

The Resilience of Israeli–Turkish Relations

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Turkey was the first – and for decades the only – Islamic country to recognize the Jewish state, opening diplomatic relations in 1949. While Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952, and Israel served during the Cold War as a Western ally to counter Soviet alliances in the Arab world, relations between the two states were low-key through the decades of wars fought between Israel and the Arabs. Yet Turkey never severed the relationship despite Arab pressure to do so. With the end of the Cold War, Israel and Turkey emerged as the most democratic and economically dynamic states in the region. Their foreign pro-Western orientation and their self-perception as bastions of democratic and free market values in an unruly neighbourhood placed them, as was the case during the Cold War years, in the same strategic boat.

In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, during a period when the Arab-Israeli peace process gained momentum, Israeli–Turkish relations also moved into high gear. Diplomatic ties were upgraded to embassy-level status, joint military exercises began and intelligence cooperation was expanded. In addition, economic relations boomed. Annual trade between the two nations grew to US\$2 billion in 2004, up from US\$200 million in 1993, and since the mid-1990s Turkey has been the number one tourist destination for Israelis.

The remarkable upgrading of relations with Israel was the result of the emergence of a evolving international constellation, following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent adoption of a new Turkish approach to a newly defined Greater Middle East. Turkey benefited only partially from the ‘peace dividends’ at the end of the Cold War, because it still found itself in a volatile strategic environment. While free to adopt a more assertive foreign policy than during the Cold War,¹ it also viewed itself as encircled by dangerous neighbours and surrounded by hotspots of instability. Thus, the main context for Turkey’s rapprochement with Israel was the reorientation of its foreign policy.

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Indeed, the many similarities in the strategic outlook of Israel and Turkey in the post-Cold War regional environment strengthened the bilateral relationship. The two shared similar regional concerns regarding Syria, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the challenge of Islamic radicalism, and the geopolitical destiny of Central Asia. These mutual concerns intensified in the 1990s as a result of the end of the Cold War, which allowed for greater freedom of action particularly for the revisionist states in the region – Iran and Syria. At the global level, the two states have displayed a strong pro-American orientation in their foreign policy, have had a problematic relationship with Europe and have been suspicious of Russian aspirations.² The parallels outlined here were clear also to the other players in the region who generally have seen the entente in strategic terms.³

This perception is reinforced by the close relationship reached between the defence establishments of the two states in the 1990s. Turkey benefited from the ability to purchase advanced weaponry from Israel that the United States and/or other Western states were reluctant to sell it directly. The transfer of military technology has become increasingly important to the Turkish military-industrial establishment.⁴ These interactions included a deal for Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) to upgrade Turkey's F-4 Phantom jets. Local Israeli defence industries have also sold Turkey other electronic systems, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), radars, Delilah anti-radar drones, EHUD debriefing systems and Popeye advanced guided-weapons. In 2002 Israel Military Industries (IMI) secured a contract to upgrade the Turkish M-60 main battle tank, and Turkey showed interest in acquiring the Arrow-2 anti-ballistic missile defence package. Turkey has also provided the Israeli Air Force (IAF) with airspace where combat pilots can train in an unfamiliar environment and practice long-distance attacks. In return Israel has provided Turkish pilots with advanced training at its Shdema Air Combat Manoeuvring Instrumentation Range in the Negev. The Israeli, Turkish and US fleets have undertaken Reliant Mermaid joint naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean on an annual basis, the most recent being held in January 2005.

Turkey capitalized on its strategic partnership with Israel when it coerced Syria in 1998 to expel the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and when it prevented the deployment of Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missiles in Cyprus also in 1998. Again, in 2001, Turkey moved, probably with tacit Israeli and American support, against Iran when the latter threatened Azerbaijani oil in the Caspian Sea.⁵ For its part, Turkey has actively thwarted organizations working against Israel. In 2000, for example, Turkey reportedly prevented Iran from supplying arms to Hizbullah through Turkish airspace.

All these ties and sales, of course, have taken place with the quiet encouragement of the United States. Moreover, Ankara believes that Jerusalem can be useful in neutralizing the hostile Greek and/or Armenian lobbies in Washington. For Israel, reaching out to Turkey has also been a way to show its acceptance by a Muslim state in a hostile Arab and Islamic region, despite its unresolved conflict with the Palestinians.

THE STABILITY OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

Despite many differences, there are highly significant parallels between Turkey and Israel. Both states are part of the Middle East and geographically proximate to Europe. The perceptions of the two countries on the major foreign policy and defence issues faced by their strategists are more similar than not. Both see the Middle East as a turbulent area in which the use of force is part and parcel of the rules of the game, though their policy prescriptions are not identical. They both welcome a greater American role in the region. To an extent relations with Israel provide a 'solution' to some of Turkey's national security problems in the post-Cold War era. In turn, the Turkish opening was very important for Israel in its quest for acceptance in the region. With Turkey at its side, its margins of security are also greater. The multifaceted Turkish-Israeli defence collaboration (including weapons upgrading, technology transfer, joint training and intelligence sharing) serves as an illustration of how convergent interests can be harnessed in pursuit of common strategic goals – despite vocal criticism in many Arab quarters. Syria, for example, led the opposition to Turkey's alignment with Israel, but was unable to provide a coherent response to the realignment in power relations.⁶

The broad common strategic agenda strengthens the Israeli-Turkish entente. Yet the international system functions in an essentially anarchic fashion, in which states pursue their own interests without coordinating them with, or subordinating them to, the interests of fellow states. Accordingly, the durability of alliances is more often than not contingent solely on a mutual perception of complementary national interests.⁷ Thus, in light of the recognition of the importance of these basic tenets of international relations, the permanence of the evolving entente is questioned in Ankara and Jerusalem, as elsewhere.⁸

Changing international constellations could bring about a foreign policy re-orientation and/or, a redefinition of national interests. Moreover, national interests are domestically determined and are subject to domestic socio-political developments. Therefore, an assessment of the durability of Turkish-Israeli ties requires a two-pronged discussion of the international and domestic contexts of the relationship.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The common perceptions about the regional and the global environment presented above bind the two states strategically and seem to be *prima facie* evidence of relevance for some time to come. The Middle East is not going to change very rapidly and will continue to be a zone of turmoil for the foreseeable future. While the intensity of the current conflicts in the region may vary over time, and new alliances among past rivals may emerge, the old enmities and suspicions are not going to fade away easily.

According to this assessment, the strategic bond between Ankara and Jerusalem, which relates primarily to common threat perceptions of regional developments, is a strong one. A further increase in threat perception, as a result of more aggressive policies of the rogue states in the region or due to an increase in their capabilities to harm Turkey and Israel would probably bring about even greater cooperation between the two. This is a likely scenario as Syria and Iran are both engaged in programmes to extend the range of their surface-to-surface missiles and their accuracy. Such contingency could bring about a higher profile of Jordanian participation in Israeli-Jordanian-Turkish relations. Jordanian input is extremely important to prevent an anti-Arab flavour in Turkish-Israeli defence cooperation and to facilitate US support for it. One binding issue could be missile defence. Indeed, faced with a growing Iranian missile threat, Turkey has shown great interest in the Israeli Arrow-2 ballistic missile defence system – the only operational system in existence so far. The fact that it is going to be co-produced by an American company such as Boeing adds to its attraction.⁹

The American plans to invade Iraq created some uncertainties in bilateral relations. Jerusalem followed with concern Turkey's awkward rejection of the American request to open a northern front from Turkish territory, which created tensions between Ankara and Washington. Israel was temporarily relieved when Turkey approved in October 2003 the sending of troops to help the US stabilize the situation in Iraq, although the US eventually declined to use Turkish troops. Indeed, Israel and its lobby in Washington did its best to mend relations between Ankara and Washington.¹⁰ This was very much appreciated in Ankara.

The tensions between the US and Turkey over the future of the Kurds and Turkmen in Northern Iraq are of concern in Israel, despite the fact that the basic interests of Israel and Turkey clearly converge in Iraq. Both states want the US to stay there and hope it will be successful in generating a process of political change for the better. While both do not anticipate the development of an Iraqi democracy in the near future, they favour the emergence of a stable Iraq that is not a threat to its neighbours.

In addition, both states strongly support the US global war on terrorism, which targets Islamic radicals. Actually, events since 11 September 2001

have strengthened the Israeli-Turkish strategic partnership as both face terrorism from similar quarters. The terrorist attacks on Istanbul in November 2003 reinforced this bond. Indeed, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the proto-Islamist AKP, urged strengthened intelligence cooperation between the two states in their counter-terror activities.¹¹

Another regional scenario, unlikely at this stage, for increased strategic links between Ankara and Jerusalem, is the expansion of Syria's orbit of influence into Iraq, Jordan and Palestine. An Islamic takeover of Egypt, also a distant possibility, would certainly bring Ankara and Jerusalem closer.

The effects of a nuclear Iran on the region requires further study, but initially the impact of Iran's nuclear ambitions on the Israel-Turkey entente seem to lead to greater cooperation. Both fear such a scenario and would prefer the international community, primarily the US, to prevent the emergence of a nuclear Iran, which Israeli decision-makers consider to be an existential threat. In his November 2003 testimony before the Israeli Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Meir Dagan, head of the Mossad, stressed that an Iranian atomic capability would constitute the greatest 'threat to the existence of Israel' since the Jewish state's establishment in 1948. Dagan's assessment followed the standard warning by Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz that 'Israel can in no way accept the presence of a nuclear weapon in Iranian hands' – a thinly veiled threat that Jerusalem would be prepared, if necessary, to neutralize the Iranian nuclear programme by force if current international efforts to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions fail.¹²

Turkey has upgraded its evaluation of the threat coming from Iran, in a review by the Turkish General Staff and Defence Ministry in planning defence procurement for 2004. The officials said the policy would seek to increase Turkish capabilities in air and missile defence as well as airborne surveillance. Turkish Defence Minister Vecdi Gonul stressed in an address to the Turkish Parliament's Budget Committee that Iran has become a major threat to Turkish security, primarily because Tehran is actively seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction and remains a major sponsor of international terrorism.¹³ Threatening postures could lead to increased collaboration between Israel and Turkey, though nuclear weapons could equally have a corrosive effect on alliances, as some Cold War experiences appear to indicate.

A more unlikely contingency, but one with the potential to disturb Turkish-Israeli relations, would be a new protracted energy crisis, which would increase Turkish dependence upon the goodwill of Arab oil suppliers. So far, the rising oil price since 2003 has not created an oil crisis and has had little effect on the political leverage of Arab oil producers or Iran. Indeed, they have hardly made a dent in Turkish foreign policy.

Moreover, the completion of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline (planned for the beginning of 2006) will turn Turkey into a leading competitor in Caspian geopolitics, which also includes energy resources. This further limits Turkish dependency upon Arab oil.

Globally, Israel and Turkey have linked their fortunes to the US. American dominance in world politics is not likely to be challenged during this or the coming decade. Even if that happens, the strong pro-American orientation of Israel is unlikely to change. In all probability, a challenger to US dominance in the Middle East will court the Arab states, which would only reinforce Israel's desire to secure US support. A resurgent Russia with a more active Middle East policy would probably elicit a similar response in Ankara.

Nevertheless, Turkey's foreign and security policy, which has undergone revisions in light of the changing security environment, has several options, including distancing itself from the West.¹⁴ The future direction depends much on US and European tendencies to incorporate Turkey into their political and military architecture. Wise policies in Washington and European capitals could preserve Turkey's present orientation. By the end of 2004, the EU had finally accepted Turkey as a partner for accession talks. Yet even a Turkey less enamoured with the West might see Israel as an important regional ally. To some extent, it has been attracted to Israel because of its disappointments with the West.

For Israel, relations with Turkey, a country with a predominantly Muslim population, have always been a high priority and there are hardly any international contingencies that may affect the Israeli desire to hold on to the current relationship. Only a pro-Arab Turkey would lead Israel to dilute the military component of the relationship, but Jerusalem would still cling to the other aspects. Israel, as a small country with narrow margins of security, and continuously engaged in securing regional acceptance, needs cordial relations with a regional power such as Turkey. Moreover, the current ties with Turkey constitute a model for potential cooperation with other countries in the region. So far, Israel's integration in the region has been limited, as its overtures to the neighbouring countries, even those with whom it has signed peace treaties (Egypt and Jordan), are mostly not reciprocated.

In contrast to Israel's constant interest in good ties with Turkey, Ankara once regarded such ties with Israel as dispensable, primarily because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, Turkey decided in the 1990s, like many other countries, to detach its links with Israel from the ups and downs of the peace negotiations. The current relationship confers important advantages, but several scenarios in the future could affect negatively the Turkish evaluation of the entente. For example, the process of Turkey's accession to an EU critical of Israel could complicate Ankara's cost-benefit analysis in having strategic ties with Israel. Easier access to European and

American weapons could also dilute some of the glue that binds the two countries. Yet the more Turkey is integrated into the Western fold – which despite intermittent tensions with Israel has basically seen Israel as a legitimate political entity and has maintained normal relations with it – the easier it would be for Ankara to maintain good relations with Israel. The full incorporation of Turkey into the EU would require greater harmonization with European foreign policies, and would lend greater credibility to the defence commitments of NATO, or a European Army in which Turkey becomes a member. This eventuality could reduce significantly the strategic component of Turkish-Israeli ties. However, full membership in the EU is unlikely to happen for the next 10–15 years. A cautious Turkey that is engaged in protracted membership talks with the EU is unlikely to put all its eggs in the European basket. Moreover, Israel is not averse to the extension of Europe into the Eastern Mediterranean.

An asymmetric division of benefits in the relationship could create tensions. So far, the perception in both capitals is that the relationship is mutually beneficial. Even equally spread benefits are not crucial as long as the two sides feel that bilateral relations bestow many advantages. Generally, Turkey needs Israel less than the other way around, which means that Ankara is more likely to adopt a cooler disposition toward Jerusalem if the international circumstances require such a realignment.

THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

Within Israel, there is hardly any opposition to ties with Turkey. Despite the fact that most Israelis know little about Turkey, there is considerable consensus among the general public over the need to foster good relations with the country. The limited interpersonal interactions in the form of tourism, foreign workers or business contacts have generally left positive impressions. Despite the differences in emphasis, Israel as a whole has tried very much to improve relations with Turkey at all levels. More intensive economic ties and upgraded cultural links also reduced, to some extent, the dominant profile of the military component.

Actually, most policy makers were pleased with the Arab perceptions that Israel had succeeded in allying itself with a strong regional power. But a few Israeli diplomats, who displayed a very dovish orientation towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, were concerned that stressing the military partnership could estrange some Arab states, such as Egypt. They also feared an inhibiting effect on the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, although all supported a positive response to any Turkish overtures in the civilian realm.¹⁵ However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under Shimon Peres, did not register any formal objection to any of the proposed arms deals. Peres and other prominent doves such as the late President Ezer Weizman supported wholeheartedly the emerging ties, including their

security component. Within the defence establishment, Uri Sagui, Head of the IDF Intelligence Branch (1991–95) was the lone sceptical voice. He was the advocate of the view that Syria was ripe for a peace treaty with Israel. In that context, he approached Prime Minister Rabin and suggested a more reserved approach to Turkey. Rabin could not ignore the view of such a high-ranking officer and ordered a reassessment within all agencies in the defence community, which recommended going ahead with the burgeoning relationship with Turkey. Rabin accepted this wholeheartedly.¹⁶ Binyamin Netanyahu, prime minister in the period between 1996 and 1999, also attached great importance to the relationship. He announced his commitment to intensifying it and viewed the entente as the main axis for a regional security framework.¹⁷ Ehud Barak, his successor, regarded Turkey as ‘a regional giant . . . with whom Israel shares deep common interests’.¹⁸ Ariel Sharon, Israel’s prime minister since March 2001, has made great efforts to maintain good relations with Ankara. In a call to the newly elected premier Abdullah Gül of the AKP government in November 2002, he praised the bilateral relations and stressed the need for even deeper ties.¹⁹

Similarly, the Turkish secular political elite generally supports good relations with Israel. Conservative political leaders such as Mesut Yılmaz of the Motherland Party (ANAP) and Tansu Çiller of the True Path Party (DYP), both of whom served as prime minister in the 1990s, have shown their eagerness to enhance relations with Israel through their public statements and actual policies. Their positions on Israel also reflected the preferences of the rank and file of their parties. By 1996, political figures on the left, such as Bülent Ecevit, the leader of the Democratic Left Party (DSP), similarly favoured the rapprochement. When he served as prime minister (1999–2002) the relations between the two countries remained excellent. The late Alparslan Türkeş, leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which had a lukewarm attitude towards Israel, also decided to support the rising ties. From his perspective, the 1996 military agreement drew the most powerful state in the Middle East to Ankara’s side thus giving it a major advantage vis-à-vis both Greece and Syria.²⁰ The secular press (including an Islamist organ such as *Zaman*) and the intellectual elite usually welcomed improved relations with a Western-oriented state like Israel. The decline in the power of the radical left in Turkish politics, which was critical of Israel, also eased rapprochement. Similarly, the small but prominent Jewish community in Turkey (estimated at 25,000 members), while cautious in the past, has benefited from the rapprochement between Ankara and Jerusalem, and is likely to exert its limited influence for preserving good relations. Above all, the Turkish military, which has a key role in the formulation of defence and foreign policy, has continuously hailed the advantages to be accrued from the bilateral relationship.²¹

However, there are some circles in Turkey more critical of the entente. For example, the business community is cautious as it balances Turkish economic interests in the Arab world with burgeoning economic ties with Israel. Those most critical of Turkish-Israeli ties are the Islamists. Attitudes to Israel often betray plain anti-Semitism and display blatant anti-Israeli positions. Representative of such a position was Necmettin Erbakan, leader of Refah, and Turkey's prime minister between June 1996 and June 1997. He rejected ties with the Jewish state, as well as close relations with the West, and promoted instead an 'Islamic International'. Generally, the Islamists advocate solidarity with Islamic causes and groups abroad, and see Turkey as a potential leader of the Islamic world. Their sympathy for the Palestinians actually reflects widespread feelings in Turkey. Yet, some Islamists, due to their nationalist outlook, regard Israel as an acceptable international actor and beneficial partner. For example, in 1999 Recai Kutan, the leader of the Fazilet Party and a critic of Israeli policies on the Palestinian issue, noted that Israel was recognized by the West and Arab countries, and added that Turkey should take advantage of its ties with Israel to cooperate on defence issues and gain technology.²² Similarly, Prime Minister Erdogan, the leader of the AKP, stressed several times that no change would occur in relations with Israel, as they served Turkish national interests. Probably the AKP needs a good relationship with Israel also to downplay its Islamist image and prove that it is a Western-oriented government. Thus, Israel is one issue (albeit a not very central one) in the struggle between moderates and extremists within the Islamist circles.

The likelihood of an Islamic takeover in Turkey, reminiscent of Iran's revolution, which would end the close cooperation with Israel – a scenario raised occasionally in Israel – is remote. Turkey started its journey to modernization and Westernization earlier than Iran and has travelled a longer distance on this road than its south-eastern neighbour. Turkey's geographic location on the Mediterranean also expedited its exposure to the West. The political and social groups with vested interests in the present regime are very strong, while the intersecting cleavages within Turkish society prevent the establishment of a broad coalition against the secular state. The AKP government, in power since November 2002, has so far been quite cautious in not challenging the secular character of the state.

Moreover, the Turkish officers' corps, in stark contrast to the military in Iran, sees itself as the guardian of the secular regime and since 1960 has had a history of intervention in politics. Formally, the power of the Turkish Army is being gradually curtailed within the Turkish political system as a result of greater democratization and the quest to conform to European standards.²³ Nevertheless, the Turkish military is likely to oppose forcefully any attempt to change the secular and democratic orientation of the country.

Yet the constraints on the military's political influence may increase, particularly as Turkey becomes more inclined to emulate the pattern of civil-military relations of Western Europe, which it wants to join. Further responsiveness of the Turkish political system to public opinion, an integral part of democratization and part of the accession process to Europe, could also bring about greater sensitivity to pro-Palestinian sentiment, at the expense of Israeli interests. In addition, if the political influence of Islamic groups gradually increases, this could act as a brake on Israeli-Turkish relations.

The evolving partnership has also played an important role in terms of the identity debate inside Turkey. Its links with Israel are perceived by the secular Western-oriented Turkish elite as partly reinforcing their struggle over the identity of Turkish society, since for many within the Turkish political-military-intellectual elite, Israel serves as an additional window to the West.²⁴ This was particularly evident when Refah's Erbakan served as prime minister. One of the issues at dispute between Erbakan and the secularists was the relationship with Israel.

The historic and cultural baggage of relations between Jews and the Ottoman Empire is part of the domestic dimension. Although the Jewish community in Palestine had occasional run-ins with the local Ottoman authority, Israel's relationship with Turkey is not haunted by memories of persecution and pogroms, as is the case with many European countries. On the contrary, in 1992 the Turkish Jewish community celebrated the 500th anniversary of the arrival of their forefathers in Ottoman cities following Sultan Bayezid II's decision to offer sanctuary to the Jews expelled from Christian Spain and Portugal (this opportunity was seized upon for the visit of Israel's President Chaim Herzog to Turkey). The Ottoman Empire also granted Jews religious and communal autonomy as part of its traditional decentralized approach to politics and religion. Modern Turkey has also shown tolerance for its Jews, who are mostly held in high regard. Turkish and Israeli contemporary leaders often emphasize this legacy of coexistence.

Both countries also share a 'common sense of otherness' in a region dominated by Arabs.²⁵ Both experienced an uneasy coexistence with Arab countries. Turkey and Israel are not Arab and their half-hearted attempts at integration in the region produced a cool response. Arab governments are traditionally wary of Turkey because of its past colonial rule over the region, while Israel is seen as a creation of Western imperialists. Their functioning democracies and liberal economic policies also make them exceptional entities in the Middle East.²⁶ Due to their political and cultural attachment to the West, Turkey and Israel find themselves preferring to live elsewhere in the world rather than in their own region. Thus the common strategic outlook is buttressed by cultural factors.

TESTING THE RELATIONSHIP

The bilateral relationship has not been without its differences of opinion. Overcoming such instances indicates the primacy of strategic considerations in foreign policy-making and is an affirmation of the entente's robustness. First, it weathered problematic domestic preferences. When Erbakan served as prime minister, the course of his government's foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel remained basically unchanged, despite Erbakan's announced intention to minimize contacts.²⁷ Erbakan was the one to sign the F-4 Phantom retrofitting deal. This showed that domestic considerations, in particular Islamic influence, were not potent enough at that time to deflect the main lines of Turkish policy, including relations with Israel. Yet the Erbakan era reminded Israelis of the vicissitudes of Middle Eastern politics and of what happened to the Israeli–Iranian relationship following the Islamic revolution. In short, it served as a cautionary note.

The peace process, particularly the Israeli–Syrian track, which Turkey was ambivalent about, also provided a few minor tests in the 1990s. The contacts between Shimon Peres and Syria's Hafez Asad in the winter of 1995–96 indicated an unprecedented Israeli eagerness to clinch a deal with Syria. Turkey feared that such a peace deal, which also included a reference to Turkish waters and the issue of terror, might be detrimental to its national interests.²⁸ During the Turkish–Syrian crisis of October 1998, Israel announced that it was not involved in the conflict. This statement was accompanied by Israel reducing its forces on the Golan Heights, signalling to Damascus its good intentions.²⁹ These Israeli acts were not well received in Ankara, which expected at least an ambiguous posture, but relations were unaffected. The efforts by the Barak government to reach a peace agreement in the 1999–2000 period elicited somewhat less concern in Turkey because by then there was much greater intimacy between Jerusalem and Ankara.³⁰ Similarly, the Syrian overtures to improve relations with Turkey were usually seen in Jerusalem as a reflection of Syria's *realpolitik* assessment that the circumstances dictated reducing Turkish hostility, particularly following the US presence in Iraq. Ankara, like Jerusalem, presumably would welcome the emergence of a moderate pro-Western orientation in Damascus. Yet it would need a lot of proof and the passage of many years to be convinced of long-term Syrian moderation.³¹

Similarly, the international criticism of the so-called slowdown in the peace process, particularly the Israeli–Palestinian track, which has been generally attributed to the Netanyahu government (1996–99), did not influence the bilateral relationship. Even the deterioration in Israeli–Palestinian relations as a result of the terror campaign started by the Palestinians in September 2000, and the resort to force by Israel in response, did not affect the relationship. For example, in September 2001,

Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem stated that his country 'is determined to improve its ties with Israel' and offered 'to expand the massive efforts to reach a solution between Israel and the Palestinians'.³² Turkey even hosted Prime Minister Sharon for an official visit in August 2001, despite his hawkish image and unpopularity in the Arab and Muslim world. Israeli counter-terror activities elicited occasionally harsh statements from Turkish officials that Israel usually ignored. Yet, when Prime Minister Ecevit described in April 2002 the Israeli military hunt for Palestinian terrorists as 'genocide', Israeli diplomacy, backed by Jewish organizations in the US, forced the Turkish premier to retract his remark, delineating a clear 'red line' regarding what Israel is willing to accept as criticism from a friendly country.³³

An additional minor test was the occasional statements by Israeli politicians on the left comparing the massacre of Armenians in 1915, when under Ottoman rule, to the Jewish Holocaust during World War Two. This infuriated Turkish officials and attracted much publicity in the Turkish press. In April 2000, such a pronouncement by the Israeli education minister, Yossi Sarid, led to a Turkish boycott of the Israeli embassy's reception in honour of its Independence Day. So far, Israeli assurances that such statements are personal opinions that do not reflect an official policy have been sufficient to restore relations to their previous course.

A major test came with the October 2002 electoral victory of the AKP, a conservative party with Islamist roots (including the Refah party). It held out the prospect of a new rapprochement between Turkey and its Muslim neighbours, and a cooling of ties with Israel. Many in Israel became quite nervous, but the government decided on a 'wait and see' policy. However, with the exception of protests over the treatment of Palestinians by the Sharon government, the alliance with Israel has held up. Erdogan made it clear to Jewish organizations in America, which he met immediately after his electoral victory, that he favoured continuing the bond with Israel and even expanding it further.³⁴ Several members of the AKP cabinet expressed their desire for Turkey to host a peace conference, while Israel has regarded Turkey's role as useful. Indeed, the AKP government allowed for contacts and visits to continue at all military and government levels.

Turkey even hosted a high-profile visit from Israeli President Moshe Katsav in July 2003, which generated much rhetoric about the virtues of the relationship and hopes for further cooperation. The Turkish arms market also remained open to Israeli firms. It is true, however, that the appeal of the Turkish arms market for Israel (and for all suppliers) has waned, primarily because of a reduction in Turkey's purchasing power following the economic crisis of 2001, as well as unrealistic demands for technology transfer.³⁵ But Turkey under AKP rule did not cancel the tank-upgrading deal, despite campaign promises to do so. Moreover, in April 2005 it selected an Israeli consortium to provide Heron UAVs, a project

estimated to be worth US\$200 million, and negotiations have taken place over the retrofitting of an additional 30 F-4 Phantoms – a deal worth US\$500 million. In addition, military exercises between the two states continued as planned.

The AKP government also successfully concluded a water deal in January 2004, according to which 50 million cubic metres of water a year for 20 years are to be shipped in giant tankers across the eastern Mediterranean and into Israeli ports. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and Turkish Energy Minister Zeki Cakan reached an agreement at a meeting in Jerusalem. Under the deal, Israel plans to build a fleet of giant water tankers to ship water from the river Manavgat in Anatolia.³⁶

Moreover, Israel and Turkey have agreed to widen their security cooperation following a string of bomb attacks in Istanbul, which provided an opportunity for a public demonstration of Israeli-Turkish friendship. The international war on terror has brought the two countries even closer. As noted above, Erdogan favoured increased intelligence cooperation against terrorism. Moreover, Israeli Public Security Minister Tsahi Hanegbi, who was in Turkey in December 2003, reached an accord under which Turkish police will for the first time train with Israeli police.³⁷ The relations between the two police forces have thus intensified and expanded.³⁸

Abdullah Gul, the foreign minister of the AKP government, visited Israel in January 2005, after a few delays, refuting rumours of a crisis in bilateral relations. Justice Minister Cemil Cicek paid an important symbolic visit to Israel in March 2005 when he attended the opening of the new Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Significantly, Erdogan visited Israel (and Palestine) in May 2005.³⁹ The visit was seen as a sign of mending fences between the two countries after a chilly period marked by Erdogan's harsh criticism of the Sharon government's policy towards the Palestinians.

The delays in purchasing water from Turkey and the Israeli refusal to give preferential treatment to Turkish firms due to strict criteria for dispensing government contracts were not met by understanding in Ankara. Similarly, Israelis have objected to losing out in tenders for military contracts. Yet half-way through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the relationship has matured enough to overcome such occasional frustrations.

The ties between the two countries have also overcome persistent Arab criticism of Turkey's behaviour. Turkey has withstood continuous pressure from the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) to limit its links to Israel. Moreover, Ankara has played a role at Islamic summits by looking to tone down some of the anti-Israeli resolutions.⁴⁰ Even Gul, the foreign minister of the AKP government, demanded in October 2003 that the OIC members show greater realism towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The two countries do not differ on the basics of the US presence in Iraq, but the Kurdish issue is a constant irritant. A Kurdish state could have irredentist claims and could constitute a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Israeli official statements in favour of the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state were not always taken at face value because of past support for the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq, forming part of Israel's strategy of seeking alliances with non-Arab minorities as a way to weaken the Arab world.⁴¹ Occasional articles in the Israeli press favouring a Kurdish independent entity are viewed as an indication of Israel's desire to break down the Iraqi state at Turkey's expense. Rumours of Israeli economic activity in northern Iraq have caused alarm in Ankara, which expressed its displeasure to Jerusalem.⁴²

Turkish officials also harshly criticized Israel in the spring of 2004 following reports that Israelis were heavily involved in Iraqi Kurdish affairs. Turkey even recalled its envoy for consultations for a few days (the pretext was Israeli military actions in Gaza). The media exaggerated the significance of these moves, announcing a crisis in bilateral relations.⁴³

In any case, the idea that promoting Kurdish independence serves Israel's interests is ill-conceived. Israel supported the Kurds in the 1950s and 1960s in order to weaken Iraq. But all such support took place *before* the emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979, which is arguably Israel's major state-level foe. Strategically, the break-up of Iraq does not serve Israel's interests; a relatively strong Iraq that would counterbalance Iran's strategic preponderance in the Gulf area does. Only a unified Iraq can serve such a role. Moreover, Israel must also contend with the possibility that a landlocked Kurdish political entity threatened by Turkey would probably fall under Iranian influence, allowing Tehran to establish a contiguous corridor from northern Iraq, through Syria and extending to its protégé, Hizbullah, in Lebanon.

Conceivably, one could imagine the emergence of a coalition of non-Arab Sunni forces and states – a Shiite Iraq, a Kurdish state, a Syria controlled by the Alawite elite and a Hizbullah bolstered by Iran – working against the Jewish state rather than for it, as originally countenanced by Israeli strategists in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁴ Even if such a prospect does not materialize would it be logical for Israel, aware of Turkish opposition to the establishment of a Kurdish state, to risk jeopardizing an important strategic relationship with a regional power in order to ally with a new, small, weak and potentially unstable state? Ankara and Jerusalem have a common goal in Iraq, namely to see the emergence of a stable state, sufficiently strong to act as a counterweight to Iran but not one that could become aggressive toward its neighbours.

Turkey and Israel do not see eye to eye on all issues, but they have learned to overlook their differences on secondary issues and concentrate on matters of key importance. The relationship is largely detached from the peace process. Turkey's sympathy for the Palestinians and Israel's soft spot for the Kurds are examples of a divergence in opinion which have had few policy consequences so far. There were also different nuances on the Kosovo crisis. Despite its declarations of support for NATO on humanitarian grounds, Israel had apprehensions about the long-range implications of NATO's military intervention on behalf of the Kosovars. It feared that this could serve as a precedent for future active international involvement in an Israeli-Palestinian dispute. In contrast, Turkey supported the NATO campaign wholeheartedly. Thus, the different perspectives on marginal issues and various irritants in the bilateral relationship have not yet changed the calculus of expediency in the strategic partnership.

CONCLUSION

In the decade since Turkey recognized Israel as a geopolitical partner, the Israeli-Turkish relationship can be described as maintaining 'business as usual'. The relationship has remained robust through government upheavals in Ankara and Jerusalem and regional instability caused by, among other things, the vagaries of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the American invasion of Iraq. Despite the possibility of oscillations in Israeli-Turkish ties and a reduction in their strategic importance, Turkey crossed the Rubicon in developing a multi-faceted relationship with Israel. In the absence of a serious deterioration in Israel's international status and a turnabout in regional dynamics or domestic politics in the two states, a reversal of Turkey's decision to upgrade relations with Israel is unlikely in the immediate future.

The shared approaches to the security predicament of a country situated in the Middle East, the overlapping security challenges, as well as the common political and economic interests indicate that Turkey and Israel have great incentives for continuing their cooperation in the years to come. Geopolitical factors will ultimately determine the foreign policies of the two states. Israel needs Turkey to buttress its position in the region. Turkey seems willing to maintain the strategic component in its ties with Israel. Turkey's former president, Suleyman Demirel, told his Israeli interlocutors in 1999: 'we can go as far as you are prepared to go'.⁴⁵ The rhetoric of politicians should always be taken with a pinch of salt, but Demirel's statement seems still to be valid. The potential for a resilient relationship remains unchanged, although future developments that Ankara and Jerusalem can hardly control will determine the final contours of the Israeli-Turkish partnership.

NOTES

1. Kemal Kirişçi, 'The End of the Cold War and Changes in Turkish Foreign Policy Behavior', *Dış Politika*, Vol.18, Nos.3–4 (1993), pp.1–43; Malik Mufti, 'Daring and Caution in Turkish Foreign Policy', *Middle East Journal*, Vol.52, No.1 (Winter 1998), pp.32–50; Alan Makovsky, 'The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy', *SAIS Review*, Vol.19, No.1 (Winter–Spring 1999), pp.92–113; Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenges to Europe and the United States*, Washington, DC, 2000, pp.93–6.
2. See Amikam Nachmani, 'The Remarkable Turkish–Israeli Tie', *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.2 (June 1988), pp.19–30; Neil Lochery, 'Israel and Turkey: Deepening Ties and Strategic Implications, 1995–98', *Israel Affairs*, Vol.5, No.1 (Autumn 1998), pp.45–62. For a most comprehensive analysis of the bilateral relationship and its regional ramifications, see Efraim Inbar, *The Turkish-Israeli Entente*, KCL Mediterranean Studies pamphlet, London, 2001.
3. See Ofra Bengio and Gencer Özcan, 'Old Grievances, New Fears: Arab Perceptions of Turkey and Its Alignment with Israel', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.37, No.2 (April 2001), pp.50–92.
4. Namik Kemal Pak, 'Changing Concepts of National Security in the Post-Cold War Era and Turkish Defence Industry', *Perceptions*, Vol.7, No.2 (June–August 2002), pp.115–17.
5. Robert Olson, 'Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000–2001: The Caspian, Azerbaijan and the Kurds', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.9, No.2 (June 2002), pp.118–19.
6. See Efraim Inbar, 'The Regional Implications of the Israeli-Turkish Strategic Partnership', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.3, No.2 (Autumn 2002), pp.21–43.
7. Stephen M. Walt, 'Why Alliances Endure or Collapse', *Survival*, Vol.39, No.1 (Spring 1997), pp.156–79.
8. For a view attributing much weight to issues that might influence negatively bilateral relations, see Gregory A. Burris, 'Turkey and Israel: Speed Bumps', *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.4 (Fall 2003), pp.67–80.
9. See *Middle East Newline* (hereafter, *MENL*), 19 June 2001; *Jerusalem Post*, 10 July 2001; *Jerusalem Post*, 6 January 2002.
10. See inter alia the 2 April 2003 declaration of the American Jewish Committee supporting the US\$1 billion for Turkey in ESE, which could be used to obtain US\$8.5 billion in loans.
11. *Aksam*, 2 January 2004; See also Uri Dan, 'Israel and Turkey Join Forces vs. Al Qaeda', *New York Post*, 10 January 2004.
12. *Ha'aretz*, 18 November 2003.
13. *Worldtribune.com*, 5 November, 2003; *MENL*, 12 November 2003. The minister also cited Iran's efforts to export what he termed the Islamic revolution and mentioned Iran's attempts to undermine Turkey's efforts to improve relations with Central Asian states. For the possibility that Turkey would contemplate a nuclear posture, see Mustafa Kibaroglu, 'Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger the Young Turks to Think Nuclear', *Proliferation: News and Resources*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.
14. For Turkey's strategic options, see F. Stephen Larabee, 'Turkish Foreign and Security Policy: New Dimensions and New Challenges', in Zalmay Khalilzad, Ian O. Lesser and F. Stephen Larabee (eds.), *The Future of Turkish Western Relations: Towards a Strategic Plan*, Santa Monica, CA, 2000, pp.48–51.
15. This group includes former high-ranking diplomats such as Uri Savir (Director-General of the Foreign Ministry), Colette Avital (Deputy Director-General for European Affairs), and Allon Liel (who eventually became Director-General of the Foreign Ministry). All became involved later in Israeli politics on the left. Their influence has drastically diminished, as the 'peace' orientation with which they were identified was largely discredited in Israeli politics with the failure of the Oslo process.
16. Interview with Maj. Gen. (ret.) David Ivry, Tel Aviv, 30 November 1999. Ivry became a central figure in the Turkish-Israeli alignment in his capacity of Director-General of the Ministry of Defence, and in his subsequent position as National Security Advisor (1997–99). For Rabin's *realpolitik* view of international relations, see Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security*, Baltimore, 1999, pp.9–11.
17. *Ha'aretz*, 3 September 1998.
18. *Turkish Probe*, July 1999.
19. *Cumburiyet*, 27 November 2002.

20. For a review of the political support for good relations with Israel, see 'RP Stand Alone as Support Grows for Turkey's Relations with Israel', *Turkish Daily News*, 13 April 1996.
21. See Gencer Ozcan and Ofra Bengio, 'The Decade of the Military in Turkey: the Case of the Alignment with Israel in the 1990s', *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol.7 (Spring 2001), pp.90-109.
22. *MENL*, 5 November 1999.
23. For a succinct treatment of these issues, see F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Santa Monica, CA, 2003, pp.27-36.
24. M. Hakan Yavuz, 'Turkish-Israeli Relations through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.27, No.1 (Autumn 1997), pp.22-37.
25. Alan Makovsky, 'Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Turkish "Periphery Strategy"?' in Henri J. Barkey (ed.), *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, 1996, p.169.
26. R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire. The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1999, pp.19-20.
27. For Turkish foreign policy in this period, see Philip Robins, 'Turkish Foreign Policy Under Erbakan', *Survival*, Vol.39, No.2 (Summer 1997), pp.82-100.
28. See Aysegul Sever, 'Turkey and the Syrian-Israeli Peace Talks in the 1990s', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.5, No.3 (September 2001), at <http://www.meria.idc.ac.il>
29. This was part of the Netanyahu government's secret attempts to reach an agreement with Syria (Author interview with a senior official).
30. Sever, 'Turkey and the Syrian-Israeli Peace Talks in the 1990s', pp.94-5.
31. Kemal Kirişçi, 'Turkey and the Muslim Middle East', in Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayari (eds.) *Turkey's New World, Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC, 2000, p.47.
32. *Jerusalem Post*, 11 September 2001.
33. For an account of the incident, see *Turkish Daily News*, 11 April 2002; *Washington Times*, 16 April 2002. Turkish leaders, including Yılmaz, criticized Ecevit for his choice of words.
34. *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 11 December 2002.
35. *Defense News*, 23 June 2003, p.10; 5 January 2004, p.6.
36. *AFP* (London), 6 January 2004.
37. *Turkish Daily News*, 25 December 2003; *Reuters* (Jerusalem), 25 December 2003.
38. Interview with Israeli police official, 20 January 2005.
39. *Sabah*, 21 March 2005.
40. Interview with David Sultan, Israel's Ambassador to Turkey, Ankara, 25 November 2001.
41. See Shlomo Nakdimon, *A Hopeless Hope. The Rise and Fall of the Israeli-Kurdish Alliance, 1963-1975*, Tel Aviv, 1996 (Hebrew).
42. *MENL*, 21 December 2003.
43. See, inter alia, 'A Strategic Friendship Cools', *The Economist*, 24 June 2004; Bülent Aras, 'A Big Chill: A Duo Divided by Democratic Legitimacy', *The Daily Star*, 10 August 2004. Another factor behind this mini-drama was the fact that the OIC summit was just about to take place and Turkey wanted to assume the presidency of the organization and gain its members' support on the Cyprus issue (both of which it succeeded in achieving). A little drama with Israel was useful for Turkey in this respect.
44. For the 'Periphery Doctrine', see Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*, London, 1972, p.278.
45. *Turkish Daily News*, 16 July 1999.