

No Longer Newlyweds:

The evolution of a decade of Turkish-Israeli relations¹

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TURKEY AND ISRAEL have mutually benefited from bilateral relations for almost half a century, but only since the 1990s have these relations become widely publicized. According to Oxford scholar, Dr. Philip Robins, whereas in the 1950s Turkey treated Israel as a mistress, “by 1993 the two countries were engaged; by 1996 they were wed.”¹ While neither country is Arab, both Israel and Turkey are geographically located in the Middle East, the center of the Arab world, and both have a history of contention within the region. They are both democracies with parliamentary governments, and both share a strong relationship and identification with the West. Both countries share values and history with Europe, but have intentionally been kept at a distance from the region at the hand of the Europeans. While Israel was formed as a Jewish state governed by Jewish law, and Turkey was formed as a secular state in which laws are based on European secular models, both states are currently facing domestic situations that demand consideration of the balance between religion and secularism in their national political identities.

There has been speculation that relations with Israel are now less of a priority for Turkey than they have been during the past decade. However, with the first official visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to Israel in January 2005, the openings for communication between Israeli and Palestinian officials after the death of Yasser Arafat, as well as recent Turkish expressions of interest in helping to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians and Israel and Syria, perhaps relations are not at risk, but have simply evolved from those of the past. It seems that rather than withdrawing from regional politics, as it has done in the past, Turkey may now be willing to play a more significant role in working towards peace and prosperity for the Middle East.

¹ I would like to thank Soli Ozel, William Hale, and Israeli Vice Consul to Istanbul Moshe Kanfi for their time and insight.

The following discussion presents the opinions of three experts on contemporary Turkish-Israeli relations, regarding issues that have affected their cooperation in the recent past and continue to do so today. These interviews were conducted in Turkey at the beginning of January 2005 in the context of research for a senior honor's thesis on post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy toward Israel. They were conducted three weeks after the European Union officially offered Turkey a date to begin accession negotiations, and in the days surrounding the first official visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to Israel.

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MOSHE KANFI, Israeli Vice Consul to Istanbul, has been serving as representative of the State of Israel to Turkey for two and a half years.

MANY PEOPLE CONSIDER THE 1990S TO BE A PERIOD OF RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN TURKEY AND ISRAEL. WHAT CONDITIONS MADE THIS WARMING OF RELATIONS POSSIBLE, CAUSING TURKEY TO CHANGE ITS ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL DURING THIS DECADE?

SOLİ OZEL: What happens in 1996 can be explained perfectly clearly in unemotional, strategic terms. In 1996, Turkey was having problems with all its neighbors.¹¹ It was in the middle of a civil war, the leader of the

¹¹ Turkey and Israel signed a number of military cooperation agreements in 1996. Despite that there had been ongoing relations between the two countries since the 1950s, the 1996 agreements marked the first time that Turkey was willing to publicly acknowledge its relationship with Israel.

PKK was residing in Damascus, PKK camps were operating in the Bekaa valley, and there was a power vacuum in northern Iraq that led the PKK to act on that front, as well.^{III} The relations with Iran were pretty strained, Turkey had come twenty minutes away from a war with Greece over the islets, and there were problems with the Greek Cypriots. The relations with the Europeans were almost at an all-time low, and the opening to Israel in one blow took care of many things. One, it ended Turkey's isolation, it gave Turkey a much better opening to the United States, and it changed the strategic framework in the region. It certainly scared the Greeks, and it was a strategic blow to the Syrians. In fact, had it not been for tight relations with Israel, transfer of military technology and all that, probably Turkey's threat against Damascus would have been less credible and Ocalan would not have been sent back.^{IV}

WILLIAM HALE: When the Turkey-Israel relationship started off in the early 1990s, Turkey's relationship with the EU was not a major priority on the agenda. So the Turkey-Israel relationship developed its own importance, if you like, irrespective of Turkey's relationships with the EU, but not irrespective of Turkey's relationship with the U.S.A., which I think is a pretty important point in the warming of relations between Turkey and Israel. Turkey needed to maintain good relations with the United States, so therefore it was also a good idea to have a good relationship with another country that is an ally of the United States, but especially Israel in this case because of the strength of AIPAC and the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. Congress. Turkey was able to piggy-back on the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Given that, it is still effectively the only pro-Turkish civil society lobby in the United States.

TURKISH PRIME MINISTER ERDOGAN HAS MADE ACHIEVING EU MEMBERSHIP A STRONG PRIORITY FOR HIS ADMINISTRATION. HOW WOULD TURKEY'S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU), OR THE REFORMS MADE IN THE PROCESS, AFFECT TURKEY'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL?

SOLI OZEL: The Israeli Defense Ministry received reports that suggest that Turkey getting close to the EU will be detrimental because then Turkey

^{III} PKK, the Kurdistan Worker's Party, is a Kurdish separatist group, classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government.

^{IV} In 1998, Turkey demanded that Syria extradite PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who had fled Turkey earlier and was residing in Syria. Turkey's relationship with Israel was beneficial in pressuring Syria to comply with Turkish demands.

will look at Israel from a European perspective, rather than an American one. I think that this is too mechanical a way of looking at things. Indeed Turkey's perspective on the Israelis and the Palestinians is a lot closer to the Europeans than to the American government. However, what is more important to Israel: that it has a Turkey critical of particular Israeli policies, but firmly anchored in the Western world, or a Turkey that is maybe closer to the Americans, but more Islamized and radicalized with more tenuous ties to the West? I think it is in the overall interest of Israel that Turkey remains firmly in the Western camp.

I don't know if Turkey will ever become a full member, but I am of the school that thinks that the road to EU membership is more important than the destination. You see, if the acceptance is to come in ten years' time, by then we will have transformed ourselves. If we have transformed ourselves and things are working fine, our sharp edges will have been cut, and we will be alright. If not, regardless of the EU, we will be in for a very rough ride.

MOSHE KANFI: There is fear in Israel that a European Turkey will align with the EU in its approach to Israel, which in the last four years, has been mostly pro-Palestinian, and some totally anti-Israeli. I can tell you, however, that even without the EU, sometimes the Turkish policy is more harsh than the European policy. For example, on the vote in the UN about the fence, the European countries did not vote, but Turkey voted with the Arab states against the fence. I think we'd prefer that Turkey align their policies with the European states than with the Arab states.

HOW HAS THE TURKISH MILITARY INFLUENCED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TURKEY AND ISRAEL? HOW WOULD THE EU DEMANDS TO DECREASE THE INFLUENCE OF THE MILITARY IN POLITICS IMPACT THE TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP?

SOLI OZEL: The Israelis should not be concerned about this. Remember that even when the military was in power, relations with Israel were kept at an all-time low. I think now there are more important aspects of Turkish-Israeli relations than just military relations. The relations are becoming more and more societal, despite the growing anti-Semitism in the country, or the growing anti-Israel sentiment.

WILLIAM HALE: The degree of independent power that the armed forces have within the Turkish political system depends crucially on three things: the first whether or not there is a relatively powerful state or single party

government in power, with a popular mandate. The second is whether or not there is a serious internal or external security threat. The third factor comes from the overall international environment and how this is affecting

Turkey's internal political life. On the first issue, it would be undoubtedly the case, I think, that for most of the 1990s, from 1991-2002 the power of the Turkish armed forces was relatively strong, because there was not a single party in power with a relatively strong government and popular mandate, particularly between 1997-1999. The Turkish army tended to fill a power vacuum at that time, and during the 1990s, until about 1998, the PKK was a serious internal security threat. Those two reasons, during the 1990s, especially during 1995-1999, tended to increase the amount of influence of the military within the system. Since 2002, you have a restoration of the kind of system that they had not had previously since 1983-1991, when you have a strong government with a

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single party in power and substantial popular mandate. What was very interesting is under Ozal, from 1983-1991, there was a substantial retreat by the military from active involvement in political game. They tended to come back during the 1990s, but have gone back to their barracks more over the last four years. What is also interesting, especially since 2002, is obviously that with the relationship with the EU, the military is a lesser influence than it had been.

MOSHE KANFI: In the 1990s, there was no European company that was willing to sell military equipment to, or share technology with, Turkey. Israel was willing to do both, so much of the good relations that evolved in the mid-1990s were thanks to the military bids and agreements. If you question whether Turkey's deals to buy European equipment now instead of Israeli equipment have influenced the relationship with Israel, I think they have not. Israel understood why there needs to be a shift in Turkey from the Israeli companies towards European companies, so Israel didn't

push Turkey and say to them, ‘if you do not buy from me, I will not sell to you ever.’ When the military industry in Israel sees an obstacle, they reach for ways around it. So we found other directions, other markets—mainly China and India, and as you can see, the process with India is going very well these past two years. This has not created any dispute between Israel and Turkey. On the contrary, it has pushed our industries in other directions, and as we say in Hebrew, ‘*ha kol l’tovah*,’ everything is for the better.

TURKEY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA HAS IMPROVED DRASTICALLY IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS. HOW HAS TURKEY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA, HISTORICALLY AND PRESENTLY, AFFECTED TURKEY’S ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL? HOW DO YOU THINK THE WARMING OF RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND SYRIA WILL AFFECT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND ISRAEL?

WILLIAM HALE: Since 1998, bit by bit we have had the beginnings of a remarkable turn around in Turkish-Syrian relations. This is not to say that Turkey and Syria see eye to eye on everything. For instance, Turkey would still like Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. They are committed to the idea that Lebanon is not an independent state as long as three fourths of the territory is occupied by Syria. They are not working hard against it, but their official position is against it.

Turkey can’t possibly take a position on anything other than blatant opposition to the use of terror as a political tool given its history as victims of terrorism. It is very interesting that in his visits to Israel and the territories, [Foreign Minister Abdullah] Gul has been very careful to say that there must be an overall peace process, it must include Syria, and it must include Lebanon. Clearly, whether Lebanon signs a peace treaty with Israel depends entirely on Syria. The Turks would like to include Syria in the process there is no doubt about that. They might argue that they have more leverage over Syria than over anybody else in the region.

MOSHE KANFI: In the past, Syria was an enemy of both Israel and Turkey. In the 1990s, Syria was reaching out for the PKK and even hiding Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus, which really harmed the relations between Turkey and Syria, and as a consequence of those bad relations, as well as our bad relations with Syria, our relations with Turkey were tightened.

Now Turkey is on better terms with Syria and we have two choices. We can feel insulted, or we can look for the benefits from this warming in their relations. Being insulted won’t bring anything positive to Israel. On the

contrary—it will isolate Israel. This will not help solve the problem of the region. The conflict between Israel and Syria does not just affect Israel and Syria. It affects many people besides Israel and Syria, including the Turks. As long as Turkey is not accepting Syria as a 100% good state, I am okay with Turkey and Syria becoming closer. But if there will be an acceptance like this, because Syria is not only Syria—Syria is Hamas, Syria is Islamic Jihad, Syria is Hezbollah—without it there is no existence of those groups. Because they are doing so many bad things to Israeli citizens, I cannot close my eyes and say, okay, Turkey is accepting Syria 100% and I don't have problems with it. If Syria would change its approach toward my crucial problem, toward those terror organizations, I believe it would change the whole process. The same way Turkey didn't start with any warmth toward Syria until Ocalan was expelled from Syrian territory or until Syria withdrew support of the PKK and stopped the incitement from the Hatay area. As long as Syria will not stop its support of terror organizations, I am not willing to look past it and support relations with Syria for Israel.

In the last few days, it has been published often that Turkey will be the mediator and will bring peace between Israel and Syria. I am wondering to myself, is this true? Is this genuine, or is it intended to bring Turkey a positive international image and look positive for the EU again? Turkey is well aware that to recognize himself as the mediator is not enough. Turkey will not solve the problem with Hezbollah, and it will not resolve the problem of incitement in Syria or in Lebanon, of terrorism, and of support for terror organizations against Israel and in the Palestinian Authority. They would need to do a lot more than just saying that they are the mediator and the supporter of peace. However, I don't mind if they will be a third participant, a third angle in this game that will do positive things for me. Turkey is seeking peace, not war between Israel and Syria, so it is good also for Israel as long as it is not harming my interests in this region.

Turkey is acting very cleverly by searching for the best position for itself, where the best position is to have good relations with all its neighbors, to have strategic positions toward influencing the peace process in the Middle East. Turkey is putting aside its problem with Syria and seeing what it can achieve from this position. It can achieve a better image toward the EU, and it can have influence in the White House and in Brussels. Turkey is very clever. It knows exactly the connection between Israel and the U.S., and it knows how tough it is for us to deal with the Syrians. So maybe there is an honest willingness for having peace in the region. Again, as long as I am not being hurt by this Turkish trial of having peace in the region, why do I care? Please go ahead, do it. I failed to do so, maybe you can succeed.

THERE HAS BEEN TENSION BETWEEN TURKISH AND ISRAELI OFFICIALS REGARDING ALLEGED ISRAELI SUPPORT FOR KURDISH INDEPENDENCE IN NORTHERN IRAQ, WHICH ISRAEL HAS OFFICIALLY DENIED. WHAT IS THE CURRENT OPINION IN TURKEY REGARDING ISRAEL AND IRAQ? DO ISRAELI AND TURKISH INTERESTS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF IRAQ CONVERGE?

SOLI OZEL: The question about the tensions over alleged Israeli support for the Kurds is real, and for me a more mysterious thing. The source for the Hersh article is supposed to be none other than the Foreign minister himself and maybe some retired generals.^v I think that it was a result of disinformation, but it no doubt played to the worst fears of the Turkish public—the suspicions that the Israelis are buying up land in Iraq, that they want to build greater Israel, and that they want to have a Kurdish state so are trying their best to make it happen. I think now, at least among the educated public, there is an understanding that Israel does not have much of an interest in a Kurdish state, although there are Israelis who do, and that Israeli relations with Turkey are far more important. However, the Kurdish issue and the entire mystique of the Kurdish issue is still a source of tension for the Turkish people.

MOSHE KANFI: As the one responsible for Israel in the Turkish media, I can say that there are many people who believe that we are supporting the PKK in northern Iraq. I have had to explain with all my heart, as much as I can, that these are theories that I compare with fiction, and do not hold true anywhere in Iraq, especially not in northern Iraq. I am emphasizing that we know exactly the Turkish interests in the region and the interest of Turkey in not having a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. The last thing that Israel wants in the region is a sovereign state in a part of Iraq that will lead immediately to another sovereign state in the South of Iraq, which will be a *sharia* state like Iran. With the Sunnis and the Shi'ites over there, it will be a radical Muslim state that will jeopardize a lot in the region, especially Israel. Isn't it enough to have Iran as my vicious enemy calling for my extermination from the map? Why do we need another one much closer to my borders? I am emphasizing again and again that I am rejecting this idea of a sovereign state for the Kurds, and I am resenting the conspiracy theories that are accusing me as the one who is training or even supporting

^v An article written by Seymour Hersh in the June 28, 2004 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, which discussed Israeli support for the Kurds in northern Iraq. The article caused a lot of discussion and tension between Israeli and Turkish officials during the proceeding months.

the PKK in northern Iraq against Turkey.

IF IRAN DOES DEVELOP NUCLEAR WEAPON CAPABILITIES, HOW WOULD THIS AFFECT THE TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP? DO TURKEY AND ISRAEL HAVE SIMILAR INTERESTS REGARDING IRANIAN NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES?

SOLI OZEL: Turkey does not want Iran to become a nuclear power, because if it does, than Turkey will be under pressure to become one itself. I think if Turkey were to become a nuclear power it would jeopardize our relations with the European Union. I don't want Turkey to become a nuclear power, I don't want Iran to become one, and I want Israel to become denuclearized. Ultimately, if Iran is prevented, the question will become why Israel should be able to keep its weapons. So long as there are nuclear weapons in the neighborhood, I don't see for how long you can keep the Iranians from making one.

MOSHE KANFI: It may be a side point, but I think it is a crucial point that what Saddam did to Israel by launching long range missiles to Tel Aviv in 1990 maybe gave Turkey a signal that if Israel is the target now, maybe we [Turkey] are next. I have seen many articles about this in the last two years with regard to Iran, saying that Israel is preparing itself to defend against Iran, and what are we [Turkey] doing? Nothing. We are sending our Prime Minister and businessmen to the country, but doing nothing to protect ourselves from the potential nuclear problem. When scuds fell on Israel, Turkey saw this very well, and I want to believe they understood that for the first time, maybe Israel crossed the line from the bad guys to the good guys by being the ones who suffered from the missiles and from Saddam Hussein. This may have caused a kind of shifting in the Turkish policy toward Israel.

I remember some articles saying that Israel is preparing itself for this threat by having some plans to protect itself, and we [Turkey] are under the threat of the Shehab [Iranian long range missile] too, so why are we not doing anything to prepare ourselves? Meanwhile, Iran is sending gas to Turkey and because Turkey does not have even one meter of gas, it is totally dependent on the outside. What Turkey can give to Iran is mainly friendship, which Iran very much needs, as these days it is the isolated state in the Middle East. I think that Iran needs Turkey now and Turkey knows it very well, and Turkey buys protection by keeping a good relationship with Iran.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, OR THE BROADER ISRAELI-ARAB CONFLICT, ON THE TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP?

SOLI OZEL: It was maybe not expected, but the Turkish-Israeli relations have withstood the pressures of four years of *intifada*, with really aggressive policies from the Israeli government. Regardless of what happened at the popular level, relations have been maintained.

WILLIAM HALE: I think the Turkish-Israeli relationship always depended on the assumption, to some extent, that there was some light at the end of the tunnel in the Arab-Israeli context. After the collapse of Camp David II, the election of Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel, and the start of the second *intifada*, that light seemed to be disappearing, so that it became far more difficult for Turkey to follow a more or less neutral path between the two. However, as the Turks have become more confident in their ability to enter the EU, they have also become more interested and more active in being a mediator and playing a “useful” role in the settlement of international problems, including those that don’t immediately impact their own security. Turkey has been sitting on the sidelines and not doing much for a very long time. Now it is trying to get back on center stage. The basic problem is that Turkey does not have very big leverage over Israel, and it has even less leverage over the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization). So I am not saying that it would be necessarily successful, but it is putting itself out there as a volunteer. And I think this is affecting the Turkish-Israeli relationship positively, but it all depends on what Israel’s policies are and what Sharon comes up with as a peace settlement.

MOSHE KANFI: Our relationship with the Palestinians has been a very strong factor of influence in our relations with Turkey. I believe it was one of the strongest elements of this foreign policy game, or of bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. There is a vast majority of Muslim people in Turkey, so many people support the Palestinians. As long as there is quiet and there are achievements in the peace process arena, people here are willing to accept Israel, but having events like the last *intifada* made tremendous negative effect on the public opinion about Israel. If the tensions between Israel and Palestinians are going high, the image of Israel is going down. The image of Israel, after the targeting of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin went down a lot. Erdogan made statements about Israel being a sponsor of terrorism and this was unbearable for Israel. From an

ally country, to which we reached out to help four years before, this was too much for Israeli policymakers and the Israeli public to stand. We tried to deal with this for many months and I think finally the visit of Abdullah Gul yesterday has shown that we have managed to get past the bad feelings and tensions with Erdogan, and are getting back to good relations with Turkey, compared to the relations we had the past few years. I read in the papers this morning an article talking about now as a new era in the region, the best one since the Camp David era.

GENERALLY, HOW WOULD YOU CLASSIFY THE CURRENT STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND ISRAEL?

SOLI OZEL: I think relations have now become relativized. First, you could not keep on with the passion of 1996 forever. Secondly, because of that relationship, Turkey's relations with everyone else have changed for the better. Relations with Iran are now fine, relations with Syria are better than they have ever been, relations with Greece have radically changed, Cyprus is calmer, Iraq is a totally different ball game, and the PKK insurrection has been defeated. So, if you will, because the conditions themselves have so drastically changed, obviously the relations with Israel have had to be relativized. In that sense, I personally do not see a crisis in relations between Turkey and Israel, as some people say there is.

MOSHE KANFI: I think objectively, they are normal relations. I am thinking of having normal relations, and by that having more than \$1.5 million mutual commerce, just think of the level of commerce we could have if we had very good relations. We have so many things that Turkey needs, mainly in the hi-tech industry. I think this is helping an opening of a new era – Turkey may accept so many good things from the Israeli market. This may be leading to an upgrade of the relationship from one basically based on arms equipment, military equipment, and defense industry, to one more civilized, more market oriented and economy oriented. Even Malaysia is buying Israeli goods in large amounts because Israel has the original products for so many things that it needs to produce. Malaysia hates Israel. So if these are normal relations, I can only imagine what great relations would be.

¹ Robin, Philip. *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish foreign policy since the Cold War*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.