

## Insights from the 2017 Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue of the Mitvim Institute

December 2017

The Mitvim Institute's annual Israeli-Turkish policy dialogue was held in Istanbul on 26-27 October 2017, for the sixth consecutive year. It focused on the state of Israel-Turkey relations following the reconciliation agreement signed by the two countries in June 2016, and on Turkey's foreign policy in light of the changing the Middle East. The policy dialogue, which was held in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, included a series of meetings with Turkish scholars, analysts, and journalists.<sup>1</sup> This document summarizes the main insights from the dialogue.

### A. Israel-Turkey relations following the reconciliation agreement

- 1. High potential for cooperation** - Turkey and Israel have a long history of good relations. The two countries have potential for economic cooperation based on shared interests. Furthermore, there are similarities in society, culture, and governance between the two countries. Yet, at present the bilateral relations between the countries are far from favorable. The Mitvim Institute's 2017 Israeli Foreign Policy Index shows that the majority of the Israeli public is of the opinion that there has not been any change in Israel-Turkey relations since the signing of the reconciliation agreement in June 2016. However, during the policy dialogue, it was noted that the exchange of ambassadors at the end of 2016 was significant and indicated proper implementation of the agreement. The new ambassadors (Eitan Na'eh and Kemal Ökem) are senior and respected diplomats, who are working to improve bilateral ties and are making efforts to engage with diverse audiences in Turkey and Israel.

The fact that Netanyahu – who usually does not apologize for his conduct – chose to apologize to Turkey for the flotilla incident, clearly testifies to the importance that Israel assigns to its ties with Turkey. Should Israel make a genuine step towards peace with the Palestinians, relations with Israel will enjoy increased legitimacy in Turkey. Israel's support for Kurdish independence, on the other hand, did not significantly overshadow the bilateral relations. In the absence of good and close relations between the governments, action should be taken to promote cooperation between civil society organizations, businesspeople, and the cultural and tourism sectors. There are already such moves happening on the ground. Some are controversial, such as an Israeli company selling cyber software to Turkey, which helps the Turkish authorities to deepen control and supervision in the country. At the civil society level, the ability to promote cooperation between Turkish and Israeli organizations is impaired by the negative change that the Turkish democracy is undergoing. Uncertainty and insecurity experienced by civil society organizations in Turkey, along with the de-legitimization of organizations supported by foreign donors,

---

<sup>1</sup> The policy dialogue was carried out under the Chatham House Rule; therefore, this document does not mention the names of the Turkish interlocutors, or their affiliation, nor does it include direct quotes of statements made during the dialogue.

make it difficult for Turkish organizations to operate internationally, including with Israeli partners.

However, there are areas in which growing interdependence is developing between Israel and Turkey, which further increases the potential for cooperation between the two countries. For example, port and transportation infrastructure projects that China is promoting in both Israel and Turkey, may create new ties. Following the geopolitical changes in the Middle East, key trade routes between Turkey and the Arab countries are blocked. The trade route that Turkey had with Egypt was blocked in light of the crisis between the two countries since al-Sisi took office. Currently, Turkey's land route through northern Iraq to the Middle East has also become less secure, easy and profitable. Against this backdrop, the sea route from Turkey to the port of Haifa and from there – through Jordan – to the Middle East is becoming increasingly important for Turkey.

In the past, the Israeli-American alliance was a contributing factor to Israel-Turkey relations. However, due to the current tensions between Turkey and the US, and given Trump's policies on the Palestinian issue, the close ties between Trump and Israel are an obstacle to Israel-Turkey relations. Israel is now portrayed in Turkey as the extension of the US in the Middle East and as a beneficiary of extensive freedom of action in the region thanks to the American support it enjoys.

- 2. Exporting gas from Israel to Turkey** - The construction of the gas pipeline was one of the areas in which the improvement in the relations between Israel and Turkey was evident in the past year. The energy ministers of the two countries held meetings and discussions, and delivered positive remarks on the subject. The assumption in Turkey is that the construction of a gas pipeline between Israel and Turkey is more feasible than the alternative of laying a pipeline from Israel to Greece and Italy. In the opinion of the Turkish interlocutors, it will be possible to overcome the obstacle resulting from laying the future pipeline between Israel and Turkey through the economic waters of Cyprus, and the US can play a major role in funding a solution if it wills. A peace treaty in Cyprus would remove this obstacle, but the negotiations held there this year did not yield the desired results, and from Turkey's perspective – the blame for the failure should be placed on the Greek-Cypriots. Currently, the export of gas from Israel to Turkey is not moving forward because of economic and political difficulties. Private companies in both countries have not yet agreed on prices, and the political echelon in Turkey is delaying the process, possibly out of electoral considerations. Moreover, Israeli leaders doubt whether Turkey can be a reliable partner in such a strategic move. The assumption among the Turkish interlocutors was that the ball is currently in the Turkish court, and the expectation is to see whether the planned visit of the Turkish energy minister to Israel will indeed come to fruition. At the moment the visit is being delayed.
- 3. Negative attitudes towards Israel and Jews** - While there is potential for greater cooperation between the two countries, the Turkish public has negative sentiments towards Israel. Most criticism is focused on Israel's policies towards the Palestinians. This phenomenon is not new; for years, public opinion polls in Turkey, including those conducted by Kadir Has University, show that the US and Israel (in this order) are the least liked countries (Russia made a brief appearance at the top of the list in 2015, following the Turkey-Russia crisis over the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey). On

the other hand, respondents of the same surveys said that it is important for Turkey to promote its ties with both the US and Israel.

In addition to the criticism of Israel, there is also anti-Semitism in Turkey and negative images of Jews. Those also impact the public attitude towards Israel, and are influenced by Israel's policy, the unfamiliarity with Turkey's Jewish community, and a broader phenomenon in Turkey of suspicion towards "others". This situation leads an increasing number of Turkish Jews, especially the younger ones, to seek their future in other countries. The negative attitudes toward the Jews sometimes create tension between the Jewish community in Turkey and Israeli diplomatic representatives in Turkey, over how much this phenomenon should be emphasized and the proper division of labor in dealing with it.

However, public opinion tends to be dynamic, and can change for the better or for the worse rather rapidly. Such changes sometimes occur following the conduct of politicians (both in Israel and in Turkey) who take advantage of the short memory of the peoples while using foreign relations to promote domestic political interests. Thus, for example, the Turkish interlocutors mentioned the frequent and effective use that Erdoğan made of the Palestinian issue (also during election campaigns) in order to gain greater public support.

- 4. Opportunities to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process** - Despite the centrality of the Palestinian issue in the Turkish public discourse, it was evident during the policy dialogue that the political elite in Turkey is not significantly nor practically occupied by the issue. However, the prevailing assumption is that progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process will help promote the bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey, as has been in the past, and vice versa. Some of the Turkish interlocutors have identified in the current circumstances opportunities to promote a peace process: Netanyahu is weaker vis-à-vis the Trump government, which can allow the Americans to put pressure on him; On the Palestinian side, Hamas is losing power and the Palestinian Authority is returning to the Gaza Strip; Finally, Saudi Arabia and Israel are drawing closer, while Qatar is weakening in the region and its support for Hamas is less than it was in the past.

## **B. Turkish foreign policy and the changing Middle East**

- 1. Turkey's foreign policy and bilateral relations** – According to the Turkish interlocutors, Turkey lacks a well-structured foreign policy. It currently conducts itself in a rather short-term and reactive mode, which is influenced by regional events and by domestic political considerations. Erdoğan is the one who sets the foreign policy, which is constantly changing. For example, a year ago, Erdoğan fiercely criticized the prime minister of Iraq while recently he embraced him. There are those in Turkey who positively consider this as pragmatism, while some attribute a random and unplanned foreign policy to Erdoğan.

Turkey is said to currently be in a claustrophobic state. It has lost the ability it had in the past to engage with most of the relevant international and regional actors. Turkey is currently relatively isolated and is facing problematic relations with its traditional allies in the West. The tension in its relations with the US is significant, and is not expected to be resolved soon. This is also the case with Turkey-Europe relations.

Russia, on the other hand, has become a more important ally for the Turks and is gaining popularity among Turkey's public opinion. However, the Turkish interlocutors estimated that the Russian S-400 missile sale deal to Turkey will not be finalized. Turkey is interested in sending a threatening message to the Americans, but does not want to create a real rift with NATO, while Russia fears the leak of knowledge related with its missile systems to the West.

Turkey recently tried to be a mediator in the Gulf States crisis, but failed to establish itself as such because it has been rejected by Saudi Arabia. In light of this, it stopped its efforts and left the arena to others (including Kuwait). The countries with which Turkey is currently developing stronger bilateral relations include Qatar, Albania, Azerbaijan and Somalia. Turkey assigns great importance to China and sees a potential in developing deeper ties with it, given the increasingly central role that China is likely to play in the Middle East. However, in spite of the large transportation projects (railways, ports, energy) that China is developing in Turkey, it appears that Turkey does not have a clear strategy with regards to its relations with China.

- 2. The civil war in Syria** - Turkey is under the assumption that the war in Syria is in the process of waning. The diplomatic moves are progressing, the parties to the conflict are tired, and the assumption that Assad will remain in power at least in the near future and that a way should be found to conduct political contacts with him (even confidential) is taking a firm grip. In light of this, some of the Turkish interlocutors claimed that Israel is wrong when it chooses to attack targets of the Assad regime, and not of Hezbollah. In their view, Israel, like Turkey, should be interested first in achieving stability in Syria, even if Assad is still in power, and only then the goal of leadership change must be pursued. There is criticism in Turkey of its over-involvement in what has been happening in Syria in recent years, to the extent that Turkey has actually become a party to the Syrian conflict. However, since Turkey is currently focused on the struggle against the Kurds in northern Syria, it is no longer that interested in the Syrian opposition. At the same time, Turkey must deal with the consequences of the three million Syrian refugees who have entered its territory, most of whom are scattered across the state (only some 300,000 are in refugee camps). The absence of orderly Turkish policy regarding refugees and their integration, along with the difficult living conditions of the refugees, create social tensions and undermine the sense of personal security in parts of Turkey.
- 3. The future reconstruction of Syria** - Upon the end of the war, an economic struggle will begin over the development and rehabilitation of Syria, in which Turkey, Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates and Iran will play an important role. Turkey, which borders Syria, will try to get as much of the pie as it can, therefore it has much to benefit from joining forces with China. While China is not involved in the political processes concerning the future of Syria, it intends to enter the scene at an appropriate timing that will enable it to realize the many economic opportunities embodied in the future reconstruction of Syria. Turkey expects China to bring in the capital and the large companies, and to carry out infrastructure projects that will pave new roads and connect different regions, while Turkey will provide the essential building materials (which are not worthwhile bringing from China) and the necessary labor. The geographical proximity between Turkey and Syria, along with the distance between China and Syria, could turn Turkey into an asset for the Chinese and yield important returns for the Turkish economy.

4. **The Turkish-Kurdish conflict** - The Kurdish conflict is both an internal and an external issue for Turkey, and a top priority for its foreign policy. Turkey is determined to prevent Kurdish independence in northern Syria, and is strongly opposed to the Kurdish independence aspirations in northern Iraq. There are different views in Turkey regarding whether the sweeping and severe opposition to the Kurdish referendum was the right move or whether it harmed Turkey's influence in northern Iraq and the good relations it had with the Kurds in that region. However, along with the firm Turkish statements against the Kurdish leadership, there are still good interpersonal relations between Turkish officials and their counterparts in northern Iraq, which may help to ease tensions and promote joint cooperation and interests.

During the policy dialogue it was claimed that Turkey was paying a price for continuing the conflict with the Kurds, similar to the price that Israel is paying for continuing the conflict with the Palestinians. Therefore, Turkey must act to resolve the conflict, and it had a window of opportunity to do so (which it missed) several years ago. It should return to the negotiating table with the Kurds, and be prepared to negotiate even with those who it currently fights. The peace process in Colombia was mentioned as a relevant model. In the Israeli context, alongside the gap between the views of Turkey and Israel regarding the Kurdish independence aspirations, it was noted that a joint Turkish-Israeli struggle against the PKK would strengthen relations between the two countries, help achieve stability in the region, and promote triangular cooperation between Israel, Turkey and the Kurds in northern Iraq.

5. **Turkey-Iran relations** - Turkey and Iran are partners in determining the future of Syria and have common interests in the Kurdish issue. However, contrary to the Israeli perception of the situation, there is no alliance between them. Turkey does not expect Iran to partake in its confrontation with the PKK and its affiliated groups, but the two countries have adopted a similar stance in fierce opposition to the Kurdish referendum in northern Iraq. The ties between Turkey and Iran are utilitarian, accompanied by historical tension, which stems both from religious differences and from a struggle over spheres of influence. Iran is heavily involved in Syria, and has a real ability to dictate what is happening there. Like Israel, Turkey is also not interested in extensive Iranian influence in Syria, and this is a topic regarding which Israel and Turkey can develop mechanisms for dialogue and coordination. According to the Turkish interlocutors in the policy dialogue, Turkey can rely more on Israel than on Iran, and in the long run Israel can rely more on Turkey than on other countries in the Middle East.