

# Politics in Troubled Times: Israel-Turkey Relations

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TESEV  
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## INTRODUCTION:

Israel-Turkey relations, which strained once again recently due to frequent crises, continue to be a major issue on Turkey's foreign policy agenda. Over the past five years, the positive relations between Turkey and Israel in political, economic, military and social spheres have deteriorated considerably. Given the military operation of Israel into the Gaza Strip in July 2014, which resulted in more than 2000 Palestinian casualties, the normalization of relations and the restoration of the previous partnership between the two countries seem unlikely in the near future. However, since both countries continue to play significant roles in the region, there is a visible need to establish a platform for further Turkish-Israeli cooperation and dialogue.

After the foundation of Israel as an independent state, Israel-Turkey relations have generally developed along the axis of Palestinian issue: decision makers from Turkey—predominantly aligning themselves with the Palestinian cause—often shaped the relations with Israel from this perspective. Although the relations have followed a fluctuating course due to periodic crises, the rapport between the two countries has also witnessed various areas of cooperation such as in the struggle against PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party); relations with the USA, and the Armenian Genocide issue. Israel-Turkey relations are subjected to a new test amidst the instability threatening the whole region. The wars and regional crises in Turkey's immediate surroundings have propelled Turkey to restore its deteriorated relations with certain countries, which has also had an impact on the bilateral

relations between the two countries. If the adversarial relations between Israel and Turkey are mended and bilateral dialogue is improved, this could in turn strengthen Turkey's capacity to tackle regional problems.

Setting out with the premise that the current situation of Israel-Turkey relations is detrimental to all parties in the region, which is already lacking in stability, as TESEV Foreign Policy Program, we have conducted a series of studies in order to dwell upon alternative areas of cooperation and discuss the current state of relations. To this end, we organized two roundtable meetings: the first one was held on 2 October 2013 in Istanbul and the second was organized in Jerusalem on 22 December 2013. These meetings brought together politicians, journalists, academics, civil society representatives and experts from Turkey and Israel. In light of the recent developments in the Middle East, alternative areas of cooperation were discussed in detail. The current trajectory of relations between Turkey and Israel and the ways in which dynamics of domestic politics reflect in bilateral relations; the Syrian crisis; the military coup in Egypt, as well as Turkey and Israel's stances and interests in face of recent developments in the region were scrutinized in the meetings.

A trip to Israel was organized between 6 and 8 July 2014 to complement these roundtables, during which a significant number of meetings were held with authorities from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, as well as journalists and various experts. In this report, we would like to touch upon the historical background of Israel-Turkey relations and the potential areas

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for Turkish-Israeli cooperation. Our objective is to contribute to the normalization of bilateral relations, while we remain very much aware of the challenges, and bear in mind that considering the existing situation, expecting any form of normalization in the short run may not be too realistic.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

Since Turkey recognized Israel in 1949, Israel-Turkey relations have been one of the most important yet complex issues pertaining to Turkish foreign policy. Even though Turkey had cast a negative vote at the United Nations General Assembly with regard to Palestine's partition, it became the first predominantly Muslim country recognizing Israel in March 1949. This recognition was a symbolically powerful gesture, but bilateral relations have still followed a fluctuating course ever since.

The first friction arose amidst the Israeli occupation of Egypt in 1956 due to the Suez Canal crisis. Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of *chargé d'affaires* and maintained this as such until 1980. Although there were signs of mutual leniency with end of the Suez Canal crisis and Israel's retreat from the occupied Sinai Peninsula, complete normalization was not achieved. Turkey did not opt for direct involvement during the second Arab-Israeli war which broke out in 1967: it did not allow the USA to use the Incirlik Air Base, but it did not facilitate the provision of arms to Arab countries either.

Turkey recognized Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1975 during the Ankara visit of Farouk Kaddoumi, the Political Bureau Chief of PLO. Relations gained momentum when Turkey allowed PLO to open a diplomatic representation in Ankara following the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul in May 1976. Although the assassination of two Turkish police officers and the subsequent occupation of the Egyptian Embassy in Ankara by Palestinian guerrillas in 1979—the year in which PLO leader Yasser Arafat visited Bülent Ecevit in Ankara—stirred great reaction, PLO representation sustained its activities in Turkey.

As in 1967, Turkey did not open Incirlik Air Base during the third Arab-Israeli war in 1973. However, permitting Soviet Union air crafts providing arms assistance to Arab countries to use its airspace, Turkey displayed a change in its stance.

By 1980, the relations between the two countries were strained once again. The annexation of Eastern Jerusalem by Israel and Israel's subsequent declaration of Jerusalem as its "indivisible and eternal" capital sparked huge reaction in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Turkey declared that it would not recognize Jerusalem as Israeli land, downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to a minimum, and temporarily closed down its consulate general in Eastern Jerusalem. During this period, Turkey supported all the resolutions supporting Palestinians' rights at the UN. When PLO declared the founding of the Palestinian state in November 1988, Turkey recognized the Palestinian state before Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Meanwhile, despite the tensions, Turkey and Israel continued to cooperate in the field of security: Israel shared with Turkey the information and documents on PKK and ASALA, which had been acquired during the occupation of Beirut.

There was a change in Turkey's attitude towards PLO around this time. The main reason for this change was the fact that Beirut based organizations such as PKK and ASALA—officially regarded as terrorist groups by Turkey—were receiving moral and financial support from PLO. Distressed by the developments and the gap in authority in Northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War, Turkey started to shape its policies in the region with security concerns. Since Syria, Iraq and Iran were regarded as unreliable neighbours, maintaining good relations with Israel came to be perceived as a safeguard.

In 1993, Turkey upgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the ambassadorial level,

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<sup>1</sup> Çelikkol, O. (2014) *One Minute'ten Mavi Marmara'ya: Türkiye – İsrail İlişkiler* [From One Minute to Mavi Marmara: Turkey – Israel Relations]: Doğan Kitap, İstanbul. p.65.

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simultaneously opening its consulate general in Eastern Jerusalem with Eastern and Western Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as its realm of authority. This implied that while Turkey continued to improve its relations with Arab countries, it also managed to establish a better ground to further its cooperation with Israel.

Some headway was achieved in the relations, brought forth by the Madrid Conference and the subsequent Oslo Peace Process that led to relative stability in the region. Another reason behind the increased dialogue was the deteriorated relations with the EU and the USA due to Turkey's human rights violations which propelled the above mentioned countries to stop selling arms to Turkey. Direct relations between the Turkish and Israeli armies were established during this period, and Israel became a significant arms supplier for Turkey when the *Military Cooperation Treaty* was signed and came into effect in 1996.<sup>2 3</sup>

Turkey's limited lobbying power against the Armenian Genocide resolutions which appear every year on the US Congress' agenda also prompted Turkey to establish good ties with the Israeli lobby in Washington, and by extension with Israel. Furthermore, this era witnessed some positive developments between the societies of the two countries. After the catastrophic earthquake of 17 August 1999 in Turkey, Israel became one of the first countries that sent humanitarian aid to Turkey. Three months after the earthquake, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak came to Turkey to visit the Israeli Village at the earthquake zone, which was extensively covered by the Turkish press and reached a wide audience.

By 2000s, the circumstances necessitating a geostrategic Turkish-Israeli cooperation started to diminish,<sup>4</sup> leading to a deceleration of the momentous relations between Turkey and Israel established at the end of the 1990s. Furthermore, while tensions with Israel heightened, this period also witnessed the betterment of relations with Arab countries, especially Syria, with which the relations had deteriorated in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Turkey's harsh criticism of Israel in international fora regarding its excessive use of violence on Palestinian civilians not only induced reactions from Israel but also triggered periodic tensions in bilateral relations.

## ISRAEL-TURKEY RELATIONS DURING JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (JDP) PERIOD:

The beginning of 2000s witnessed a change in government for both countries. In 2001, Likud Party in Israel and in 2002 Justice and Development Party (JDP) in Turkey came to power. Israel changed its policies toward Turkey—especially with regard to the issue of oil pipelines—during the Likud Party rule under the leadership of Ariel Sharon. In return, the fact that Turkey was also going through a period of reshaping its foreign policy also played a part in redefining relations. Turkey began to focus more on the Middle East and adopted a policy geared towards resolving existing problems with its neighbours. A series of positive developments in its bilateral relations with Syria were realized in this respect through the resolution of issues dating back from the 1990s regarding PKK and water disputes. The atmosphere changed in such a way that it enabled the signing of free trade and freedom of movement agreements with Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Even though Israel's military operations in Palestine and Lebanon were always harshly

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- 2 Turkey bought various warfare equipment from Israel including Popeye missiles (88 million \$) and Heron unmanned aircrafts (131 million \$). Additionally, Turkey bought F-4 warcrafts (1.1 billion \$), F-5 warcrafts (130 million \$) and M-60 tanks (754 million \$) from Israel. Çelikkol, O. (2014) p. 69.
  - 3 Akçay, E., & Anlı, İ. A. (2013). "İsrail: Türkiye'siz Güvenlik" (Israel: Security without Turkey). *Uluslararası Alanya İşletme Fakültesi Dergisi*, pp. 155-162.

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- 4 S. D. Enstitüsü & Koordinatörlüğü, U. İ. (2011). "Türkiye-İsrail İlişkileri" (Turkey-Israel Relations). *SDE Analiz*, p. 16.
  - 5 İlker Aytürk (2011) "The Coming of an Ice Age?, Turkish-Israeli Relations Since 2002", *Turkish Studies*, 12:4, p. 676.

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criticized by Turkey, military, economic and diplomatic relations were maintained under the JDP government. Import and export between the two countries increased exponentially until 2008.<sup>6</sup> An Israeli company took over the project of modernizing twelve M-60 tanks of the Turkish Armed Forces. In 2004, an agreement was reached on the longstanding negotiations between Turkey and Israel for selling water supply drawn from the Manavgat River to Israel.

Soon after Israel had assassinated Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi in 2004, the President of the Palestinian National Authority Yasser Arafat passed away. Taking advantage of the authority gap after the deaths of these two leaders, Israel launched a military operation called 'Orange Iron' into Rafah and Khan Yunis refugee camps in December 2004. Turkey severely criticized this operation.<sup>7</sup> Following the electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine in 2006, Turkey's establishment of close ties with Hamas and the organization's Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashal's visit to Ankara perturbed Israel. In July of the same year, Israel entered Lebanon with heavy weapons and aircrafts which damaged the bilateral relations once again.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Turkey's proposal to act as a mediator for the peace process between Israel and Syria was received positively on both sides. Even though Shimon Peres' visit to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey at the same time as Mahmoud Abbas and his speech boosted hope toward the establishment of regional peace, subsequent developments reversed the process.<sup>9</sup> Ehud Olmert's visit to Turkey following Peres

marked the last visit at prime ministerial level between the two countries. On 27 November 2008, four days after Olmert's visit to Turkey in order to discuss the details of the ongoing peace process between Syria and Israel, Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" on the Gaza Strip was launched. This attack drew the deepest wedge so far between Israel and Turkey. Turkey declared the operation as "unacceptable" and considered its timing while Turkey was mediating the peace process between Syria and Israel as the disruption of the atmosphere of mutual trust on the part of Israel. Prime Minister Erdoğan indicated that this operation, in which 1391 people died<sup>10</sup> and more than 4000 people were critically injured, was an example of state terror perpetrated by Israel.

Following "Operation Cast Lead", the Palestinian issue became almost the sole item on the Turkish-Israeli relations agenda, and a series of crises ensued. At the Davos Summit about two months after "Operation Cast Lead", PM Erdoğan and President Peres, who were participants on the same panel, engaged in a heated argument; Erdoğan stormed out of the hall protesting the moderator on the grounds that he was not given adequate time to speak. After this incident, which went down in history as the "One Minute Crisis", not only was there no form of improvement in relations between the countries, another discord, the so-called "Lower Sofa Crisis" broke out a year later.

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon held a meeting with the Ambassador of Turkey to Israel at the time, Oğuz Çelikkol, in order to voice his complaints about the Turkish TV series "Kurtlar Vadisi" (The Valley of the Wolves), in which MOSSAD agents were depicted as children traffickers. Ayalon triggered another political crisis by making Ambassador Çelikkol

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6 The data for 2011 is based on information received from the Undersecretariat of Foreign Trade and Turkish Statistical Institute as of September.

7 S. D. Enstitüsü & Koordinatörlüğü, U. İ. (2011). "Türkiye-İsrail İlişkileri". *SDE Analiz*, 16. p. 43.

8 Banu Eligür (2012) "Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations (December 2008-June 2011): From Partnership to Enmity", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 48:3, p. 431.

9 (2007) "Memleket İsterim" (I Want A Country), <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/11/15/yazar/sazak.html>, Milliyet, 15.11.2007.

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10 B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories Statistics, accessed 17.11.2014. <http://www.btselem.org/statistics/fatalities/during-cast-lead/by-date-of-event>

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sit on a lower sofa at the meeting.<sup>11</sup> This incident induced nearly the total dissolution of the already deteriorated mutual trust between the two countries. Yet, the event that led to the complete destruction of Israel-Turkey relations was the raid by the Israeli Defence Forces on Mavi Marmara flotilla in international waters in May 2010, which resulted in the death of eight citizens of Turkey and one US citizen of Turkish descent. The flotilla was carrying humanitarian aid for civilians living under blockade in the Gaza Strip, and also had citizens of Germany, USA, various Arab countries and the United Kingdom on board. A number of activists and Israeli soldiers were also wounded as a result of this attack. Members of the Islamic movement in Israel, Hanin Zuabi and Sheikh Raid Salah, who were on the flotilla, were interrogated by the Israeli authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Requesting an emergency meeting from the United Nations Security Council, Turkey ensured the issuance of a declaration condemning Israel's attack on the Mavi Marmara flotilla and a call for the lifting of the blockade on the Gaza Strip. The Mavi Marmara Crisis instigated a strong reaction among the Turkish public and protests in front of the Israeli Consulate General in Istanbul continued for a long time. While the Turkish Ambassador to Israel, Oğuz Çelikkol, was called back to Turkey,<sup>13</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu defined the incident as "our 9/11" and labelled the Israeli raid as "state terror".<sup>14</sup>

The United Nations Secretariat established a commission under the leadership of the former

Prime Minister of New Zealand Geoffrey Palmer in order to investigate the Mavi Marmara incident. The report drafted by this commission and published in September 2011 comprised the investigation reports of both countries as well as of the roadmap to be followed to avoid such situations in the future. Stating that "Israel's decision to board the vessels with such substantial force at a great distance from the blockade zone and with no final warning immediately prior to the boarding was excessive and unreasonable. The loss of life and injuries resulting from the use of force by Israeli forces during the take-over of the Mavi Marmara was unacceptable. Nine passengers were killed and many others seriously wounded by Israeli forces", it acknowledged Israel's responsibility for the incident that occurred 70 sea miles away from Israel in international waters on May 31, 2010.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the report in question also acknowledged the right of Israel to defend itself from the threats coming from the Gaza Strip and the naval blockade as a legitimate security measure. It propounded that "The naval blockade was imposed as a legitimate security measure in order to prevent weapons from entering Gaza by sea and its implementation complied with the requirements of international law"<sup>16</sup> and concluded that "to deliberately seek to breach a blockade in a convoy with a large number of passengers is in the view of the Panel [was] a dangerous and reckless act", thereby criticizing Turkey's actions.<sup>17</sup> Although the activists on the flotilla were not regarded as being prone to violence, it was indicated that "there exist serious questions about the conduct, true nature and objectives of the flotilla organizers, particularly IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation)". The report confirmed the shooting

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11 Umut Uzer, "Türkiye-İsrail İlişkilerinde Bunalım" (Crisis in Turkey-Israel Relations, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, January 2011, pp. 137-168.

12 UNGA A/HRC/15/21, Human Rights Council: Report of the International Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate Violations of International Law Resulting from the Israeli Attacks on the Flotilla, September 27, 2010, pp.19-21, 26, 28, 35, 38, 52-53.

13 (2010) "Tel Aviv Büyükelçisi Türkiye'de" (Tel-Aviv Ambassador in Turkey), <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/14919615.asp>, *Hürriyet*, 3 June 2010, Accessed 3 December 2014.

14 (2010) "İsrail'in saldırısı bizim 11 Eylül'ümüz" (Israel's Attack is Our 9/11), *Milliyet*, 7 June 2010.

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15 Palmer, Geoffrey, Alvaro Uribe, Joseph Ciechanover Itzhar, Suleyman Ozdem Sanberk, (2011) Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Inquiry on the May 31, 2010, Flotilla Incident. September 2011. [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle\\_east/Gaza\\_Flotilla\\_Panel\\_Report.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf)

16 *Ibid.* [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle\\_east/Gaza\\_Flotilla\\_Panel\\_Report.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf)

17 *Ibid.* [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle\\_east/Gaza\\_Flotilla\\_Panel\\_Report.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/middle_east/Gaza_Flotilla_Panel_Report.pdf)

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of two Israeli soldiers but could not find any precise evidence with regard to the shooter or shooters. While the report also emphasized that no evidence had been found on whether the casualties had been armed, the news reports in the Israeli media indicated that there had been an open fire directed at the Israeli soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

Israeli State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss published a 153 page-report on June 13, 2012 in which he asserted that the Prime Minister Netanyahu had made serious mistakes in decisions about the operation. Lindenstrauss emphasized that the discussion and decision making processes preceding the Mavi Marmara attack had been malformed and pointed out that PM Netanyahu had disregarded the warning of the Israeli military.<sup>19</sup> On the side of Turkey, a case in absentia was presented to a court in Istanbul for the prosecution of the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces Gabi Ashkenazi, Commander of the Israeli Navy Eliezer Alfred Marom, head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate Amos Yadlin, and Commander of the Air Force Avishay Levi for their responsibility in the attack.<sup>20</sup> The victims of the Mavi Marmara attack and the representatives of the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) indicted Israel for criminal actions at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. However, the court's chief prosecutor stated that while there was "reasonable basis" to believe IDF troops committed war crimes, the crimes in question were not of sufficient gravity to fall under court's jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup>

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18 (2012) "IDF Failed in Handling of Flotilla Video," Jerusalem Post, June 13, 2012.

19 (2010) "Netanyahu'ya 'Mavi Marmara' suçlaması" (Mavi Marmara Accusation to Netanyahu), <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25357843/>, Ntvmsnbc, 13.06.2010, accessed 5 December 2014.

20 (2012) "Mavi Marmara davası başladı" (The Mavi Marmara Case has Started), <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/mavi-marmara-davasi-basladi>, Aljazeera, 6.11.2012, accessed 5 December 2014.

21 (2014) "Savaş suçu var soruşturma yok" (There is a War Crime but No Investigation), <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/-savas-sucu-var-sorusturma-yok-/dunya/detay/1966100/default.htm>, Milliyet, 7.11.2014, accessed 5 December 2014.

Palmer Commission suggested that in order for relations to normalize Israel should offer its condolences and pay compensation to the families of the nine decedents. Representatives of Turkey and Israel expressed their own opinions to be annexed to the report: while Turkey's representative Özdem Sanberk rejected the legitimacy of the naval blockade and the indication that IHH's intentions were suspicious; Israel's representative Joseph Ciechanover asserted that the Israeli soldiers were defending themselves.<sup>22</sup> The Palmer Report, which aimed to initiate a normalization process between the two countries, was not accepted and signed by Turkey on the grounds that it was protecting Israel. Turkey's demand for an official apology was not accepted by Israel, and subsequently, bilateral relations were downgraded to the minimum level.

## AFTER THE MAVI MARMARA CRISIS:

The Davos and Mavi Marmara crises instigated perhaps the most strenuous phase in Israel-Turkey relations. In September 2011, PM Erdoğan stated that the Mavi Marmara attack could be "grounds for war"<sup>23</sup> and the Turkish Navy was ordered to "secure the freedom of action" in Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> While the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the UN to take action to stop Israel's aggressive policies towards the Gaza Strip in November 2012,<sup>25</sup>

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22 Geoffrey Palmer, Alvaro Uribe, Joseph Ciechanover Itzhar, Suleyman Ozdem Sanberk, *Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Inquiry on the Flotilla Incident*. May 31, 2010, September 2011, pp. 3-4.

23 (2011) "Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saw 'grounds for war' with Israel after flotilla raid", <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/8757910/Turkeys-Recep-Tayyip-Erdogan-saw-grounds-for-war-with-Israel-after-flotilla-raid.html>, The Telegraph (London), 13.10.2011, accessed 5 December 2014.

24 (2011) "Report Finds Naval Blockade by Israel Legal but Faults Raid" [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/world/middleeast/02flotilla.html?\\_r=0Sept](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/world/middleeast/02flotilla.html?_r=0Sept), The New York Times, 02.09.2011, accessed 5 December 2014.

25 (2012) "Turkey condemns Israeli attack on Gaza, demands halt", [http://en.apa.az/xeber\\_turkey\\_condemns\\_israeli\\_attack\\_on\\_gaza...182563.html](http://en.apa.az/xeber_turkey_condemns_israeli_attack_on_gaza...182563.html), AZTM, 15.11.2012, accessed 5 December 2014.

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Erdoğan accused Israel of being a “terrorist state”.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the months following the Mavi Marmara crisis, Israel made various attempts to dissolve the tension between Jerusalem and Turkey. However, as a result of Turkey’s insistence on its conditions, bilateral relations—except for trade—deteriorated even further. It was claimed that PM Netanyahu’s efforts to officially apologize were obstructed by the Israeli opposition and Israel’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, diplomatic relations were downgraded to a minimum level in 2011, the ongoing cooperation projects were interrupted, and the military agreements were suspended.<sup>28</sup>

Even though there were significant fluctuations in the number of tourists, strangely enough, what was affected the least by the political diplomatic crisis was bilateral trade. The bilateral volume of trade increased from 3.4 billion dollars in 2008 to 4.4 billion dollars in 2001 and again exceeded 4

billion dollars in 2012. While Israel had been the 24<sup>th</sup> largest export destination of Turkey during the first six months of 2013, it rose to 17<sup>th</sup> place in the first half of 2014. During the first five months of 2014, bilateral trade with Israel increased by 27% compared to the previous year.<sup>29</sup> Yet the tension between the two countries did affect tourism visibly: the number of Israeli tourists visiting Turkey decreased from 514,000 in 2008 to 311,000 in 2009 and to 109,000 in 2010, going as low as 80,000 in 2011.<sup>30</sup>

Negotiations for a solution proceeded despite the tension. Minister of Foreign Affairs of the time, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that these initiatives were geared to ensure a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.<sup>31</sup> The tension, which went on throughout the three years following the Mavi Marmara incident, started to show signs of alleviation as a result of the efforts on the part of the United States. There had been high level contact between the two countries prior to this as well: Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Agency undersecretary Hakan Fidan met with MOSSAD chief Tamir Pardo; Ministry of Foreign Affairs undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu and Israel Prime Ministry’s special representative Joseph Ciechanover got together for two meetings in Geneva.<sup>32-33</sup> However, until the US President Barack Obama’s visit to Israel on 22 March 2013, the long-awaited apology from Israel had not been made.

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26 (2012) “PM: Turkey does not intend to negotiate with Israel on Gaza situation”, <http://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2088855.html>, 16.11.2012, accessed 5 December 2014.

27 Matthew S. Cohen and Charles D. Freilich. “Breakdown and Possible Restart: Turkish-Israeli Relations under the AKP.” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Volume VIII, Number 1, 2014.

28 Before 2008, Turkey rented two unmanned aerial vehicles (Heron) from Israel, whereas in 2008, Israeli national defence company IMI (Israel Aerospace Industries) won the tender for Heron; Turkey paid 183 million\$ for 10 Herons. In 2009, these Herons were used for Turkey’s trans-border operations to Northern Iraq. Turkey reached an agreement with Israel for modernization of M-60 tanks and F-4, F-5 warplanes; thus, for the modernization of 54 F-4 war planes, Turkey paid over one billion\$. Turkey also paid 650 million\$ for the modernization of 170 M-60 tanks. Israel won the tender for Synthetic aperture radar (SAR) that enables F-4 to recognize moving objects for 160 million\$. Israel also won the tender for Datalink 16 project that enables F-4 and F-16 warplanes to send images to ground base; Turkey paid 120 million\$ for this. In 2008, two countries signed an agreement worth 167 million\$ on military intelligence. BIANET, “Türkiye ile İsrail’in Askeri Ortaklığı” (Military Cooperation between Turkey and Israel), 1.06.2010, <http://bianet.org/bianet/bianet/122431-turkiye-ile-israilin-askeri-ortakligi>, accessed 5 December 2014.

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29 (2014) “Turkish-Israeli trade booms amid Gaza debate”, [http://www.todayszaman.com/business-turkish-israeli-trade-booms-amid-gaza-debate\\_353447.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/business-turkish-israeli-trade-booms-amid-gaza-debate_353447.html), Today’s Zaman, 18.7.2014, accessed 6 December 2014.

30 Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-israel%20.en.mfa>

31 Arbell, D. (2012) “The Beginning of a Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement?”, The Brookings Institute, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2012/12/03-turkey-israel-arbell>, 3.12.2012

32 (2012) MIT ve MOSSAD Kahire’de buluştu. <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25401834/>, NTVMSNBC, 28.11.2012

33 (2010) Cenevre’de Barış Girişimleri, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/578151-cenevrede-baris-girisimleri>, Habertürk, 05.12.2010

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During Obama's visit, PM Netanyahu personally called Erdoğan in order to offer his condolences for the fatalities of the Mavi Marmara incident and to apologise for the "operational mistakes" made during the incident. Turkey accepted this apology and Israel also pledged to pay reparation to the families of the victims. Furthermore, PM Netanyahu promised that the limitations for civilian entrance to Palestinian territories, including the Gaza Strip, would be lifted so long as peace was maintained. This was soon followed by a statement that the relations between the two countries would normalize.<sup>34</sup> President Obama also expressed that he attached great importance to the normalization of Israel-Turkey relations for the establishment of regional peace.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these positive developments, Israel's reluctance to lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip, as well as Turkey and Israel's harsh mutual rhetoric prevented the relations from assuming an entirely positive course. On a television program, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that "We are currently in a period when the relations are the closest to normalization as they have ever been since the Mavi Marmara incident". However, a few days later PM Erdoğan indicated in a statement that even though progress had been made regarding the Mavi Marmara reparations, without the lifting of the blockade on Gaza or the formalization of the end of the Gaza embargo through a protocol, relations would not normalize.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Israeli Minister of Intelligence Yuval Steinitz said the reason as to why the parties had not been able to come to

an understanding was actually "Erdoğan's fault".<sup>37</sup>

Yet another rupture ensued following the wavering reconciliation efforts with Israel's military operation on the Gaza Strip in July 2014 which resulted in more than 2000 fatalities—the majority of whom was women and children. If Israel continues its reluctance to alter its policies regarding the Gaza Strip, keeps enforcing the strictly imposed embargo, as well as the ongoing blockade and military operations, it seems unlikely that there will be any positive political developments in Israel-Turkey relations in the near future. Just recently, Israel's military operation in the Al-Aqsa Mosque was defined by Erdoğan as "an unforgivable act" and "barbarism".<sup>38</sup>

## IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION:

It appears that the only thing to be done at the moment is to avoid actions or expressions that could cause any further deterioration of bilateral relations, and for the two countries to pay heed to each other's interests. Given the course of the bilateral relations since 1949, it is clear that considering Israel-Turkey relations without the context of Palestine is quite difficult and any improvement of relations has been realized with the developments in the process towards the resolution of the Palestinian issue. It does not take a clairvoyant to claim that in a world where the resolution of the Palestinian issue is possible, Israel-Turkey relations would be much better and stronger.

The fluctuating course of the relations between the two countries goes a long way back before the JDP government in Turkey. Therefore, it would not be realistic to deem the JDP government

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34 (2013) "Israel, America and Turkey: A useful first step", <http://www.jta.org/2013/03/22/the-archive-blog/israel-and-turkey-a-short-history-of-a-tense-relationship>, 30.3.2013

35 Sidner, S. (2013) "Israel to Turkey: We apologize for deadly raid on Gaza-bound flotilla", CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/22/world/meast/israel-turkey-apology/>, 24.3.2013

36 (2014) "Erdoğan'ın Gazze şartına İsrail'den yanıt?" (Response from Israel to Erdoğan's Gaza condition), <http://www.aktifhaber.com/Erdoğanin-gazze-sartina-israilden-yanit-933960h.htm>, Aktifhaber, 13.02.2014, accessed 6 December 2014.

37 (2014) "Turkey: Will Erdoğan Sink Reconciliation Process with Israel?", <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68044>, Eurasianet, (13.2.2014), accessed 6 December 2014.

38 (2014) "Erdoğan'dan İsrail'e sert tepki: Bu eylem asla affedilemez" (Harsh Reaction from Erdoğan to Israel), <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Erdoğan-dan-israil-e-sert-tepki-siyaset/detay/1966447/default.htm>, Milliyet, 7.11.2014, accessed 6 December 2014.



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responsible for the current situation based on its political stance. It should be noted that the same government hosted President Peres in Turkey, PM Erdoğan paid an official visit to Israel in 2005, and condemned anti-Semitism publicly. That said, it ought to be stressed that not only could the current deadlock further deteriorate the existent situation, but the legal consequences of the Mavi Marmara incident may also influence the bilateral relations deeply.

The meetings we held in Israel right before the latest Gaza operation in July suggested that the Israelis were very much aware of the potential problems in case of a protraction in the process and were therefore pro-normalization of relations. However, it has become evident after the Gaza operation that the restoration of relations between Turkey and Israel seem unlikely in the short run. There is a widespread discourse in Israel prevalent from economics to the political realm that “having a dialogue with Turkey would have more pros than cons”. Although it has been noted that economic relations were least affected by the impasse, it should be emphasized that while existing trade relations which are based on mutual interests have continued, investments have nearly reached a stagnation point and there has been almost no new initiatives in potential areas of cooperation between the two countries.

Energy cooperation stands out as the most prospective area of cooperation between Israel and Turkey. The latest successful natural gas explorations in the Levant Basin are very much likely to influence the energy politics of not only the Eastern Mediterranean region but also Europe, the Middle East and South Caucasus. The new discoveries in the Levant Basin such as Tamar (2009), Leviathan (2010), and Cyrus-A (2011) have introduced a whole new dimension to energy politics as this basin comprises offshore territories including the Gaza Strip, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Cyprus.<sup>39</sup> The

emerging resources could compensate the natural gas need of the region and offer a diversification of supply resources and routes of energy for Turkey and Europe.

Innovation technologies and ecological operations are also regarded as potential joint investment and cooperation areas. In case a comprehensive agreement is achieved, it would be possible to say that there is a will on the part of Israel to establish bilateral relations with Turkey with a strong emphasis on transparent economic and social relations. Nevertheless, the current impasse needs to be overcome in order to start negotiating these processes.

Radical movements, which emerged with the geopolitical gap in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, also necessitate the establishment of a joint strategic vision for the two countries. The rupture in bilateral relations could propel the two parties to manipulate the problems in Iraq and Syria against one another, which may in turn cause further problems. It should also be noted that a positive development in the political aspect of Israel-Turkey relations would facilitate the management of the hydrocarbon fields in the Mediterranean Sea and enhance economically feasible alternatives for their transmission to the global markets.

## CHRONOLOGY

**1949:** Turkey recognized Israel.

**1956:** After the Israeli invasion of Egypt, Israel-Turkey diplomatic relations were downgraded to the level of *chargé d'affaires*.

**1967:** During the second Arab-Israeli war, Turkey did not allow USA to use its Incirlik air base located within Turkish territory.

**1975:** PLO Political Bureau Chief Farouk Kaddoumi visited Ankara.

**1976:** Turkey allowed PLO to open a representative office in Ankara during the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting in Istanbul.

**1979:** Yasser Arafat met with Ecevit in Ankara.

**1980:** Israel declared Jerusalem as its “indivisible and eternal” capital.

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<sup>39</sup> Okumus, O.,(2013), “Changing prospects for natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean” interview with Dr. Sohbet Karbuz, *European Energy Review*.

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**1982:** Turkey condemned the Israeli massacre in Sabra and Shatila camps during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

**1988:** PLO declared the Palestinian state and Turkey became one of the first countries to recognize it.

**1991:** Turkey restored diplomatic relations with Israel on the ambassadorial level.

**1992:** Ambassador Ekrem Güvendiren presented the letter of credence to Israeli President Chaim Herzog on March 23rd.

**1996:** Turkey and Israel signed a bilateral agreement for military cooperation.

**1999:** After the 17 August earthquake, Israel became one of the first countries to send aid.

**2002:** The modernization project of 12 M-60 tanks belonging to Turkish Armed Forces was awarded to an Israeli company.

**2004:** Turkey and Israel signed the agreement on water sales from the Manavgat River to Israel.

**2006:** Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mashal went to Ankara.

**2007:** Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres visited the Grand National Assembly of Turkey at the same time.

**2008:** Ehud Olmert visited Ankara in order to discuss peace negotiations with Syria.

**2009:** During Davos Summit, Erdoğan protested the speech of the Israeli President Peres by saying “one minute” and left the conference hall.

**2010:** Mavi Marmara flotilla carrying aid for local people injured during the attacks on the Gaza Strip was attacked by Israeli forces in international waters.

**2011:** United Nations investigation commission for the Mavi Marmara incident published the Palmer Report.

**2012:** Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) undersecretary Hakan Fidan met with MOSSAD Chief Tamir Pardo in Cairo.

**2012:** Netanyahu called Erdoğan and apologized for the deaths of Turkish citizens and

“operational errors” during the raid on the Mavi Marmara flotilla.

**2014:** During a TV program in February, Davutoğlu indicated that relations with Israel were normalizing.

**2014:** The bilateral relations deteriorated again after the Israeli military attack on Gaza in July, causing more than 2000 Palestinian fatalities.

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