The Evolution of Turkish-Israeli Relations: Historical Foundations, Strategic Alliances and Contemporary Challenges

Türk-İsrail İlişkilerinin Evrimi: Tarihsel Temeller, Stratejik İttifaklar ve Güncel Zorluklar

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Abstract

This study examines the historical trajectory of Turkish-Israeli relations, focusing on political, military, and economic dynamics that have shaped their bilateral ties. The aim is to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship by addressing earlier and contemporary phases that have received limited attention in existing studies. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research is based on historical archives, diplomatic records, and scholarly sources. It addresses three research questions: how historical and geopolitical factors influenced the relationship, to what extent regional/global developments shaped cooperation or crises, and how domestic political changes affected foreign policy behavior. Findings suggest that national security interests and strategic pragmatism, rather than ideological affinity, have been the main drivers of bilateral relations. The study concludes that despite recurring diplomatic tensions, mutual geopolitical necessities have ensured the continuity of cooperation.

Keywords: Türkiye-Israel Relations, Middle East Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Security Cooperation, Regional Conflicts.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türk-İsrail ilişkilerinin tarihsel gelişimini; siyasi, askerî ve ekonomik boyutlarıyla kapsamlı şekilde incelemektedir. Araştırmanın amacı, mevcut literatüre katkı sağlayacak şekilde, özellikle daha az ele alınan erken dönem ve güncel gelişmeler ışığında bu ikili ilişkinin dönüşümünü analiz etmektir. Nitel bir yöntemle yürütülen çalışmada diplomatik belgeler, tarihî kayıtlar ve akademik kaynaklar kullanılmıştır. Üç temel araştırma sorusu üzerinden; tarihsel-jeopolitik dinamiklerin, bölgesel ve küresel gelişmelerin ve iç siyasi değişimlerin Türk-İsrail ilişkilerine etkisi değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, bu ilişkinin ideolojik benzerlikten çok güvenlik temelli çıkarlar ve stratejik pragmatizmle yönlendirildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, tekrarlayan diplomatik krizlere rağmen ortak güvenlik çıkarlarının iş birliğini sürdürülebilir kıldığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye-İsrail İlişkileri, Orta Doğu Diplomasisi, Dış Politika, Güvenlik İşbirliği, Bölgesel Çatışmalar.

Introduction

Israel was officially established in 1948, and Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize it. However, the evolving dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict necessitated a reassessment of Turkey's foreign policy in the region, ultimately influencing its bilateral relationship with Israel. Despite Israel's formal statehood being declared in the mid-20th century, Turkish-Jewish relations predate its establishment. Between 1923 and 1948, Turkey maintained interactions with Jewish communities and facilitated migration to Palestine, underscoring a historical connection that extends beyond contemporary diplomatic engagements. Both Turkey and Israel, as relatively young nation-states formed in the 20th century, have navigated the complexities of regional politics while seeking to assert their national interests within the Middle East.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the historical trajectory of Turkish-Israeli relations by identifying key diplomatic, military, and economic developments. This research is crucial as it fills a gap in the literature regarding the long-term transformation of this bilateral relationship, particularly the underexplored periods before and after the Cold War. The study also aims to contribute to the broader discussions on Middle Eastern geopolitics by examining how external and internal factors shape state interactions.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How have historical and geopolitical factors influenced Turkish-Israeli relations? (2) To what extent have regional and global developments shaped cooperation and crises between the two countries? (3) How have domestic political shifts in Turkey and Israel impacted their foreign policies toward each other? The research argues that Turkish-Israeli relations have been primarily driven by security concerns and strategic pragmatism rather than ideological alignment. It posits that while regional conflicts and domestic political transformations have caused periodic crises, shared strategic interests have repeatedly revived bilateral cooperation.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative research approach, combining historical analysis with content analysis of diplomatic archives, government statements, and academic literature. A chronological framework is used to examine key phases of Turkish-Israeli relations, including early Jewish migration to Palestine, Cold War security collaborations, post-Cold War military and economic interactions, and contemporary diplomatic recalibrations.

Understanding the historical trajectory of Turkish-Israeli relations is essential for a comprehensive analysis of broader Middle Eastern geopolitical dynamics. A nuanced examination of their bilateral interactions, particularly during the formative years, provides critical insights into contemporary diplomatic challenges and policy considerations. The post-Cold War era witnessed a significant strengthening of Turkish-Israeli relations, particularly in military and intelligence-sharing agreements. However, shifting regional power dynamics, coupled with changes in Turkish domestic politics, notably under the AKP government, introduced new tensions.

Since its establishment, Israel has sought to secure diplomatic recognition amidst the volatility of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as highlighted by Aytürk (2009, p.58): "Since Israel's foundation, Israeli governments have had to wrestle with the problem of diplomatic recognition, which was subject to the ebbs and flows of the Arab-Israeli

conflict." Within this broader diplomatic framework, fostering stable and cooperative relations with Turkey, the most strategically positioned Muslim-majority nation in the region, has been a key priority for Israel. While Turkey and Israel have had numerous periods of cooperation, it has been widely argued that, for Israel, maintaining a positive relationship with Turkey is not merely a diplomatic objective but a strategic necessity for ensuring its survival in a region characterized by security threats and political volatility.

Despite the historical significance of Turkish-Israeli relations, scholarly research on the early phases of their diplomatic engagement remains limited. Existing academic literature has predominantly focused on the Cold War period and the post-2000 era, particularly during the tenure of the AKP government. The limited availability of archival records and the restricted access to official documents from the early Republican era have contributed to this gap in scholarship. Conversely, extensive research has been conducted on Turkish-Israeli relations in the post-Cold War era, particularly with regard to military cooperation, economic partnerships, and intelligence-sharing agreements. This period witnessed a strategic deepening of bilateral ties, which, despite periodic disruptions, played a crucial role in shaping Türkiye 's broader regional security strategy.

The study's findings suggest that Turkish-Israeli relations are primarily driven by security concerns and pragmatic interests rather than ideological or religious factors. The research highlights that periods of cooperation have often coincided with regional security threats, while diplomatic crises have largely been influenced by domestic political changes. These findings emphasize the dynamic and complex nature of Turkish-Israeli relations, demonstrating that despite fluctuations, strategic imperatives often dictate the trajectory of bilateral ties.

In summary, this study contributes to the broader literature on Middle Eastern diplomacy by providing a comprehensive historical and strategic analysis of Turkish-Israeli relations. It emphasizes the importance of security-driven partnerships in shaping state interactions and underscores the role of domestic and international factors in influencing diplomatic engagements.

Jewish Immigration to Palestine from Türkiye

The mass immigration of Turkish Jews to Palestine represents a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of Turkish-Israeli relations. This migration, which began in the early 20th century and accelerated throughout the interwar period, was not a state-mandated population exchange as was the case with the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923. Instead, it was largely driven by socio-political developments and individual decisions, reflecting the changing conditions within the newly established Turkish Republic. Toktaş (2006:506) highlights the relative neglect of this subject in academic discourse: "Despite this prominent characteristic, the mass migration of Jews to Israel has failed to attract significant attention either from the perspective of policy-making or of social science, as shown by the paucity of studies on the subject."

While immigration from Türkiye to Palestine during the early 1920s was relatively limited, political shifts following the Turkish War of Independence and the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) altered the legal and social status of non-Muslim communities, including Jews. The newly established Turkish Republic sought to forge a unitary,

secular, and nationalist identity, leading to policies that, intentionally or not, placed increasing pressure on minority populations. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, which had historically welcomed Jewish refugees and facilitated their integration within the millet system, the Republic of Türkiye pursued a nation-building project that prioritized ethnic homogeneity.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, socio-political transformations in Türkiye led to changes in the status of non-Muslim minorities, including Jews. While the Jewish community had historically been integrated into Ottoman society under the millet system, the transition to a nation-state brought new dynamics. The adoption of Turkish as the official language in public institutions and economic nationalist policies gradually reshaped minority positions in state employment (Toktaş, 2006:506). Although there was no direct government policy targeting Jews, certain bureaucratic and economic challenges emerged.

Economic shifts and nationalist discourse influenced social perceptions, and some segments of the Jewish community faced difficulties in securing public sector positions. Rıfat N. Bali (2012) notes that Jewish professionals encountered obstacles in state employment as part of broader policies encouraging Turkish-Muslim entrepreneurs. Additionally, reports in Turkish newspapers at the time reflected nationalist rhetoric that sometimes categorized non-Muslim minorities including Jews within the broader discourse of national unity and economic sovereignty (Bali, 2012:185). While these changes did not amount to systematic persecution, they contributed to a climate of uncertainty, prompting segments of the Jewish population to consider emigration.

Between 1923 and 1948, a total of 7,308 Turkish Jews migrated to Palestine, influenced by both domestic socio-economic transformations and the broader Zionist movement (Toktaş, 2006:507). This trend accelerated in the 1940s, particularly after the introduction of the Wealth Tax (Varlık Vergisi) in 1942, which disproportionately affected non-Muslim communities, leading to further economic challenges (Bali, 2012:204). While many Turkish Jews maintained strong ties to their homeland, the combined impact of national economic policies and international developments encouraged a portion of the community to seek new opportunities abroad.

This multifaceted migration pattern not only shaped the demographic structure of pre-state Israel but also laid the groundwork for long-term Turkish-Israeli diplomatic dynamics. The socio-political context of this migration must be considered to fully understand the motivations behind Türkiye's early positioning in Middle Eastern affairs, particularly regarding the Jewish population and the emerging Israeli state.

In order to grasp the deeper causes and context of this migration wave, it is necessary to analyze the domestic and international factors that influenced the choices of Turkish Jews between 1923 and 1948.

Domestic and International Factors Affecting Immigration (1923-1948)

The migration of Turkish Jews to Palestine between 1923 and 1948 can be analyzed from both domestic and international perspectives. At the domestic level, the implementation of Lausanne-based minority rights policies redefined the legal status of Jews, Armenians, and Greeks. Although they were granted official recognition as protected minorities,

subsequent governmental policies contributed to a climate of uncertainty. Economic, social, and linguistic reforms played a particularly significant role. The adoption of Turkish as the sole official language in public institutions and businesses created difficulties for Jewish citizens, particularly for those who spoke Ladino or French.

Further challenges arose from economic policies that sought to encourage national entrepreneurs at the expense of minority-owned businesses. The Wealth Tax (Varlık Vergisi) of 1942, implemented during World War II, disproportionately affected Jewish and other non-Muslim communities. Many Jewish families, faced with severe financial burdens, were forced to sell their assets or migrate to Palestine. Additionally, the 1934 Thrace Pogroms which saw attacks on Jewish communities in the Thrace region of Türkiye reinforced concerns about the long-term security of Jews within the republic. Bayraktar (2006: 95) describes these events: *"Menacing letters were received, Jews were physically beaten, and their shops were boycotted."* Such developments contributed to a steady increase in Jewish emigration.

On the international stage, the rise of Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and its policies of persecution against Jews led to a broader wave of Jewish migration across Europe. While Türkiye remained officially neutral during most of World War II, it served as a transit route for European Jews fleeing Nazi-occupied territories. The growing anti-Semitic climate in Europe reinforced the perception among Turkish Jews that emigration to Palestine was the most viable option. Toktaş (2006:507) estimates that between 1923 and 1948, approximately 7,308 Jews emigrated from Türkiye to Palestine.

By the late 1940s, as the prospect of Israeli statehood became increasingly tangible, migration patterns accelerated. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was met with significant enthusiasm by many Turkish Jews, leading to a second, much larger wave of immigration. Between 1948 and 1951, an estimated 34,547 Turkish Jews comprising nearly 40% of Türkiye's Jewish population relocated to Israel (Toktaş, 2006: 508). This migration movement, which intensified toward the establishment of the Israeli state, not only shaped the demographic and social structure of early Israel but also contributed to building an influential Turkish-Jewish community that would play a role in bilateral relations.

These evolving people-to-people ties laid a historical foundation that complemented Türkiye's gradual diplomatic recognition process. The political and strategic dimensions of this recognition must be considered within the broader Cold War context, which also shaped Türkiye's early foreign policy recalibrations.

The Integration of Turkish Jews into Israeli Society

Once in Israel, Turkish Jews underwent a process of cultural integration, much like other Jewish immigrant groups. However, their experience differed in certain aspects. Many Turkish Jews retained elements of their Ottoman and Turkish heritage, forming a Turkish-Jewish identity within Israel. While integrating into Israeli society, they also established organizations and cultural institutions that preserved their linguistic and historical connections to Türkiye.

A Turkish-Jewish lobby emerged within Israel, advocating for stronger bilateral relations between the two countries. Despite many Turkish Jews leaving due to economic and

political pressures, their connection to Türkiye remained significant. Some of the wealthier and more politically engaged members of the Turkish Jewish diaspora in Israel established the first Turkish-speaking Masonic lodge in Israel, highlighting their continued ties to their cultural origins.

The large-scale migration of Turkish Jews to Israel had long-term diplomatic consequences. The Turkish government's recognition of Israel in 1949 was, in part, influenced by the existence of a substantial Turkish-Jewish diaspora in Israel. Unlike other Muslim-majority nations, Türkiye sought to maintain economic and political ties with Israel, despite regional pressures.

Additionally, in later decades, Turkish Jews in Israel played a role in mediating diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries. Türkiye's decision to grant dual citizenship to Turkish citizens residing abroad further strengthened these connections. By the late 20th century, Turkish-Israeli relations had evolved into a strategic partnership, with historical migration patterns serving as one of its foundational elements.

The Establishment of Israel in 1948 and Türkiye's Recognition

Before World War II (WWII), Türkiye adopted a neutral stance in global affairs, prioritizing regional stability and diplomatic balance. This approach was evident in Türkiye's participation in multilateral agreements such as the Sadabad Pact (1937) and the Balkan Entente (1934), both of which aimed to prevent external interventions and promote peace in the region. The İnönü government (1938-1950) maintained this policy of non-alignment, deliberately avoiding commitments to either the Western or Soviet blocs.

During the 1945–1947 period, Türkiye generally aligned itself with Arab states regarding the Palestine question, particularly within the framework of United Nations (UN) deliberations. Türkiye voted against the 1947 UN Partition Plan, which proposed the division of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. However, by 1948, with increasing Western influence, Ankara began shifting its position towards a more pro-Western orientation. This policy realignment led to the eventual recognition of Israel in 1949, despite Türkiye's previous reservations regarding Zionist ambitions.

Türkiye was one of the earliest countries to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel, yet its approach was initially cautious. Unlike many Western European nations that immediately recognized Israel's sovereignty, Türkiye adopted a "wait and see" policy, only extending full diplomatic recognition on March 28, 1949 nearly a year after Israel's establishment.

Initially, Türkiye's diplomatic mission in Israel was not at the ambassadorial level but rather a "Legation," with Türkiye appointing a Minister instead of an Ambassador (Güvendiren, 1999:173). This indicated a measured and careful approach, reflecting Türkiye's desire to maintain a diplomatic balance between its ties with Israel and its relationships with Arab nations.

Despite this deliberate diplomatic caution, Türkiye's eventual recognition of Israel marked a significant geopolitical shift. As Türel Yılmaz (2016) argues, the recognition of Israel was not an isolated event but rather part of a broader strategic realignment aimed at securing Türkiye's position within the Western bloc. In this context, Türkiye's foreign

policy evolved from Arab-aligned neutrality in the late 1940s to a pro-Western stance that prioritized security, economic, and military cooperation with key international actors.

Türkiye's move towards recognizing Israel was also influenced by its Cold War security concerns. Ankara feared Soviet expansionism and sought alignment with the United States (US) and NATO. By recognizing Israel, Türkiye aimed to strengthen its ties with Washington and gain access to Western economic and military aid. Bölükbaşı (1999:22) argues that Türkiye's initial reluctance towards Zionism stemmed from a misconception that Israel was aligned with the Soviet Union. However, once it became clear that Israel was firmly positioned within the Western camp, Ankara reconsidered its stance.

Türkiye's Geopolitical Realignment in the Early Cold War Era

Türkiye's decision to recognize Israel in 1949 cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it must be viewed as part of a broader geopolitical realignment during the early Cold War period, in which Ankara redefined its foreign policy in response to Soviet pressure and aspirations for Western integration.

Within this context, Türkiye's strategic engagement with Israel was shaped by multiple factors, including:

1. Western Integration: Türkiye sought to strengthen its ties with the US and Western Europe, particularly as it aimed to secure membership in NATO (which was eventually achieved in 1952). The Truman Doctrine (1947), which provided economic and military aid to Türkiye and Greece, reinforced Ankara's pro-Western trajectory.
2. Containment of Soviet Influence: Türkiye's growing security concerns regarding Soviet territorial ambitions especially with USSR demands over the Turkish Straits (Bosphorus and Dardanelles) pushed Ankara closer to Western allies.
3. Economic Considerations: Establishing relations with Israel facilitated bilateral trade agreements and enhanced economic ties with Western economies, further reinforcing Türkiye's economic security.
4. Strategic Positioning in the Middle East: While Türkiye was cautious about alienating Arab nations, it also sought to balance regional dynamics by engaging with Israel as a potential ally in intelligence and security cooperation.

Türkiye's Dual Alignment in Middle Eastern Diplomacy

Despite its early recognition of Israel in 1949, Türkiye maintained formal ties with Arab states and pursued a policy of diplomatic neutrality in subsequent Middle Eastern conflicts. This approach reflected Ankara's broader attempt to balance its emerging Western alignment with the sensitivities of its regional neighborhood. For instance, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Türkiye refrained from direct involvement and upheld a non-interventionist stance, signaling its desire to avoid alienating Arab partners.

However, Türkiye's recognition of Israel did not go unnoticed in the Arab world. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser openly criticized Ankara, stating, *"Türkiye, because of its policy toward Israel, is increasingly disliked in the Arab world"*(Pipes, 1998:32). Many pan-Arab leaders viewed Türkiye's action as a betrayal of Muslim

solidarity in favor of Western interests, intensifying regional skepticism toward Ankara's foreign policy direction.

This tension placed Türkiye in a delicate position. On one hand, it had committed to a strategic alignment with the Western bloc a trajectory reinforced by its NATO membership bid and security dependence on the United States. On the other, it sought to preserve regional legitimacy in the eyes of Arab nations. The result was a dual alignment strategy that defined much of Türkiye's Middle East policy during the Cold War.

As discussed earlier, this orientation was not merely symbolic. Türkiye's geopolitical calculations were shaped by mounting Cold War pressures, including territorial concerns over Soviet ambitions in the Turkish Straits. Notably, in 1939, Turkish Prime Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu was directly pressured by Soviet officials during a visit to Moscow to reconsider Ankara's neutrality. Türkiye resisted these overtures and moved further toward Western alignment, a decision ultimately solidified through economic and military cooperation under the Truman Doctrine (1947).

Within this evolving security framework, recognition of Israel became part of Türkiye's broader strategy to anchor itself firmly in the Western camp. By doing so, Ankara not only sought to deter Soviet aggression but also to improve access to Western aid and defense networks. However, this came at the cost of alienating some Arab states, especially as pan-Arabism and anti-Zionist sentiment grew stronger in the 1950s and 1960s.

Thus, Türkiye's recognition of Israel was more than an isolated diplomatic act it was a calculated geopolitical move within a shifting regional and global landscape. Unlike in the previous section, which emphasized Türkiye's internal deliberations and Western-oriented realignment, this part underscores the external reception and regional implications of that decision, offering a complementary perspective on the balancing act that would come to characterize Turkish foreign policy for decades.

Long-Term Implications of Türkiye's Recognition of Israel

The diplomatic relationship between Türkiye and Israel, despite periodic fluctuations, has remained a consistent element of Türkiye's foreign policy. Since 1949, bilateral relations have encompassed trade agreements, military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and strategic partnerships.

By 1952, Türkiye officially joined NATO, reinforcing its position within the Western alliance. This further shaped its Middle East policy, wherein it adopted a Western-aligned but regionally pragmatic approach to its interactions with both Israel and Arab states. The recognition of Israel was, therefore, not merely a bilateral diplomatic move but a reflection of Türkiye's broader geopolitical positioning during the Cold War era.

The Cold War period introduced a new geopolitical order in the Middle East, significantly impacting Türkiye's foreign policy and its approach toward Israel. As Türkiye sought to navigate the complexities of regional power struggles, Western alliances, and Arab-Israeli conflicts, its relationship with Israel evolved through fluctuating periods of cooperation and strategic disengagement.

At the onset of the Cold War, Türkiye was initially cautious about fully committing to Israeli diplomacy. Turkish policymakers were uncertain about Israel's geopolitical positioning and whether it would align with the Western bloc or maintain a neutral stance. Nachmani (2003:7) notes that, from Türkiye's perspective, "Israel's neutrality served as camouflage for a deep-rooted communism." This skepticism gradually diminished as Israel's firm pro-Western orientation became evident, prompting Türkiye to reassess its strategic alignment.

However, developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict increasingly required Türkiye to recalibrate its foreign policy toward the region. The first major revision of Türkiye's approach came in 1963, when the Cyprus crisis escalated and Türkiye found itself at odds with several Arab states, which sided with Greek Cypriots in international forums. This lack of Arab support led to a diplomatic recession in Türkiye-Israel relations, particularly after incidents such as:

1. The Masjid al-Aqsa fire (1969), which provoked widespread condemnation in the Islamic world.
2. The establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1969, which further pressured Türkiye to align with Arab interests.
3. The 1973 Oil Crisis, in which Arab states leveraged oil embargos to punish pro-Israeli nations, forcing Türkiye to reassess its diplomatic priorities (Arbell, 2014).

These developments placed Türkiye in a delicate balancing act, where it sought to maintain security cooperation with Israel while avoiding economic and political alienation from the Arab world. Despite diplomatic tensions, economic and trade agreements between Türkiye and Israel steadily increased. The economic component of their relations became an essential factor, particularly as Ankara recognized Israel's potential as a strategic trade partner in the region.

While certain Arab states expressed discontent with Türkiye's cooperation with Israel, Türkiye viewed its security partnership with Israel as a regional necessity rather than a political endorsement. Altunışık (2000:4) highlights that, from Türkiye's perspective, "the base of the relationship with Israel was internal security and political problems rather than ideological alignment." This perspective underscores Türkiye's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, particularly in the context of regional security dynamics. Rather than framing its relationship with Israel through an ideological lens, Türkiye prioritized its own national security concerns, including countering perceived regional threats such as Soviet influence during the Cold War and later, Kurdish insurgency and instability in neighboring states.

These dynamics laid a flexible groundwork for bilateral cooperation, even as political tensions occasionally resurfaced, requiring Ankara to continually recalibrate its regional strategy. This security-driven rationale allowed Türkiye to navigate its ties with Israel despite pressure from Arab nations, demonstrating Ankara's ability to balance regional relationships while maintaining its strategic priorities. However, this pragmatic stance also led to periodic fluctuations in diplomatic engagement, as shifts in regional politics often necessitated recalibrations in Türkiye's approach toward both Israel and the Arab world.

The Cold War Era and Strategic Alliances

Türkiye's strategic calculations became particularly evident during the Suez Crisis (1956) when Israel, alongside Britain and France, launched a military campaign to seize control of the Suez Canal from Egypt. Facing strong pressure from Arab states, Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel, temporarily aligning with Iraq's pro-Arab stance (Sekulow, 2008:5). However, this distancing was short-lived, and by 1958, Türkiye and Israel secretly negotiated the Peripheral Pact, which included military intelligence-sharing, covert military cooperation against regional adversaries, and economic coordination. This agreement, signed by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, underscored the pragmatic and security-driven nature of Turkish-Israeli relations during the Cold War.

The 1960 military coup in Türkiye introduced a more cautious approach to Middle Eastern politics. The new Turkish government under Prime Minister Cemal Gürsel sought to balance relations with Arab states while maintaining discreet but essential ties with Israel. Despite periodic diplomatic tensions, intelligence-sharing and military cooperation continued in the background.

The 1967 Six-Day War and Israel's territorial expansion into the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights created another diplomatic challenge. While many Arab nations severed ties with Israel, Türkiye refrained from labeling Israel as an aggressor but expressed concerns over the occupation of Palestinian territories. This stance strained relations with Arab states but allowed Ankara to maintain a degree of diplomatic neutrality.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Türkiye shifted its foreign policy focus toward economic opportunities in the Middle East, strengthening trade relations with oil-producing Arab states. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) even opened an office in Ankara in 1979, reflecting Türkiye's attempt to balance regional alliances. However, by the late 1980s, Türkiye grew frustrated with the lack of Arab support for its Cyprus issue, prompting a revaluation of its Middle Eastern strategy.

This period of cautious engagement and regional balancing laid the groundwork for a more assertive strategic orientation in the following decade, where Cold War pragmatism gave way to post-Cold War security recalibrations and economic integration with Israel.

Strategic Cooperation and Economic Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

The election of Turgut Özal (1983–1993) marked a turning point in Turkish-Israeli relations. Seeking to align Türkiye more closely with Western allies, Özal expanded economic and security discussions with Israel and emphasized regional diplomacy as a key foreign policy pillar. As Özal stated,"Having relations with Israel, in addition to Türkiye's relations with the Arab countries, was a practical necessity for Türkiye to play a role in solving the problems of the Middle East." (Altunışık, 2000:173).

With the collapse of the bipolar world order after the Cold War, new security challenges emerged in the Middle East and Central Asia, prompting Türkiye and Israel to reassess their strategic ties. The 1990s saw a deepening of Turkish-Israeli cooperation, particularly in military, intelligence, and economic domains, facilitated by the United States as part of its broader Middle East strategy.

Key defense agreements signed during this period enabled:

1. Joint military exercises, including Israeli air force training at Konya Airbase in Türkiye.
2. Naval cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean, reinforcing maritime security.
3. Defense technology transfers, granting Türkiye access to advanced Israeli military systems.
4. Intelligence-sharing on regional threats, particularly concerning Iran, Iraq, Syria, and terrorist organizations.

These developments marked not just a continuation but a qualitative deepening of bilateral ties, aligning with the strategic vision outlined by Özal and supported by mutual security needs. These findings indicate that the post-Cold War cooperation was not merely reactive to global shifts but reflected a proactive recalibration in Türkiye's regional posture. However, this alignment proved sensitive to domestic political shifts and evolving threat perceptions.

Türkiye's concerns over Syria's support for the PKK further incentivized security ties with Israel, with Ankara procuring Israeli-made military equipment to enhance its counterinsurgency operations. In parallel, economic relations expanded significantly in the 1990s, as Türkiye increased exports to Israel in agriculture, textiles, and infrastructure while Israeli investments in Türkiye's water and energy sectors strengthened commercial ties. Despite occasional diplomatic friction, trade, tourism, and investment helped normalize relations.

Nonetheless, by the 2000s, rising regional instability and the political transformation under the AKP government introduced new dynamics, challenging the sustainability of these strategic and economic bonds.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the economic dimension of Turkish-Israeli relations gained momentum, particularly through trade in agriculture, textiles, and defense-related sectors. This cooperation was not solely based on mutual economic benefit but also reflected a broader strategic pragmatism. Türkiye's decision to maintain strong economic ties with Israel, even amid intermittent diplomatic rifts, demonstrated the prioritization of national interest over ideological consistency. Trade volume between the two countries, which steadily increased throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, underscores the resilience of this partnership despite regional political upheavals. As Kırbaşoğlu and Hasançebi (2024) argue, the bilateral economic agenda served as a stabilizing factor and exemplified Türkiye's realist approach to foreign policy, where economic functionality outweighed symbolic political gestures.

Evolving Dynamics and Diplomatic Realignments (2010–2024)

In recent years, Turkish Israeli relations have fluctuated between diplomatic crises and normalization efforts. A significant low point was the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, where a clash between Israeli soldiers and Turkish activists on a flotilla to Gaza resulted in the deaths of ten activists and a severe diplomatic fallout.

Following this event, intelligence cooperation between the two countries entered a more cautious and fragmented phase. A Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MİT) report dated February 24, 2011, suggested that Israel had supported PKK militants in

northern Iraq, including allegations of Mossad training activities and involvement in the 2010 İskenderun attack. These suspicions were rooted in concerns that Israel favored the establishment of an independent Kurdish state for its own strategic interests (Yesevi, 2020,:4; Koç, 2011).

Nevertheless, diplomatic de-escalation gained traction in 2013, when Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu issued a formal apology for the Mavi Marmara incident. Mossad chief Tamir Pardo's visit to Ankara in June 2013 marked a notable turning point. Reports suggested that Pardo conveyed intelligence regarding Iran's Revolutionary Guards cooperating with Syria's intelligence agency (El Muhaberat) in activities hostile to Türkiye (Yesevi, 2020).

Despite these tensions, the landscape of regional politics shifted with the Abraham Accords (2020), which established formal diplomatic ties between Israel and several Arab states. Türkiye initially criticized these agreements, arguing they prioritized economic and strategic interests over Palestinian rights (SWP, 2023).

However, by 2022, Türkiye initiated a diplomatic rapprochement with Israel. In March 2022, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Ankara, marking a significant step toward restoring relations. This visit was followed by the reinstatement of full diplomatic ties and ambassadorial appointments in August 2022 (Wilson Center, 2023).

Still, underlying political tensions persisted. The 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict reignited friction, with Turkish President strongly condemning Israeli military actions in Gaza and expressing support for Palestinian self-determination (Financial Times, 2023). In response, Israel recalled its diplomatic representatives from Türkiye, once again straining relations.

Despite these political disruptions, the economic dimension of bilateral ties has shown remarkable resilience. As of 2022, bilateral trade exceeded $8.4 billion, making Israel one of Türkiye's key economic partners (ISPI, 2023). The energy sector remains an area of mutual interest, with discussions on a potential Mediterranean gas pipeline linking Israeli natural gas resources to European markets via Türkiye (Washington Institute, 2024).

Trade resilience despite political fluctuations has been a recurring pattern in Turkish-Israeli relations. For instance, even during periods of intense diplomatic strain such as after the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident or the 2023 Gaza conflict bilateral trade not only endured but in some cases expanded. Demir and Yayar (2025) argue that from 2013 to 2024, political crises had limited long-term effects on economic exchanges, highlighting a compartmentalized and interest-driven foreign policy approach focused on economic pragmatism.

Türkiye's evolving regional strategy, particularly its growing engagement with Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, has also influenced its Israel policy. By 2023, trilateral meetings involving Türkiye, Israel, and Gulf nations focused on trade, security, and infrastructure development (Sharq Forum, 2022).

In 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Erdoğan engaged in direct talks, emphasizing energy cooperation, regional security, and counterterrorism. However, Türkiye's unwavering support for Palestinian sovereignty continues to create

diplomatic friction, ensuring that Turkish-Israeli relations remain complex and subject to geopolitical shifts (Financial Times, 2024).

These recent interactions affirm the article's central argument that Turkish-Israeli relations, while ideologically divergent, have consistently been guided by strategic pragmatism. The persistence of economic and intelligence cooperation amid political tensions demonstrates how national interests override value-based alignments. This highlights the growing relevance of issue-specific collaboration in foreign policy, especially in regions marked by volatility and overlapping rivalries.

As these evolving dynamics show, the bilateral relationship though periodically strained continues to be shaped by shifting regional alignments, shared economic priorities, and persistent political sensitivities. In this context, a comprehensive historical assessment becomes essential to understand the cyclical nature of cooperation and crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations.

Conclusion

Turkish-Israeli relations have evolved through multiple historical, geopolitical, and strategic phases, shaped by domestic politics, regional dynamics, and broader international developments. While historical ties between the Turkish nation and Jewish communities date back to the Ottoman Empire, the modern bilateral relationship gained its current structure through a combination of post-World War II developments, including early Jewish migration from Türkiye to Palestine, and the establishment of the State of Israel. This foundational migration, prompted by domestic sociopolitical factors and global trends such as the rise of European antisemitism, laid important groundwork for diplomatic engagement in the ensuing decades.

From the Cold War era onward, Türkiye and Israel developed a fluctuating relationship, characterized by periods of strategic cooperation and political tension. During the Cold War, security imperatives particularly concerns about Soviet influence and regional instability encouraged bilateral intelligence sharing and military cooperation, even as Türkiye maintained a careful balancing act with Arab states. The post-Cold War era introduced new opportunities for collaboration, especially in the 1990s, when defense agreements and trade partnerships deepened ties under a shared framework of strategic pragmatism. However, the rise of the AKP government brought with it a recalibrated foreign policy, with increased emphasis on Türkiye's role in the Muslim world and heightened advocacy for the Palestinian cause, which at times generated friction with Israeli policies.

More recently, regional diplomacy has continued to test the durability of bilateral ties. The Abraham Accords (2020) reshaped the geopolitical landscape, prompting Türkiye to reexamine its role and relationships in the Middle East. Though initially critical of these normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, Ankara subsequently engaged in its own rapprochement with Israel, culminating in the restoration of full diplomatic relations in 2022. Nevertheless, recurring tensions over Israeli-Palestinian conflicts including the escalations in 2023 and 2024 have continued to strain relations, especially at the political level.

Despite such challenges, economic cooperation particularly in energy, infrastructure, and trade has provided a stabilizing layer in bilateral engagement. Shared interests in energy transit, technological exchange, and regional security continue to create space for pragmatic cooperation, even amid political disagreement.

The trajectory of Turkish-Israeli relations reflect the multi-layered nature of foreign policy in the Middle East, where history, geography, and shifting alliances interact in complex ways. As two non-Arab powers in a predominantly Arab region, Türkiye and Israel have at times found strategic convergence, particularly in areas such as counterterrorism and regional stability. Türkiye's role as a NATO member and regional actor has further contributed to the functional, if at times contentious, nature of its relationship with Israel.

In conclusion, Turkish-Israeli relations illustrate how bilateral partnerships in volatile regions are shaped by a dynamic interplay of security imperatives, domestic political shifts, and evolving global trends. While this study has emphasized the pragmatic underpinnings of the relationship, it also acknowledges the fragility inherent in alliances that must navigate both internal pressures and external volatility. Moving forward, the ability of both states to compartmentalize disputes and sustain dialogue will likely determine the resilience and strategic relevance of their cooperation in an increasingly uncertain international environment.

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