

The 2019 Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue of the Mitvim Institute

May 2020

In September 2019, the Mitvim Institute held its annual Israel-Turkey policy dialogue, for the eighth consecutive year. The dialogue took place in Istanbul and Ankara, in cooperation with [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#), and was participated by Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Moran Zaga and Gabriel Mitchell of the Mitvim Institute. The policy dialogue included a series of meetings and discussions, with Turkish scholars, journalists, former diplomats, and a member of parliament. It focused on the nature of Israel-Turkey relations and potential for diplomatic ties to be resumed. The meetings took place after the Istanbul municipal elections and Israel's national elections, so the meetings also review the domestic conditions in both countries. The policy dialogue enabled experts from both countries to exchange views on regional developments, to identify opportunities for improving bilateral relations, and to discuss possible cooperation between Israeli and Turkish researchers and policy analysts.

There was a positive atmosphere during the discussions. Most parties agreed that Turkey and Israel should find a way to overcome their current crisis and reinstate ambassadors. Turkish participants expressed hope that Israel and Turkey will resume talks on energy cooperation; shared their concern about America's departure from the Middle East; and reiterated that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the primary diplomatic obstacle between the two countries. At the same time, most Turkish participants felt like there was little motivation to improve ties in the current political climate.

This paper highlights key insights from the policy dialogue. It does not reflect a consensus among the participants who met with Mitvim's representatives during that period of time. The policy dialogue took place under Chatham House Rule, and therefore this document does not include direct quotes, attributions or names of Turkish participants.

A. Israel-Turkey Bilateral Relations

In May 2018, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's protest against Israeli actions in Gaza prompted Israel and Turkey to downgrade diplomatic ties. At the time of the policy dialogue, there were still no signs that bilateral relations would improve. Still, it would be unfair to compare this period to the years following the Gaza Flotilla affair. Between 2010 and 2016, Turkey's engagement with Israel and the Israel-Palestinian conflict was a more prominent foreign policy issue. That is no longer the case today. Turkey's government is focused on other regional issues and the country's media has followed suit.

The dispute between Israel and Turkey is rooted in the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The lack of progress and occasional escalations between Israel and the Palestinians, damaged Israel-Turkey relations, especially as Erdoğan tried to position himself as a moral authority on the issue in the region. But beyond Erdoğan, the Palestinian cause remains an important matter for many Turks and there is an expectation that the Turkish government will defend Palestinian interests on the international stage. Israel's

untenable status quo with the Palestinians – in particular its policies towards Gaza – will limit the potential for cooperation. From the Turkish perspective, Israel is the dominant and responsible party in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many in Turkey hold Israel responsible for Gaza's lack of prosperity and freedom, and expect Turkey to act in order to change the situation. However, the enduring nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the last decade has also reduced Turkish public interest in the matter and it may be easier for the Ankara to improve ties with Israel during this period of relative public apathy.

At present, the majority of Turkey's regional policy decisions are being made by President Erdoğan and his closest advisors. Some believe that Erdoğan's critical position towards Israel has negatively impacted Ankara's standing in the international community (and with the United States in particular).¹ It is often said that Erdoğan uses foreign policy as a tool to achieve his domestic goals, yet that ignores the international consequences of his decisions. Nevertheless, Turkish politicians are reticent to say this publicly out of concerns that Erdoğan would use it against them and further polarize the public. If Israel-Turkey normalization were to occur, however, a necessary step would be to reengage with Israel at the interministerial and interparliamentary levels, so that a degree of pragmatism could return to the relationship which for the last decade has been overshadowed by the personal feud between Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the animus between their leaders, it is unclear whether Turkey and Israel have serious conflicts of interest. Most Turks who engaged with Mitvim's representatives viewed Israel as a democracy, like Turkey, in a largely illiberal region. The continued economic partnership was cited as evidence to the maturity and resilience of the relationship despite a rocky decade. Our partners argued that Turkey and Israel may disagree about *how* to resolve the Syrian civil war but that they remain fundamentally on the same page, especially when it came to Iran's presence.

During the 2018 policy dialogue, Turkish counterparts emphasized the importance of Jerusalem for large segments of Turkish society and concerns that Israel strives to change the status quo around the al-Aqsa Mosque. However, during the most recent visit the conversation focused more on Turkish religious tourism to Israel. From the Turkish perspective, the experience for Turkish tourists is a challenging one. For starters, the visa process is lengthy and oftentimes the experience at Ben Gurion airport is an unpleasant one. But some also felt that the experience in Jerusalem is also a difficult one because it casts Israel in such a negative light and does not permit Turkish tourists to see anything outside of East Jerusalem. While many Turkish tourists are visiting Israel for religious purposes, there was concern voiced about the over politicization of these experiences.

However, the most significant factor in the future of the relationship remains Israel and Turkey's engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean and the question of regional energy cooperation. In 2016, when the two parties signed a reconciliation agreement, energy was cited as a primary reason to set aside bilateral differences. Those dreams were never realized, though Turkish experts believe that this option remains viable as do long-term projects in the area of renewable energy. Turkey remains one of the few regional actors with the existing energy infrastructure to handle Israel's natural gas and is eager to diversify its supply away from Russia and Iran.² Even though this option has not been raised in several years, our Turkish partners did not rule out that possibility.

¹ For example, without full diplomatic relations with Israel the Turkish government is limited in its ability to support Palestinian interests.

² Turkey sees itself as a balancer to Iran, both in Syria and at the regional level.

But when Turkey looks out towards the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean it is concerned with what it sees. Israel's emerging alliance with Greece and Cyprus troubles Turkey because it marks a potential shift in the regional balance of power. Similarly, the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) is viewed in Ankara as an "alliance against Turkey". Offshore natural gas discoveries in the last decade have aggravated tensions between Turkey and the Hellenic states; Ankara is following Israel's behavior carefully in this delicate chess match. Some of our Turkish partners stated that Turkey's interests in the Eastern Mediterranean are fixated on Cyprus alone and that Turkey has limited commercial interests in developing offshore hydrocarbons. There was also a dismissive attitude towards Israel's new partners in the Arab world, including Egypt. From the perspective of some in Turkey, these relationships are transactional and do not offer the robust qualities that Israel requires long term. Some suggested that the long-term stability of these partners was in doubt.

B. Turkey's Regional Policies

Turkish foreign policy aspires to maintain positive relations with various countries and regions, in a way that will facilitate movement and connections, mediation and conflict resolution. An aspect of the Turkish narrative includes diverse foreign relations, and a pragmatic foreign policy that preserves Turkey's dignity and independence. Diplomats will often refer to the mythical 1934 speech of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who offered consolation to those Australians whose sons fell at the Battle of Gallipoli in the First World War.

Following the 2018 Turkish presidential elections, there were signs that Erdoğan sought to adopt a balanced regional policy that veered away from the region's existing religious and political divisions. It appears, however, that in the past year Turkey's relationship with its surrounding neighborhood has only become more complicated. At the time of our visit, the Turkish military had recently completed Operation Olive Branch – a major offensive in the Afrin district of Northern Syria – and was about to launch another operation in the coming weeks against Kurdish militia groups and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey's role in the Libyan civil war and the Eastern Mediterranean was also raising eyebrows in Western capitals.

Relations between Turkey and the major Arab states have not improved. There does not appear to be a desire in Turkey to mend ties with Egypt. Turkey views Egyptian president Abdel Fattah a-Sisi as illegitimate and operating on borrowed time. Tensions between the two countries appear to have increased as a result of Turkey's continued interference in the Libyan civil war and disputes over the regional framework for energy cooperation. Turkey's relationship with Saudi Arabia has also soured following the targeted assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul.

Turkey's primary interest in Syria remains 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. Turkey continues to seek Middle Eastern allies to help it fight the PKK and the Kurds in northern Syria, but recent activity suggests that it is unconcerned about the risks of going it alone at this point. Public debate on this subject is very sensitive, as our partners shared with us. Roughly 20 percent of Turkish voters are ethnic Kurds and their voting patterns tend to shift depending on the government's policies. Erdoğan's AKP party lost many conservative

Kurdish votes because of the continued conflict and his partnership with the nationalist MHP party. Turkey's activities in Syria also raise worries about the future of Syrian refugees, already a significant economic and political responsibility, as well as the resurgence of ISIS and other jihadist actors.

Engagement in Syria has of course impacted Turkish ties with the United States and Russia. Our partners expressed concern about Turkey behaving like a "ping pong ball" and bouncing between great power politics and regional issues. Most of our partners implied that there was an overall preference for American leadership in the region. But, given the Trump administration's current policies, Turkey was left with little choice but to cooperate with Russia and China. Not everyone agreed with this assessment, citing the 2016 failed coup as a serious breaking point in US-Turkey relations and the event that later prompted Ankara to pursue Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft weapon system. Further still, others argued that Ankara's interest in the S-400 was always a negotiation tactic to try to get the attention of the United States the way that a little brother seeks the attention of his older sibling. The consensus opinion in the policy dialogue was that despite the understanding between Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkey could not rely on Moscow in any meaningful way. Turkey's fiscal instability continued in 2019, and only the United States and the European Union can provide the necessary capital and foreign investment to keep the Turkish economy from collapsing.