

A Window on Turkish-Israeli Relations

From the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1921 until 1952, Turkey's foreign policy was largely inactive. It was defined by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's push towards the West but also the neutrality evinced through the charades of the WWII episode, where the Republic took painstaking efforts to avoid any war declarations until the end of the fight was within sight.

A period of intensely pro-Western policy decisions followed the World War II events and did not change until 1964. These pro-Western decisions were driven largely by Adnan Menderes and the Western-loving nature of his foreign policy. Preceding Menderes, Turkish policy was typified by a self-interested neutrality. Clear evidence of this trend is evidenced in the 1947 U.N. vote on the partitioning of Palestine. It is critical to note that Turkey opposed this partitioning not based on any affinity or solidarity with the Arabs, nor upon ideological opposition to Zionism. Rather, Turkey feared the birth of a communist regime that would enclose it from the south when it already confronted its larger socialist nemesis to the North.¹ This fear of communism combined with Menderes' later love for the West drove Turkey's policy over the next decade and a half. The declination of a Palestinian partition was followed by the approval, in 1948, of a "reconciliation commission" on Palestine and the recognition of the state of Israel on 28 March, 1949. Seemingly, after American backing for the establishment of the Jewish state, the Turks were not nearly as concerned with the rise of a communist entity.²

Again in 1956 with the Suez Canal Crisis, Turkey toed a carefully neutral line. It joined the Baghdad Pact countries – Britain excluded, understandably – in condemning the occupation of Egypt and calling for a withdrawal of troops. However, it convinced the other Pact members not to eject Great Britain from the group.³

By 1958, however, a fascinating secret agreement, sometimes referred to as the "peripheral pact", had emerged between the two nations. It's conceptual framework can be traced back even before the founding of the state to the ideology of Baruch 'Uzel, an Israeli leader who would later become a member of the Liberal Party. His vision of "a peripheral and minorities' alliance" would, by 1958, either directly or indirectly, give birth to close cooperation between the two nations.

The Turkish willingness to accept an alliance proposed by Israel was, according to analyst Ofra Bengio, rooted in three factors: a. Iraq vote against Turkey over Cyprus at the U.N. in December, 1957 b. The establishment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria in February, 1958, and c. the fall of the monarch of Iraq in July, 1958. Whatever their final motivations, it now seems that David Ben-Gurion and

¹ Bulent Aras. Palestinian and Israeli Peace Process and Turkey. (Commack; Nova Science Publishers, 1998.), 115.

² *Ibid*, 115.

³ William Hale. Turkish Foreign Policy: 1774 – 2000. (London; Frank Cass; 2000), 127.

Adnan Menderes met secretly on August 29, 1958, to form the basis for their nations' partnership.⁴

Notably, exact details of the alliance remain hidden in numerous classified Israeli documents, and are obscured by Turkish secrecy, classified documents, and insistence that there was no actually documented pact between the countries. Nonetheless, it seems the alliance had three fundamental tenets. The diplomatic tenet involved joint public relations campaigns to influence general publics. The military aspect allegedly involved the exchange of intelligence information, joint planning for mutual aid in emergencies, and Turkish support in the Pentagon and at NATO for an improved Israeli military. Some also say that "highly sensitive" scientific cooperation as well as the export of Israeli military equipment to the Republic occurred.⁵

Several pivotal events in the early 1960's led to the gradual disintegration of this cooperation, however. By 1961 the U.A.R, which Turkey and Israel had perceived as a significant threat, had dissolved. Most importantly, in 1964, the neutral but Western-oriented nature of Turkish foreign policy took a subtle but pragmatic turn away from Western dependency and towards a diversification of its defense and alliance options. This shift was sparked by a double blow to Turkish policy makers, the affects of which would influence its foreign policy decisions well into the early 1980's. In 1964, the U.S. withdrew its Jupiter class nuclear weapons from Turkey as a condition of the Cuban Missile Crisis resolution, and later President Johnson sent the famed letter with not only an unsupportive but an almost hostile tone regarding the Cyprus affair. Turkey felt, thereafter, that the U.S. would not unconditionally defend it or support its activities. Over the following years, the Republic pursued a rapprochement with the Soviet Union in order to mitigate any threat it could pose. Resistance of Soviet power had been, critically, one of the unifying elements of the Turkish-Israeli partnership. Turkey also began shifting greater energies towards a rapprochement with Arab states. Moreover, it recognized a failure in its ignoring relations with third-world and non-aligned countries, just the type that could again help to reduce its dependencies on the United States and its apparent isolation in the international community for its support of Cyprus.⁶

Again, during the 1967 war, Turkey's fence-sitting became evident. The Republic joined the other Arab nations in condemning Israeli gains and calling for a withdrawal from occupied lands, yet they abstained from a section referring to Israel as an "aggressor state." In 1969, Turkey joined the Islamic Conference Organization, primarily in hopes of getting support for the Cypriot conflict. However, it opposed the '69 Rabat Conference that called for a break in diplomatic relations with Israel. As world oil prices soared in the '70's Turkey pursued an even more aggressive rapprochement with its Arab neighbors. By 1979, Turkey had allowed the PLO to open an office in Ankara, although it never explicitly condemned the Israelis. With this period the last consistently solid decades of strong Arab cooperation came to an end.

⁴ Ofra Bengio. The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 42.

⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

⁶ Aras, 118.

The '80's decade would witness Turkey slowly turning again towards the West to find comfort amidst the Soviet aggression in Central Asia, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and the failure of Arab and other states to support it in its Cypriot aspirations and to provide the type of economic and strategic partnership Turkey had hoped they would offer. The Özal government also provided impetus for strong Westernization. Still, Turkey never chose sides absolutely. In '82 it refused to participate in a U.N. resolution accusing Israel of genocide, and in '88 it was the first Western country to recognize the PLO after it declared its independence in November of that year.⁷

Thus, it becomes clear that throughout the long Cold War Turkey successfully maintained a balanced approach with regards to the Israel-PLO conflict. What becomes more intriguing are the developments in its policy since that time. While Turkey has still never overtly condemned or supported either side, it has taken a multitude of Pro-Israeli measures which can be all but equated to tacit approval of the Jewish state's policies and practices.

During the most recent decade, Turkey and Israel have displayed an impressive zeal for cooperation. High-level state visits have reached previously unseen proportions. Bilateral trade that hovered around \$54 million in 1987 had expanded to \$850 million by 1998, and that figure excludes military trade of almost \$650 million.⁸

According to the scholar Efraim Inbar, this growing friendship was based on several factors, or mutual strategic concerns. With regards to Syria, both countries had land and water disputes. Both countries felt radical Islam threatened regional stability and domestic well-being. Both countries feared the proliferation of weapons of mass-destruction that threatened to change the regional political balance, particularly in the early nineties. Turkey and Israel also partook in sweeping military cooperation including defense contracts, strategic cooperation, and training exercises such as the January 1998 "Reliant Mermaid."⁹ Finally, both countries felt increasingly neglected by Western Europe and the need to diversify away from overwhelming U.S. influence.

Nevertheless, the strengthening relationship between these nations needs little explanation. In order to gain a clear picture of where the two nations' friendship now stands, one need only compare a chronology of some of the significant events which have occurred over the last fifteen to twenty years between the two with the changing nature of the relationship over the half century which preceded it. Such a chronology has been prepared.

⁷ Aras, 125.

⁸ Efraim Inbar. "The strategic glue in the Israeli-Turkish alignment," in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*. Ed. By Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişci. (Istanbul; Boğaziçi University Press; 2002), 152.

⁹ This was a joint naval exercise including the U.S. Jordan observed.

Turkish-Israeli Timeline

1985

▫ Israel appoints Yehuda Millo, a diplomat with minister-counsellor rank, as charge d'affaires

1986

▫ Turkey appoints Ekrem Guvendiren, a diplomat with ambassadorial rank, as its "Second Secretary" in Tel Aviv.

▫ Turk Hava Yollari (Turkish Airlines) begins direct flights between Israel and Turkey

1987

September: The Turkish and Israeli foreign ministers meet at the UN General Assembly.

December: The Intifada begins and Turkey makes "several statements denouncing Israeli oppression and supporting the Palestinians' right of self-determination."

1988

November: Turkey immediately recognizes the Palestinian state. It is the first nation having diplomatic relations with Israel to do so. The Israelis protest to the Turkish representative in Ankara. Turkey refrains from granting full diplomatic status to the PLO representative in Ankara.

1989

▫ Pro-Israel lobby plays supportive role in assisting Turkey to support the defeat of a U.S. Senate draft resolution denouncing the alleged massacre of Armenians in the early 20th Century

1990

1991

December: Both nations restore full ambassadorial relations.

1992

April: The two nations' Defense Ministries sign a document on principles for cooperation

July: Israeli President Chaim Herzog visits Istanbul

October: Bilgin Unan, the Turkish Foreign Ministry's deputy under-secretary, visits Israel

▫ early 1992 Turkey is an extra-regional party in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) meetings. Israel is a full participant.

1993

March: The Turkish-Israeli Business Council is established

April: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visits Turkey for the funeral of Turkish President Turgut Ozal

November: 1993 Memorandum of Understanding creating joint committees of senior officials to handle regional threats (terrorism, fundamentalism, etc.)

November 13-15: Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin visits Israel (first visit by a Turkish Foreign Minister)

- Agree to cooperate in gathering intelligence on Syria, Iran, and Iraq and to meet regularly to share assessments pertaining to terrorism and these country's military capabilities. Turkey agreed to allow IDF and Israeli security forces to gather electronic intelligence on Syria and Iran from Turkey. In exchange, Israel assisted in the equipping and training of Turkish forces in anti-terror warfare along the Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian borders.
- Israel shares with Turkey secret data on the MiG 29 (Syria's main combat plane) which was acquired from an anonymous "friendly" country.

1994

January: Israeli President Ezer Weizman visits Turkey, cultural agreement and Memorandum of Understanding signed (first official visit by an Israeli head of state)

April: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visits Turkey, environmental protection agreement signed

May 31 OR MARCH?: Security and Secrecy Agreement (Guaranteed secrecy in the exchange and sharing of information.)

July: Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller attends the Nobel Prize ceremony for Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Yasir Arafat and holds talks with each.

Summer: The two nations exchange military attaches.

September: Negotiations on a Turkish-Israeli free trade agreement begin

October: Israeli director of Security Asaf Haffetz visits Turkey

October: The April '92 protocol on Defense cooperation is embellished and solidified. Specific areas for military cooperation are expressed.

November 3: Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller visits Israel (First official visit by a Turkish Prime Minister)

November: Agreement for cooperation on the exchange of information is reached between the police forces of both countries.

1995

May: Israel's deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin visits Turkey

September 18: Memorandum of Understanding for the training of pilots of both countries in each other's airspace.

November: Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller attends Yitzhak Rabin's funeral

November: Israeli Naval Commander, Admiral Ami Ayalon, visits Turkey

- early 95, accord against drug trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime signed

1996

January: Turkish under-secretary of the Foreign Ministry Onur Oymen visits Israel

February: The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) advises and equips the Turkish security forces at the borders with Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

February 23: Five-year Military Training Cooperation Agreement (Renewable annually thereafter. Involved exchange of military experience, visits between the armed forces of the two countries, joint training as well as separate exercises in each other's territory, and attendance of observers from each country)

March: Turkish Israeli Free Trade Agreement signed
March: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel visits Israel, numerous economic agreements signed (First trip to Israel by a serving Turkish President)
April: Israeli F-16's train in Turkish airspace (Scheduled to continue for one week, four times annually)
April: Turkey reveals the existence of the new military cooperation agreement
June: Israeli President Ezer Weizman visits Turkey
June: 12 Turkish planes train in Israel (Scheduled to continue for one week, four times annually)
August 28: Military Industry Cooperation Agreement
August: Joint \$150m production of Popeye I air-to-ground missiles
December: Israel Aircraft Industries wins a \$632.5 million contract to upgrade 54 Turkish F-4 Phantoms (This was the largest deal up to that date for IAI.)
▫ Israeli Submarine Crew trains in Turkey
▫ Forum for the biannual convening of leaders for strategic evaluations is established

1997

February: Turkish Chief of Staff Ismail Hakki Karadayi visits Israel
April 8-9: Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy visits Ankara
April-May: Turkish Defense Minister Turhan Tayan visits Israel
May 4-6: Turkish Chief of Staff Cevik Bir visits Israel
May 19: Joint production of Popeye II missiles (\$100 million estimate)
May: Turkish-Israeli Free Trade Agreement becomes operational
June: Five-vessel Turkish naval battle group visits Israeli port of Haifa after the Sea Wolf-97 exercises
October: Israeli Chief of Staff General Amnon Lipkin-Shahak visits Turkey
December: Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai visits Turkey

1998

January: Operation Reliant Mermaid (Joint U.S., Turkish, and Israeli search and rescue exercise)
February: General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, commander of Turkish land forces, visits Israel.
July: Turkey raises number of military attaches in Tel Aviv from one to three
September: Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz visits Israel
October: Israeli President Ezer Weizman visits Turkey
December: Turkey's Chief of the Air Force, General Ilhan Kilic visits Israel
▫ In a \$75 million contract, Israel upgraded 48 Turkish F-5's
▫ Turkey purchases large fuel tanks for its F-16 fleet and high-tech military equipment from Israel
▫ Israel purchases 50 armored vehicles from Turkey

1999

July: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel visits Israel
September: Israeli President Ezer Weizman visits Turkey
October – November: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak visits Turkey
December: Reliant Mermaid 1999 is held off of Turkey's western Mediterranean coast.

2000

January: Turkish-Israeli Free Trade Agreement becomes operational.

January: Turkey and Israel sign an agreement which will allow for the purchase by Israel of 50 million cubic meters of Turkish water.

February: The two nation's Joint Economic Commission signs a protocol allocating six agriculture irrigation projects in the GAP region totaling \$600 million.

September: Outgoing Turkish President Suleyman Demirel is asked to participate in the Mitchell Commission (set up to investigate the outbreak of the second intifada).

▫ The two nations' Air Forces begin training together.

2001

January 17: Reliant Mermaid III is held

April: Turkey and Israel carry out joint maneuvers from the Marmaris Aksaz Deniz naval base.

June: Turkish, Israeli, and U.S. Air Forces hold joint exercises, called Anatolian Eagle, over Konya.

July: Israeli Defense Minister Benyamin Ben Eliezer visits Ankara.

December 3-7: Reliant Mermaid IV is held

2002

March: Israel commits to buy water from Turkey.

March 29: Turkey signs a secret agreement with Israel Military Industries to update 170 M-60A1 Turkish tanks for \$668 million.

July: Israel is awarded a \$110 million contract to put electronic warfare systems on Turkish helicopters.

August 6: Turkey and Israel sign an agreement valued at \$800 million to \$1 billion to import water from Turkey's Manavgat river.

December: Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, IDF Chief of Staff, visits Turkey.

December: Reliant Mermaid V commences.

2003

January : Reliant Mermaid V ends.

April : Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom visits Turkey.

July: Israeli President Moshe Katsav visits Ankara.

November: Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom visits Istanbul following a string of bombings which targeted Jewish synagogues, the British Consulate, and an HSBC building.

December: Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, visits the chief rabbi of the Turkish Jewish community, Isak Haleva. This marks the first such visit in Turkish history.

2004

March: Israel signs a deal with Turkey to import 50 million cubic meters of water per year over 20 years. The deal was finalized in parts and completed under significant

pressure from Turkey which allegedly threatened to cancel military and development projects were Israel to abandon the agreement.