

The 2018 Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue of the Mitvim Institute

January 2019

In October 2018, the Mitvim Institute held its annual Israel-Turkey policy dialogue, for the seventh consecutive year. The dialogue took place in Istanbul, in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and was participated by Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Roei Kibrik and Arik Segal of the Mitvim Institute. The policy dialogue included a series of meetings and discussions, with Turkish scholars, journalists, former diplomats, and civil society activists. It focused on Israel-Turkey relations, in light of the current crisis in ties, and on Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. The policy dialogue aimed at helping improve Israel-Turkey relations, by enabling experts from both countries to exchange views on regional developments, to identify opportunities for better bilateral relations, and to increase cooperation between researchers and policy analysts from both countries.

Throughout the dialogue, there was a sense that Turkey and Israel can find a way to overcome their current crisis and to reinstate ambassadors. Nevertheless, such progress is not expected to lead to a significant breakthrough in the relations. The Turkish counterparts expressed hope that Israel and Turkey will resume talks on natural gas export from Israel; shared their concern over what they perceive as Israel's support of the Kurds in northern Syria; and pointed out that Turkey and Iran should not be considered by Israel as allies, but rather as countries that cooperate at times regarding shared interest but are also competing with each other and adhering to different ideologies and beliefs. The dialogue also emphasized the importance attributed in Turkey to Jewish community in the US, and to the impact it has on the American discourse towards Turkey as well as on US policy towards the Middle East.

This paper highlights key insights from the meetings and discussions that took place throughout the policy dialogue. It does not reflect consensus among all participants.¹

A. Israel-Turkey Relations

In May 2018, diplomats from Israel and Turkey returned to their homelands as a result of Turkey's President Recep Tayip Erdoğan's protest against Israeli actions in Gaza. At the time of the dialogue there were still no sign of improvement in the bilateral relations. Israel and Turkey do not trust each other, and the longer the current crisis remains unresolved, the more difficult it will be to overcome. A survey conducted by Kadir Has University in 2018 found that the Turkish public perceives Israel as a threat, and that more than 20 percent of respondents referred to Israel as high-priority foreign policy issue for Turkey. There seems to be a feeling in Turkey that Israel has lost its interest in its former friend and accordingly does not attribute much importance to mending ties with it.

¹ The policy dialogue took place under Chatham House Rule, and therefore this document does not include direct quotes, attributions or names of Turkish participants.

Crises between Israel and Turkey typically erupt due to developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in regards to Gaza and Jerusalem. Repeatedly, history has shown that whenever there is progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel-Turkey ties improve, and vice versa. The current Israeli government does not take steps to promote the peace process, and is viewed in Turkey as one that works to make the two-state solution more difficult to obtain. This leads to negative responses in Turkey. In fact, at times the ruling party and the opposition parties there compete with each other over who holds a tougher stance towards Israel.

At the policy dialogue, Turkish counterparts highlighted the importance of the Jerusalem issue to large segments of the Turkish society, and not only to Erdogan and his supporters. From the Turkish perspective, Jerusalem's significance derives from a combination of religious, historical and political aspects. While Turkey acknowledges the importance of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, it claims that Israel should share the holy city with others to whom it is also sacred. There is concern in Turkey that Israel strives to change the status quo around the al-Aqsa Mosque, and to take measures that will limit the free entrance of Muslim worshipers to the holy site. Israel denies that it has such intentions, but that does not manage to dismiss public concerns in Turkey, and this creates additional hardships in Israel-Turkey relations. Gaza is also an important issue to many in Turkey. They hold Israel responsible for the lack of prosperity and freedom that the people of Gaza are suffering from, and expect Turkey to act in order to change the situation. Netanyahu is personally criticized in Turkey for the way he handles the Palestinian issue, and is seen there as the main cause for the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the crisis in Israel-Turkey relations limits Turkey's ability to play a role in the Palestinian issue. Turkey finds itself excluded from processes relating to internal Palestinian politics, as well as from international efforts to improve the situation in Gaza. To alter this, Turkey will need to have once again an ambassador in Tel-Aviv and a consul general in Jerusalem, and this can be a source of motivation for resolving the crisis with Israel.

On the regional level, Israeli policy in the Middle East is often referred to in Turkey as maximalist, and as one that aspires to enhance territorial influence in the region and destabilize it in a way that serves Israel's interests. However, there are others in Turkey, who stress that Israel and Turkey have joint interests in the Middle East, which they should find ways to pursue together. According to their viewpoint, Israel and Turkey are two central countries in the region, which can both benefit from greater stability in the Middle East, and which do not necessarily hold contrasting views of geopolitical developments. For example, both would like to prevent Syria from continuing to be a failed state and from becoming a terror state, and both would like to limit Iran's influence in the Middle East. Regional developments can serve as a catalyst for Israel and Turkey to somewhat improve ties, even before progress is made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Even after the signing in 2016 of the Israel-Turkey reconciliation agreement that resolved the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla crisis, bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey did not change dramatically. The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict poses a glass ceiling that limits these relations. On the other hand, even in the height of the Israel-Turkey tension in May 2018, both countries avoided official declarations of a formal downgrade of ties. This fact may ease a future resolution of the crisis, because it will enable the two countries to present a return of ambassadors as a technical move, and not as an official upgrade of ties.

The policy dialogue was held at a time during which Erdogan refrained for several months from making harsh public remarks against Israel. This untypical conduct was highlighted by Turkish counterparts, who emphasized that Erdogan acted in this manner in the past at

times when Israel and Turkey are holding back-channel talks or when Turkey was seeking to improve ties with the US. It was noted, that during his September 2018 visit to New York, Erdogan held a meeting with representatives from Jewish organizations, as a sign of pragmatism. Channels of dialogue and communication should also be maintained and fostered between Israelis and Turks, as well as between civil society organizations in both countries (a goal that is being pursued by the Turkish-Israeli Civil Society Forum – TICSF).

A step towards improvement of ties will be for experts from both countries to identify regional interests that Israel and Turkey share in the Middle East, and to propose a set of mutual gestures that can help restore trust between them. Such gestures can also be directed towards a third-party (e.g. an Israeli move towards the Palestinians), and should have the ability to positively impact both the public and the leaders. There does not seem to be much awareness in Turkey of the type of Turkish gestures that can have such a positive effect on Israel. On the other hand, Turkey may be interested in Israel enabling the return of the Turkish Consul General to Jerusalem (in parallel to Israel retuning its Consul General to Istanbul) as part of a pre-determined sequences of mutual steps that will lead to the return of ambassadors. Other possible Israeli gestures towards Turkey, which were raised in the policy dialogue by Turkish counterparts, included an Israeli commitment not to change security measures around the al-Aqsa Mosque (in contrast to claims made by the Turkish media), and to have Jewish organizations in the US adopt a more positive stance towards Turkey and its requests from Washington.

Turkey perceives the American Jewish community as an influential player, and is concerned by its evolving relationships with Saudi and Emirati lobbying groups in Washington. Such relationships are believed, from the Turkish perspective, to have contributed to a negative attitude that has been developing towards Turkey in the American administration as well as in the policy community in Washington. Turkey may be interested in efforts by Jewish organizations in the US to convince the Trump administration to enable greater Turkish influence in Iraq, as a counterweight to Iran (thus also serving an Israeli interest). In general, Turkey is well aware of the good relationship between Trump, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and of the challenge that this poses to Erdogan. However, despite Turkey's criticism of Trump and his policies, there seems to be no other country that has an interest and desire to mediate between Israel and Turkey. Not Germany, despite Merkel's recent meetings with Erdogan and Netanyahu, nor Russia, despite Putin's ties with the leaders of both countries. Therefore, it was argued in Istanbul, it would not be wise to give up on prospects for trilateral relations between Israel, Turkey and the US, nor would it be wise to lose the US as a potential mediator between Israel and Turkey.

Turkey is also concerned about Israel's alliance with Greece and Cyprus (although Israel stated on several occasions that it is not aimed against other countries), and warming relations with Egypt and (to a certain degree) Saudi Arabia. Some Turkish experts doubt how sustainable these relations can be in the long-run, given changing regional circumstances and lack of economic and political stability in some of those countries. On the other hand, they believe that Israel-Turkey relations have much potential, especially on energy issues. Joint energy projects, including natural gas export from Israel to Turkey, can serve as an insurance policy for bilateral relations (just as the Turkish-Russian gas pipeline affects the relations between those two countries) and help in stabilizing the regional system. In addition, they argued that gas exports to Turkey is the best and most economically viable export option for Israel.

Despite Israel's official statements that exporting gas to Turkey is no longer on the agenda, it was stated by our Turkish partners that merely by keeping this option on the table, Israel and Turkey will foster a more positive public discourse in each country towards the other, which will highlight common interests. Considering Israel's hi-tech industry, joint technological projects is another type of potential cooperation that has not yet been realized (in fields such as energy, medicine, agriculture, and air defense). Israeli and Turkish companies can join forces to advance joint projects, including in the Middle East, with possible involvement of US companies as well. The economies of Israel and Turkey complement each other, it was argued by our Turkish counterparts, and trade between the countries continues to be in high volumes even in times of political crises. However, when the relationship is in crisis, it negatively affects other economic activities – it deters investors (especially on long-term projects) and harms tourism.

In general, despite the difficulties in Israel-Turkey relations, there is still acknowledgement within the Turkish policy elite of the positive history of the bilateral relations (such as the Israeli aid following the earthquake in Turkey in 1999), the ability of the countries to overcome moments of crisis and changing circumstances (such as the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000), and the high resilience of the relationship (which were not cut off since they were established in 1949). There are also those in Turkey who emphasize Israel's historic diplomatic importance for Turkey and the fact that the position of the ambassador to Israel was once one of the five most prestigious positions in the Turkish foreign ministry. There were also some interlocutors who referred to the Jewish community in Turkey and the Turkish community in Israel as possible agents of change, who may help advance civil-cultural relations between the two countries and contribute to improving relations.

B. Turkey's Middle East Policy

Turkish foreign policy aspires in principle to maintain good relations with various countries and regions, in a way that will facilitate movement and connections, mediation and conflict resolution. Part of the Turkish narrative, as presented to us during the policy dialogue, includes diverse foreign relations and pragmatic foreign policy, which preserves Turkey's dignity and independence. There is a perception in Turkey that its tendency in recent years to get closer to the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters in the region (including Hamas) was overplayed. After the 2018 Turkish presidential elections, there were signs that Erdoğan tried to change course to a certain extent and adopt a more balanced regional policy. This was reflected, for example, in strengthening relations with the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, Hamas is becoming critical of Turkey, for not stepping up and supporting it to the extent aspired for by Hamas. Turkey currently has little influence on Hamas, but there are various channels of dialogue between Turkey and the movement. Turkey recognizes that if it distanced itself too much from Hamas, it could result in a rapprochement between Hamas and Iran, which is not in Turkey's best interest.

There does not seem to be a desire in Turkey to mend ties with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Relations are most problematic with Egypt. Turkey regards the a-Sisi as artificial, not elected, and unstable. There are currently no signs of improving relations between Turkey and Egypt, and Erdoğan even canceled participation in an important international event just so as not to run into al-Sisi who was present therein. In the eyes of the Turkish interlocutors, a legitimately elected Egyptian government, which will represent the public and respects human rights and democracy, can be a good partner for Turkey, unlike the current regime in Cairo that Turkey resents.

With regard to Turkey's policy toward Syria, after a period of incoherence, Turkish experts now identify a more coherent Turkish policy. The main Turkish interest in Syria is security-related and concerns the suppression of Kurdish independence aspirations in northern Syria. The possibility of establishing a Kurdish entity near the Syrian-Turkish border is perceived in Turkey as a significant threat, partly because of the fear that it will encourage separatism among the Kurds in Turkey. While Turkey seeks allies in the Middle East to help it fight the PKK and the Kurds in northern Syria, it was mentioned in the policy dialogue that Turkey should be careful not to interfere too much in the affairs of other countries, as it mistakenly did in Syria during the civil war.

Turkey and Russia were able to effectively overcome the crisis that followed the downing of the Russian jet by Turkey in late 2015, and are now cooperating rather effectively on Syria. The understanding between the leaders – Putin and Erdoğan – plays a key role in their successful relationship, which allowed the two countries to reach an agreement on the issue of Idlib in Syria, despite disagreements between security officials in both countries. In Turkey, however, there is also concern about the expansion of Russian influence in Syria and the Russian presence along the Syrian coast, in the eastern Mediterranean basin and inside Syria. This presence, which surrounds Turkey, is dictated by Russian interests with regard to gas supply and trade routes. The positive relations between Netanyahu and Putin are being noticed in Turkey, and Putin is identified as a potential mediator between Israel and Turkey, if he shows interest to do so (and so far he has not shown such interest).

The Turkish-Russian dialogue on Syria also includes Iran, although Turkey has also been advancing an additional channel that excludes Iran, with the participation of Turkey, Russia, France and Germany. Turkey and Iran are not allies and never have been. Turkey buys energy from Iran, therefore Turkey has a great interest that Iran remains stable. If Turkey does not buy energy from Iran, its dependence on Russia will be even greater, and this is something that Turkey – which is trying to diversify its sources of energy – is not interested in. Additionally, Turkey wants to maintain trade with Iran, as it needs new markets such as the Iranian market. However, Turkey and Iran have differences of opinion about what is happening in Syria and Iraq, and their long-term interests in the region are different. Turkey is concerned about the spreading influence of Iran in the Middle East as well as the Iranian migration to Turkey, which is expected to increase in size as the situation in Iran becomes more difficult (and therefore Turkey prefers to see a stable Iran). Turkey claims that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are deliberately portraying an exaggerated depiction of the relations between Turkey and Iran, in order to create an appearance of closer relations between the two countries than they actually are.

The Middle East has become increasingly important for Turkey, although traditionally its general tendency is towards Europe and the West. Nevertheless, Turkey expresses growing criticism of Europe, for closing its borders and for distancing itself from Turkey. Erdoğan recently announced that he may hold a referendum on whether to continue the futile negotiations to join the EU, and at the same time he took steps to enhance Turkey-EU dialogue on security issues and the refugee problem. Turkey stresses that its exclusion from Europe will create difficulties for the EU, especially on the issue of immigration and the infiltration of terrorists from Syria into Europe through Turkey, and emphasizes the economic benefits that will accrue to the EU from improved relations with Turkey. Turkey is also trying to encourage Europe to invest more efforts in Syria, especially in the Idlib region, in order to prevent Syrian refugees from entering Turkey.