



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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## **Turkish-Israeli Relations in the Shadow of AKP Populism**

**Berna Uzun**

The Turkish government's decision to bar Israel from a NATO air force exercise in October provided stark indication that the Turkish-Israeli strategic alignment which emerged in the mid-1990s has been substantially weakened and has entered a new, more uncertain era. The cause of this change is the shift in the balance of power within the Turkish political system, in favor of civilian authority at the expense of the military establishment. Accompanying this shift was a redefinition of defense and foreign policy interests which brought them more in line with the norms of the European Union. Turkish-Israeli intimacy was primarily based on close military cooperation, not on cooperation in the civilian sectors, notwithstanding the jump in bilateral trade and tourism. Hence, Turkish-Israeli relations are no longer underpinned by common strategic thinking among the two countries' governing elites.

Most people in Turkey believe that there is less need for close ties with Israel than a decade ago, as Turkey now has more room for diplomatic maneuver in the region. Ten years ago, Turkey almost went to war with Syria over its support of the PKK insurgency and harboring of its exiled leader. Since then, relations have been transformed, highlighted by the signing in September of a strategic cooperation agreement. Concurrently, and remarkably, Turkey has also signed a rapprochement agreement with Armenia, notwithstanding the Armenian community's long-standing insistence that the Ottoman government committed genocide against Armenians in 1915. With this pact, Turkey hopes to be better able to counter the influence of the Armenian-American lobby in Washington, which seeks to win US Congressional acknowledgement that genocide did indeed take place. Thirdly, relations with the US, which had reached a nadir after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, have been repaired.

Indeed, Turkey has much to offer the US, thanks in part to its geo-strategic location. It may assist the US in an orderly drawing down of its forces from Iraq, in the build-up of NATO forces in Afghanistan, and in helping to deliver oil and gas from Central Asian oil fields to Western markets. Also, Turkey could potentially play a useful role in ongoing US efforts to open up channels of dialogue with Syria and Iran. As Turkey's strategic value for Washington has increased, a more direct channel between Turkey and the US has been now opened.

Contrary to the claim of some Israeli scholars, the cooling in Turkish-Israeli relations is not primarily due to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s Islamic underpinnings and orientation (heritage). The AKP is a populist, pragmatic and increasingly centrist party. Moreover, it is also less stridently nationalist, and less skeptical towards the West than other parties in the Turkish Parliament.

According to the AKP's strategy, Turkey's alliances with Middle Eastern countries can be used as a tool to help advance Western interests. The AKP is also mindful that Turkey's proximity to centers of regional instability reinforces European reluctance to favorably consider Turkey for European Union membership. In AKP thinking, serving as a mediator for the Arab-Israeli conflict, and thus helping promote a more cooperative and stable regional environment, improves Turkey's chances for EU membership.

All that being said, Israel's military offensives in Gaza and Lebanon provoked strong AKP opposition, and even anger. While Israel viewed its actions as based on the sovereign right of self-defense, the AKP government saw them as violations of international law. The AKP's declared aim is to have Turkey employ "soft power" in the Middle East, in contrast to Israel's willingness to exercise its military might.

To this end, the AKP wants all parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict to be active participants in diplomatic efforts, including Hamas. Hence, senior Hamas officials were welcomed in Ankara, notwithstanding the fact that according to Turkish law, Hamas is a terrorist organization. From the AKP's perspective, Hamas was legitimately elected by the Palestinian public, thus representing its will. Israel, by contrast, contends that Hamas unduly benefits from Turkey's willingness to legitimize it, emboldening the organization without bringing about a change in its underlying rejection of Israel's right to exist.

Israel and Turkey also have major differences regarding the issue of Iran's nuclear aspirations. While Israel views Iran's nuclear program as posing an existential threat, Turkey does not view Iran as posing a strategic threat to it. At the same time, Ankara is aware that Iran's achievement of nuclear capability could alter the balance of power and undermine stability in the region. Thus, Turkey publically stresses that it wants to see the entire Middle East as a nuclear-free zone, including both Israel and Iran.

Another reason for the cooling in Israeli-Turkish ties is the AKP's inherent populism, against the background of the thinness of Israeli-Turkish societal links. Palestinians have always been regarded in Turkey as innocent victims and suffering Muslims. Consequently, the harsh statements of the AKP toward Israel dovetailed with its domestic political interests.

Taken together, these developments have caused a deep chasm of mistrust between Ankara and Jerusalem. As a result, Israel no longer considers Turkey an honest broker in potential peace talks with Syria. Whether or not this will change remains to be seen.

The AKP's populist discourse also contains an economic aspect. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's harsh statements towards Israel since last year's Gaza offensive have altered Turkey's image in the eyes of Muslim countries. Throughout the Cold War, they commonly, and suspiciously viewed Turkey as an "advanced Western outpost in the Middle East". However, Turkey's improved image, thanks to

its populist message, has brought it economic benefits, attracting Iranian and Arab capital. From 2003 to 2009, total Turkish trade with the Arab countries increased by 13.1%. In contrast; Israeli exports to Turkey fell by 44% during January-September 2009. [1] According to the Turkish Tourism Ministry's statistics [2] , Israeli tourism in Turkey decreased by forty-five percent while Iranian and Arab tourism to Turkey increased by 13.4 percent.

Turkey is clearly a country in transition, mainly due to an evolution in its foreign and defense policies, from "securitization" to "Europeanization". Israeli-Turkish relations would have been adversely affected by this development regardless of whatever government was in power. However, the AKP's Islamic populism accentuated this negative trend. At the same time, paradoxically, this new era of Turkish foreign policy could be an occasion for Israel to reevaluate its policies and make good use of Turkish mediation to reach out to the Arab states.

Two dangers exist for Turkey. The first one stems from the fact that it is "juggling a lot of balls in the air. It must be quite careful it doesn't drop any of them," [3] especially the European one. The second one is that Erdogan's harsh statements could provoke rising nationalist and populist sentiment. Historically, Turkey has never been a seedbed for anti-Semitism, but with today's climate, the country may well become one. The announcement of Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak's pending visit to Turkey next month indicates that both countries are interested in improving their now-strained ties. However, the current hostile, even poisonous climate in Turkey nonetheless carries the potential of erupting, with possible long-term negative results for Turkish-Israeli relations.

Berna Uzun is a visiting researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center from Marmara University.

[1] Undersecretariat of the Prime Ministry for Foreign Trade, 15 November 2009, <  
<http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmweb/index.cfm?action=detay&yayinID=244&icerikID=347&dil=TR> >.

[2] Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 15 November 2009, <  
<http://www.kultur.gov.tr/TR/Genel/BelgeGoster.aspx?F6E10F8892433CFF2B81939FD5B60AFAFFDE13C621852F44> >.

[3] Christopher Torchia , "Turkey, an ally to Iran and the West" , 15 November 2009, <  
[http://www.etaiwanews.com/etn/news\\_content.php?id=1096120](http://www.etaiwanews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=1096120) >.

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