

# The US role in Israel-Turkey relations

## Summary of the 5th Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue of the Mitvim Institute and the GPoT Center

In cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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[Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) and [Global Political Trends \(GPoT\) Center](#) held their 5th policy dialogue on March 23rd, 2015, in Washington D.C. The event which was organized in cooperation with the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#) was attended by experts from Israel, Turkey, and leading think tanks in the United States. The policy dialogue focused on the current state of Israel-Turkey relations, the American role in shaping this relationship, and future opportunities to mend Israel-Turkey ties.

The working sessions of the dialogue included opening remarks by Prof. Mensur Akgun and Dr. Sylvia Tiryaki of GPoT Center, Dr. Nimrod Goren and Gabriel Mitchell of the Mitvim Institute, and Alan Makovsky, former top Middle East Advisor at the House Foreign Affairs Committee. These remarks were followed by a discussion among all participants, which is summarized in this document.

## 1. The current state of Israel-Turkey relations

About a year ago, Israel and Turkey were close to signing an agreement that would reconcile their differences. Today, the agreement seems far off and the two parties share a **deep distrust to one another**. The reasons for this are the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in April 2014, and the subsequent war in Gaza, which contributed to the rise of tension between Israel and Turkey.

History shows that when there are **conservative governments** in both Israel and Turkey, there are often difficult relations between the two countries. This political situation is likely to continue in the coming years, in light of the results of the recent election in Israel and the anticipated results of the upcoming election in Turkey. However, this does not mean that reconciliation is impossible, but rather means that there is a need for trust building measures with the involvement of different actors from both societies.

Another obstacle in Israel-Turkey relations is that the **new social and political elites** in both countries feel less committed to restoring relations. This is in contrast to the **representatives of the old elites** who collaborated in the past and are supportive of mending the relationship. Again, this adds up to the requirement of building confidence between these new social and political elites.

In the past, Turkey was interested in having positive relations with Israel, as it also garnered **the support of the American Jewish lobby**, especially on the Armenian issue and the Cyprus conflict. On the other hand, Turkey also has a significant importance for Israel by being the only democracy in the Muslim world that Israel could build partnerships with, and a stable economy in the region that could serve both countries interests.

In fact, Israel and Turkey essentially have **“official unofficial” relations**. In public – there is mutual incitement, but in secret – there is mutual collaboration on many levels. The clearest expression of this phenomenon is economic – **the volume of trade between the two countries continues to rise**, and reached a new peak in 2014. And this is during a period when Turkey’s trade with most of its other neighbors is in decline.

Economic cooperation is the primary driving force of the Israel-Turkey relationship, and this should be expected to continue. Leaders on both sides have been careful not to damage this, and **the free trade agreement** between the countries has remained untouched. Israel and Turkey have **common economic interests**, which also benefit Turkish businessmen who are close to the government.

Given the above, **there is no sense of urgency** in Israel, Turkey, or the United States to solve the Israel-Turkey political crisis. The feeling is that **this is a manageable situation**, and that the involved parties are not interested in progress at present.

This is also due to the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. **There is a clear historical connection between Israel-Turkey ties and the Palestinian issue**. The current deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and growing international pressure on Israel could further complicate ties, particularly if there is **another round of violence in Gaza**.

However, highlighting the common interests of Israel and Turkey, and engaging different parts of both societies in second-track diplomacy initiatives, could help building mutual understanding and confidence between the societies, and could hopefully restart official negotiations. The importance of such initiatives is on the rise, given the ongoing crisis on the official level.

## 2. The American role in shaping Israel-Turkey relations

**The United States has not been sufficiently engaged** in restoring Israel-Turkey relations. After the Israeli apology to Turkey during President Obama's March 2013 visit to Jerusalem, the United States **should have been following the process between the two countries**. But it did not do this, on the assumption that rapprochement would quickly follow the apology and did not require a third-party mediator.

In addition, the United States also abstained from critiquing Erdoğan for presenting the apology as a humiliation for Israel. Similarly, after the Israeli and Turkish negotiating teams developed a draft agreement in 2014 and Netanyahu hesitated whether to move forward with the agreement, **the United States did not push Israel to sign**. Supposedly, mending Israel-Turkey relations was not a priority for the United States at the time.

Today, the American motivation to mediate between Israel and Turkey is even weaker. **The United States has tense relations with both countries**, which includes the cold personal relationships between Obama and Erdoğan, and between Obama and Netanyahu.

American foreign policy is currently focused on the **nuclear talks with Iran**, and this is the top priority for the United States. In regards to the United States' bilateral ties with both Israel and Turkey, **the priorities of the Obama administration** are that Israel re-engages in the peace process with the Palestinians, and that Turkey supports the American campaign against the Islamic State and turns down Chinese overtures.

Washington's current impression is that there is little for it to gain from engaging in mediating the conflict between Israel and Turkey. This position may change **in case Americans see a real opportunity for progress**, such as a **pragmatic diplomatic step** by one of the two parties. For the time being, the United States is likely to wait and see what kind of coalition government takes form in Israel, and whether rapprochement with Turkey is on Netanyahu's agenda. The US will also wait to see the results of the Turkish elections, and whether or not the new government will work on building new relationships in the Middle East.

**Future American involvement** in Israel-Turkey relations could include the following: **preventing the deterioration of trade relations**, and maintaining existing levels of cooperation; preventing the deterioration of political/security relations between the two countries until a formula is found to resume Israeli-Palestinian talks; supporting joint initiatives between **Israeli and Turkish civil society organizations**; appointing an **American envoy** to mediate between the two countries and/or accompany their negotiation process; preparing groundwork for **the next administration**; and supporting the creation of official and unofficial **Israeli-Turkish coordination mechanisms**.

### 3. Future opportunities to mend Israel-Turkey ties

**The successful economic relationship** between Israel and Turkey, which includes the utilization of Israel as a route to transport Turkish goods to the rest of the Middle East, as well as **changes in the regional security situation**, can contribute to the improvement of relations to a certain extent, even in spite of **the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**.

But Israel-Turkey relations should not be solely based on economic and security interests, or on the cooperation of representatives of old elites. They require the investment of **broader groups within each country's respective populations**, and ideally in a more transparent manner. Building such a relationship will not take place overnight, even if the two countries sign a reconciliation agreement, and it will be **conditional on progress between Israel and the Palestinians**.

Until then, **common regional concerns** (such as the Islamic State and the war in Syria) will be the dominant trends that draw these countries together – **although Israel and Turkey often adopt different policies regarding the challenges in the Middle East**. Recent efforts by Qatar and Saudi Arabia to mend **ties between Turkey and Egypt** could also lead to an improvement of Israel-Turkey relations, given the close coordination between Israel and Egypt.

At long as the official political communication between Israel and Turkey is limited, **the importance of track-two initiatives only increases**. Such initiatives can allow for **joint analysis of regional events**, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of each country's interests, convey messages between the respective governments, **identify opportunities to improve the relationship**, and help realize these opportunities.

On the official level, it should be examined whether Israel and Turkey may be willing to **exchange ambassadors prior to the signing of an actual reconciliation agreement**. This is a bold step, but considering that a breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians may be far off, such an exchange would allow for a **gradual normalization** prior to reaching a formal agreement. Turkey already **laid the groundwork** for this in 2014, when it stated that returning its ambassador to Tel Aviv would allow it to play a more central role in rebuilding the Gaza Strip.