into account the conditions that led to these “mistakes” to begin with. What is harder, and lacking in the current situation, is to be self-critical. Without a doubt, this is easier said than done – but when there is so much to lose, and so little to gain from aggression and obstinacy, we need to aim for the harder option and use our intellectual capacity to actualize it.

### ***Who Has Changed, and What Does it Signify?***

One of the issues encountered in the current relations between Turkey and Israel where there is more reciprocal blaming than mutual understanding, is on problematizing who has changed; and conceptualizing “change”. Who is responsible for this change in the bilateral relations? If we are to blame the AKP, for example, as the party solely responsible for the current state of affairs and argue that Turkey has changed under the AKP rule, how can we explain the speech made by a former Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit (in April 2002), in which he blamed Israel of committing genocide?

In light of these questions, one of the participants of the roundtable argued that Turkey is changing not simply because the AKP is in power (the new Turkey will not simply disappear once the AKP is out of the picture), but because there is structural and paradigmatic change that transforms social, political and economic realities in Turkey. Turkey has become more nationalist, more suspicious of outsiders (and therefore paranoid), more conservative and fractured yet self confident (in its neo-Ottoman spirit). This structural transformation ironically goes hand in hand with the consolidation of Turkish democracy and accession negotiations with the EU. Another participant, on the other hand, argued that

while Turkish politics is becoming more “megalomaniac”, Israeli politics is becoming further “autistic”.

The change in Turkey-Israel relations is being evaluated with more cynicism among experts. Following Foreign Minister Davutoğlu’s vision, Ankara may be looking at the world differently. Turkey has become more interventionist in regional politics, and according to certain academics, is aiming for becoming a power-player in the Middle East. Whereas the more nationalistic and Islamist camps appraise this vision and argue that Turkey should use every possibility to become more involved with its region, for secularist and certain liberal camps, Turkey’s close affiliation with this “Muslim geography” hints at its flirtation with Islamization. Change, from these two opposing perspectives, is attributed both good and bad connotations.

Israel, which has been perceived by the Turkish authorities as the aggressor in Middle East talks is, from this perspective, becoming even more aggressive and reactive in its relations with its neighbors recently. The level of aggression and reaction will probably increase if and when both Turkey and the United States (under President Obama) become more critical of Israel’s actions towards Palestine. What this means is that Israel’s ties with its allies might further weaken. Change in both Turkish and American approaches to the Middle East, from the Israeli perspective is feared for it would alienate Israel and push it into further isolation in a challenging geography. Yet at the same time, such change will also be received by the Israeli state in the forms of increasing nationalism among the Israelis and radicalization of politics. Without a doubt, this would increase antagonisms and cast a shadow on the prospect for cooperation in the region.

What is barely heard in these discussions on change (of attitudes, and of paradigm) in bilateral relations, is what causes the change that is taking place. Is it only because there is a new Minister of Foreign Affairs in Turkey who has an agenda that is different and who is more eager to cooperate with Israel’s long time adversaries? In answering this question, other elements that are shaping regional politics should not be overlooked. As far as the Turkish position is concerned, the American occupation of Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) has severely damaged the “democratic” and “liberal” image of the United States, as well as that of the other countries supporting this invasion. From a more theoretical perspective, one of the consequences of this war (and the September 11 attacks) was the otherization and stigmatization of Muslims in general and Islamists in

particular. Terms such as “radical Islam” and “Islamist terrorism” have become fashionable once again, reviving a Huntingtonian world built on unbreakable cultural differences. Turkey, as a Muslim country, was facing a decision in 2003: to be with the American camp, or not. This could also be read as the following: Turkey was left with the decision of defining its ideological borders with the Islamists either by further secularization or further Islamization. The fact that Turkey was facing such a black and white dichotomy and had to make a hasty decision (which ended up with the resolution which would have granted American troops the right to use Turkish soil to enter Iraq from the northern front, also known as the March 1 Parliamentary decision) also raised tensions within the Turkish society. And from one perspective, these developments forced the AKP to come up with new ways to orient its foreign policy priorities. This new approach reconstructed the discourse on Westernization with an Eastern twist, and although the focus has not completely shifted from the West, it was rather divided in a fashion which included Turkey’s eastern neighbors.

In order to evaluate the current situation in Turkish-Israeli relations, we have to look at the bigger picture, which not only includes other neighboring states, but also other international actors, such as the United States, or the EU. In order to conceptualize change and analyze it, which this review will not delve into (for such an ambition would require strong theoretical discussions on the very concept of change), we need to not only go further back in the history of relations between Israel and Turkey, but also keep in mind other factors that may have been decisive in shaping contemporary developments.

### ***Problems with Conceptualization***

The final point which crystallized in the roundtable discussion was the difficulty of finding the right concepts to analyze the impact of the corrosion in bilateral relations. The Israeli concerns regarding rising anti-Semitism and loss of pluralism in the Turkish society led to heated discussions among the participants over the very concepts used. Is Turkey transforming into a country where there is less tolerance for minorities (in this context, the Jewish minority) or should the demonstrations that are taking place to protest the killings in Palestine be read as anti-Israelism, and not anti-Semitism? Can we separate the role of religion in Turkey’s critical expressions over Israeli actions (and argue that it is not religion but human rights that is central to such outbursts), or does religion play an integral part in motivating the criticism vocalized in the national and international

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arena? Should the Jewish minority feel threatened by the Turkish Prime Minister's attitude towards Israel and more importantly, are his remarks widely shared by the public?

Although these questions still remain unresolved, the thin line separating anti-Semitism from anti-Israelism, that is, a religion/ethnic-based condemnation from humanity based denunciation, needs to be drawn very carefully. This task becomes further challenging when religion is perceived as an element that is inseparable from politics. Although both Turkey and Israel are secular states, Islam and Judaism are also constitutive elements of the Turkish and Israeli nations. Religion is an essential part of the social fabric in these nations. From this perspective, the Israeli invasion of Palestine is not simply perceived by the Turkish society as a matter of Israeli foreign politics – but is approached as social matter, which highlights in the role of religion and affiliates it with (Israeli) state politics. Hence, criticisms directed at Israel's foreign policy (i.e. the invasion of Gaza), and the denigration of Israeli politicians, which come in the form of verbal attacks from parliamentarians or mass demonstrations, inevitably touches upon religious elements. And especially in mass demonstrations we see that the theme of these criticisms slides from a humanitarian and ethical one to a religious one.

The solution to the problem, as illustrated by one of the discussants at the roundtable, is to make a clear distinction between policies and people. How much do Israeli policies reflect the views of the Jewish minority in Turkey; how much do these policies reflect the views of Israelis? The Israeli people, –let alone the Jewish minority in Turkey– are not accountable for every ill-fated action taken by their leaders. And Turkish people at large should not be judged by the words uttered by their leaders (such as Prime Minister Erdoğan's statement about the Armenian migrants in Turkey<sup>3</sup>), or by the fashion in which these words are spoken. When restlessness with state policies turn into restiveness with the people these policies represent, and when reactions to steps taken in state affairs turn into collective bashing and lynching of the communities these policies signify, then the concerns for religious hatred, and loss of plurality materialize.

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<sup>3</sup> Erdoğan argued that the Armenian nationals which are illegally residing in Turkey may be expelled. "Turkey Threatens to Expel 100,000 Armenians," *BBC*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8572934.stm>, 17 March 2010.

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## *Conclusion*

How should one evaluate the current state of affairs between the two states, and the two societies? If one is to approach the issue with optimism, then there are many opportunities for the two countries to rediscover their mutual interests. Yet, from a more pessimistic and realistic perspective, the prospects for relations do not seem very bright. In fact, the danger that lies ahead is foreseen as a total collapse of relations in the near future, which would have devastating consequences for Turkey, Israel and the region at large.

Among the discussants, questions similar to the following were raised and tackled: Does the current state of relations serve the best for the interests of the AKP? If so, from the AKP's and Turkey's point of view, is there no need for negotiations to even take place between the two states? And has bashing Israel become a daily, enjoyable activity among Turks? Is anti-Semitism immune to punishment or will there be a point where people and politicians in Turkey will be more cautious with their words?

More time will be needed in order for us to come up with definitive answers to some of these questions. Yet, if we want the consequences of our answers to be beneficial for both states, and more importantly, for Turkish and Israeli people, policies which are creating tensions need to be revised, mutual gains and not mutual disrespect have to be prioritized, and lessons must be taken from previous mistakes. And in this process of learning from our mistakes and empathizing with the other, the main mediator should not necessarily be looked for outside the borders of the two nations, but perhaps within. Civil society and the business world, as was brought up by one the discussants, can perhaps provide the bilateral relations with the necessary dynamism and enthusiasm it lacks and invigorate cooperation between the two countries once again.