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What Next in Turkish-Israeli Relations?

Lucia Najšlová and Gershon Baskin



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What Went Wrong?

The *Mavi Marmara* tragedy in May 2010 represented a new low point in Turkish-Israeli relations that have been steadily worsening over the last few years. The leaders of both countries have on numerous occasions used rhetoric that disregarded the perceptions and concerns of their counterpart and was perceived as humiliating. Though this rhetoric might have originally been intended for their domestic audiences, it has severely influenced their bilateral relations. Additional regional factors have also had a negative effect on the current state of affairs between Israel and Turkey. The lack of progress in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians is a major factor, while another is the Israeli-Lebanon war of summer 2006, after which Turkey withdrew from mediation of the Israeli-Syrian proximity talks. Turkey's strengthening of ties with Iran and Syria and use of double standards for evaluating their own and Israel's conduct are also a matter of concern.

This policy brief explores what went wrong between Turkey and Israel: it analyzes the sources of tension and strategies for its alleviation. The authors believe that it is in the interest not only of the two countries in question, but of their wider neighborhood as well, to have a more positive working Turkish-Israeli relationship. The paper argues that even if the political relations are strained, other levels of the relations need to be reexamined. At the same time, given the relevance of the Middle East for international players, particularly the EU, they might also want to bear in mind that their policies can also contribute to the improvement of this relationship. The analysis is mostly based on interviews with Turkish and Israeli policy-makers, think tankers and intellectuals conducted between March 2010 and March 2011. As some of the respondents spoke only on the condition that they remain anonymous, we do not specify the context in which the cited interviews took place.

One might argue that this is not the right time to write a paper on "what next", as the political dialogue seems to be frozen at least until the next parliamentary election in Turkey (June 2011) and in Israel (scheduled for 2013, but likely to take place earlier). Turkey's ruling AKP has made it clear that there will be no talk on "rapprochement" until Israel apologizes for *Mavi Marmara*. Therefore, the AKP cannot be expected to make any accommodating move during the campaign period – it would undermine its credibility. In Israel, the Netanyahu coalition has the support of its 63 (of 120) members plus the additional support of probably half of the Kadima opposition party (28 seats) not to make any positive overtures to Turkey and not to apologize. The mood in the Israeli Parliament, strongly backed by popular public opinion, is that Turkey has joined the side of Hamas in the conflict and the *Mavi Marmara* was an act of aggression (terrorism is what it is called in Israel) and, therefore, it is Turkey who owes an apology to Israel. In Israel, the determining factor for viewing relations with Turkey is not the Palestinian issue but rather the security of the State of Israel.

Yet, bilateral political dialogue is not the only level of Israeli-Turkish relations. In spite of the political downturn, business cooperation seems to be largely running as usual, not being too impacted by the political mess, although that might change significantly, especially in the realm of defense.

But there is a notable lack of civil society cooperation – efforts by grass-root organizations or NGOs in general to go against the stream of the dominant political discourse and point to the importance of people-to-people contacts. Prior to the downturn in relations, Turkey was one of Israel's number one tourist destinations. Today, many Israelis say that they no longer feel comfortable in Turkey and many no longer wish to support the Turkish economy. This only highlights the need to go beyond political dialogue and foster cooperation networks between civil society groups.

Again, what went wrong? Despite the strong pragmatic interest in mutual cooperation, Turkish-Israeli relations belong to one of the most complicated and confusing pieces of the Middle Eastern puzzle. Many of the issues that make the bond strong reach back to the past, before the two states existed. In the 15th century the Ottoman Empire accepted Jews expelled from Spain, in the 16th another wave came expelled from Bavaria, in the 1930s many Jewish scholars from Nazi Germany found a refuge in Turkey and helped to build academic institutions in the country¹ and during the Holocaust there are reports of Turkish diplomats helping the Jews. Parallel to this positive heritage, however, there is a growing wedge in the relationship. The tensions consist largely of the different perceptions of the Palestinian issue and of Turkey's rapprochement with Iran and Syria, and, generally, making its foreign policy more balanced in comparison with the previous era, when it was mainly looking to its Western partners.

Turkey is one of the first countries to recognize Israel. Their relationship has never been trouble-free, but it has lasted despite a number of crises. These erupted notably when Turkey was forced to choose, either by circumstances or, directly, by some of its other partners, between being a loyal friend to Israel and/or the Arab states in the region. For most of the time, the emphasis in the relationship had been trade and security, rather than politics. Turkey imported hi-tech products, communications technologies, military related goods from Israel, while Israel received textiles, processed agricultural products and manufactured goods from Turkey.²

From the 1970s, the first major defense deals started to be signed and implemented. In terms of security, these two were no strange bedfellows – Israel's establishment was not received too warmly by most of the Arab states and Turkey, after Atatürk's revolution, also did not have a good standing among them. Both Israel and Turkey at the same time looked to the West: they saw close alliance with Europe and the United States as a guarantee of their security and, at the same time, their elites and certain segments of population felt cultural affinity with the West.

Turkey's membership of NATO and the incremental but determined process of a rise in strategic cooperation between Israel and NATO (including a regular strategic dialogue and annual joint training operations) have also played a role over the past years in the strategic cooperation between security/military officials in Israel and in Turkey. Thus, their mutual cooperation was understandable.

1. M. Ergin, "Cultural Encounters in the Social Sciences and Humanities: Western Émigré Scholars in Turkey", *History of the Human Sciences*, 22 (1), 2009, pp. 105-130.

2. For the history of Israeli-Turkish relations, see for example: E.J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2005; A. Nachmani, Israel, *Turkey and Greece: Uneasy Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean*, London, Frank Cass, 1987; C. Bir and M. Sherman, "Formula for Stability: Turkey Plus Israel", *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2002, pp. 23-32; M.M. Bac, *Turkey and Israel: An Evolving Partnership*, "Policy Paper", No. 47, Ariel Center for Policy Research, 1998; B. Aras, "Turkish-Israeli-Iranian Relations in the 1990s and their Impact on the Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, VII (3), 2000, pp. 151-164.

For most of history, however, the depth of Turkish-Israeli relations was not a matter of open public discussion at home.³ The weakening of the Turkish military, through the democratic processes taking place in Turkey, may also have some impact, perhaps on the margins, on the future of military cooperation between the two countries that strengthens the ability of the Turkish government to determine its own foreign policy directives independent of former constraints. That there was not always an open debate on the importance of mutual relations could be, at least in the case of Turkey, one of the reasons why anti-Israelism is a successful political strategy. At the same time, while Turkish rhetoric shows considerable empathy with the Palestinians, there is not that much understanding of the Israeli perspective. And this is the core of the Israeli perception: Israel feels permanently threatened and misunderstood, and this is how it frames its view of relations with Turkey. Given this vicious circle in bilateral relations and with regard to the involvement of external players in issues central to the Israeli-Turkish relationship (the Middle East peace process), it is of the utmost importance that the international players are aware that they can also contribute to Turkish-Israeli rapprochement – for this we offer some suggestions in the concluding part of this policy brief, after we have reviewed the perceptions and motivations of both sides.

3. J. Abadi, "Israel and Turkey: From Covert to Overt Relations", *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 15th September 1995, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/4548/5389>. Date accessed: 6th March 2011.

The Views from Ankara
(Perceptions and Motivations)

PM Erdogan's storming off the stage during a debate with Israeli President Peres in Davos in January 2009, the Israeli diplomatic faux pas that led to the "chair crisis" in 2010⁴ or the *Mavi Marmara* incident in which the IDF killed 8 Turkish citizens are oft-cited examples of the recent deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations. This worsening of relations is often attributed to the coming to power of the AKP in Turkey, yet, in certain realms (such as business), the situation seems to be quite the opposite – the ties have actually strengthened. Turkey and Israel have cooperated pragmatically on a government and business level basically since the establishment of the State of Israel. At the same time, one should recall that anti-Israeli rhetoric has been part and parcel of public debate for many years, and was not invented by the AKP.⁵

While Turkey's criticism towards Israel is by many accounts justified in substance, it is the style that raises the concern of the international community. Just like Turkey, the EU and the US leaders have also on many occasions expressed – subtly on the record and more vehemently off the record – their frustration with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process going nowhere. At the same time, the current Israeli government is not perceived as "pro-rapprochement" or "pro-solution" by any relevant political force in the Euro-Atlantic community. Moreover, Palestinian disunity and Hamas autocracy do not contribute to hopes about the situation.

However, Western leaders have questioned the double standards that Turkey applies to its foreign partners: namely that any Israeli human rights violation receives much more attention than violations committed by Turkey's other allies. PM Erdogan called Iran's President Ahmadinejad his "good friend", Sudanese President al-Bashir found in the Turkish Prime Minister a good advocate denying any claims of genocide in Sudan and, quite recently, Mr Erdogan received Gaddafi's Human Rights Award.⁶ At the same time, while Turkey forged good relations with dictators in the Arab world, its stance on the verge of the 2011 revolutions was more reluctant.

What are the sources of the over-emphasis on Israeli wrongdoings? What makes Turkey's politicians focus on the misconduct of Israel and often ignore wrongs committed by Turkey's other allies? Except for genuine concern about the situation of the Palestinians, there are also more pragmatic motivations. Broadly speaking, there are two levels on which antagonism towards Israel is perceived as beneficial for some of Turkey's leaders: the domestic and foreign. The domestic level serves the goal of getting re-elected and "speaking the same language" as the people. The foreign level, on the other hand, serves the amplification of Turkey's role and prestige in world affairs, especially when it comes to gaining leadership among the emerging powers, where anti-Israelism and anti-Americanism is not a new phenomenon. It should be noted, though, that the Turkish political scene is divided on the Palestinian issue – the CHP opposition has recently criticized the governing AKP for getting too involved and blowing up the relations with Israel.

4. Israeli Deputy PM Danny Ayalon called in Turkey's ambassador to Israel, Ahmet Oguz Celikkol, and asked him to explain PM Erdogan's growing criticism of Israel. Celikkol was, however, seated on a sofa positioned lower than his Israeli counterpart, and the meeting was followed live by Israeli media (about which Celikkol had no prior information). This situation created strong anti-Israeli sentiment in Turkey.

5. Anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism appears frequently in Turkish popular culture. Examples of writers who could be labeled openly anti-Israel would be Yalcin Kucuk or Soner Yalcin, whose books are widely circulated.

6. "Erdogan receives Gaddafi Human Rights Award", *Today's Zaman*, 1st December 2010, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsByld.action?load=detay&newsId=228386.

The Israeli card's importance in domestic politics has been evident on a number of occasions. A good example is the 2010 campaign on the constitutional referendum⁷ that coincided with the aftermath of the *Mavi Marmara* affair. Turkey's Prime Minister and other AKP leaders in a number of meetings with citizens around Turkey did not only speak about the benefits of the amendment package, but frequently referred to the government's determination to stand up to Israel, almost as if Israel was a player in the constitutional debate. These words clearly resonated with the public, even though the constitutional reform itself did not have much to do with foreign policy. Expression of solidarity with the Palestinians thus clearly served as a strategy to gain support in approaching referendum.⁸ It needs to be noted that the resonance of criticism of Israel only rarely spills over into anti-Semitism and, when it does, this is in the case of fringe nationalist or extreme religious groups. The main source of criticism of Israel is Turkish solidarity with Palestinians – not so much the religious Jewish/Muslim divide. The resolution of the Turkish Parliament (TBMM) adopted 2nd June 2010 (two days after the *Mavi Marmara* attack), although uncompromising in the measures it demands from the government and international community to adopt towards Israel, states explicitly: "The TBMM believes that these reactions will not resort to violence and do not convey offences against our Jewish fellow citizens. The reactions against the belligerent attitude of the Israeli government may not be aimed at the Israeli people."⁹

That Turkey's reaction should not be perceived in religious terms is evidenced also by the fact that secular Turks, with no allegiance whatsoever to the AKP, and non-practicing religious people participated in anti-Israeli demonstrations (also during the Israeli Cast Lead operation in Gaza and on other occasions) and expressed dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Israel and Palestine. At the same time, while there is a strong "Palestinian solidarity" current in Turkish society, it is by no means dominant. Its strength is, however; underlined by the lack of an "Israeli solidarity" current. As a public opinion poll conducted in 2008 concluded: "Turks are divided on whether their government should take either the Palestinian's side (42%) or neither side (38%) in this conflict. Only 4 percent of Turks say Turkey should take Israel's side."¹⁰ This has also been confirmed by the authors' interviews and observations. To sum up, while the expressions of Palestinian solidarity do resonate with a large part of Turkish society, expression of solidarity with Israelis is less likely to win the hearts and minds of Turkish voters. This has a lot to do with the lack of civil society exchange between Israel and Turkey, which we discuss later in this policy brief.

There is also, however, a foreign policy dimension to Turkey's position on Israel. On the one hand, Turkey is a NATO member and an EU aspirant. This vocation is an expression of the pro-Western orientation that Turkey already adopted in pre-republic, Ottoman times. Yet Turkey is aiming to balance its foreign/international presence. While many observers of Turkish politics dub this as an "axis shift" (a label that causes fury among the Turkish governing elite), the creators of this new foreign policy merely remind us that the global balance of power is changing and a number of issues such as the North/South and West/East gap will not be tackled efficiently unless the periphery and the underpri-

7. On 12th September 2010, Turkey held a referendum on amendments to the Constitution.

8. Authors' interviews and observations on the public meetings in the wake of 31st May 2010 events.

9. Turkish Parliament condemns Israeli attack, 2nd June 2010,

<http://bianet.org/english/minorities/122480-turkish-parliament-condemns-israeli-attack>.

10. "World Public Opinion on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", worldpublicopinion.org, July 2008, research in Turkey conducted by ARI movement, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/jul08/WPO_IsPa_Jul08_countries.pdf.

vileged get more opportunities to articulate their interests. As Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs recently wrote, "Today, Turkey has a great deal of say in the international arena. More importantly, there is a critical group of countries that lends a careful ear to Turkey's stance on a myriad of regional and international issues. At this point, the world expects great things from Turkey, and we are fully aware of our responsibility to carry out a careful foreign policy."¹¹

At the same time, many of Turkey's new or merely rediscovered allies from the non-Western world have been ardent critics of Israel and have frequently used anti-Israeli rhetoric to obtain domestic votes, although their actual contribution to the conflict resolution has been minimal. With Turkey now gaining a new role in a loose movement/association of non-Western countries that have many goals in common, Israeli leadership should consider an important question. Namely: does it want to keep Turkey as an ally? Is there an advantage in keeping Turkey as a friend, with whom not only to do pragmatic business but that can also be a friend who listens to Israel and is able to communicate its concerns to the rest of the Palestine-solidarity camp? Should the answer be yes, then the Israeli leadership and intellectual elite might want to do a careful analysis of Turkey's new foreign policy and perhaps refrain from interpreting Turkey's every Eastern excursion as an anti-Western gesture. Most certainly, premature statements such as this one, which already pass the verdict that Turkey has left the West, do not help build confidence: "NATO probably needs to adopt greater caution in sharing with Turkey sensitive information and technologies to stop potential leaks and technology transfer to Iran."¹² Given the fact that Turkey is a NATO member (and Israel is not), Israeli advice to the West about being cautious about Turkey is further antagonizing the Turkish elite and does not create much respect for Israel in Turkey's policy circles.

Business Pragmatism

It is a common mistake to assume that Turkish-Israeli relations naturally had to deteriorate after the election of the AKP. In this realm, business/trade relations are important evidence to the contrary. The table below shows that the trade volume between Israel and Turkey has been growing and in 2010 it reached 3.4 billion USD (compared to 2.6 billion USD in 2009 or 1.2 in 2000) and increased from 1.4 billion USD in 2002 to 3.3 billion USD in 2008.¹³

Moreover, in 1996 Israel and Turkey concluded a free trade agreement, largely in the framework of Turkey's efforts to become closer to the European Union. In 1996, the EU and Turkey established a customs union and, in order for this to become effective, it had to respect already existing agreements, namely the Association Agreement between the EU and Turkey and the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement Establishing an Association between the European Communities and the State of Israel.¹⁴

Shortly after the *Mavi Marmara* tragedy, the Turkish Parliament called for a boycott of trade with Israel. This political appeal, however, does not reflect much on business reality. According to inter-

11. A. Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy*, 20th May 2010,

http://www.mfa.gov.tr/article-by-h_e_ahmet-davutoglu-published-in-foreign-policy-magazine-usa_-on-20-may-2010.en.mfa.

12. E. Inbar, *Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy and its International Ramifications*, "Paper", No. 132, The BESA Center Perspectives, 2011.

13. "Turkey-Israel Trade Volume Rises by 135 pct under the AKP Government", *Hurriyet Daily News*,

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/finance/10898837.asp>.

14. Free Trade Agreement between Turkey and Israel, <http://www.worldtradelaw.net/fta/agreements/isrturfta.pdf>.

views carried out in the wake of the event, the business community would not like to see politics interfere in trade ties.

The trouble, however, might arise with the defense contracts that constitute a large share of the trade volume. Here the different perceptions of threat (discussed in other sections of this paper) might complicate some of the deals. For Turkey, Israel is an important provider of military equipment (second to the USA) but Turkey's policy towards Iran raises concern among the Israeli elite and is a source of doubts about whether the equipment purchased from Israel could not in fact be used against it (via selling to Iran).

Although there are voices in Turkish politics calling for the boycott of deals with Israel, many of them at the same time favor the best possible equipment for the Turkish army. Thus, trade might in the end prevail over ideology.

Turkey-Israel Trade Data (1999-2010) in Thousands of USD¹⁵

Year	Export	Change (%)	Import	Change (%)	Volume	Balance
1999	585,328	—	298,257	—	883,495	286,981
2000	650,141	11.1	505,481	69.4	1,155,623	144,660
2001	805,217	23.9	529,489	4.74	1,334,706	275,728
2002	861,433	7	544,466	2.82	1,405,900	316,967
2003	1,082,998	25.7	459,488	-15.6	1,542,486	623,509
2004	1,315,292	21.4	714,142	55.4	2,029,435	601,149
2005	1,466,912	11.5	804,690	12.6	2,271,603	662,222
2006	1,529,158	4.2	782,149	-2.8	2,311,307	747,008
2007	1,658,194	8.4	1,081,742	38.3	2,739,937	576,451
2008	1,935,234	16.7	1,447,918	33.8	3,383,153	487,315
2009	1,528,459	-21.01	1,074,726	-25.78	2,598,497	458,242
2010	2,083,986	36.3	1,359,624	26.53	3,443,610	724,362

Source: Turkish Prime Ministry, Undersecretariat for Foreign Trade (2010).

Limited Civil Society Exchange

The people-to-people contacts between Turks and Israelis exist notably in tourism, business and academia, but on the level of what is usually understood as civil society – activist networks, local development, experience sharing networks – not much is happening.

15. Undersecretariat of the Turkish Prime Ministry for Foreign Trade, *Israel: Genel Bilgiler (2010)*, <http://www.dtm.gov.tr/dtmadmin/upload/ANL/OrtaDoguDb/israil.pdf>.

From the point of view of Turkey, there is a lack of grass-roots civil society initiatives towards their Israeli counterparts. While Turkey's civil sector is booming, and there are also a number of big initiatives or ad hoc efforts in such sensitive issues as Turkish-Armenian relations, similar effort is rare when it comes to dealing with Israel. This can on the one hand be explained by the fact that Turkish civil society is very sensitive to the Palestinian issue. While mending ties with Armenians is perceived as a priority by many Turkish NGOs, mending ties with Israel and development of cooperative networks is not perceived as a burning issue. Moreover, such an activity is preconditioned by a significant shift in Israel's policy towards Palestinians.

The important point, however, is that stronger cooperation between Turkish and Israeli civil society might in fact contribute to the desired effect – resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Let us note how the Turkish-Armenian civil society rapprochement has left traces of change in public debate in Turkey. It is no longer taboo to discuss certain issues from the past; it is no longer so beneficial for a Turkish politician to play the anti-Armenian card. Should there be more joint events, research and other forms of collaboration between Turkish and Israeli organizations, something similar could happen with Turkey's debate on Israel.

Especially given the fact that there are strong networks linking Turkish and Palestinian organizations, a strengthened cooperation that would involve Israeli NGOs might help Turkey to become a more balanced player in the conflict and return to earlier phases of its involvement, when it was considered an honest broker by both sides.

When it comes to externally supported opportunities for cooperation, some actually exist – for example, the Eureka/Eurostars funded calls for joint projects in R&D.¹⁶ The EU also supports youth exchange through the Youth in Action Program. Another opportunity is the Anna Lindh Foundation¹⁷ or the UN backed Alliance of Civilizations. Should Turkish and Israeli civil society come up with joint proposals for common initiatives, there is little doubt that donors who have not yet expressed interest in supporting such ventures might get interested.

16. See, for example, "Turkey-Israel 5th Call for Proposals for Joint R&D Projects", <http://www.tamas.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/4884C98C-7DF1-4EF5-A0CB-F6A2E8E13162/0/5callforproposalsTurkeyIsraelv2.pdf>.

17. Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, <http://www.euromedalex.org>.

Views from Jerusalem
(Perceptions and Motivations)

From Israel's perspective, Turkey is acting mainly with the goal of boosting its influence in the Middle East and beyond and it does so at the expense of "old partners". An Israeli respondent concludes: "All that remains is what had been strategic relations. There are no new businesses. Israeli-Turkish relations were very important in the past, but not anymore. Israel recognizes that Turkey is a very important player in the region, but now Turkey has made a decision that its relations with Syria and Iran are more important than its relations with Israel. The government of Erdogan and his AKP is not a secular expression of political Islam, but a clear and determined political strategy based on the increasing Islamification of Turkish society."

The Turkish decision to improve relations with Iran and Syria is thus perceived as being at the expense of Israel. Israeli policy circles believe that this move came as a result of the understanding in Ankara that Turkey's aspirations to join the European Union would not be fulfilled, despite the almost complete adherence to the European demands on democratic and economic reforms. In Israel there was never much belief that Turkey would be accepted into the EU because of the reality that despite its secular façade Europe would not agree to have a new 78 million members with open borders whose citizens would be free to move, work and reside anywhere in Europe. Israelis perceived that Turkey's acceptance into the EU would be seen by Europe as a Muslim invasion that would never be allowed.

In 2011, Iran remains the single most dangerous strategic threat to Israel. The combination of Iran's nuclear program, Iranian threats to remove Israel from the map, Iranian arming and financing of Hamas and Hezbollah and Iranian training of Palestinian and other terrorists creates a situation whereby the friends and allies of Iran cannot be the friends and allies of Israel. Moreover, Turkey's decision to move closer to Iran coincides, both in terms of time and strategic vision, with the downward swing in relations with Israel. Thus, Israeli security is the single most important prism through which Israeli policy-makers perceive relations with Turkey.

What, however, happened to Turkey's old role of facilitator of pro-solution talks between Israelis and Palestinians? In the end, would not a settlement of the conflict with Palestinians be the major step towards Israeli security? From the Israeli vantage point, while appreciating Turkey's positive role in conducting proximity talks between Olmert and Assad, Israel's understanding was that as soon as the talks became serious, Turkey would be replaced by the United States, at the mutual desire of both Syria and Israel. Thus, the Turkish role was never understood as the key contribution. When Israel launched its attacks against Gaza on 27th December 2008, days after the Israeli Prime Minister visited Ankara, Prime Minister Olmert did not think about the need to inform Prime Minister Erdogan about Israel's plans. In fact, Olmert expected Turkey to understand Israel's position and need to respond to the continuous Hamas provocations of more than 100 rockets and mortars each day being fired at Israel's civilian population around Gaza. Perhaps Olmert feared

that if he shared the information about the impending attack on Gaza that Erdogan would share it with Hamas, knowing of Turkey's affinity for the Palestinian Islamic movement. Apparently in the Ankara meeting, Erdogan pressured Olmert to remove the siege on Gaza to which Olmert responded with complete rejection. Olmert probably never considered the need to share his war plans with Erdogan while on the Turkish side Olmert's failure to inform them was not only a great humiliation, as the whole world knew that Olmert had visited Ankara shortly before the world, it could have also been interpreted in Ankara as if Olmert had engaged Turkey in his plans and may have even received Turkish blessing. This required an immediate Turkish condemnation of the Israeli attack on Gaza even before knowing of the scope of anger that would be raised from the Turkish public against Israel.

The war in Gaza began on 28th January 2008 and, on 29th January, Prime Minister Erdogan walked off the stage of the Davos World Economic Forum after an angry exchange with the Israeli president, Shimon Peres, during a panel discussion on Gaza. To Israelis in government and in the public the behavior of Erdogan was humiliating and abrasive but, more importantly, it signaled that Turkey's support was behind Hamas and its attacks against Israel rather than supporting Israel and the Israeli people, who they believed were the victims of the extremist Hamas Islamic movement. Relations between the two would not return to normal after this event. Turkey's full backing of the Hamas position, its full support behind Hamas leaders in Gaza and in Syria including Khaled Mashal and repeated Turkish statements that Israel committed war crimes in Gaza firmed up the Israeli position that Turkey could no longer be considered an ally or even neutral in the conflict.

In February 2009 Turkish prosecutors announced that they were investigating whether Israeli leaders should be prosecuted for crimes against humanity over the recent military offensive in the Gaza Strip. The Ankara chief prosecutor's office said the probe was opened after Mazlum-Der, an Islamic-oriented human rights organization in Turkey, filed an official complaint against Israeli leaders. This was immediately perceived in Israel as having direct Turkish government support.¹⁸

On 8th October 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan accused Israel of committing greater crimes against Palestinians during its war in the Gaza Strip than those for which Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir had been indicted. Erdogan said he would rather confront Bashir, indicted for orchestrating crimes against humanity in Darfur, than discuss state killings of civilians with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Moreover, in mid-October 2009, Turkey's state-sponsored channel TRT1 produced a prime-time program depicting a monstrous image of the Israeli military as bloodthirsty and murderous. This was viewed in Israel as not the right of free expression but rather a state guided deliberate policy of incitement against the Jewish people and the State of Israel. *The Sunday Times* of London re-

18. "Turkey Probes Israel on 'War Crimes' in Gaza", 6th February 2009, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3667770,00.html>.

ported it as follows: "Israel's relations with Turkey plunged to a new low yesterday after Turkish state television aired a fictional series showing troops murdering Palestinian children during last winter's Gaza war. Ties between the two strategic regional allies had already taken a serious blow this week when Turkey demanded that Israel be excluded from military exercises that it was staging with US and NATO allies. The US was forced to cancel the war games."¹⁹

On 30th May 2010, the *Mavi Marmara* entered international waters off the coast of Gaza. Israel immediately saw the ship's intention to break the siege on Gaza as an act of terrorism and treated the event in kind. In January 2011, Israel published its report on the *Mavi Marmara* affair. The report put direct responsibility on the government of Turkey for supporting what Israel claims is a terrorist organization and an organization which supports Palestinian terrorism: "The flotilla itself was organized by a coalition comprised of a number of organizations, of which the leading organization was the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation. The IHH organization is, as stated, a humanitarian organization with a radical-Islamic orientation [...]" The (Israeli) Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center report dated 20th June 2010 implies that there is a connection between the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation organization and the government of Turkey. The leader of the organization, Yildirim, enjoys close relations with the most senior members of the Turkish government, including the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Israel does not believe that the government of Turkey was a passive player in the sending of the *Mavi Marmara*. The government of Israel believes that Turkey bears direct responsibility for supporting an act of terrorism against the State of Israel and that the unfortunate death of nine people on board the ship was because they attacked the Israeli navy commandos who were ordered to bring the ship to Israel's port. The government of Israel strongly believes that it bears no responsibility whatsoever for the deaths of those passengers.

At the end of June 2010, Israeli Minister of Industry and Trade (from the Labor Party) met with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in an attempt to find a way back to more positive relations. The Minister had arranged the talks in agreement with Defense Minister Barak and it was believed that Prime Minister Netanyahu supported them as well. In July 2010, there were additional attempts to resolve the tension and a deal was initially agreed that would include some form of an Israeli apology for the killing of nine Turkish citizens aboard the *Mavi Marmara* and the payment of compensation to their families. Netanyahu's own envoy, Yosef Ciechanover, was expected to bring a proposal drawn up in talks with the Turkish Prime Minister. These talks were encouraged and perhaps even facilitated by the US Administration. When the talks were discovered and leaked to the media, Prime Minister Netanyahu's office issued a statement that the talks were unofficial. It was reported that Defense Minister Barak initially disagreed with the Prime Minister but later issued a statement that he was against paying any compensation to the families of Turks killed aboard the

19. J. Hilder, "Turkey TV Drama Casts Israeli Troops as Gaza Child Killers", *The Sunday Times*, 16th October 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6876969.ece>.

ship. Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman, who opposes any Israeli reconciliation attempts with Turkey, was not informed about the meeting. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not said he is in favor of apologizing to the Turks over the *Mavi Marmara* incident, only that he hopes it is possible to solve the crisis in the relationship with Ankara. Another senior Israeli government member from the PM's Likud party said: "Turkey is an important country, improving relations is important for both Israel and Turkey but we need to preserve our national honor, as well as the honor of the IDF soldiers."²⁰

Refusing to take any responsibility for the current state of affairs, Israeli officials believe that the steady decline in relations is the direct and sole responsibility of Turkey. "Yes, it's entirely Turkish responsibility, Erdogan and the Foreign Minister who have designed and implemented the policy of improving relations with Iran and Syria." An Israeli Turkey expert who was a former Israeli diplomat in Ankara and today has business connections in Turkey commented: "Most of the Israeli politicians, academics and the majority of the Israeli public see Erdogan as an anti-Semite and see this Turkish government as hostile to Israel for religious reasons. They see the changes in Turkey's relations to Israel as not connected at all to Israel. It is a political change in Turkey, it is a change in Turkish foreign policy and what happens bilaterally between the two countries is just the result of it. It has nothing to do with the Israeli response to the Flotilla and the Turkish demand for an apology."

Security and Business Cooperation

The strong anchor of Israeli-Turkish relations during the decade of the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s was based on the alliance of military leaders, and the strong roles that the military in both countries played in relation to each other. The military relations, which involved not only joint trainings including regional Mediterranean naval cooperation and a wider regional strategic outlook, also involved multi-million contracts with Israeli military industries including upgrading the Turkish air force by Israeli companies.

From Israel's eyes the AKP worked diligently and determinedly to strengthen their own ruling hand at the expense of the Turkish military, which had been the "guarantor of the Turkish Constitution" and had on more than one occasion in the past imposed martial law when the civilian government did not fulfil its role (according to the military). The AKP has succeeded in changing the role of the Turkish army in the last decade and decreasing its power within Turkey. It is recognized by Israel (without pleasure) that the Turkish army, with every passing year, is less involved in civilian, political and regional affairs.

The weakening of the Turkish army in influencing Turkish politics while the Islamic AKP gains in strength is not viewed in Israel as strengthening Turkish democracy, but rather as Islamizing the formerly secular Kemalist regime and orientation that existed prior to the rise of the AKP. The decline in the role of the

20. Yisrael Katz, Minister of Transportation, quoted in H. Keinon, "Netanyahu Not in Favor of Apologizing to Turkey", *The Jerusalem Post*, 12th December 2010, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?ID=199017&R=R1>.

army and the strength of the AKP is, in the Israeli perception, the root of Turkey's decision to move away from its relationship with Israel in favour of turning eastwards. In this respect, many Israelis in the military-security elite believe that Turkey will run into problems even within the NATO alliance. Israel does not see Turkey as a full reliable member of the Western alliance and gives evidence of that in the rather cold Turkish response to NATO's role in the No Fly Zone over Libya. "Turkey is part of NATO but its policy is not part of NATO's policy," said a Foreign Ministry official. He went on to say: "Basically, the Turks play together with Iran. You know that they're in the same club with Venezuela and with Brazil, they are simply not reliable." If in the past Israel envisaged various possible roles for Turkey as a reliable third party in the peace process, either with the Palestinians perhaps playing a role in Gaza, or with the Syrians as a mediator in previous proximity talks, today the current government of Israel cannot see any positive role that Turkey could play.

The Turkish-Iranian alliance is beyond what Israel is capable of accepting from a country seeking to befriend Israel. The depth of the strategic threat perception of Israel regarding the Iranian regime has made Israel's number one foreign policy directive to apply a painful sanctions regime against Iran and continuous appeals to Western nations, mainly the US and the UK, to keep the military option of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities on the table. The Israeli Foreign Ministry is constantly engaged in supplying "evidence" to Israel's emissaries around the world on the Iranian nuclear program and its intentions (as understood by Israel) to achieve nuclear bomb status. In light of this, a Turkish-Iranian alliance brings the Iranian threat much closer to "home" and for Israel puts Turkey in the "potential enemy" category.

Business seems to be an area that has not been too badly affected by the downward trend of general Israeli-Turkish relations. This point was emphasized by the Director of International Relations of the Israel Manufacturers' Association: "I must tell you that economic relations actually seem to be stronger than politics [...] The business community on both sides is overcoming the political dimension. It might be that the cooperation is not for a long-term vision, but we are talking about a win-win situation. There are clear interests on both sides and there is real complementarity between the Israeli and Turkish economies. We may even see new areas of cooperation: in the chemical products, pharmaceutical, automotive, IT, banking and medical sector; there are so many other areas in which we see relatively good cooperation between Turkish companies and Israeli companies that I am relatively optimistic."

However, tourism is a different story and here there is a huge collapse from half a million Israelis in Turkey each year to a few thousand Israeli Jews and some 30-40,000 Israeli Arabs. The travel agents in the Arab sector in Israel are almost the only agents dealing directly with wholesalers. With the political climate getting even worse, it is hard to imagine that many Israelis will holiday in Turkey during summer 2011.²¹

21. "Antalya Mayor Calls on Israelis to Return", 2nd August 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3928932,00.html>.

Israeli Consensus and Some Divergent Views

While the position of the government of Israel and its perspective on how relations deteriorated so much over such a short period of time is widely accepted by the public, there are some significant divergent views amongst various important “Turkey experts” in academia and in think tanks. The following comments are from one such respected Turkey expert in a leading Israeli policy center: “I think things are much more complex but some do feel Turkey is turning to the East and is becoming an axis of Syria, Iran and Turkey. I think that even if there is something, it’s temporary. I think Iran and Turkey cannot be in an axis together as they have too many diverging issues that will make things harder for them to cooperate in the future. Furthermore, Turkey has not given up the dream of joining the European Union and they know that you cannot join the EU with an army that is running the country. So there is a change, a meaningful change in the role of the Turkish army in politics. As a result of that, the army is playing a game today that is very similar to the game of the Turkish government and is very limited in its ability to have an independent policy of its own or independent connections of its own.”

These experts, who would fall within the minority voices in Israeli policy circles, also point out that Turkey is not interested in a nuclear Iran. Their point of view is that Turkey is trying to mediate in the West’s dispute with Iran. Turkey does not want the West in general and Israel in particular to take any coercive actions against Iran. Turkey is afraid of the economic repercussions of sanctions, not only against Iran but also itself because of the traumatic memories of the economic repercussions of the sanctions in Iraq in 1991. If Iran continues to build nuclear weapons, it will mean that Turkish mediation efforts have failed.

These policy experts (in the minority) have a more comprehensive view of the complexities of the region than those who are in a current decision-making position within the Israeli ruling elite. They, for example, also see Turkey’s complex relations vis-à-vis Iraq, where it is clear that Turkey wants Iraq to remain a unified state, but Iran wants a weak Iraq with a Shia dominance. Turkey wants Iraq with Sunni, Shia and Kurdish representatives, in the kind of power-sharing relations that are emerging there and, of course, Turkey has strong concerns regarding any possible future Kurdish uprising that might make new demands for autonomy or secession from Turkey. Israel has traditionally supported Kurdish forces in the region in the past and probably still does today. Turkey has additional tensions with Iran in the region that have to call into question the Israeli government’s Turkey perspective. Regarding Syria and the Palestinian conflict, Iran rejects any kind of agreement with Israel, while Turkey is pro the peace process and agreements and is even still willing to play a positive role in advancing peace, although not with the current Netanyahu government.

Almost all of those interviewed, officials and academics alike, agreed that if there was significant progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process a positive impact would be seen in Israeli-Turkish rela-

tions. However, this was not perceived to be a strong incentive for Israeli moves towards the Arabs' positions. Many of the interviewees do see a potential positive role for Turkey in the future if there is progress. The Head of the International Division of the Manufacturers' Association noted that Turkey is still trying to advance the construction of a border industrial zone between Israel and Palestine. "This Ankara initiative that started six or seven years ago was a very good idea to bring the private sector of the three sides together and then focus on this specific attempt to bring Turkish investors economic zones that will employ Palestinians and be exported via Israel, benefiting from the Israeli free trade agreements, either with the Europeans or the Americans. The Turks are not giving up. I used to joke that the Ankara forum (the project for the industrial zone) was a forum in which the Turks were mediating between us and the Palestinians. Now I say that it is the forum that the Palestinians will use to mediate between us and the Turks."

But today that is still not possible. An Israeli official speaking off the record said: "Turkey is actively working against Israel regionally these days, building a kind of a block that is including Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. This is causing a kind of encirclement of Israel. Israel is more isolated in the region than before because of this active Turkish policy. If I look back to the last 60 years, we always had at least one partner in the Muslim world, whether it was Iran or Turkey or Egypt and Jordan in the last fifteen years. Now we don't have anyone. If we really assume that the new Egypt will not be Mubarak's Egypt and the new Turkey is not the Kemalist Turkey and the new Jordan is not the Jordan of King Hussein, we are on our own. Now the Israeli public has to think 'what does this mean?' I think that in an indirect way the Turkish, Syrian and soon I think the Egyptian policies will force the Israeli public to think if they are part of this region or not. If not, we'll have to find friends elsewhere."

Long “To Do List”, Not Many Volunteers

From the brief overview of Israeli and Turkish positions and motivations it is clear that the conundrum is not an easy one to fix. It is also clear that there is plenty of work for Israel, Turkey, and the international community to do. The “to do list” does not, however, merely involve tasks for the state actors – if the relations were to be left to the state, we would, finally, end up with what we have had until now: business contracts worth billions but cold people-to-people contacts.

Given the present domestic situation in both countries and the depth of the cold sword between Turkey and Israel, one should not expect any quick remedies to the whole situation. Even if political dialogue was to resume after elections in Turkey (2011) or Israel (2013 or earlier), any new crisis might easily bring the relations to a new low. In order to build a path towards less shaky relations, there are a number of issues that have to be tackled. It needs to be emphasized that some of these issues have not been caused by strained Israeli-Turkish relations, although they do have a bearing on its present form.

Opportunities and Suggestions for Israel and Turkey

Firstly, the improvement in Israeli-Palestinian relations will alleviate tensions between Jerusalem and Ankara, even without Turkey playing any role in those developments. The Palestinian issue is important for a large segment of Turkish society and the political elite often plays the “Palestinian card”. In case the Israeli political elite is genuinely interested in mending ties with Turkey, the surest way to achieve that is through adopting a more constructive stance in negotiations with the Palestinians. As long as Israel refuses to compromise in this realm, it is unlikely that the partnership with Turkey will reach a qualitatively new level.

Secondly, internal reconciliation between the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank and the Hamas-run Authority in Gaza could help in easing tensions between Jerusalem and Ankara if the agreement between the two Palestinian parties is welcomed in the West. If, on the other hand, a unity government in Palestine is established that is perceived to have an upper hand for Hamas it will be rejected by the West with Israel’s insistence and this could lead to increased tensions between Israel and Turkey with the latter probably recognizing and supporting the Palestinian government.

Thirdly, Israeli-Syrian progress will also work towards lessening tensions between Ankara and Jerusalem; the new revolutions across the Arab world and especially in Syria make predictions of this kind impossible. There are too many unknowns about what will unfold in the region in the coming days, weeks and months. It remains to be seen who will be the new leader of Syria (if any), and how Ankara will behave towards Syria. Needless to say, it remains a question how far Turkey will be appreciated in post-Assad Syria, given its close relations with the Assad regime.

Fourthly, calls from Jerusalem that NATO should watch out and not share information with Turkey, or that Turkey is changing axis, are interpreted by Ankara as a mechanism of exclusion, as an effort to kick Turkey out of ties with its long-term allies. A constructive Israeli policy, which wants to keep talking to Turkey, should emphasize interests Turkey has in being “with the West”, not focus on Turkey’s distancing.

Fifthly, if the Turkish political elite are interested in alleviating Israel’s concerns, they should refrain from applying double standards in judging the conduct of Israel and its other allies, such as Iran and Syria. It does not ring well in Jerusalem to read “you know how to kill well”, while at the same time the wrongdoings of Iran or Libya are pardoned.

Finally, the mutual referring to and thinking about each other in religious terms – not Israelis but Jews and not Turks but Muslims – only helps to strengthen social distance. In both countries there are a lot of domestic reasons why anti-Turkish or anti-Israeli rhetoric works on the electorate, even if it is counterproductive to the country’s standing in world affairs. The efforts on the part of civil society have so far been only limited. A stream of grass-roots initiatives, like there are in Turkish-Armenian or Israeli relations, would be desirable.

Opportunities and Suggestions for International Players

From the perspective of the international community, there are also opportunities that can be taken to assist with improving Israeli-Turkish relations. These opportunities do not lie as much in the effort to “mediate” but rather in having a closer look at the sources of the tension, the motivations both players might have to prolong it; and conducting a policy that addresses legitimate demands of both Turkey and Israel and, at the same time, contributes to the ability of both Israel and Turkey to be confident international players, rather than defensive and submerged in fears and paranoia.

Firstly, the European Union could clearly make a lot of difference provided it gives a fresh impetus to its relations with Turkey. The accession negotiations between the EU and Ankara are deadlocked today, which understandably contributes to Turkey’s doubts about the worthiness of relations with the West as such. Again, the fact that there are not too many optimistic moments on the horizon should not overshadow the plain fact that unless the European Union applies fair criteria to the evaluation of Turkey’s accession prospects, it has little to preach about Turkey applying double standards to other countries (Israel in this case). More strategic thinking on behalf of the EU can certainly take the wind out of anti-Israeli rhetoric in Turkey. Apart from that, the European Union certainly should invest more effort in promotion and facilitation of Turkey-Israel civil society relations. As we outlined in the paper, such cooperation is almost non-existent. Although the EU cannot push it, it can create opportunities. One option would be to announce specific calls through already existing EU instruments for engagement of civil society (for example, EIDHR, Non-State Actors



and Local Authorities, and the like). Certainly, the main initiative has to come from civil societies and actors in Turkey and Israel. Yet, if the EU wants to keep up with its self-image of an actor that fosters democracy and good neighborly relations, it should not refrain from appropriate intervention. The EU, of course, can also help rhetorically, by deciding whether it makes more sense to debate “Turkey’s changing axis” and “disentanglement from the West”, or, rather, to make moves to entrench Turkey more firmly in the Euro-Atlantic community. The first step definitely has to be revitalization of Turkey’s EU accession negotiations.

Secondly, and this applies to all external players involved in the Middle East peace process, either as mediators or sponsors: the Israeli and Palestinian leadership should be given clear signs that the inability or reluctance to reach a compromise has consequences; be it in political and financial support or in trade relations. A significant shift in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is bound to have an influence on Turkey’s policy towards Israel.

Finally, as already suggested in recommendations to the EU, the West cannot force Turkey to “choose” between the West and the rest. It can, however, conduct policies that create synergies between, for example, the efforts of the EU to tackle the new situation in North Africa and Turkey’s ambition to assist in this part of the world. A self-confident Turkey will be a better friend to Israel than a Turkey that feels it needs to play defense during the whole game.

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IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Government of Catalonia, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

EuroMeSCo

Comprising 58 institutes from 35 European and Mediterranean countries, as well as 28 observer institutes, the EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) network was created in 1996 for the joint and coordinated strengthening of research and debate on policy and security issues in the Mediterranean, aspects considered essential for the achievement of the objectives of Euro-Mediterranean policy.

As agreed by the EuroMeSCo General Assembly in 2010, the objectives of the network are: encourage communication, foster joint initiatives and facilitate the publication of the works of member institutes; promote the activities and research of the network among experts and institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations; and provide policy recommendations in the framework of the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes the organisation of an annual conference, where the members debate political and security issues in the Mediterranean that have emerged during the year; a research programme to foster research projects among the institutes and experts of the network; and a series of seminars, workshops and meetings to stimulate debate on Mediterranean politics.