

## **The Dynamics of Turkish-Israeli Relations\***

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines Turkish-Israeli relations from 1948 to 2012 in light of domestic and international events that have impacted the two countries throughout the years. The article examines each country's threat perceptions, which emanate from developments in the Middle East. The author points out commonalities and confrontations between the two countries, and discusses how the latter can be avoided. The article explores how to improve relations in view of the rapid changes occurring in the region, and discusses how the two countries are positioning themselves in the current restructuring of the Middle East and emerging new power balances, some of which are created by these two major regional players themselves.*

**Keywords:** Threat perceptions, confrontation, strategic alliance, axis shift, Arab Spring

### **1. Introduction**

Given the current state of affairs globally, and particularly in the Middle East, to evaluate Turkish-Israeli relations, and particularly in which direction they are headed, is a phenomenal task. Although generally considered allies, it can either be argued that the two countries' relations have always been friendly and smooth, or that the troubled and fragile aspects have been overlooked for the sake of convenience. One could also take the view that, while initially affable, relations soured over time and became confrontational. If the latter is true, what factors played a role and what does the future hold?

### **2. The Turkish Perspective**

Turkey is a long-standing regional power, something relatively rare in world history. The Ottoman Empire reigned in the region for centuries, leaving a legacy and heritage shared by all states in the Middle East. Although Turkey is now in the form of a republic, and no longer has the geographical reach of the Ottoman Empire, it maintains strong cultural, religious and historical ties with the people of the region. Although Turkey does not necessarily reference this history in formulating her foreign policy towards the region (and at times it has worked to her disadvantage) it makes Turkey an integral part of the Middle East equation in many aspects, particularly in regards to her geo-strategic position. To consider a Middle East

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equation without Turkey would constitute a short and inept assessment of the current and previous state of affairs. Turkey has changed greatly over the past two decades, becoming richer, more self-confident and no longer dependent on the US and the EU. She will at times pursue shared goals with other countries, but using her own tactics, her own methodology and on her own terms. Over time, her foreign policy has become partially disengaged from the West, stemming mostly from and motivated by, according to some, her heritage, geography and unique identity. Recently especially, signs indicate that Turkey is heading towards a more pro-Islamic identity. Some are inclined to define this tendency as neo-Ottomanism, which broadly stands for rebuilding influence in former Ottoman lands. There is no doubt that Turkey's foreign policy is shifting from a static, pro-*status quo* policy to a more dynamic, pro-active policy.

Shifts in form rather than essence, these changes are influenced by *ad hoc* crises and Turkey's reaction to them, and to changing priorities in foreign policy; they are not, however, necessarily luring her from the West, with whom she shares many common values. Today, a power center and actor on her own, Turkey attempts to pursue diversified, assertive, rhythmic and results-oriented policies focused on her national interests. She aims at achieving "zero problems" with neighbors by applying soft-power politics: dialogue, soft balancing, sharing and forming an umbrella identity, establishing common interests and establishing interdependence through finding solutions to problems by considering the interests of all actors. As such, it is said that Turkey's foreign policy in its present form has gained *strategic depth*. In the final analysis, Turkey's engagement in the dynamics of her geography has the sole aim of building regional peace and prosperity. When an opportunity arises to resolve a conflict, she does what she can in a practical way. However, whether or not she acts in cooperation with others and/or without becoming party to regional disputes under the influence of Islamic ideology is questionable. Moreover, the recent developments in the Middle East and beyond suggest that Turkey's new foreign policy may need to be further adapted to cope with the rapid changes. Particularly, there is a need to examine whether her policies strain relationships rather than solve problems. If badly managed, these policies can decrease rather than increase confidence and make her an unpredictable power center instead of a credible mediator. The policies may even create confusion, by giving the impression that they are ideologically motivated.

How Turkey's policies are perceived by Israel, herself one of the region's major actors may lay the groundwork for an undeclared power struggle between the two countries. With the region's new and changing threat perceptions, Turkey may no longer be considered a dependable ally for Israel and others. The same could be said for Turkey's perceptions of Israel. Regional dialogue suggests that the area may have been transformed into a land of "friendly enemies". If this is true, it is very difficult to determine the reasons for this change: which actor(s) is at fault, and more disturbing, whether the changes have been purposely engineered or whether they stem from the dynamics of the region, which appear to be out of control. These factors must be explored to understand the Middle East, and particularly Turkish-Israeli relations in the past, present and future.

### 3. The Israeli Perspective

As to how Israel fits into the Middle East equation, it is sufficient to say that she fits because she exists. This fact cannot be ignored, overlooked or set aside. Israel is a part of the equation,

and that recognition is what she has been striving for since her foundation in 1949. Surrounded and rejected from the outset by a pile of highly hostile neighbors, survival has become a *sine quo non* priority, and thus security is her top concern. Her domestic and foreign policies are motivated, formulated and executed to serve that objective. Consequently, she is, above all, a military state, a politico-military regime. Her existence and survival is guaranteed first and foremost by the US, if not also by others. Her aggressive and relentless policies towards her adversaries, however (albeit usually in self-defense), further exacerbate existing animosities and undermine attempts at lasting peace and stability in the region. In addition to resolving her security concerns, Israel must find ways to remedy some of the shortcomings she faces as a country. She may be strong in terms of military power and economic, financial and technological standing, but she lacks sufficient fertile land, water supplies and natural resources, particularly oil reserves. Therefore, in addition to military security, her foreign policy focuses on compensating for these deficiencies.

Finally, there is Israel's religion, which is the source of all her motivation. She is a religiously conservative country and strongly committed to Zionism in terms of ideology, which, unfortunately, alienates her from her Islamic neighbors. On the other hand, notwithstanding hardships and challenges, she has, since her inception as a sovereign state, made significant progress in eliminating some of her formidable enemies. Her success lies first in her own military and economic strength, and second in the unwavering support of the US. In many areas the two countries' national interests and strategies pursued in the region, and even the entire geography, coincide, which makes them strongly allied. Adversaries and unresolved issues include Syria, Iran the state of affairs in Lebanon and a Palestine under the administration of Hamas, which Israel and others consider a terrorist group committed to the destruction of Israel. Israel refuses to recognize Hamas a legitimate party with whom to negotiate a peace process, although it came into power by democratic election. For now, it seems Iran, Syria (although in domestic turmoil) and a Hamas-led Palestine continues to form an axis against Israel, with Iran having uncurbed potential to develop nuclear weapons. Although possessing other nuclear capabilities, Iran declares that weapons development is not her intention. She acknowledges, however, that if she had them, she would use them if necessary. Whether this declaration is an offensive or defensive stance is open to debate. As much as Iran's regional role and bargaining power in regional affairs appears to have increased, whether or not this is in Iran's favor is also debatable; such a situation makes Iran a target for any eventuality, military or otherwise. Lebanon has the potential to destabilize politically by falling further under the influence of Hezbollah, which Israel must seriously consider and follow such developments closely.

#### **4. The Dynamics of Turkish-Israeli Relations**

In three phases, the paper next examines how Turkey and Israel have positioned themselves in the constantly changing dynamics of the Middle East and how this positioning has affected their bilateral relations.

##### **4.1. Phase I (1949-1991)**

Although Turkey had voted against the 1947 UN resolution to partition Palestine to Arabic and Jewish sectors, on March 28, 1949 Turkey became the first Muslim country in the

Middle East to recognize the State of Israel and establish diplomatic relations with her. This acknowledgement gave Israel and Turkey a much-needed boost, although for different reasons.

Turkey remained inactive when Arab forces from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq invaded the new nation immediately after her inception in 1948, and Turkey did not react when, as of the ceasefire on January 7, 1949, Israel had increased her original territory by 50 percent, taking Western Galilee, a broad corridor through central Palestine to Jerusalem, and part of modern Jerusalem. With these non-responses, Turkey had, in addition to recognizing the State of Israel, not only given passive support to Israel against her hostile Arab neighbors but also won prestige in the eyes of Western powers; Turkey had proven to be Israel's only dependable regional ally. A predominantly Muslim, but secular, non-Arab country, democratic and fully integrated into Western institutions, Turkey was, and even with her recent Islamic shifts still is, a unique balancing factor in the region, an "anchor" state.

Turkish-Israeli relations remained devoid of problems until the Suez Crisis in 1956. When Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in that year and barred Israeli shipping, coordinating with Anglo-French forces, Israeli troops seized the Gaza strip and drove through the Sinai Peninsula to the East Bank of the Suez Canal, but withdrew under US and UN pressure. In response, Turkey downgraded her diplomatic representation in Tel Aviv; Israel then did the same in Turkey, which effectively froze relations. However, "reel politics" eventually forced Israel to re-establish relations with Turkey. David Ben Gurion, Israel's founder and her first prime minister, fluent in Turkish as a graduate of Istanbul University, secretly visited Ankara on August 29, 1958 to meet with Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. The two countries forged a top-secret pact that established relations between their military bodies and that has since played a crucial role in bilateral ties. Subsequently, military-intelligence and economic relations began to significantly improve. Relations on the political front, however, began to worsen in the 1960s. The intensification of the Palestinian crisis and the outbreak of the Cyprus problem dealt a serious blow to the new relationship. A lack of international support for Turkey on the Cyprus issue pushed Turkish leaders to seek better relations with Arab countries, while Israeli support for the Greek Cypriots led to deep resentment in Turkey, especially within the military. Israel tried to compensate by increasing her secret support to Turkish military and intelligence matters, but relations between them continued to be troubled. In the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel made simultaneous air attacks against Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian air bases, defeating the Arabs. Expanding her territory by 200 percent, Israel held the Golan Heights, the West Bank of the Jordan River, Jerusalem's Old City and all of the Sinai, including the East Bank of the Suez Canal. In the face of Israeli reluctance to even discuss the return of occupied territories, another Arab-Israel war erupted on October 6, 1973, with a surprise Egyptian and Syrian assault on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. Initial Arab gains were reversed when a ceasefire took effect two weeks later, but this time Israel suffered heavy losses.

Turkey had never sanctioned the territorial expansion of Israel as such, and maintained her even-handed policy towards the region by not allowing the US to use her military bases in Turkey to aid Israel and by sending food supplies to Syria, Jordan and Egypt. Turkey also supported Resolution 242 of the United Nations Security Council, which foresaw the withdrawal of Israel to her pre-war borders, but neither joined in identifying Israel as the "aggressor state" nor in "condemnation" statements against her. Turkey allowed her air

space to be used by Soviet planes carrying military equipment to Arab countries, but in Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) meetings, she did not participate in any of the resolutions toward or condemnations against Israel.

Later in the 1970s, Turkey pursued pro-Palestinian policies, recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 and allowing it to open an office in Ankara in 1976. Following Israel's decision to declare a united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 1980, Turkey reduced her diplomatic representation in Israel to the level of second secretary and closed the Turkish General Consulate in Jerusalem. While this was the lowest representation level ever in Turkish-Israeli relations, diplomatic relations were never severed.

#### 4.2 Phase II (1991-2000)

1991 marks the beginning of normalizing relations between Turkey and Israel. The first half of this decade, until 1996, can be considered the "golden" years, when relations flourished and reached their peak. The reasons for this development constitute one of the most important aspects of Turkish post-Cold War foreign policy.

The Middle East was at a critical juncture at the outset of the 1990s; the repercussions of the Cold War were just beginning to be felt, and the Gulf War, where Turkey had indirectly but actively participated in the US-led coalition against Iraq, had changed the politico-strategic environment. Reconciliation with Israel mainly resulted from Turkey redefining her regional security concerns as well as from her reactions to international and regional developments. Consequently, during the 1990s, Turkey began abandoning her traditional policy of strict neutrality in the Arab-Israeli contest by developing an entente with Israel. There was widespread disillusionment in Turkey with the Arab countries, which had failed to support the Turkish cause over Cyprus and, in the case of Syria, gave active support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Conflict over the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, flowing from Turkey to the Middle East, added to these tensions. The beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace process in 1991, followed by the signing of the Declaration of Principles by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in September 1993, made it possible for Turkey to develop closer relations with Israel without rupturing her relations with the PLO and the main Arab states.

The expectation that good relations with Israel would increase Turkish influence in Washington and that both countries stood to gain from technical, military and economic cooperation, were additional incentives for a bilateral understanding. This rapprochement was indeed welcomed and supported by the US. With these considerations in mind and in support of launching the peace process, the Demirel government restored relations with Israel to ambassadorial level in December 1991 and reactivated the Turkish General Consulate in the Palestinian quarter of Jerusalem at the highest level. The embassy was reinforced by appointments of military, commercial, tourism and information attachés. The 1993 Oslo Accords between the actors in the Middle East peace process provided further impetus for improving relations. Various diplomatic high level visits between Turkey and Israel ensued including the Presidents and Prime Ministers of both countries, but it was the visit of Tansu Çiller (head of Turkey's right-of-center *Doğru Yol Partisi* (True Path Party; DYP)) to Israel in November 1994, the first by a Turkish prime minister, that solidified the positive direction of relations between the two countries.

The Kurdish issue and the perceived threat of Islamic radicalism had become dominant

elements in Turkey's relations in the Middle East. Turkey's decision makers emphasized Syria and Iraq's increasing support for the PKK, while linking the domestic Islamic fundamentalist threat to Iran. The Turkish politico-military leadership considered these issues directly tied to Turkey's territorial integrity and the survival of its regime. Under a 150- billion-dollar, 25-year defense modernization program, the Turkish military requested high-quality military hardware and technology from her Western allies, but was turned down because her human rights issues were increasing and her relations with Greece deteriorating. Israel, on the other hand, had the technology and the arms and did not tie their availability to political or human rights issues. Turkey realized that she could also provide US military hardware and technical knowledge via Israel. Thus, during Çiller's 1994 visit, she supported *inter alia* increased security cooperation arrangements and several agreements were signed, with the most important allowing Israel Aviation Industries to modernize Turkey's F-4 and F-5 Phantom fighter aircrafts. In February 1996, a framework for the Turkish-Israeli security cooperation was set by the Military Training and Cooperation Agreement (MTCA). Valid for five years, with subsequent renewal at annual intervals, it provided for acquiring military know how, as well as for mutual military visits, joint exercises, joint training, sharing training information, observing one another's training exercises, air force training missions in each other's airspace, training Turkish pilots in electronic warfare technology in Israel and port visits. The MTCA had far-reaching consequences for Turkey, Israel and the region as a whole.

The second key framework agreement was signed in August 1966. It provided for technology transfer, training technicians and researchers, intelligence sharing and biannual "strategic dialogue" meetings of the two countries' security and foreign policy officials. In late 1997, a second contract was awarded to modernize Turkey's F-5s. The first Turkish-Israeli military exercise, Operation Reliant Mermaid, was held with the US off the coast of Israel in January 1998. To much of the world, this exercise became a symbol of deepening strategic alignment between Turkey and Israel; although not directed against any third party, it nevertheless drew angry protests from Iran and some Arab countries. Jordan took part as an observer but Egypt rejected a similar invitation. Operation Reliant Mermaid II, again with the US, was held in December 1999, this time off the Turkish coast. Again, Jordan attended and Egypt did not.

Military sales constituted another important aspect of Turkey and Israel's security cooperation. They agreed to co-produce the sophisticated Popeye air-to-ground missile. Turkey had bought 50 Popeye I missiles for her F-4s; the Popeye II deal involved a consortium with two Turkish firms to produce a smaller version of the Popeye I and with more advanced technology. There was also ongoing discussion regarding co-producing Israeli-developed Arrow II anti-missile missiles and Merkava III tanks, upgrades to Turkey's M60 main battle tanks and manufacturing an assault rifle to replace Turkey's G-3s.

Cooperation between Turkey and Israel was not limited to the military; a Turkish-Israeli business council established on March 1, 1993 significantly improved bilateral economic relations. A free-trade agreement covering all sectors was signed in March 1996, becoming effective on May 1, 1997. Turkish businessmen saw this agreement as important not only as it provided access to the Israeli market, but also as a steppingstone to other markets, such as those in the US, Palestinian areas and Jordan. Another agreement, on preventing double taxation, was signed in March 1996 and entered into force on May 27, 1998. Finally, an agreement for mutual encouragement and protection of investments was signed in March

1996, effective August 27, 1998. Trade volume increased approximately 600 percent between 1990 and 1998, and there was interest in and opportunity for launching Turkish-Israeli ventures in agricultural and other sectors of the Transcaucasian and Central Asian republics. Israel's advanced agricultural technology also created possibilities for such cooperation in Turkey, especially in the southeast. In 1992, during the first visit to Israel of a Turkish minister of tourism, a tourism agreement was signed that led to an increase (from 40,000 to 400,000) in the number of Israeli tourists to Turkey in the following years. In the political field, during Turkish foreign minister Hikmet Çetin's 1993 visit to Israel, a memorandum of understanding was signed that defined the parameters of political relations and areas of cooperation between the two countries.

These developments between Turkey and Israel, unprecedented and nonexistent with any other country in the region before or since, show how close their relations had become, not only in vital fields but also between the peoples of both nations. A solid base had been established in a trilateral relationship between Turkey, Israel and the US. In Washington, the Jewish lobby had become almost like a Turkish lobby. Although Israel's influence on the EU itself was likely weaker, Israeli president Shimon Peres is said to have influenced his European colleagues in Socialist International to shelve their objections to Turkey's EU membership. Turkey and Israel had reached a point of "strategic partnership", with their people and official and unofficial organizations closely integrated.

Shared security concerns about the region, although different in context, particularly with respect to Syria, Iraq and Iran, played a crucial role in achieving this close relationship. During this period, policymakers, especially the military, believed that the defense of Turkey's territorial integrity was linked to the defense of her regime and its secular nature, which had implications for the policymaking process. The security-defense establishment became more prominent in formulating Turkey's policies, particularly with respect to the Middle East, and exercised its influence through the National Security Council, which increasingly became the central organ for policymaking. The "national military strategic concept" changed. The new concept identified two internal threats, separatism and Islamic fundamentalism, mainly fed by two external actors, Syria and Iran. Paralleling this change, emphasis fell on building security arrangements with Israel. The military particularly believed that Turkey's strategic cooperation with Israel might pose a deterrent to Syria and Iran. The Turkish-Israeli alignment produced its first fruit when a military showdown with Syria in October 1998 resulted in PKK leader Öcalan's removal from Damascus and Syria's agreement to end her support to the PKK. Despite Israel's attempts to disassociate herself from the crisis, Damascus and the Arab League accused Israel of fomenting the row.

By the end of the 1990s, Turkish foreign policy had become heavily intertwined with domestic issues. More conservative parties found ways to share power, at first within coalition governments and then, by the early 2000s, on their own, challenging the domestic and foreign policies of the "old school" politico-military establishment. Leftist and rightist political parties, except the ultra-nationalist religious *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party; RP) led by Necmettin Erbakan, supported the growing Turkish-Israeli relationship. Before coming into power in 1997 (in the so-called *Refahyol* coalition with Çiller's DYP), the RP was openly and harshly critical of Israel in general and of Turkish-Israeli relations in particular. Once in power, however, *Refah* began to approach the issue with pragmatism and a sense of national interest. Its influence did not alter the pace of relations between Turkey and Israel, partly

because the military allowed the government little room for maneuver. Erbakan bowed to military pressure by reluctantly accepting the military cooperation and free trade agreements with Israel. He also tried to steer an independent course by keeping Israel at arm's length, supporting militant Palestinians who opposed the peace process and pursuing a program to develop an "Islamic" foreign policy. In the RP's opposition to the peace process, it invited representatives of the Palestinian Hamas movement and the Lebanese Hezbollah to its party congress, as well as gave verbal support to the Egyptian Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood. Secularists, particularly in the military and the foreign ministry, strongly opposed Erbakan's policies, mainly because they alienated Turkey from the West, but also because Turkey needed to preserve a balance in her relations between Israel and the Arab states, and because an Islamic foreign policy conflicted with the country's Kemalist commitments. The RP's alignment with Iran and militant Palestinians certainly played a part (though probably not a decisive one) in Erbakan's fall from power in June 1997 after repeated warnings from the military-dominated National Security Council and mounting public protests. In February 1998, the RP was closed down by Turkey's Constitutional Court and Erbakan was banned from running for public office for five years. A successor party was rapidly formed in the shape of the *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party; FP), nominally under the leadership of Recai Kutan. After the RP, no party was able to construct a sustainable government, and thus Parliament voted to hold early general elections on April 18, 1999. All parties suffered serious setbacks in the polls, and a tripartite coalition government was formed under the leadership of premier Bülent Ecevit's *Demokratik Sol Partisi* (Democratic Left Party; DSP), deputy premier Devlet Bahçeli's *Milli Hareket Partisi* (National Action Party; MHP) and Mesut Yılmaz's *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party; ANAP). The coalition emerged because many Turks felt that many of the domestic and foreign issues Turkey faced were related to her survival; however, the coalition's installation did not end the continual internal political upsets.

During this period, Turkey wanted to continue benefiting from her relations with Israel, but without driving the Arab states into united opposition and without taking on military commitments in the Middle East that would have little support at home. The Turkish military profited from its access to Israeli military weaponry and intelligence, and in economics, both countries almost certainly gained from the free trade agreement. Turkey was still heavily dependent on trade with the Arab countries, however, mainly for imports of oil and natural gas, though also for exports of food stuffs and light industrial products. In the broader political sphere, the most significant gain for Turkey from her entente with Israel was incrementing her relationship with the US.

Turkey was also careful to maintain contacts with, and support for, the PLO and the Arab-Israel peace process in general, which was made easier by the return of Israel's Labor Party to power in 1999 and the re-launch of the peace process that the Likud-Labor coalition government had begun in 1991. The process had faltered after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the center-right Likud party leader and Israeli prime minister, by a fanatic Israeli youth in 1995. In the interim, with right-wing governments under Benyamin Netanyahu and others, it was not possible to make meaningful progress in the peace process. Moreover, apart from Turkey's disagreements with the Netanyahu government over the basic aims and scope of their relationship, Turkish and Israeli policies did not entirely overlap on other issues. Israel has always refused to support Turkey against the PKK, and while Turkish secularists did not support Erbakan's embrace of Iran, they still needed to preserve relations with her.



Turkey refused Israel's suggestions to denounce the Iranian regime on the grounds that its nature was purely a domestic affair for Iran. When Israel warned Turkey that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons, Turkey replied that she opposed nuclear proliferation in any part of the Middle East, implicitly a criticism of Israel as much as of Iran.

### 4.3 Phase III (2000-2012)

Between 2000 and today, Turkey and Israel have been dramatically influenced by internal and external factors, all of which have had an adverse impact on their relations. During this period, relations have been evasive and strained, if not confrontational. In both countries, right-wing ultra-conservative governments have come into power unchallenged and with different agendas. In Israel, the so-called second *Intifada* was launched towards the end of 2000 pursuant to the failure to reach an agreement for lasting peace between then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and then-Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at Camp David under the leadership of US president Bill Clinton. Right-wing parties, under the leadership first of Ariel Sharon, later Ehud Olmert, and now (although in a broad-based coalition that makes it highly fragile) under Benjamin Netanyahu, have consecutively come to power since 2001. In addition to stalling the peace process, this state of affairs has forced Israel to engage in hard-power politics towards her neighbors (such as military operations against Hezbollah militants in Lebanon in 2006) and to sometimes use force disproportionately (as in the case of the Gaza bombardment in 2008). These actions have resulted in negative reactions from Turkey and the international community alike.

Israel's internal and external politics are motivated by a single concern: survival. Any situation with the potential to threaten this concern is subject to elimination. This position is valid for any country; however, the appropriateness of means used and ways exercised in reaching or safeguarding survival are debatable. Israel often chooses hard-power politics to ensure her survival, and this is where she differs from many other countries that are willing to first apply soft-power politics in a given situation.

After the collapse of Turkey's DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition in 2002, the conservative right-wing *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party; AKP) swept to power under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AKP won 34.26 percent of the votes and obtained 363 of the 550 seats in the Grand National Assembly. It is still in power, unchallenged and increasing in popularity. Erdoğan's agenda differs from his secular predecessors in internal and external issues. The AKP's roots stretch back to Erbakan's *Refah* and Kutan's *Fazilet* parties, giving the impression that it may have Islamist agendas for its domestic and foreign affairs; some even claim the AKP has a hidden agenda.

These radical political shifts have severely strained Turkish-Israeli relations, with military actions contributing to the situation. Israel's war on Hezbollah has always been viewed as a covert struggle against Iran and Syria, since according to Israel, Hezbollah is supported and armed by these two "rogue" states. On August 3, 2006, the Turkish Grand National Assembly declared that Israel was exercising "state terror" and called on the International Criminal Court to act. In February 2006, Khaled Mashal, the official representative of Hamas in Damascus, met with Turkish officials, including President Abdullah Gül, an action criticized by Israel and the international community alike. Turkey maintains that the purpose of the visit was to mediate between Israel and the Hamas leadership, but Israel felt the meeting provided Hamas with undeserved legitimacy. Israel cannot accept Hamas because it has expressed the desire

for extermination of the State of Israel. American Jewish lobby representatives indicated that, from that incident, Turkey had lost her credibility to mediate Israel-Palestine talks. Even civilian actions are at issue, such as Turkey's airing of anti-Semitic Turkish TV series, namely *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves) and *Ayrılık* (Separation). As regards other contributing factors affecting the deterioration of bilateral relations, one can cite the war launched by Israel on 27 December 2008, where disproportionate force was indiscriminately used on the Palestinians, Israel was officially and harshly condemned by Turkey and an immediate cease fire was called for between the parties. Furthermore, Erdoğan severely criticized Israel's war on Gaza in a debate with Israel's President Shimon Peres at the 2009 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, and walked off the stage in protest. This incident has been interpreted by various circles as a new configuration of Ankara's foreign policy in the region.

The last straw, as it were, occurred on May 31, 2010, when Israel Defense Forces intercepted six humanitarian aid ships en route to Gaza. The ships had been sent by a Turkish relief agency (*İnsani Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı*) with the intention of breaking through Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. Nine activists (eight Turks and one Turkish-American) were killed in the conflict. This incident, known as the Mavi Marmara affair, brought Turkish-Israeli relations to the brink of crisis. Despite Turkish demands, Israel has not officially apologized to Turkey and is reluctant to compensate families of the victims. In reaction, Ahmet Oğuz Çelikkol, Turkish ambassador to Israel, was reprimanded by Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister himself. Further, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon called Çelikkol to a meeting with the media present, where, out of contempt, he was seated lower than Ayalon. In protest, Turkey recalled Çelikkol, downgrading her representation in Israel to a second secretary, one political action short of severing diplomatic relations. These happenings aptly demonstrate how quickly Turkish-Israeli relations have deteriorated; the only sign of amelioration has been to extend humanitarian assistance during natural disasters, such as the December 2010 Mount Carmel forest fire in Israel and the October 2011 Van earthquake in Turkey.

This freeze in relations occurs as the US withdraws her military presence from Iraq and during visible turmoil and civil strife in the region in the wake of the recent Arab Spring. Further, at the beginning of the 2000s, the US initiated a "restructuring" of the Middle East and its surrounding geography under a project named "The Greater Middle East", chairing it with Turkey. The project is nebulous but apparently continues; some claim that the Arab Spring may even be a byproduct. The US War on Terror launched after the 9/11 attacks has also affected Turkish-Israeli relations. The Iraq war opened the way for Iran, a prominent regional state, to intervene and spread her influence in the region by taking sides in sectarian strife and supporting Shiite opposition leaders and their strongholds in Iraq and elsewhere. Finally, ongoing events, particularly in Syria and Egypt, further complicate the state of affairs in the Middle East. How Turkey and Israel perceive these events and evaluate developments from the viewpoints of national interest and security inevitably sets the tone of their relations. In other words, whether the threat perceptions of the two countries continue to correspond or whether a shift has occurred must be carefully examined to fully understand the source of the rift between the two countries.

## 5. Assessment

In this author's view, the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel stems from structural changes in the countries' internal and external environments.

### 5.1. Internal changes

1. From the outset, no matter how strained relations became between Turkey and Israel, the countries continued to cooperate, particularly in the military and intelligence fields, because of similar security concerns in view of the regional policies pursued by Syria and Iran. This cooperation was possible because in both countries the politico-military establishment had a strong influence in domestic and foreign affairs. Their links began to weaken in 2002, as military influence in Turkey diminished after the election of the AKP under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Today, the military is almost non-existent in Turkish politics, due to AKP policies toward a more “civil democracy”, as called for by EU norms. No such transformation took place in Israel. She remains a military state; her threat perceptions regarding Syria and Iran have not changed, nor have her strategy and policies towards them. The same applies to her security concerns about anti-Israel radical groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood stationed in Lebanon, Gaza, Egypt and elsewhere in the region. Turkey, on the other hand, with her new foreign policies of zero problems with neighbors, soft balancing and establishing dialogue with all parties concerned, has become more flexible and lenient in her approach towards Syria, Iran and the associated radical groups. Turkish-Israeli relations have changed from a concentrated military and intelligence relationship to a civil-political relationship, with Turkey also solidly conservative in regards to religion. Israel has also shifted from relatively secular to more conservative governments, but under the circumstances, it is difficult to say whether the security concerns of the two countries continue to overlap. Each country’s threat perceptions may have changed over time, particularly in view of the rapid structural changes in the region from the Iraqi War and the Arab Spring. Through these changes, Israel may have lost her dependable ally.
2. The loss of two visionary leaders, namely Turgut Özal (1993) and Yitzhak Rabin (1995), has severely undermined the Middle East peace process. Radical religious elements in Israeli conservative parties have strongly opposed the peace process and Turkey’s AKP government has abandoned the previous governments’ even-handed outlook towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, most probably in reaction to Israel’s harsh and uncompromising policies towards the Palestinians. Because Turkey has chosen to openly support the Hamas administration, she has legitimized a radical political group that Israel (and others) considers a terrorist organization bent on destroying her, and has alienated Israel in the process.

### 5.2 External changes

1. Military and non-military interventions in the Middle East have caused the collapse of political systems, an increase in terrorist and asymmetric activity and an undesired security vacuum in the region, all of which has led to a fluid and unstable internal and external environment. Events after the Iraq War and, more recently, the Arab Spring have exposed the region to possible further decomposition, fragmentation and deconstruction.
2. In the circumstances, it is possible that Turkey and Israel have felt the need to separately position themselves against old and new threats because their security concerns no longer mesh. In the past, both countries’ foreign policies were set in a

common security front against Iran, Iraq and Syria. Now, Iraq has been dismantled, the Saddam regime has fallen, and the PKK conducts terrorist operations in Turkey from its bases in Northern Iraq unchecked. Iran is threatening Turkey by openly declaring that the NATO missile shield in Eastern Turkey would be the first target in the event of a military intervention against her. Syria is in civil strife and close to collapse. Further, establishing a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq is being considered as a buffer against Iran; such a state could also include parts of Iran, Turkey and Syria, and as such, those countries' territorial integrities are at stake. The disintegration of Iraq and the establishment of a Kurdish state there is unacceptable to Turkey; such developments would give new momentum to the PKK. Turkey is apprehensive, however, about US and Israeli support of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. There are 50,000 Jews of Kurdish origin in Israel and a considerable number of Jewish Kurds in northern Iraq. Israel supported Kurdish nationalists in Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s and now supports the formation of a Kurdish buffer state. Israel would not be terribly disturbed by the division of Iraq or any other country with the potential of threatening her security; for her, Iran and her associates are the ultimate target. For Turkey, however, Iran is not a target; reestablishing Iraqi territorial integrity has become a cornerstone of her security policies. Other areas of tension have existed as well. Israel has fretted over the constant possibility of being dragged into Turkey's problems and has seemed particularly wary of being seen as a party to the Greek-Turkish disputes, while Greece has openly declared her discontent with Turkish-Israeli ties. Israel also does not want to be seen as party to the Kurdish dispute and thus become a PKK target. And then there is the Arab-Israeli peace process. Turkey has played the role of "facilitator" in the ongoing Israel-Syria issue and Arab-Israel conflict but, particularly since Israel's 2008 Gaza incident with its disproportionate use of force, she is no longer willing to do so. Any setback in or breakdown of the peace process would create further problems in Turkish-Israeli relations, despite the fact that their alignment developed largely independently. Breakdown would also provide more fodder for critics of Turkey's relations with Israel and increase Turkey's problems with other countries in the region. These developments beg the question of whether the two countries have, as a result of conflicting national interests, become merely competitive, or whether they have become confrontational. If one is a derivative of the other, is there a limit to amicable Turkish-Israeli relations?

3. In the 1990s, the US was considered the only effective outside actor in the Middle East. Today, we face a new Middle East, with other actors sharing the spotlight. The Russian Federation is involved in military and political arenas, and China is entering into economic and political cooperative relations. Under her new vision of balanced and soft-power politics in the 2000s, Turkey became a power center in the region, causing Israel (apparently through the American Jewish lobby) to accuse her of turning away from the West. Although this may sound like an exaggeration, it should not be minimized, since it shows that the Jewish lobby can cut both ways - for or against Turkey -depending on the circumstances. Turkey's foreign policy has become more focused on developing common interests rather than common security. It is pro-active, working on transforming economic and military power into politico-diplomatic power, and Israel appears to be having difficulties coping with it. The

Iraq War has exposed conflicts of interest between Israel and Turkey, while political developments in the region have weakened conditions that previously drew the two countries together. Israel's disproportionate use of force against the Palestinians has drawn strong reaction from Turkey and strained relations. Turkey's lack of support for policies aimed at neutralizing Iran, which is Israel's objective, makes her apprehensive of Turkey. Similarly, Turkey is concerned by Israeli-US policies to control power balances in the Middle East.

4. To counter Turkey's growing influence, Israel appears to be searching for other allies within the region and peripherally. Israel provides military assistance to Azerbaijan and improving relations with it is of particular interest, because it has a dimension of containing Iran. Azerbaijan has a Shiite population and 12,000 Azeri Jews. She has rich oil reserves and is geographically somewhat captive between Russia, Iran and Armenia. Israel has some problems with Armenia but she could be a potential ally. With Greece and Cyprus, despite Turkey's protests, Israel is exploring oil and natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean basin.
5. Within the framework of NATO's new outlook on its global role and strategy, a new development is emerging in the Middle East. This change, i.e., "partnership" with non-member countries, was discussed at NATO's Chicago Summit in May 2012. Japan's involvement in NATO operations in Afghanistan was the catalyst for this approach. Some may be thinking about associating Israel with NATO to better ensure her security against possible attacks. The installation of a missile shield in Turkey, attempts by Israel to join NATO military exercises and, more recently, inviting Israel to the Chicago Summit, can be taken as indications of that direction. Whether such developments will result in further confrontation between Turkey and Israel and what the consequence of that confrontation will be (if any) within and outside NATO, remains to be seen.

## 6. Conclusion

1. Despite the embedded tensions and differences of opinion on Turkish-Israeli relations, the author is of the opinion that their relations should be complimentary, not confrontational. While turbulent at times, the two countries have enjoyed close and harmonious relations in the past, and there is no reason why, with appropriate dialogue, these could not be rekindled. It is true that both countries encounter internal and external difficulties given the dynamics of the region, and must balance internal pressures with external realities. This is the same for any country, but these two face unique challenges. Therefore, regardless of the diplomatic nomenclature, Turkish-Israeli relations have been defined by the media sometimes as an "alliance", sometimes a "partnership" and sometimes merely as a "relationship", depending on the regional dynamics and the leadership at the time. Despite strained periods, when it comes to safeguarding common interests, the underlying relationship between the two countries appears solidly intact. This author ventures to argue that survival for both countries rests heavily on a close tripartite relationship between Turkey, Israel and the US, as long as this does not provoke counter-alignments that would further destabilize the geography.
2. If recent regional and bilateral events have caused a loss of mutual confidence, this

situation must be resolved as quickly as possible by resuming cooperation in the military, security and intelligence fields. This author's considered view is that Turkey is the only anchor country in the region for Israel and the US for the following reasons: 1) she is militarily aligned to the West under a NATO membership, 2) although having a predominantly Muslim population, politically she is a Western-oriented, democratic and secular state and 3) she is a non-Arab country. In that context, she is irreplaceable.

3. Despite setbacks, the political, economic, technological, scientific and military relations between Turkey and Israel have always exhibited overall progress, mainly because their structures, economies, political systems and military hardware are complementary. However, with the foreign policy vision of the AKP government, a new episode has been initiated; rather than changes in the relationship stemming from Israel using force as a political instrument, they stem from Turkey's increased political and economic interests in the Middle East under existing and new power balances. Bilateral relations will likely continue at a stable but low level in the near future; but regional dynamics over the next few years could draw the two countries closer together or drive them farther apart. The latter scenario would likely have grave consequences; however, this author feels that such an outcome is improbable because Turkey and Israel do not have the luxury to ignore or negate each other. Events in the Middle East continue to change the region's power balances and are dangerously connecting its security system to the international security system. A Middle East without Turkey or Israel is unthinkable, as is a Middle East where the two are in open conflict with each other. There are indications that Turkey has been making an effort to safeguard Israel's security despite their current cool relations. She agreed to the NATO missile shield over protests from the Russian Federation, and over protests from and threats of becoming a target for Iran. Turkey has also been pressuring Syria's Iranian- and Russian-supported leaders to end the turmoil in that country and step down. Such actions deserve appreciation and reciprocity from Israel. In the final analysis, this author believes that in the interests of both countries, and of the region, Turkey and Israel should engage in quiet diplomacy to improve their strained relations, with support from the US. One can conclude that how Turkey and Israel see their roles in the present and the future of the Middle East and the methodology used in any restructuring of the region will set the tone of their relations.