

## TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS: THEIR RISE AND FALL

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One of the most significant developments in the Middle East in the 1990s was the inception of strategic relations between Turkey and Israel. Going back to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Periphery Pact of 1958, the strategic dimension of bilateral relations culminated in the 1990s in a multilayered liaison including political, economic and cultural dimensions in addition to military cooperation. The two countries were on the verge of establishing an informal alliance against Syria, Iraq and Iran due to common threat perceptions. Furthermore, as a consequence of the warming of relations, Israeli tourists rushed to Turkish beaches to enjoy being in a Muslim, but friendly, country. In fact, this decade can be dubbed as the golden age of Turkish-Israeli relations.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002 brought about a gradual change in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. As former Islamists, the leaders of the JDP transformed themselves into "conservative democrats," though it should be remembered that almost all the upper echelons of the JDP hailed from the Islamist National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi). For pragmatic reasons, however, they accelerated Tur-

key's membership in the EU, abolished the death penalty, pressed the Turkish Cypriot leadership to make a deal with the Greek Cypriots, and gave the Kurds and other ethnic groups cultural rights. However, as relations with Europe deteriorated, the JDP government opened up to the Muslim and Arab worlds, and, after Israel's Gaza operation (Cast Lead) in late 2008 and early 2009, Turkish-Israeli relations went downhill. This culminated in a number of crises, the most important of which was the storming by Israeli soldiers of the *Mavi Marmara*, a ship carrying Islamist activists from Turkey. As a result of this assault, nine of them were killed.

I will discuss the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations within the context of the declining Arab-Israeli peace process, Israeli-Palestinian confrontations and the ideology of Islamism. My conclusion is that bilateral relations did not deteriorate because of the Islamist ideology of the JDP, something which the party does not openly embrace in any case, but because of Palestinian casualties, both militants and civilians, as a consequence of Israeli operations in Gaza and the West Bank. Political contingency seems to be more important than ideology in the JDP's foreign policy. This does not rule out sympathy ex-

pressed towards the Palestinians, not only by former Islamists but also by secular politicians such as President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000-07) and Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit before the JDP came to power.

In fact, Israeli diplomats were fully aware of these sympathies. Professor Zvi Elpeleg, who served as the Israeli ambassador to Ankara from 1995 to 1997, characterized the Turks as extremely sensitive to the plight of the Palestinians. Many Turks, including the social democrat Mumtaz Soysal, a professor of constitutional law and an adviser to Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denктаş, perceived the Palestinians as defending their rights and were critical of Israelis who called them terrorists.<sup>1</sup>

While the style and sympathies of the Turkish prime minister might have intensified the conflict with Israel, any government in Turkey would have had difficulty continuing warm relations with Israel in the face of the negative public opinion regarding Israel's actions in the Palestinian territories.

### INTERESTS VS SYMPATHIES

Turkey established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1949, and after more than four decades of low-profile contacts, liaisons — military, economic, cultural and educational — were upgraded in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The relationship was spearheaded by the United States and emanated from Turkey's military requirements; Israel was ready to modernize Turkish airplanes and share intelligence, even though intelligence and other forms of cooperation had existed throughout the low-contact years, 1950-90. Relations were to a large extent predicated on the Cold War and Turkey's position as a key ally of the Western camp, even though Israel's relations with the United States had evolved from the late 1940s into

an intense partnership from the Kennedy administration onward.

In the 1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations were not only becoming more open, but were deepening in all spheres. Arab hostility to Turkey, especially Syrian aid to PKK terrorists, as well as Iran's revolutionary anti-secular policies, coupled with Europe's lukewarm attitude to Turkey, all contributed to Israel's being transformed into a natural ally. On the other hand, Turkey was a Muslim country with a strong tradition of secularism and Western-oriented policies and identities, especially among the intelligentsia and the civilian-military bureaucracy. These factors were welcomed by Israel, which shared common threat perceptions about Syria and Iran, in particular, and about Islamic radicalism, in general.

Turkish-Israeli relations had been influenced by the larger Arab-Israeli conflict in the past. Turkey downgraded its relations after the 1956 Sinai War and after the Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law in 1980.<sup>3</sup> The relationship was based on an implicit understanding that there would be no military incursions against the Palestinians and preferably a certain amount of progress on the peace process. Furthermore, Turkey wanted the support of the U.S. Jewish lobby, especially to counterbalance the influence in Congress of the Greek and Armenian lobbies. At the time, the Armenians were attempting to have Congress recognize the killings of Armenians by the Ottomans during World War I as genocide.

On the other hand, Turkish-Israeli relations had a polarizing impact on Turkish domestic politics, and it worried the neighbors — especially Iran, Iraq and Syria.<sup>4</sup> In other words, besides the national-interest dimension of the bilateral relationship, the military used these ties to corner the

Islamist Erbakan government in 1996-97. As far as relations with its Muslim neighbors are concerned, Turkey made a rational calculation that improving ties with Israel served Turkish national interests better. Ironically, however, Syria came to appreciate Turkey's contacts with Israel as potentially useful in helping Syria get the occupied Golan Heights back.

It should be pointed out that, even during times of difficulties, Israelis adopted a pragmatic approach. During his first tenure as prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu (1996-99) had to face Necmettin Erbakan, who became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister in 1996. Netanyahu sent him a congratulatory letter on the historical affinities between the Jewish and Turkish peoples, and the hospitality of the Ottoman Empire to the oppressed Jews from Spain in 1492. (In fact, on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event, Israeli President Chaim Herzog was among the participants at Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul). Netanyahu concluded his letter by saying Israel wanted "peace with the entire Muslim World," and that he was ready to meet Erbakan at his earliest convenience.<sup>5</sup> The current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, during his tenure as the mayor of Istanbul, promised the chief rabbi of Turkey in 1994 that he would work for people of all religious backgrounds. Similarly, the Welfare Party (Refah) mayor of Ankara, Melih Gokcek, included Israeli ambassador Zvi Elpeleg at a dinner he hosted for diplomats residing in Ankara.<sup>6</sup>

It should be reiterated that a breakdown in the peace process is bound to lead to a deterioration in Israeli-Turkish negotiations, no matter which party is in power.<sup>7</sup> By the same token, progress in the peace process would lead to a warming of relations.<sup>8</sup> The fact that both the extreme left and the conservative masses and politi-

cians had sympathy for the Palestinians was counterbalanced by anti-Arab feelings among Turks, all of whom accused the Arabs of having betrayed the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Furthermore, there were also warm feelings towards Israel, especially at the Foreign Ministry and in the military during the 1990s. Relations were very much a function of strategic and political considerations, with the caveat that public sympathies towards the Palestinians needed to be taken into consideration.

### DECLINE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Strategic considerations initiated the blossoming of Israeli-Turkish relations; however, they coincided with the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 and the Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement of 1993. Endeavors to solve the Palestinian issue legitimized Turkish-Israeli relations in the eyes of the Turkish public. However, the eruption of the Second Intifada in 2000 and subsequent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians demonstrated an implicit correlation between progress on Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking and Turkish-Israeli relations. Even if there is no direct causality between a demand to resolve the Palestinian question and improvement of Turkish-Israeli relations, amelioration of the situation would positively impact bilateral relations.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Israeli air force was training in Turkey for its long-range missions. "Until Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip last winter, the IAF frequently flew over Turkey, and it had participated in several annual exercises with the Turkish Air Force. Following the offensive against Hamas and the deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations, Ankara has refused to allow Israel to deploy its fighter jets in Turkey."<sup>9</sup> The truth of the matter is

that clashes between Israelis and Palestinians rule out the continuation of Turkish-Israeli strategic relations. It should also be mentioned that the climax of the downfall of the relationship was the *Mavi Marmara* incident of May 31, 2010, when an Islamist civil-society organization, called terrorists by a number of Israelis, torpedoed Turkish-Israeli relations.

While it is true that the confrontational style of Prime Minister Erdoğan contributed to the conflict, he was the same person who previously pursued close relations with Israel and the Jewish community, especially in the United States. However, it should be added that, according to one analyst, “Political leaders in Turkey and Israel are mixing politics and personal sentiments” and pursuing policies against the national interests of their respective countries.<sup>10</sup>

It is striking to note that Erdoğan visited Israel in 2005, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reciprocated in 2007 and again in 2008. Israeli President Shimon Peres was the first Israeli statesman to address the Turkish parliament, in 2007. Furthermore, visits by the respective defense ministers in 2008 are noteworthy. These webs of mutual visits and the lack of them since 2010, coupled with a decrease in Israeli tourists to Turkey from 500,000 in 2008 to 100,000 in 2010,<sup>11</sup> are a function of the downgrading of relations. One might label this drop in Israeli tourists an unofficial boycott, rising perhaps from fear or protesting Turkish policies toward Israel. Despite the cooling of the relationship, trade between the two countries has risen.

### **THE MAVI MARMARA INCIDENT**

The point of no return between Israel and Turkey was the *Mavi Marmara* incident. In May 2010, the “Gaza Free-

dom Flotilla” sailed toward the Gaza Strip to break the embargo imposed by Israel and bring humanitarian assistance to the Gazans. In total, there were eight ships, but one had mechanical difficulties and another was late. Therefore, six were approaching the Gaza Strip when one of them, the *Mavi Marmara*, owned and operated by an Islamist humanitarian organization, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), was attacked by Israeli commandos. Nine Turks died and numerous activists and Israeli soldiers were injured. The Human Rights Council of the United Nations called the interception of the flotilla “unlawful,” labeling its actions crimes, including willful killing and torture, and charging Israel with the use of excessive, unnecessary and disproportionate force.

Besides Turks, there were Germans, Americans, Arabs and British activists in the flotilla. In fact, there were five Israeli citizens, including member of the Knesset Haneen Zouabi and Sheikh Raed Saleh from the Islamist movement in Israel, who were also interrogated by the Israeli authorities.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, IHH was an Islamist organization motivated by ideological convictions to “save” the Palestinians from oppression and possibly seek confrontation with the Israelis if they were prevented from reaching the Gaza Strip.

Having said that, however, the fact that there were no firearms on the ship and no threat to the Israeli soldiers<sup>13</sup> makes the Israeli reactions to the *Mavi Marmara* unreasonable. In retrospect, both governments mishandled the crisis: the Turkish government for allowing — maybe encouraging — the flotilla to sail towards Israel; and the Israeli government for killing citizens of a friendly country. Both countries have lost from this fiasco.

Israeli leaders claimed that they perceived the activists on the *Mavi Marmara* to be government-supported, violent, armed Islamist militants.<sup>14</sup> This was all the more reason to handle the situation carefully, as — if it were true that the Turkish government was supporting the flotilla — a violent clash would jeopardize relations with Turkey for a long time to come. On the other hand, labeling and perceiving them to be terrorists made the defense of Israel essential — hence the harsh reaction.

Turkey has undertaken a series of diplomatic maneuvers at the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and NATO, where Israel was criticized. The Turkish ambassador in Tel Aviv, Oguz Celikkol, was recalled to Turkey; and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu called this incident “our 9/11,” pointing out that it was the first time Turkish citizens had been killed by the army of a foreign country. It was also striking that the order to attack was given by Minister of Defense Ehud Barak. He was the sympathetic prime minister during the devastating earthquake in Turkey in 1999 who personally visited Turkey to open the Israel-Turkey village built for the victims of the earthquake.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there were Jewish voices such as Tikun Olam, which criticized the incident as an execution.<sup>16</sup>

IHH, besides being a humanitarian organization, also calls for political demonstrations to bring the suffering of oppressed peoples onto the world agenda.<sup>17</sup> It was established in 1994 and got involved in sending humanitarian aid to Yugoslavia, Kosovo and Chechnya.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the leader of an influential Muslim politico-cultural movement, Fethullah Gulen, who resides in Pennsylvania, criticized the IHH for not asking prior approval from Israel before undertaking the trip.<sup>19</sup> This was the

first time that a civil-society organization has initiated a crisis that was not properly managed by the authorities.<sup>20</sup> The bottom line is that IHH singlehandedly torpedoed Turkish-Israeli relations, despite the fact that there was criticism of Israel by Turkey over the Palestine issue. However, the IHH’s dispatching of the ships and the subsequent killings have destroyed relations for a long time to come.

There was the characterization by Arutz Sheva (Channel 7, 18 May 2012) of IHH as a Turkey-based terror group,<sup>21</sup> and by Barry Rubin as an “Islamist terrorist group” supported by the Turkish government.<sup>22</sup> There has been a recent investigation by Turkish courts into the possible diversion by the chairman of IHH, Bulent Yildirim, of funds to al-Qaeda.<sup>23</sup> The Israeli Commission Report (Turkel Report) characterized the IHH as a “humanitarian organization with a radical-Islamic orientation which provides support to Hamas.” It also points out that activists attacked the Israeli soldiers with clubs, iron rods and knives, as a result of which nine soldiers were wounded including two by bullets.<sup>24</sup>

The UN Panel of Inquiry (Palmer Report) described the events on May 31, 2010, as follows: “A flotilla of six vessels was boarded and taken over by Israeli Defense forces 72 nautical miles from land,” resulting in nine deaths, which “should never have taken place.” On the other hand, the panel recognized Israel’s right to protect itself from threats emanating from Gaza, and that a naval blockade was a legitimate security measure. The report found that the flotilla acted recklessly in trying to breach the naval blockade, and although the flotilla participants had “no violent intentions, there exist serious questions about the conduct, true nature and objective of the flotilla organizers, particu-



larly IHH.” Israel’s boarding of the ship was “excessive and unreasonable,” since nonviolent options should have been used. Despite the fact that there was violent resistance from *Mavi Marmara*, the “loss of life was unacceptable.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, the panel recommended that Israel make a statement of regret and pay compensation to the families of the deceased and that full diplomatic relations be resumed.<sup>26</sup>

The Palmer Report characterized the flotilla as having engaged in a reckless act and questioned the conduct, true nature and objectives of the flotilla organizers.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Israel treated the flotilla as if it were an immediate threat to the state, resulting in excessive reaction.<sup>28</sup> The report recognized that two Israeli soldiers received gunshot wounds and that they “may have been shot by passengers,” but was unable to determine the exact source. However, it concluded that there was no proof any of the deceased possessed firearms,<sup>29</sup> and that the loss of life was unacceptable.<sup>30</sup> According to reports from the Israeli press, on the other hand, live shots were fired at the Israeli troops;<sup>31</sup> and according to the testimony of one of the severely beaten troops, he was shot in the stomach. He said he had killed a “terrorist” who was about to shoot at another soldier.<sup>32</sup>

Israeli State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss issued a report on the incident on June 13, 2012, concluding that the “flawed decision-making process regarding the Turkish flotilla” was due to a lack of discussion and proper coordination at the cabinet level; consequently, there were serious flaws<sup>33</sup> in the policies undertaken by the government.

Columnist Amos Harel argued that the incident was a failure for the Israeli government, as Israel’s Gaza policy was

reversed and its relations with Turkey were damaged.<sup>34</sup> Gideon Levy was critical of the “foolish campaign” of incitement and fear that labeled passengers on *Mavi Marmara* terrorists and of an equally foolish campaign against Turkey, “our only ally in the Middle East.” In his judgment, Prime Minister Netanyahu should have hurried to Turkey to apologize to the families in person.<sup>35</sup>

This incident and its aftermath marked the end of Turkey-Israel relations.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, there were criticisms from Turkey regarding the language used by the prime minister and other officials, giving the impression that Turkish foreign policy was conducted according to religious or cultural inclinations.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the trial in absentia of four senior Israeli commanders — former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, Navy Vice Admiral Eliezer Marom, head of Air Force intelligence Avishai Levi and military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin — began on November 6, 2012, in an Istanbul court. Standing in front of the building, IHH chairman Bulent Yildirim said the case was not against the Jewish nation, but against Zionists and murderers. He added that, if Jews had lived in Gaza and faced similar persecution by Muslims, they would have tried to break the siege, too. He also questioned Israel’s right to exist on occupied Palestinian territory. The leader of the Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi), Mustafa Kamalak, was also present as an observer.<sup>38</sup> Demonstrators in front of the court building carried placards equating Hitler with Zionism and Israel. While the Turkish foreign ministry said it was not a party to the trial, this process is bound to negatively affect Turkish-Israeli relations for some time to come.

## THE JDP WELTANSCHAUUNG

The Justice and Development Party won the elections of 2002, 2007 and 2011, steadily increasing its support. Its leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, advocated a proactive foreign policy developed by their strategist, Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu. As the foreign-policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan and as foreign minister from 2009 onwards, he championed the use of Turkish history and its imperial legacy, an idea articulated in his 2003 book, *Strategic Depth*.<sup>39</sup> Davutoğlu was of the opinion that Turkey could become a central state (*merkez ulke*) in its region and follow a “multidimensional foreign policy,”<sup>40</sup> using the Middle East as its hinterland.<sup>41</sup> Foreign Minister Davutoğlu believed in close engagement with the former territories of the Ottoman Empire. He referred to the “spirit of Sarajevo,” emphasizing centuries of coexistence among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and Serbs, Croats and Bosnians — adding that he considered Sarejevo the Jerusalem of the Balkans.<sup>42</sup> He characterized Athens and Medina as civilization-establishing cities, whereas Baghdad was established by a civilization. There were also cities transformed by numerous civilizations such as Istanbul,<sup>43</sup> referring to its Byzantine and Ottoman past.

On January 9, 2010, Davutoğlu took Turkish ambassadors to Mardin, in south-eastern Turkey, where he talked about religious and ethnic harmony and the city’s significance. He coined the term *tarihdaşlık* (sharers of history) and pointed out that various peoples were sharers of the same history. He also presented Turkey as the protector of underdogs, such as the Palestinians, and noted the example of an African president, without naming him, who had requested Turkey’s intercession to be represented at a G-20 meeting.<sup>44</sup>

These ideas emphasize similarities of culture and history, but do not focus exclusively on Islam. There is nostalgia for the Ottoman past, though this worldview does not entail an expansionist foreign policy for Turkey. Nationalism is very weak among JDP cadres. Davutoğlu characterized his worldview as synthesizing multiple legacies. A highly sympathetic journalist who has also written his biography characterizes the JDP not as Islamist but “aiming to balance between different worlds.”<sup>45</sup>

The policy labeled neo-Ottomanism by some analysts entails using the instruments of Islam and Turkey’s imperial past as “soft-power tools”<sup>46</sup> in the former territory of the empire and beyond. This policy was made possible by the rise of a conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie whose economic liberalism formed the backbone of the JDP,<sup>47</sup> starting with its companies, subsidies to media outlets and promotion of schools. From the 1980s and 1990s, there was a sense among Turks that Turkish and Muslim peoples in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire were discriminated against by the West. The “Bosnian genocide” and rejection by the EU were the catalysts for this neo-Ottoman identity,<sup>48</sup> later shared and built upon by the JDP cadres. Consequently, Turkish foreign policy became more sensitive to the demands of the masses, which have always been skeptical about relations with Israel. Of course, it is unclear how much Islam and Islamism as an ideology are shaping Turkish foreign policy, as opposed to national interests. There is definitely an emphasis by policy makers on the OIC, and a perception in the Middle East that Turkey is aligning with the Sunnis against the Shiites in Iraq and elsewhere.

While Turkey seems to be establishing closer ties in the Middle East since the sec-

ond JDP government, in 2007, especially in the past year, it should not be forgotten that EU membership was Erdoğan's original objective, for whatever reasons. Only after EU-Turkish relations reached a dead end did he seek closer relations with the Middle East, though there was some emphasis on this in the early days of the JDP government. Initially there was a tactful discourse towards Israel, and members of the government visited Jewish organizations in all their trips to the United States.

Furthermore, the fact that promising diplomats such as Namik Tan (current Turkish ambassador in Washington) and Feridun Sinirlioğlu (undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry) were posted to Israel and later to even more crucial posts, demonstrates the significance Turkey attributes to Israel. Erdoğan's visit to Israel actually revolved around how to energize the Middle East peace process,<sup>49</sup> again demonstrating the significance attributed to the resolution of the Palestinian issue. However, there is an increase in public expressions of anti-Semitism as a consequence of the ongoing crisis and the feeling that Israel is an enemy of Turkey.<sup>50</sup> During the Erbakan period, by contrast, government rhetoric was openly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic,<sup>51</sup> equating Europe with Israel and Zionism. By contrast, Erdoğan has openly condemned anti-Semitism on a number of occasions as a crime against humanity.

The current debate in Turkey revolves around Islamic, Ottoman, Turkish and regional identities among Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Arabs, Azeris, Armenians, Greeks and Jews based on the common "Ottoman experience they have shared and built together."<sup>52</sup> Emphasis is on diplomacy and the peaceful and multilateral solutions to international conflicts. Turkey's increased engagement with the Islamic

world was demonstrated when it gained observer status in the Arab League. The Turkish ambassador in Cairo represents Turkey in the Arab League, and the League has opened an office in Ankara. At the September 9, 2009, Arab League foreign-ministers summit, Davutoğlu called all conflicts in the Middle East interlinked and specified Palestine as Turkey's cause. He affirmed the two-state formula and called for East Jerusalem to be the capital of the independent Palestinian state.<sup>53</sup> Before the JDP government, Turkey took a more even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Having said this, however, pro-Arab policies are not entirely new, and pro-Palestinian sympathies are not confined to Islamists and conservatives. Turkey has from time to time taken decisions such as voting against the UN Partition Plan in 1947, downgrading relations with Israel to the chargé level as result of the 1956 Suez War, condemning Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War, and voting with many third-world countries in 1975 for the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism. The secular prime minister Bulent Ecevit called Israeli actions against the Palestinians in Jenin in 2002 genocide.<sup>54</sup> Admittedly, Ecevit's pro-Palestinian sentiments hail from his third-world identification during the 1970s, when he allowed the PLO to open an office in Ankara. On the other hand, Turkey recognized the Jewish state one year after its declaration of independence and has never totally cut off diplomatic relations or questioned Israel's right to exist.<sup>55</sup>

One also needs to note a number of JDP foreign-policy achievements: the election of Professor Ekmelettin İhsanoğlu as the secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the start of



accession talks with the EU, and Turkey's election to the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member in 2008.

While the JDP was in favor of "civilizational dialogue" between Muslim and Western peoples, it did not shy away from criticizing the Islamic world as well. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, at the OIC summit in Tehran in 2003, stated that the Muslim world was in dire need of democratization, promotion of human rights and protection of the status of women.<sup>56</sup> Prime Minister Erdoğan, during his visit to Egypt in September 2011, called on Egyptians to prepare a secular constitution, arguing that secularism was not atheism. He did not present himself as a secular person, but rather as a Muslim who was the prime minister of a secular country. He also noted, "unfortunately Turkey recognized Israel in 1949."<sup>57</sup>

We can detect both moderate and more radical messages in Erdoğan's statements. However, it should be kept in mind that Turgut Özal was the first statesman in Turkey to say he was not secular but a Muslim, adding that only states, not individuals, could be secular.<sup>58</sup> It is part of the game of Islamic politics to curry favor with constituents. This has led to a conservative discourse, employed by center-right politicians from Adnan Menderes in the 1950s, to Süleyman Demirel in the 1960s and 1970s to Turgut Özal in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The JDP also tried to establish links between East and West. Even though the first EU-OIC summit meeting was held in February 2002 under the tenure of Ismail Cem, the late foreign minister of the Democratic Left Party, the JDP continued these summits, perceiving them to be commensurate with their promotion of dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

To show his pro-European orientation, Erdoğan's first visit after becoming prime minister was to Greece and other European capitals.<sup>59</sup> The pro-EU policies of the JDP government served a number of functions. By moving away from the Islamist discourse, they opened up new spaces to play the political game domestically and internationally; they shielded themselves from criticism by secularists — including the bureaucracy and intellectuals — that they were an anti-secular movement by making the domestic reforms needed for EU accession. Furthermore, they made a *de facto* alliance with the liberal intellectuals in the press and academia, who supported the government's policies of democratization and the softening of Kemalism.

At the international level, Erdoğan and Gül succeeded in convincing many quarters in European capitals, and to some extent in Washington, that the party was the wave of the future and on the path of Europeanization and democratization. Consequently, the new Spanish prime minister proposed the "Alliance of Civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim World" to the UN secretary general during a speech at the General Assembly on September 21, 2004, and invited Turkey to become a co-sponsor. In fact, Kofi Annan was adamant that a Muslim country should take such a role.<sup>60</sup> Turkey's involvement in the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, while demonstrating its multilateral and diplomatic preferences, also displays the self-image of its leaders as separate from Europe: the representative of the Islamic world.

It should be remembered that Turkey's participation in the OIC before the JDP government was rather restricted, due to the fact that it wanted to preserve a neutral position in the inter-Arab conflict, as well as between Arabs and Israelis.<sup>61</sup>

Turkey's activism in its region and beyond might be outside its material and intellectual capabilities. While there is sympathy in the Arab world for Turkey as a result of the pro-Arab policies of the JDP and an interest in Turkish soap operas and tourist sites, there is no desire for Turkish leadership of the Arab world. But Turkey's observer status in the Arab League could never have been envisaged under a more secular government, in which European direction and identity were paramount. It should, of course, be emphasized that it was the EU that pushed Turkey away. After years of waiting for membership in the EU, Turkey's people and its leaders felt cheated and moved towards the East. Increased trade also played a role.<sup>62</sup> There were more economic interests at play than ideological affinities.

At the domestic level, the JDP successfully devised a conservative populist narrative, promoting itself as the protector of the people against the elite.<sup>63</sup> This policy, as well its economic policies, much more than Islamism, were critical in their electoral success. They mobilized groups within the center right, in addition to former Islamists and idealists (one-time sympathizers of the Nationalist Action Party) in their antipathy towards the military and its privileges. The latest JDP convention featured the articulation of center-right as well as Islamist themes.

The fourth JDP Congress, on September 30, 2012, however, displayed its ambivalence. The presence of Egyptian President Mohamad Morsi and Hamas leader Khaled Meshal indicate the Middle Easternization and Islamization of Turkey. Meshal referred to the "martyrs of *Mavi Marmara*" and called Erdoğan one of the leaders of the Islamic world.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the Turkish prime minister made constant

reference to democracy, rule of law and national will. He also alluded to numerous Turkish poets, most of them conservative, and to sultans, as well as to center-right prime ministers Adnan Menderes and Turgut Özal and his former mentor Erbakan. It is still too early to make a final judgment on this convention, but there were elements of Islamism in its style and rhetoric.

One upshot of this shift is that Israel is no longer perceived to be paramount for Turkey's interests. According to a poll conducted on April 7-8, 2010, 57 percent of the Turkish populace believed Turkish-Israeli relations were not important; 36 percent considered them significant.<sup>65</sup> Israel is no longer a priority for many Turks. Of course, both countries need each other — militarily, politically, economically and culturally. Coordination in their policies vis-à-vis Syria is particularly essential in light of the severity of the current crisis.

Israel is looking for new friends too, replacing the peripheral alliance it had with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia with a new one involving much weaker states — Romania, Greece, Cyprus, South Sudan and Azerbaijan. Romania has been allowing Israeli pilots to train within its air space. Nonetheless, the strategic value of this new pact is low, and the United States would prefer that Turkey and Israel repair their relations.<sup>66</sup>

Another sticking point is that many Turks perceive Israel to be supporting the Kurdish PKK, which they consider a terrorist organization. They see Israel's relations with the northern Iraqi Kurds as linked to support for Turkish Kurds.<sup>67</sup> This is a serious psychological barrier that Israel needs to overcome if it intends to improve relations with Turkey.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's rhetoric continues to be highly critical of Israel. On

September 21, 2012, during a ceremony in Ankara where al-Quds University (of Jerusalem) conferred an honorary doctorate on Erdoğan, he scoffed at Israel's refusal to recognize the university's degrees: "What is Israel? It is not important."<sup>68</sup> He also used the word "genocide" at the September 2012 JDP Convention to describe Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. The characterizations by the Turkish prime minister were rather hardline.

### **TURKEY DISCOVERS THE HOLOCAUST**

There has been an unexpected development in Turkey: an interest in Holocaust commemoration and education. In 2008, Turkey became an observer to the Holocaust Task Force (ITF, the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, which decided to change its name to International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance [IHRA] in December 2012), an intergovernmental organization aiming to commemorate and teach the lessons of the Holocaust to new generations. Turkey has accepted the Stockholm declaration adopted in 2000 defining the aims of the organization and has expressed its desire to become a member of the ITF. There will be Holocaust education for students at the high school level in a few years.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the Holocaust was commemorated on January 27, 2012, the UN International Day of Commemoration in memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. It occurred in the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Istanbul with official representatives attending, including Governor of Istanbul Hüseyin Avni Mutlu and Ambassador Ertan Tezgör, the Turkish representative on the Task Force. Furthermore, the speaker of the parliament, Cemil Çicek, and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu sent messages to the

gathering.<sup>70</sup> On the same day, the documentary *Shoah* by French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann was shown on Turkish state TV (TAT), the first time it had been screened in a Muslim country.<sup>71</sup>

Recently, on January 27, 2013, the Holocaust was commemorated at the Ortakoy Etz Ahayim Synagogue in Istanbul, attended by Chief Rabbi Ishak Haleva, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos, Ambassador Ertan Tezgor, foreign diplomats, academics and Aykan Erdemir, member of Parliament from the opposition Republican People's Party. Speaker of the Parliament Cemil Cicek, Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and Minister for European Affairs Egemen Bagis all sent messages to the ceremony. This was Turkey's third consecutive commemorative event on the Holocaust; they will most likely continue in the future.

This interest in the Holocaust might be a tactical tool, an opening to Israel in light of the crisis of the past few years. Whatever the motive, the fact that the issue is discussed in a Muslim-majority country is significant. It disproves the allegation that there is Islamist hegemony in the thinking of the JDP. Another significant development was the Anne Frank exhibition at Kadir Has University in Istanbul in March 2012, attended by Ertan Tezgör, head of the Turkish ITF delegation.<sup>72</sup> More events dealing with the Holocaust are to be expected.

### **OTHER UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS**

In addition to an increased interest in the Holocaust, no doubt promoted by the government, there have been two other noteworthy developments. In May 2012, Can Bonomo, a Turkish citizen of Jewish origin, represented Turkey in the Eurovi-

sion Song Contest in Baku, Azerbaijan. Certain commentators found a hidden meaning in his selection by the TRT: an opening to Israel. While this seems far-fetched, the fact that the government did not oppose his nomination shows that they can be pragmatic. It should be added that this year the singer was nominated by a jury composed of musicians and artists.

There is a more important factor, and one that might contribute to the eventual improvement of relations between Turkey and Israel: trade between the two countries increased 29 percent in 2011, reaching its highest level in five years. Turkey's exports to Israel climbed from \$1.8 billion in 2010 to \$2.17 billion in 2011. Israel's exports to Turkey jumped from \$1.31 billion in 2010 to \$1.85 billion, bringing bilateral trade to \$4 billion, according to the office of the Israeli commercial attache in Istanbul.<sup>73</sup> However, trade between Israel and Turkey is small compared to that between Iran and Turkey (\$20 billion),<sup>74</sup>

and an Israeli aerial intelligence system for fighter jets has been canceled.<sup>75</sup> Turkish-Israeli bilateral trade is not rising as much as it should, and its overall size is not large. Furthermore, the arms trade between the two has been significantly reduced.

### THE NEXT DECADE

Turkey's relations with Israel, since the 1960s and even earlier, were predicated on the assumption that there should be progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. This was applicable during the golden age of the 1990s as well. Therefore, the improvement of Turkish-Israeli relations requires progress on the Palestinian front. More important, in light of what transpired in May 2010, and the intransigence of both parties, there is only a slim chance of resuscitating bilateral relations under the current governments. Cooler heads need to prevail as there are mutual interests at stake, especially with a new Middle East emerging in this globalized and dangerous world.

<sup>1</sup> Amikam Nachmani, *Turkey: Facing a New Millennium* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 209.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the 1990s, I was one of the first Turkish students to go to Israel in 1993 and then in 1995 to study Hebrew and Arabic as well as the Arab-Israeli conflict at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> George Gruen, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: Crisis or Continued Cooperation?," *Jerusalem Letter*; Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, July 15, 1996, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli Relations through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Fall 1997): 22-38. I would like to thank Hakan Yavuz for his comments on this article.

<sup>5</sup> Gruen, "Turkish-Israeli Relations," 3. Also see <http://www.danielpipes.org/242/the-event-of-our-era>, for President Chaim Herzog's visit to Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> Gruen, "Turkish-Israeli Relations," 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Turkey and the Middle East: Between Euphoria and Sobriety," in Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom, eds., *Strategic Survey for Israel 2011* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2011), 114.

<sup>9</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Locked Out of Turkey, IAF Now Searching for Space to Drill," *Jerusalem Post*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=173299>.

<sup>10</sup> Oded Eran, "Turkey and Israel: The Wrong Crisis at the Wrong Time," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 3 (2011): 9.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-israil-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa>.

<sup>12</sup> UNGA A/HRC/15/21, Human Rights Council: *Report of the International Fact-Finding Mission to Inves-*

*tigate Violations of International Law Resulting from the Israeli Attacks on the Flotilla*, September 27, 2010, 19-21, 26, 28, 35, 38, 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> HRC, 26, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Shlomo Brom, "The Israeli-Turkish Relationship," in William Quandt, ed., *Troubled Triangle: The United States, Turkey, and Israel in the New Middle East* (Just World Books, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Aynalar Galerisi: Turkiye-Israil iliskilerinde Yansimalar, Yanilsamalar ve Gercekler," *Ortadogu Analiz* 2, no. 18 (June 2010): 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> Umut Uzer, "Turkiye-Israil iliskilerinde Bunalim (Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations)," *Ortadogu Etutleri* 2, no.2 (January 2011): 158. See this article for an in-depth look into the past and present of the bilateral relations between the two countries.

<sup>17</sup> Vakıf Kuruluş Senedi, IHH, <http://www.ihh.org.tr/vakif-kurulus-senedi/tr/>.

<sup>18</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Aynalar Galerisi," 44.

<sup>19</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Mavi Marmara Bunaliminda Sonun Baslangicina Dogru," *Ortadogu Analiz* 2, no. 21 (September 2010): 34.

<sup>20</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Aynalar Galerisi," 44.

<sup>21</sup> "IHH to Mark Flotilla Incident with Anti-Israel March," Arutz Sheva, May 18, 2012, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/155936>.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Rubin, "Obama's New Anti-Terrorist Group," <http://www.pjmedia.com/barryrubin/2011/09/14/obama%E2%80%99s-new-anti-terrorist-group-islamist-and-pro-terrorist-turkish-regime-annointed-as-co-leader-israel-left-out/>.

<sup>23</sup> "IHH başkanına 'El Kaide' soruşturması," NTVMSNBC, June 15, 2012, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25358400/>.

<sup>24</sup> Israeli commission report quoted in Palmer Report, 29-30, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Inquiry on the May 31, 2010, Flotilla Incident. Geoffrey Palmer, Alvaro Uribe, Joseph Ciechanover Itzhar, Suleyman Ozdem Sanberk, September 2011, 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Report of the Secretary General's Panel, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Palmer Report, 48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> "IDF Failed in Handling of Flotilla Video," *Jerusalem Post*, June 13, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> "Exclusive: The Battle on the Marmara," Ynet, April 20, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,73-40,L-4218728,00.html>.

<sup>33</sup> "State Comptroller Report: Netanyahu Inadequately Heeded IDF Warnings Ahead of Gaza Flotilla Raid," *Haaretz*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-inadequately-heeded-idf-warnings-ahead-of-gaza-flotilla-raid-1.436116>.

<sup>34</sup> "Gaza Flotilla Report Serves as Warning Ahead of Israeli Strike on Iran," *Haaretz*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/gaza-flotilla-report-serves-as-warning-ahead-of-israeli-strike-on-iran.premium-1.436079>.

<sup>35</sup> Gideon Levy, "The Curse of the Mavi Marmara," <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/the-curse-of-the-mavi-marmara.premium-1.436818#>.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Cook, "The End of Turkey-Israel relations," <http://blogs.cfr.org/cook/2011/09/06/palmer-politics-and-the-turkey-israel-denouement/>.

<sup>37</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Mavi Marmara Bunaliminda," 37.

<sup>38</sup> "Mavi Marmara durusmasi basladi" *Hurriyet*, November 6, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Küre, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "JDP and Foreign Policy As an Agent of Transformation," in Hakan Yavuz, ed., *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK* (University of Utah Press), 292.

<sup>41</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Aynalar Galerisi," 41.

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-oslobodjenje-gazetesinde\\_bosna-hersek\\_-14\\_12\\_2009-tarihinde-yayimlanan-makalesi.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-oslobodjenje-gazetesinde_bosna-hersek_-14_12_2009-tarihinde-yayimlanan-makalesi.tr.mfa).

<sup>43</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikinci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesiyle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi\\_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikinci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesiyle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa).



- <sup>44</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikinci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesi-yle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi\\_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-ikinci-buyukelciler-konferansi-degerlendirme-toplantisi-vesilesi-yle-mardin-artuklu-universitesi_nde-yaptigi-ko.tr.mfa).
- <sup>45</sup> Gurkan Zengin, *Hoca: Turk Dis politikasinda Davutoğlu etkisi* (Inkilap, 2010), 99, 197.
- <sup>46</sup> Alexander Murinson, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (BESA Center for Strategic Studies, 2012), 1.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. The idea of Neo-Ottomanism was also devised during the rule of Turgut Özal. According to a close adviser, Cengiz Candar, this idea was promoted to create a citizenship-based identity divorced from nationalism. Liz Behmoaras, *Türkiye'de Aydınlar Gozuyle Yahudiler*, (Gozlem, 1993), 234.
- <sup>48</sup> Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism," *Critique* no. 12 (Spring 1998): 19,21, 29, 32, 35, 38,40.
- <sup>49</sup> Gencer Ozcan, "Aynalar Galerisi," 41.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>51</sup> George Gruen, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: Crisis or Continued Cooperation?," *Jerusalem Letter*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, July 15, 1996, 2.
- <sup>52</sup> İbrahim Kalın, "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey," *Perceptions* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2011): 10.
- <sup>53</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-132\\_-arap-ligi-olagan-disisleri-bakanlari-konseyi-toplantisinin-acilis-oturumunda-yaptigi-konusma.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-132_-arap-ligi-olagan-disisleri-bakanlari-konseyi-toplantisinin-acilis-oturumunda-yaptigi-konusma.tr.mfa) and <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=155736&bolum=100>.
- <sup>54</sup> Turel Yilmaz, "Türkiye-İsrail İlişkileri: Tarihten Günümüze," *Akademik Orta Dogu* 5, no.1 (2010): 19.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-14.
- <sup>56</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "JDP and Foreign Policy," 288-89.
- <sup>57</sup> <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/669311-laiklik-ateizm-degil-korkmayin>.
- <sup>58</sup> [http://www.caykaragazetesi.com/makale\\_detay.php?article\\_id=1037](http://www.caykaragazetesi.com/makale_detay.php?article_id=1037).
- <sup>59</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "JDP and Foreign policy," 287.
- <sup>60</sup> Balcı and Miş, 2008, 392.
- <sup>61</sup> Mahmut Bali Aykan, *Turkey's role in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, 1960-1992: The Nature of Deviation from the Kemalist Heritage* (Vantage Press, 1994), xii, 74-75, 83.
- <sup>62</sup> Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Turkey and the Middle East: Between Euphoria and Sobriety," in Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom, eds., *Strategic Survey for Israel 2011* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2011), 106.
- <sup>63</sup> Sakir Dincshahin, "A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development Party's Populism in Turkey, 2007-2010," *Government and Opposition* 47, no.4: 624-625.
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- <sup>65</sup> "For Turks Relations with Israel Not Much Important," <http://turkishreporter.com/headlines/734-for-turks-relations-with-israel-not-much-important-poll.html>.
- <sup>66</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?," *Strategic Assessment* 15, no.2 (July 2012): 27, 30, 36.
- <sup>67</sup> Hasan Kosebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations: What Is Its Strategic Significance?," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2010).
- <sup>68</sup> "Erdoğan'a El Kudüs Üniversitesi'nden Fahri Doktora," *Hurriyet*, September 21, 2012 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/21526056.asp>.
- <sup>69</sup> "Turkey Devising Different Holocaust Curriculum for Schools," *Jewish Tribune*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.jewishtribune.ca/features/2012/04/10/turkey-devising-different-holocaust-curriculum-for-schools>.
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- <sup>73</sup> <http://www.israeltrade.org.tr/>.
- <sup>74</sup> Hasan Kosebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations: What Is Its Strategic Significance?," *Middle East Policy* 17, no 3 (Fall 2010).
- <sup>75</sup> "Israel Cancels Military Contract with Turkey to Supply Aerial System," *New York Times*, December 23, 2011. The author would like to thank Gallia Linderstrauss for her assistance in locating this article.