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# REPORT

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23-10-2009

## TURKISH-ISRAEL RELATIONS AND THE SYRIAN TRACK

### Introduction

Throughout this presentation the subject of the Turkish-Israeli relations will form my main focus. However, I shall also seek to draw wider conclusions from this basis.

In order to put this issue into context, it is necessary to begin with a short introduction based on the first 55 years of relations between Israel and Turkey, before proceeding to discuss one specific area of time.

### Developments 1949 -2002

In order to understand the importance of this relationship, it is crucial to note that Turkey is the only Muslim country which has had diplomatic relations with Israel since it was founded. These relations were created at the beginning of 1949, and have been maintained ever since, so this truly is a unique relationship. Subsequent to this we have had more Muslim countries that have created diplomatic relations with Israel such as Egypt and Jordan, and in the past with Iran. Turkey, however, is the only country that has upheld this link continuously throughout the years.

Despite this continuity, it has been a turbulent relationship, mostly due to regional events rather than any bilateral events. Initially, for roughly the first 6 years of relations, from 1949-55, there existed a harmonious partnership, and the two countries cooperated in every possible sense, even with regard to the military.

During these early stages Israel was just emerging from the War of Independence, but during the years 1952-53 there were already units of the Israeli army marching in military parades in Istanbul, and Israeli Navy boats were going to Turkey for exercises.

This convergence between the two countries presented a tremendous surprise to Israel. However, the affable relations did not continue for very long. In 1955 the Baghdad Pact came about, and a different regime came into force in Iraq. This created new pressures for the Turkish government, and subsequently the Prime Minister Menderes called for a halt in associations. As a result of this, the Israelis had very little contact with Turkey for almost three years, despite the Israeli flag remaining in Ankara.

In August 1958, Iraq changed once again to become very anti-western, and so Menderes came back to Israel. There was a meeting between Ben-Gurion and Menderes where the two countries agreed on an alliance. This provided that Iran and Ethiopia should also be included by way of a periphery alliance. From this point until the end of 1963, the relationship was very good, although it was carried out in secret. It was very different from the relationship that existed in the early 50s.

The relationship changed yet again due to regional events in 1964. The dispute between Cyprus and Turkey was surfacing, which meant that Turkey had to focus on its international affairs, and it subsequently became increasingly difficult for Israel to maintain reasonable relations with them.

During 1964-67, Israel tried very hard to upgrade the relations to an embassy level, but the Turkish politicians and diplomats were too involved in the international issues surrounding the Cyprus problem, and upgrading their relationship with Israel would have created greater problems with the third world countries.

In 1967 there was the Six Day War where Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. This event created a major crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey. Shortly after the war, however, Turkey participated, for the first time, in the first meeting of the Islamic conference in 1969.

From 1967-73 the relations were cooler, but in 1973, at the beginning of the energy crisis, the situation began to deteriorate even further. Turkey was in desperate need of oil, especially from 1977 onwards, and was dependant on supplies from Muslim countries, particularly Iran, Iraq and Libya. It started to owe large amounts of money, as it would often obtain the oil by credit agreements, and as a result, they accumulated billions of dollars of debt.

During 1977-80, relations between Israel and Turkey became very dry until 1980, when the biggest crisis in Israeli history occurred. Israel began to apply its laws to East Jerusalem, something that Turkey strongly disapproved of, and pressures were subsequently placed on Ankara to break the diplomatic link.

Although the link was not entirely broken, the relations were downgraded to the position of second secretary, and the Israeli chargé was removed.

In February 1981, the Turks insisted that we send the second secretary to Ankara rather than the Ambassador. I was the second secretary at this time, and it was at this point that the dramatic change became very apparent. I was sitting in Ankara, holding the flag and I could not do anything. I could not see anyone, and I had no visitors from Israel, for three years, and no Israeli officials visited me. The relations really had deteriorated dramatically. It even reached the point where when I organized a reception for Israeli Independence Day, a note was sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to all of the officials in Turkey telling them not to attend, and subsequently nobody did.

Things started to change, however, in 1985 when Israel withdrew from Lebanon after the first war, and this was met with strong approval from Turkey. In addition, the oil crisis was now over, and a regional change occurred due to the war between Iraq and Iran. This weakened both countries, and in turn increased their dependence on Turkey, subsequently making the Turkish foreign policies more independent, and more assertive. Israel began to identify signals that things were improving. The first indication of this was in relation to the tourism field, when the tourism agreement was signed. During 1987-88, as a result of this agreement, Israelis began to visit Turkey for tourism purposes.

The next sign of improvement was garnered from cultural exchanges occurring in 1991, when the Madrid conference took place. During this conference the Turkish leadership saw the Israeli leaders in the same hall with the Jordanian leadership, the Syrian leadership, the Palestinian leadership, and the Egyptian leadership, thereby prompting an apparent change in attitude.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1992, Israel was finally upgraded to the level of an embassy. From this point there was a considerable change in the Turkish approach towards Israel, and the beginnings of a peace agreement began to come into fruition.

In 1993, after the Oslo Agreement, there was yet again another dramatic change in the countries negotiations, and even before Oslo the two armies had been discussing military cooperation. After this point there were many high level visits from Turkish leaders to Israel, which had never previously happened. There had never previously been a visit from a Turkish minister to Israel until the early 90s.

From 1994-2004 the two countries shared exceptional relations, and things were developing very quickly in every possible sense including the military, economic, cultural and political fields. The intimacy on a political level was truly unbelievable, and during 1994-2002 Turkey became one of the three closest countries to Israel.

Despite this very intimate and agreeable relationship, the situation was dramatically effected by the election of Erdoğan into the office of Turkish Prime Minister in 2002.

## Rifts in the relationship

On 6<sup>th</sup> of November Erdoğan held a press conference in which he referred to Israel as being a “terror state”. As the former mayor of Istanbul he had never previously even mentioned Israel, and then suddenly he gives it the label of a terror state.

This was the first indication of how Erdoğan perceived Israel, and the policies that were to follow. Ever since the day that Erdoğan was elected, there has been an extremely different policy adopted towards Israel. This policy indexed the bilateral relations between the two countries in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Erdoğan was increasingly keen for the Israelis to make peace with the Palestinians before he could continue with the prosperous relationship that they had once shared. In 2004 the relations became very troubled, and increasingly difficult. Israel killed two of the leaders of Hamas, including Sheikh Yassin, which made Erdoğan simply furious. For a period of roughly six months Israel was subjected to a barrage of abuse, being constantly referred to as a terror state, and being accused of state terrorism.

In 2005, things began to improve as Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül were convinced that Ariel Sharon was going to disengage with Gaza. On 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005, Abdullah Gül came to Israel to affirm the status of these proposals. Sharon made it clear that these were indeed his intentions, and shortly afterwards Erdoğan visited Israel. A very productive, and amicable, meeting took place where Ariel Sharon defined precisely what his intentions were with regard to Gaza. Turkey was subsequently very encouraging of this process, and it was hoped that relations could continue thereafter. By August 2005 Israel had withdrawn from Gaza, and immediately the effect of this movement was felt on a bilateral level.

In 2006 a new Israeli Prime Minister came into power, and the war in Lebanon began during the summer. This action was extremely dissatisfactory for Turkey, and in turn, caused a significant deterioration in the bilateral link. Problems were also starting to occur on a military level with regard to the arms deals.

One significant improvement was, however, witnessed, in February 2007. Prime Minister Olmert visited Ankara and asked Erdoğan to mediate in the negotiations between Israel and Syria. At this juncture things started to change for the better on a bilateral level. For a period of roughly fifteen months, Turkey mediated the negotiations in secret, and in turn managed to establish an increasing amount of credibility with both Israel and Syria.

During the months of July and August 2007, things continued to deteriorate. This period was dominated by tension between Ankara and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and several other major American Jewish groups. The ADL decided to change its approach toward the Armenian tragedy in World War I defining it for the first time as

genocide and in so doing triggering Turkish protests to Jerusalem, which was unjustly seen as responsible for the Jewish organization's behavior.

To make matters worse still, on September 8–9, 2007, a grave incident took place that heightened tensions. Not only had Israel (in unexplained circumstances) attacked Syria, Turkey's friendly neighbor, but on their way back, at least according to Turkey, Israeli aircraft had violated Turkish airspace without any notification and without any reasonable explanation. The new Turkish foreign minister, Ali Babacan, branded the Israeli attack "unacceptable." One of his senior diplomats called the Israeli behavior "unprofessional." It seemed as if Israel had forgotten that to a great extent, Turkish–Israeli relations were based on military ties between the two countries, and that losing that special military link could have an existential impact on ties between Jerusalem and Ankara.

In May 2008, both sides announced simultaneously that official negotiations were indeed taking place. The teams were already established in Turkey at this stage, and there were five rounds of talks, with the last round involving only the heads of state. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2008, the draft agreements were almost finalized in relation to the bilateral issues but not the regional issues. The optimism for a solution was unfortunately premature. At 1am on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup>, Olmert told Erdoğan that he was returning to Israel in order to hold a meeting with the cabinet and to discuss the drafts. The agreements were never finalized, however, because by Saturday morning Israel had begun attacking Gaza.

That very day Erdoğan announced that the talks with Syria were cancelled and that Turkey was no longer to be viewed as a mediator in the matter. Erdoğan was furious once again, firstly because Gaza was subjected to extreme attacks by Israel - and Erdoğan was always very close to Hamas which is the religious leadership of the Palestinians - and secondly because he thought that Israel had attacked Gaza in order to avoid signing the agreement with Syria.

The collapse was immediate because of the indexation, and the effects were felt immediately, because not only did the talks between Israel and Syria collapse, but the talks between Israel and the Palestinians also collapsed. After this unfortunate event a new government came into power in Israel and Netanyahu was elected. So since that day there have been no further negotiations with either the Syrians or the Palestinians.

The incident at Davos which occurred between Erdoğan and Peres was particularly damaging for relations. However, even some nine months after this incident, Erdoğan continually attacked Israel in a particularly brutal manner. Israel ignored these attacks on the most part as Turkey represented a vital ally to Israel. However the attacks by Erdoğan were extremely damaging. At one stage the Secretary General of the UN was asked by Turkey to expel Israel from the UN.

Despite all of these issues, Israel instinctively believed that an issue should not be made of it as it would be likely to create bigger problems. For a while it went relatively

unnoticed. It was, however, as if the Turkish Prime Minister was looking for an explosion to occur though, as he had a point to make.

The opportunity that he had been waiting for arose only two weeks ago when in the course of a military exercise that had been prepared, after inviting Israel, he told the Israeli Air Force only the day before the event that they were not to go. This was a very big event, and noticeably caused increasing problems between the two countries.

To exacerbate the problems even further, the Turkish national television station, TRT, broadcast a series of programs depicting Israeli soldiers intentionally killing Palestinian civilians, especially children.<sup>1</sup> After this event things really exploded. The Israeli public was furious. However, the politicians were not as expressive of their feelings on account of their fear that they may lose their relations with Turkey altogether.

It would seem that now the relations had reached their lowest point in twenty years. During the last 10 months, there has not been one conversation between the top leaders of both countries. There is a total paralysis on a political level, but a lot of shared content still exists. The civilian trade is still at a volume of \$3.5 billion, and there are still military trade, tourism and cultural relations. In this respect, it is not quite as bad as it was in the early 80s where there was no content at all, but there is currently the most terrible political atmosphere. We must consider whether the crisis is mostly a result of an overall change in Turkey's foreign policy, or if it mainly stems from Ankara's wish to enhance the momentum of the Israeli-Arab peace process through growing pressure on the government of Israel.

In order to prevent further deterioration, Israel has to make a special effort to regain Ankara's confidence. Losing Turkey's friendship could have devastating regional consequences—for Israel and even for the Americans.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is very noticeable that Turkey is currently exerting tyrannous pressure on Israel in order to get them to move forward in the peace process. Many other countries have also applied pressure on Israel such as Norway or Sweden, but no country in the world has been applying pressure in such a direct and brutal way as the Turkish government has. It does not seem that this will change in the very near future. The policy that is currently in place is an Erdoğan policy and not one which was created by Abdullah Gül. Abdullah Gül may have supported it, but I do not think that he created it; it was Erdoğan who created it. It would also seem that all the anti-Israeli statements, the fierce ones, were created by Erdoğan himself.

Despite these fractions, Israel today is stronger than it was 30 years ago. There is a stronger economy, a strong army, and technically it has the stability to respond to

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<sup>1</sup> TRT "Separation" series – Reported 15<sup>th</sup> October 2009 "*Turkey TV series further strains Israel relations*", Joseph Nasr for Reuters - <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLF150215>

Turkey. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, it chooses not to. This decision is also effected by the fact that Turkey is still seen to be in the moderate camp of the Muslim world. Turkey has completely linked the level of its bilateral relations with Israel to progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process, and the fact that the process is now frozen is at the core of the deterioration of bilateral ties. It is all stemming purely from the regional developments.

As it looks now, the only way to bring about a positive change in the atmosphere would be to re-launch peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians or the Syrians, and to reignite a meaningful momentum toward peace. Nothing less will convince the current government in Ankara to renew the Turkish–Israeli friendship.

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