

Turkish-Israeli Relations: Crises and Cooperation

by **Oğuz Çelikkol***

Several factors have always played an important role in Turkish-Israeli relations since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1949. First of all, both countries have been in the Western camp and have a special relationship with the United States. Turkey's recognition of the importance of the Jewish lobby in US politics and Turkey's contacts with this powerful lobby predated its diplomatic contacts with the State of Israel. When Turkey faced the expansionist threat of the Soviet Union just after the Second World War and wished to establish close military ties with the United States, it also initiated contacts with the American Jewish lobby, and recognized the newly established State of Israel. Although Turkey voted against the Palestine partition plan of the United Nations and the division of Palestinian territories into Arab and Jewish states in 1947, it became the first regional power to recognize the Israeli State, just a few weeks before the Turkish foreign minister's first official visit to Washington in 1949. Turkey joined the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 and formed special diplomatic and military ties with the US during the 1950s.

The American Jewish lobby has continued to play an important role in Turkish-Israeli relations. In the 1970s and '80s when Turkey needed “friends” in the US Congress to protect it against “hostile” American Greek and Armenian lobbies working against Turkish interests, Turkish contacts with the Jewish lobby intensified. I was a counselor at the Turkish Embassy in Washington between 1985 and 1990 and the Turkish consul-general in Los Angeles between 1993 and 1996. With the beginning of the American Greek and Armenian lobbies' activities against Turkish interests in the United States, Turkey came to view the American Jewish lobby as a natural “ally” against “hostile” lobbies, and Turkey's contacts with the American Jewish Organizations took on a new dimension. At this time, the small Turkish American community also started to organize a political “lobby” to counter the American Greek and Armenian lobbies' increasing anti-Turkish activities.

Unlike the Turkish-Greek and Turkish-Armenian history, Turkish-Jewish relations in the past have provided a very “fertile” foundation for current and future Turkish-Jewish relations. Although there were “unpleasant”, even “dark” pages in Turkish-Greek and Turkish-Armenian history, Turks and Jews have enjoyed “happier”

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and “friendlier” relations throughout history. Turks and Jews have enjoyed close relations since the eleventh century when Turks became the ruling power in Anatolia. When the Ottoman Empire enthusiastically welcomed two hundred thousand Sephardic Jews escaping persecution on the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, ties between two nations solidified. Turkey's attitude towards the Jews during the Second World War was also quite “positive” compared to many countries in Europe. This positive historical background not only made it easy for Turkey and Israel to establish and maintain relations but also facilitated smooth contacts between Turkey and diaspora Jews all over the world. When I was a diplomat in the Turkish Embassy in Washington, our contacts with the American Sephardi Organization were much friendlier than with any other American Jewish Organization. We noticed that this organization was very enthusiastic about celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Sephardic Jews' immigration to the Ottoman Empire, to mark the solid relations between the Turkish and Jewish nations.

Another unwavering factor affecting Turkish-Israeli relations has always been the Palestinian issue. We can find sympathy for the Palestinians in every section of Turkish society from the far right to the far left, for different reasons. The overwhelming majority of Turkish public opinion believes that Palestinians are the real victims of the armed struggle between Israel and its Arab neighbors over the Palestinian territories. If we look at the statements of Turkish leaders from Demirel to Ecevit to Özal and Erdoğan on this issue, we can find expressions of sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinians. Turkish public opinion also believes that the Palestinian problem, which has remained unresolved for more than sixty years, not only has created animosity between the Arabs and Jews, but also is one of the main reasons why the Arab World cannot solve its other problems. The Palestinian problem has been a major obstacle, preventing all kinds of cooperation in the region. Turkish public opinion continues to view the Palestinian problem as an unfortunate remnant of the Western colonial era in the Middle East.

When we look at Turkish foreign policy, we see continuing diplomatic support for Palestinians in the United Nations voting. Turkey has invariably voted with Arab states on all UN resolutions concerning the Palestinian issue and Palestinian rights. This voting pattern did not change on controversial resolutions such as the 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism and racial discrimination. Turkish diplomatic support for Palestinians continued in other international organizations such as UN-affiliated UNESCO and Islamic Cooperation Organization (ICO). Turkey was among the first states that recognized the unilaterally declared Palestinian State in 1988 and elevated Palestinian representation in Ankara to embassy level. Turkey not only supported but became a sponsor for resolutions upgrading Palestinian status in the UN and UNESCO.

Ups and downs in Israeli-Palestinian relations have constantly affected Turkish-Israeli relations. When a crisis erupts in Israeli-Palestinian relations, its immediate effects can be seen in Turkish-Israeli diplomatic ties. Ankara was among the first capitals that reacted harshly to the Israeli decision to annex East Jerusalem in 1980. Although Turkey supported the UN resolution declaring the Israeli annexation decision void and invalid, Ankara also took a further step and downgraded diplomatic representation between Turkey and

Israel to the lowest second secretary level. It took Turkey and Israel more than 10 years to upgrade diplomatic representation to the standard ambassador level.

Turkish-Israeli ties have also reflected improvements that occur in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Turkey welcomed the Oslo Process and the Oslo Accords, and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This very important breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations in 1993 also paved the way for a rapid thaw in Turkish-Israeli relations that created the necessary environment for both countries to move with speed not only to normalize their diplomatic relations but also to advance collaboration in all fields including military cooperation. Turkey and Israel exchanged ambassadors once again in 1993.

Turkey has been among the countries that has genuinely supported a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian problem. The Oslo Process and Oslo Accords paved the way for a final and just settlement of the century-long Palestinian issue with the creation of a Palestinian state that will exist side by side with the State of Israel. Turkey has supported the “two-state” solution envisioned in the Oslo Accords, from the beginning. As long as Israeli-Palestinian negotiations continued on the basis of a “two-state” solution, Turkey saw no obstacle to moving its ties with Israel to higher levels. Some international observers called this increased cooperation between Turkey and Israel a new “alliance” in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's deteriorating relations with Syria at that time, due to Syrian support for terrorism aimed at Turkish interests, undoubtedly contributed to Ankara's decision to promote its ties with Israel.

During the first decade of the 2000s, many changes occurred in Turkish, Israeli, and Palestinian politics, and in the Middle East in general. In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party came to power, leading to greater influence on public opinion in foreign policy. Turkey began to develop its relations with Syria after successfully forcing Damascus to sign the Adana Accord on terrorism cooperation. In Palestinian politics, a rift developed between Fatah and Hamas, leading to separate administrations in the West Bank and Gaza, and Israeli governments declared the Hamas administration in Gaza the “real enemy”. In Israel, politics began to move more to the right, and support for a genuine “two-state” solution began to evaporate. As hopes of reaching a negotiated solution for the Palestinian issue started to diminish, antagonism between the Palestinian Authority and Israeli governments grew.

I was the Turkish ambassador in Tel-Aviv when Turkish-Israeli relations were passing through what I called a period of crisis. The deterioration in relations started in 2009 and continued in 2010 with one crisis following another. Turkish-Israeli relations hit a very low level with the Mavi Marmara incident when nine Turkish citizens lost their lives in an Israeli military operation against a Turkish ship in international waters in the Mediterranean Sea on May 31 of that year. I left Tel-Aviv for consultations in Ankara two days after the Israeli military operation following the evacuation of all 490 Mavi Marmara passengers from Ben-Gurion Airport on three civilian planes sent by the Turkish government. I did not return to Israel even though I continued to carry the title of Turkish ambassador to Israel for several months in Ankara, where I was staying for

consultations. When the Israeli government failed to meet the conditions set by Ankara, which included an official apology and compensation for the Turkish victims of the military operation, Turkey decided to downgrade diplomatic relations to the lowest second-secretary level and severed all military contacts with Israel, eventually ending all high-level interactions between Turkey and Israel. The Israeli military attack on the Mavi Marmara created a wound in Turkish-Israeli relations that has been taking a very long time to heal.

The root of the crisis between Turkey and Israel can be traced to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Ankara on December 22, 2008. This visit proceeded as expected and was uneventful, but the Israeli military operation in Gaza that took place just a few days after this visit generated anger and frustration in Ankara. Prime Minister Olmert made no mention of the impending military attack on Gaza during his talks with Turkish leaders. Turkey was among the countries that strongly criticized this Israeli military operation, which caused wide-spread destruction in Gaza and loss of a large number of civilian lives.

Turkey was also unsettled by the fact that the Israeli Gaza operation ended the Israeli-Syrian peace talks under Turkish auspices. Ankara believed that Turkey had succeeded in bringing Israel and Syria together to hold direct talks, and that the peace talks were on the verge of a breakthrough. After the Israeli Gaza military operation, Syria withdrew from the indirect peace talks with Israel under Turkish mediation. Turkey blamed Israel for ruining this opportunity, which Ankara believed might have been a step toward an overall peace between Israel and the Arab World.

After Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu became the Israeli prime minister. Ankara was convinced that Israel was gradually abandoning a genuine two-state solution, and that Israeli housing projects in the West Bank were destroying all hopes of a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The original UN resolution of 1947 divided the territories of the Mandate of Palestine equally between Arabs and Jews, and designated the city of Jerusalem as an international area. After more than 65 years and three major wars, Israel currently controls all of the Palestinian territories and the city of Jerusalem. By signing the Oslo Accords, Israel agreed in principle to negotiate a two-state solution, roughly on an 80/20 percent division of territories. Today roughly 6.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and Gaza, which make up a little more than 20% of the historic Palestinian mandate. The majority of the world public opinion finds it difficult to understand why Israel, once content to share the Palestinian territories on 50/50% basis with Palestinian Arabs, now is backing off from a peaceful settlement of the Palestinian issue based on a two-state solution on an 80/20% division.

I have visited Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip many times in the past because of my previous duties in the Turkish Foreign Ministry. I went to Israel in 2009 as ambassador after the Davos incident when the relations of the two countries were passing through a period of very damaging crises coming one after another. I, myself when I was in Israel, became the target of a plot unfortunately prepared in detail by the

deputy foreign minister of Israel, which was unprecedented in the world's diplomatic history. During this premeditated plot, blatant and even fake photoshopped photos were used to deceive the public. Although a clear letter of apology was written by the deputy foreign minister, as demanded, and I remained in Israel, Turkish and Israeli ambassadors' ability to work effectively to deal with the ongoing crises in Turkish-Israeli relations was dramatically curtailed after that undiplomatic incident. I always believed that this immature plot was prepared by the Israeli deputy foreign minister with one or two accomplices in the ministry alone, without the consent of the higher Israeli leadership. The prompt apology letter proved my belief. My meetings with high level Israeli Foreign Ministry officials after the incident revealed the disgust felt by the majority of the Israeli diplomats for the undiplomatic behavior of the Israeli deputy foreign minister. I also witnessed the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Israeli public opinion disapproved of this childish and unnecessary behavior.

It took almost six years for Turkey and Israel to negotiate a way out from this period of crises and normalize their diplomatic relations. The governments of both countries behaved responsibly by not allowing poor political and diplomatic relations to damage their mutually beneficial economic interests. As a matter of fact, trade between two countries has noticeably increased since 2010. Trade volume between Turkey and Israel reached US\$5 billion in 2014. There was even a conspicuous increase in the number of Israeli tourists visiting Turkey the same year. After Israel's discovery of offshore natural gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea, energy became an attractive area for future cooperation. Israel began to see Turkey as a potential important regional customer for its natural gas exports and a most likely route of a gas pipeline from Israel to Europe. Turkey began to see Israeli natural gas as a potential alternative that might reduce its energy dependency on other sources.

Besides the increasing bilateral incentives to normalize diplomatic ties, Turkey and Israel have started to notice compelling new regional developments and changes in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean in the last six years, which have made their diplomatic dialogue and cooperation more urgent. The new Turkish government's decision to make more friends in the countries surrounding Turkey also contributed to Ankara's decision to move forward in the normalization process with Israel. Israel's compliance with Turkey's three conditions (apology, compensation, and special status to Turkey that would allow it to take action to improve the daily lives of Palestinians in Gaza) obviously made it easier for Ankara to proceed on signing the Rome agreement with Israel to normalize the diplomatic ties.

The disastrous effects of the Arab Spring on the Arab world, and civil wars and violence in Syria and Iraq, have created imbalances and uncertainty in the Middle East. Although there are important differences in the way Turkey and Israel view the unfolding events in Syria and Iraq, both countries are obviously concerned over the uncertainties arising from these civil wars, the proliferation of the violent organizations, and the increased threat of terrorism in the region. The future of Syria is of special interest to both Turkey and Israel because both countries share land borders with this failing state. Both Turkey and Israel evidently regard with increasing concern the Russian military involvement in the Syrian civil war and Moscow's intentions of

turning Syria under Bashar al-Assad into a Russian military base and “satellite” state in the Middle East.

There is no doubt that direct Iranian involvement in the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and increasing Iranian political influence in the region are a source of growing concern and uneasiness in the capitals of the major states in the Middle East. Rising rivalry and the struggle for domination between the Arab Gulf states and Iran in the Gulf area and beyond are certainly among the leading reasons that the Middle East region is going through a very rough and violent period. Evidently, Turkey and Israel feel the need for a constructive dialogue and high-level contacts as all the powers in the Middle East are dramatically changing and the future of Syria and Iraq hang in the balance.

Clearly the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations at the beginning of this decade has created a trust issue between Turkish and Israeli governments. Following the Turkish Parliament's approval of the Rome agreement and after upgrading of their diplomatic ties, Turkey and Israel will be entering a new and hopefully more constructive and mutually beneficial period in their relations. Probably the first challenging task of this new period is going to be building trust between the governments of the two countries. Although this task falls mainly on the governments of the two countries, non-governmental and civil society organizations and especially the media in Turkey and Israel can contribute significantly to this “confidence building” period.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GPoT Center, Mitvim Institute, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue Publication Series

Upon the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the Israeli and Turkish governments in June 2016, and the start of a new chapter in bilateral relations, participants in the ongoing policy dialogue between Mitvim - The Israeli Institute of Regional Foreign Policies and the Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center were asked to offer their thoughts on the lessons that can be drawn from the recent period of diplomatic tension, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing this bilateral relationship in the coming years.

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