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ESSAY

The Changing Dynamics of Turkey–Israel Relations: A Structural Realist Account

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ABSTRACT This article tries to examine the changing dynamics of Turkey's relations with Israel in recent years from a structural realist point of view. The main argument is that both the establishment of strong strategic relations during the 1990s and the growing tension in recent years could be convincingly analysed through a structural realist perspective that mainly values systemic and exogenous factors in explanation of states' foreign policy preferences and behaviours. The major goal is to complement domestic and identity-related factors with structural ones in order to have a better understanding of the changing nature of bilateral relations over the last decade.

Introduction

This essay aims to examine the changing dynamics of Turkey's relations with Israel in recent years from a structural realist point of view. The main argument is that both the establishment of strong strategic relations during the 1990s and the growing tension in recent years could be convincingly analysed through a structural realist perspective that mainly values systemic and exogenous factors in explanation of states' foreign policy preferences and behaviours. Structural realism posits that causes of interstate cooperation and conflict should be looked for in the system. In responding to external security threats and regional challenges, states either try to increase their internal power capabilities or enter into alliance relations with other states. Faced with common external enemies and sharing common threat perceptions, states tend to establish alliances. According to this view, the anarchical nature of the system on the one hand and the distribution of material capabilities on the other leave states with no option but to follow the dictates of *realpolitik*.

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However, saying this does not mean to suggest that other factors, most notably domestic and identity-related considerations, have not played a role in Turkey's relations with Israel over the last two decades. The Islamist tendencies on the part of the Justice and Development Party (hereafter AKP) and the growing influence of public opinion in Turkey and the nature of party politics in Israel might have affected the way that bilateral relations have unfolded thus far. For example, one would not be able to offer a full account of the radical shift in Turkey's approach towards Israel, without taking into account the ideological stance of the AKP government. Yet this essay will try to demonstrate the impact of structural factors embedded in the dynamics of regional and international politics on Turkish–Israeli relations. It will offer such an analysis from Turkey's perspective.

That said, the next section will offer a concise account of relations from the mid-1990s up to the present. The aim is to demonstrate the extent of transformation in the relationship. Then attention will switch to the permissive causes of strategic cooperation during the 1990s. The following section will try to shed light on the negative turn in bilateral relations over the last decade from a structural perspective. The conclusion will recap the major findings of the research and offer predictions for the future.

From Where to Where?

The 1990s witnessed how Turkey and Israel speeded up their cooperation process to an extent one would have found difficult to imagine during the Cold War era. Following the elevation of diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level in 1991, the number of high-level state visits increased. Not only did the two countries sign a free trade agreement in 1997 but they also set into motion a sophisticated military cooperation process in 1996 unseen in the history of Turkey's relations with any Middle Eastern country. Israeli pilots were allowed to train in Turkish airspace; Israeli companies outstripped their rivals as they became involved in the modernization efforts of the Turkish military and the number of joint Israeli–Turkish military exercises in the eastern Mediterranean Sea increased. A growing number of Israeli tourists flocked to Turkey's southern coasts, while both capitals ascertained the possibility of constructing pipelines carrying water, gas and oil from Turkey to Israel (Bishku, 2006).

In contrast with the trend of the 1990s, observers have increasingly been surprised to see Turkish–Israeli relation going through a cooling-off period over the last decade, particularly following the victory of the AKP in the parliamentary elections held in November 2002. Even before the AKP's victory, bilateral relations began to go sour during the 1999–2002 term of the three-party coalition government led by the late Bülent Ecevit, the leader of the Democratic Left Party. For example, Ecevit 'protested very strongly Israel's treatment of Yasser Arafat in 2001 and the Battle of Jenin in 2002, which he believed was tantamount to "genocide"' (BBC News, 4 April 2002, quoted in Ulutas, 2010: 5).

Similarly, the AKP leadership strongly criticized the Israeli attacks on Hizballah forces in southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and on Hamas forces in Gaza in

late 2008. Party leaders also accused the Israeli defence forces of committing state terrorism, using excessive force, failing to differentiate between combatants and civilians and resisting calls to lift the economic and political embargo on Hamas (Aras, 2009). Israel was held responsible for the continuing stalemate in Israeli–Palestinian peace talks as well as the escalation of inter-communal violence since the international attempts, led by the United States, failed to produce a final solution.

To give an example of the diverging views of both countries, one can mention that whereas from Israeli's perspective it would be impossible to engage Hamas unless it accepts all the agreements hitherto signed by the Palestinian Authority and Israeli government, renounces violence as a legitimate method and accepts the territorial sovereignty and existence of the Israeli state as givens, the AKP has viewed Hamas as a political organization that came to power through elections and needs to be incorporated into the negotiation process (Zuhur, 2008).¹ The AKP's invitation of Khaled Mashel, the leader of Hamas' political wing based in Damascus, to Ankara was harshly criticized by Israel and interpreted as an unfriendly action that would certainly diminish Turkey's credibility to act as a neutral party between the Israelis and Palestinians (Times, 2006).

Turkish dissatisfaction with Israeli policies came to a head when the Turkish prime minister Erdogan exchanged vitriolic statements with President Shimon Peres of Israel on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum meetings in Davos in late 2008. Erdogan thought that Peres was simply trying to help legitimize the use of disproportional force by Israel's defence forces against Hamas and accused Israel of knowing how to kill well (New York Times, 2009). Even though the parties immediately tried to overcome the atmosphere of crisis, many noted that future bilateral relations could no longer return to what they had been during the 1990s. For example, some circles in Israel began to doubt Turkey's credibility as a neutral facilitator of relations between Israel and Syria whereas others asked Turkey to reconsider its position on the so-called Armenian genocide issue before accusing Israel of state terrorism against Palestinians (Haaretz, 2009a). Other voices warned that Turkey should no longer take it for granted that the Jewish lobby in the United States would automatically support Turkey in the US Congress (Today's Zaman, 2009).

Subsequently, a crisis atmosphere resurfaced despite attempts on both sides to repair the tarnished relations in the post-Davos period. For example, many Israeli politicians and people alike protested strongly over a TV series broadcast on the state-run TRT television in which Israeli agents were portrayed as brutal killers of innocent children (Kardas, 2009).

Similar protests took place at Turkey's decision to deny Israel the right to participate in a NATO military exercise in late 2009 (Ravid, 2009). On the other hand, there was a furore in Turkey when the deputy foreign minister of Israel summoned the Turkish ambassador to his office in the Knesset and insulted him in front of the cameras with a view to demonstrating Israel's uneasiness over recent Turkish policies against Israel (BBC News, 2010). A similar Turkish protest occurred when some AKP MPs were denied the right to enter Gaza through the

Rafah crossing as members of the Turkish team were attempting to deliver aid to the Palestinians in Gaza (Today's Zaman, 2010).

Identity and Domestic Factors as Explanatory Variables

One way to account for the dynamics in the Turkish–Israeli relationship is to refer to the identities and political ideologies of the parties concerned, in this case the political actors in Turkey. There is no doubt that the positive climate in bilateral relations during the 1990s was very much influenced by the fact that both Turkey and Israel were democratically governed countries in the midst of autocratic regimes and had secular state–society relations and western-oriented foreign policies and development strategies. That the process of strategic cooperation on Turkey's side had been planned and directed by the military, allegedly the most pro-western and secular force in Turkey, might have also bolstered the explanatory value of identity-related considerations. In fact, one of the reasons why Turkey signed strategic military agreements with Israel in 1996 was that the Turkish military wanted to prevent the coalition government of the Welfare Party and True Path Party under the premiership of Necmettin Erbakan from steering for Turkey along a route from the West to the East.

It was to nobody's surprise that Erbakan held Turkey's intimate bonds to the western international community in general and Israel in particular responsible for Turkey's backwardness and underdevelopment. In the view of the political movement he used to lead, Turkey should end its links to the West and intensify its efforts to bring into existence an Islamic Union under Turkey's leadership. The D-8 project could be seen as an example of this mentality.

Similarly, it would not be abnormal for the AKP, coming allegedly from a political Islamist past, to adopt anti-Israeli views and support Islamist Hamas and Hizballah out of ideological considerations. In fact, some high-level figures of the AKP had in the past vehemently criticized Turkey's relations with Israel and argued that Turkey should lead the Islamic community of nations rather than cooperating with Israel (Burris, 2003). Aligning with Israel would lead to Turkey's further disengagement from the Islamic world and would culminate in a one-dimensional, western-oriented Turkish foreign policy. In addition, a foreign policy approach valuing strategic cooperation with Israel would help legitimize the prerogatives of the traditional security establishment at home. The more relations with Israel were defined in military terms, the more the military would shape domestic politics.

In the absence of interdependent social and economic exchanges, structural factors would always impede the emergence of a lasting Turkish–Israeli strategic relationship (Bengio, 2010). That is why, for example, the kind of strategic cooperation that took place between the two countries in the 1990s should not be defined as an alliance similar to the one between the United States on the one hand and the United Kingdom and Israel on the other. It was after all a discursive alliance devoid of strong social and economic bonds and interdependencies. Notwithstanding a few businessmen and Turkish citizens of Jewish origin, there was no influential pro-Israeli lobby in Turkey. The relationship was more bureaucratic than social and

interpersonal. With the exception of the military bureaucracy, which held a strategic approach towards Israel, the majority of Turkish people were critical of Israeli policies and identified with the cause of the Palestinians.

That Turkish public opinion has recently become more influential than ever in the shaping of foreign policy could, however, affect Turkey's relations with Israel negatively in the years ahead. Given the increasing scepticism toward the West in Turkish public opinion, the AKP government will not easily adopt a cooperative stance towards Israel which mainly derives its legitimacy from strategic considerations. A political leadership that feels itself more accountable to the public than ever will be likely to view Israel's policies through sceptical eyes.

Attractive though such arguments seem, this essay claims that neither Turkey's intense cooperation with Israel during the 1990s nor the recent deterioration can be fully explained in terms of identity-related motivations. A number of factors seem to cast a shadow over identity-related and domestic motivations. First, one wonders why the Turkish military had not played a leading role in the formation of alliance-like relations between the two countries during the Cold War era and why the military has not done much to halt the downward spiral in bilateral relations in recent years.²

Second, one notices that the traditionally pro-western circles in Turkey, in and outside Parliament, have recently adopted more anti-western and anti-Israeli attitudes than Turkey's so-called political Islamists. Rather than accusing the AKP of sabotaging Turkey's relations with Israel, the opposition parties claim that the AKP led Turkey to take part in the so-called Greater Middle Eastern Project as part of the western policies intended to give rise to moderate Islamic regimes in the Muslim world. Turkey's secular circles identified this project with the American and Israeli conspiracies to divide and rule the countries of the Middle East so that western imperialism and dominance could continue uninterrupted. For example, these circles argue that Turkey's transformation into a moderate Islamic country would be in line with Israel's interest in eliminating anti-Israeli forces in the larger Middle East.

Third, there is now a country-wide consensus in Turkey that prime minister Erdogan's behaviour in Davos was right and morally justified. Asked how they would interpret his performance there, the majority of people who tend to support opposition parties praised Erdogan for his bravery. A related observation in this context is that leaving aside the issue of dealing with Hamas, one cannot detect serious disagreements between these circles and the AKP as to what Turkey's approach towards Israel should be. Some polls show that growing opposition to Israel's policies is independent of party affiliation.³

Third, the AKP has not been opposed to the idea that Jewish capital should be invested in the Turkish economy. This is in stark contrast to the position adopted by the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Action Party, ostensibly the traditional supporters of Turkey's western orientation. For example, the opposition parties strongly objected to the decision of the government that an Israeli businessman, Ofer, could invest in critical sectors of the Turkish economy in line with market regulations (Radikal, 2005). That the AKP appears to have adopted

an ideology-free approach towards Turkey's economic policies at home and abroad might explain why Erdogan once said that money had no nationality (Radikal, 2006).

Structural Causes of Cooperation in the 1990s

From a structural realist perspective, improving relations between Turkey and Israel during the 1990s would not be unexpected given that the dynamics of regional politics in the Middle East, on the one hand, and the dynamics of these countries' relations with other systemic actors, on the other, forced Turkey and Israel to adopt similar threat perceptions and foreign policy visions (Bishku, 2006). This section aims to account for this.

That the end of the Cold War accelerated the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, namely the Oslo process, seems to have eased Turkish–Israeli cooperation. The peace process appears to have made the idea of direct engagement less problematic for both parties. As Israel itself began to negotiate with the Palestinians, the need for Turkey to walk a fine line between Israel and the Palestinian Authority evaporated and Ankara found the idea of cooperation with Tel Aviv less risky. The traditional concern to strike a balance between Israelis and Palestinians became less and less important as these two communities themselves engaged in a process of dialogue.

Another permissive factor was the common feeling that Turkey and Israel had been surrounded by hostile regimes in their region (Walker, 2006). A sense of loneliness seems to have driven them together. Both capitals viewed Iran and Syria as potential enemies and considered the Saddam regime in Iraq as a menace to regional stability. As long as Israel felt encircled by hostile countries in the region, Ankara appeared to be a potential ally that might help Tel Aviv overcome its predicament. Though Turkey was certainly seen as attractive for its secular, western-oriented, non-Arab character, this would not have been enough to drive the two countries closer to one another in the absence of the common feeling of encirclement. Simply stated, Turkey would help Israel enlarge its extremely narrow strategic depth. Making use of Turkey's airspace for the training of Israeli pilots would add to Israel's war-making capability in case of an armed confrontation with Iran (Inbar, 2002). Cooperation with Turkey would also help assure the Israelis that they were not alone in the midst of an Islamic ocean hostile to their territorial existence. In 1949, Turkey had been the first country in the Islamic world to recognize Israel as a sovereign state.

On the other hand, Turkey had been quite uneasy with the fact that PKK training camps were located in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa valley in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Damascus viewed PKK terrorism as a bargaining chip in its relations with Ankara. From Ankara's perspective, strategic cooperation with Israel would most likely help strengthen Turkey's bargaining position vis-à-vis Syria. The Turkish assumption was that Syria would not be able to deal with Israel and Turkey simultaneously and would easily succumb to Turkish pressure. During the 1990s Turkey tried hard to convince Syria to cease its support to the PKK. However, Damascus had long ignored such Turkish calls. For the events to unfold in Turkey's

favour, one would have had to wait for Turkey to intensify its cooperation with Israel, on the one hand, and adopt a more hawkish policy stance in 1998, on the other. This might partially explain why Turkish airplanes violated Syria's airspace from time to time in the past. Though it is not easy to prove that Turkey's emerging strategic cooperation with Israel forced Syria to alter its position on the PKK from the second half of the 1990s onwards, one could in retrospect argue that Turkey's coming closer to Israel caused alarm bells ring in Damascus.

Turkey's strategic cooperation with Israel seems also to have been motivated by the declining prospects of Turkish accession to the European Union, another systemic factor. The growing estrangement from the EU might have led the Turkish leadership at that time to believe that improving relations with Israel might in some way compensate for this loss. During the 1990s the EU criticized Turkey for its non-democratization record and the adoption of non-European norms in the fight against PKK terrorism (Altunisik, 2000). In the absence of a common Soviet threat, the EU began to define Turkey more in the Middle Eastern than the European context. In a particular environment where Turkey's role in European security architecture had been seriously questioned by EU members, growing relations with Israel appeared valuable in compensating for Turkey's strategic isolation from the EU. Though Israel is located in the Middle East, Turkish mental maps define Israel as a gate to the western international community (Bishku, 2006).

In fact, both Turkey and Israel shared the feeling that the EU was discriminating against them. From Israel's perspective, the feeling was that the EU had never become a credible third party in the solution of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. The Israelis shared the view that the EU had been predisposed to Palestinians due to a growing number of Arabs living in Europe and the legacy of European colonialism in the Middle East. Similarly, Turkey felt alienated from Europe, as the EU began to doubt the credentials of Turkey's European identity in the absence of a common Soviet threat. This common feeling of exclusion might have driven them closer. This resembles Turkey's growing cooperation with Russia in the 2000s, as both countries felt that the EU had a condescending attitude towards them. Observers did not have to wait too long, though, to see that the EU changed its mind about Turkey. That the EU partially lost control over Turkey's foreign policies following its decision to exclude Turkey from the enlargement process in December 1997 seems to explain why the EU declared Turkey a candidate country in December 1999. Rather than liberal democratization at home, strategic and realpolitik concerns appear to have caused this about-turn by the EU.

The estrangement from the European Union also indirectly led Turkey to draw closer to the United States and this suited the US strategy of bringing Turkey and Israel together within the framework of the US-led containment strategy against Baghdad and Tehran. It is worth noting in passing that the so-called strategic partnership between the United States and Turkey, allegedly established during the Clinton presidency, coincided with growing Turkish–Israeli military cooperation. Believing that the European Union was turning inwards and considering enlargement only towards the Central and Eastern European countries, the Americans came to the conclusion that the EU was so myopic that it would never

become a global strategic actor and truly assess Turkey's potential benefits to western security interests. Looking from Turkey's perspective though, growing relations with Israel would not only help increase Turkey's strategic value in American eyes but also convince the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington to support Turkey in the US Congress whenever Greek and Armenian lobbies brought anti-Turkey resolutions onto the agenda (Altunisik, 2000). The pro-Israeli lobby played a key role in defeating moves to grant recognition to the so-called Armenian genocide claims in the Congress.

Turkish generals were also motivated by some strategic concerns while approaching Israel (Bengio, 2009: 124–35). For example, Israel would also be of use in meeting Turkey's growing demand for sophisticated military technology. Turkey's western allies had been dragging their feet in offering Turkey high-tech military technology on the pretext of Turkey's poor human rights record and the adoption of non-western norms in dealing with PKK terrorism. Israel would not bring such concerns to the fore, for it had also been preoccupied with terror.

Last but not least, the fact that the Clinton administration shied away from supporting Israel unconditionally in its struggle against the Palestinians appears to have indirectly pushed Israel closer to Turkey. The more the United States supported the two-state solution in this context, the more Israel experienced the feeling of strategic loneliness in the region and the more it valued cooperation with potential allies, such as Turkey. In the absence of unconditional American support, Israel turned to other countries, such as Turkey, with a view to lessening the country's strategic vulnerability.

Structural Causes of the Recent Deterioration

Against this background, recent years have seen a gradual worsening in Turkey's relations with Israel. This part will simply try to uncover the structural factors of this development. The most notable factor in this context seems to be the negative turn Israeli–Palestinian relations have taken since the start of the second intifada in 2000. The more Israelis and Palestinians adopted a collision course, the more difficult it became for Turkey to see Israel in a positive light. Neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations in the United States succeeded in convincing Israel and the Palestinian Authority to sign a final peace agreement. Despite the fact that Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, the rise of the Right in Israeli politics has contributed to a more demanding Israeli approach peace talks. For example, both the Sharon and the Netanyahu governments have been against the idea that Israel should revise its settlement policy and accept a two-state solution as the ideal recipe for peace.

Another factor is that Turkey and Israel have begun to embrace opposing threat perceptions in the post-9/11 era, particularly following the latest war in Iraq. This has been so despite the fact that both countries still adhere to some common objectives in their region, such as strengthening liberal democracy, the elimination of structural causes of transnational terrorism, etc. While Turkey has begun to perceive the possibility of Iraq's implosion, the growing likelihood of Kurdish

independence and the rising PKK attacks as the core security concerns facing the country, Israel has attached disproportionate importance to the rise of Shia Iran, the growing ascendancy of Hizballah and Hamas and the emerging impact of Al-Qaeda's ideology on anti-Israeli feeling across the world.

Of particular concern in this regard is the way of dealing with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. While Turkey has been viewing the policies of the Iraqi Kurds sceptically, Israel has supported the strengthening of Kurdish rule in northern Iraq in the hope that this might contribute to the lessening of its own strategic isolation in the region (Hersh, 2004). In this context, many Turkish circles have doubted whether the growing assertiveness of Israeli security agents in northern Iraq would help Kurds establish their independent state (Kibaroglu, 2005). Some Turkish press reports suggest that Israeli agents have trained Iraqi Kurdish Peshmergas (Radikal, 2004). Whereas an independent Kurdish state would possibly serve Israeli interests by indirectly helping reduce Arab influence in the Middle East, this particular outcome would certainly be viewed by Turkey as posing an existential threat to the make-up of the Turkish nation-state.

A notable structural factor leading to cooler bilateral relations is that Turkey no longer feels isolated in the Middle East. This has been so thanks to the more pragmatic, less ideological foreign policy approach of the current AKP (Kalin, 2008). Turkey's growing engagement in the Middle East has more to do with the country's emerging security considerations than identity-related motivations. The particular assumption that had long shaped Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East was that Turkey should stay away from the region as much as possible if it wanted to prove its western and secular identity. The expectation had been that the more Turkey became estranged from the Middle East, the closer it would come to Europe and the more secure it would feel. For the AKP, far from having contributed to Turkey's western identity and security, this particular policy has in fact perpetuated Turkey's strategic isolation in the Middle East (Aras and Polat, 2007).

In the AKP's understanding, Turkey has multiple simultaneous identities and the country's involvement with the West would become much easier if it could prove its value in relation to western security interests in the Middle East in the post-9/11 era. This foreign policy understanding has also facilitated Turkey's efforts towards the settlement of territorial problems in its neighbourhood. The more Turkey's security and democratization process has been affected by developments in the Middle East, the less Turkey could afford the luxury of turning a blind eye to the region. In this context, the growing Middle Easternization of Turkish foreign policy seems to have been informed more by structural factors than ideological or identity-related considerations (Oguzlu, 2008). This is so despite the fact that the AKP leadership has concluded that Turkey, as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, should have a particular responsibility and mission in maintaining order and facilitating the settlement of perennial disputes in the Middle Eastern region. This might at first sight suggest an identity-related motivation, yet it is not. What Turkey does is rather to help put out fires in the region so that the flames do not reach Anatolia. For Turkey to do that, the *sine qua non* condition is that Ankara develop cordial relations with all

the actors in the region. Adopting a one-sided pro-Israeli stance would be likely to work against Turkey's ability in this context.

Therefore, Turkey has begun to take the utmost care not to put its improving relations with Arab countries at risk by following pro-Israeli policies. It is also worth mentioning in this regard that as Turkey has increasingly begun to employ soft-power instruments in its foreign policies, Israel's value as one of the main providers of Turkey's hard-power capability has begun to decline. Turkey has lately become an important destination for Arab capital and Turkey's exports to the Arab countries have skyrocketed. Recent figures suggest that Turkish exports to the Middle East have been on the rise while those to Europe have been in decline (Kutlay, 2009).⁴ Turkey now feels itself so powerful that its need to secure Israeli help has diminished drastically. As Turkey has become more market-seeking (trading state) than security-seeking (military state), the need on the part of Ankara to seek Tel Aviv's cooperation against existential threats has decreased greatly (Kirişçi, 2009). As the process of de-securitization has gradually taken root in Turkish foreign policy, the value of Israel as a strategic ally has diminished.

That Turkey's relations with Syria have begun to improve following the expulsion of Ocalan from Syria in late 1998 has also affected the nature of Turkey's relations with Israel. Now Turkey and Syria have a free trade agreement; there is no visa requirement for travel; Syria is supporting Turkey's EU accession process; and the parties seem to have come to a *modus vivendi* concerning the status of Hatay and the sharing of the waters of the River Euphrates (Aras and Polat, 2008). More importantly, Damascus has been asking for Turkey's help in efforts to reach an agreement with Tel Aviv and Baghdad. It seems that the roles have changed. Rather than Turkey asking about potential Israeli help to put pressure on Syria, it is now Syria that courts Turkey against Israel. This seems to explain why Turkey felt disappointed and frustrated when it saw how the Israeli attacks in Gaza in December 2008 seriously harmed Turkish efforts to help mediate in the disputes between Syria and Israel on the one hand and Israel and Palestinians on the other (Ulutas, 2010: 6).

Turkey no longer feels threatened by Syria. Therefore, there is no longer a need on the part of Turkey to secure any potential Israeli support against Syria. Unlike the Bush administration, which criticized Turkey for indirectly helping Syria to escape the dangers of international isolation, the Obama presidency appears to share Turkey's view that Syria needs to be diplomatically engaged to contribute to regional stability and so that Damascus does not ally with Iran. This Turkish perception of Syria contradicts the Israeli depiction of Syria as an existential threat that does not hesitate to support Hizballah and Hamas as proxies.

Another structural factor to note in this regard is that Turkey, as opposed to Israel, has recently improved her relations with Iran. Turkey does not feel itself threatened by Iran, though Iranian attempts to obtain a nuclear weapons capability have intensified in recent years (Kibaroglu and Çağlar, 2008). During the much of the 1980s and the 1990s Turkey used to believe that Iran was trying to export its Islamist ideology to Turkey. However, recent years have seen Turkish–Iranian economic relations greatly improve, mainly thanks to the trade in oil and natural gas. Turkey appears to have been supporting the EU-led constructive engagement approach

towards Iran that prioritizes economic incentives, diplomatic negotiations and Iran's incorporation into the international community as a legitimate player. Despite the fact that the post-Saddam era has contributed to the rise of Iranian influence in the Middle East, Tehran does not appear as an existential threat on Ankara's radar screens. Ankara appears to be of the view that Tehran is trying to acquire the nuclear weapons capability for defensive purposes. It is believed that Tehran feels itself encircled by anti-Iranian forces. The presence of American troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Gulf region on the one hand, and belligerent Israeli attitudes on the other, seem to have left Iran with no option but to invest in nuclear weapons capability for deterrence. However, Turkey would feel itself threatened if Iranian nuclear policies created a chain reaction in the Middle East and if the credibility of NATO's nuclear security umbrella dwindled to a significant extent. Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran do have a similar perception of the Kurdish problem in the region and cooperate against the PKK's presence in northern Iraq (Hurriyet Daily News, 2008).

Unlike Turkey, Israel views Iran as the most important existential threat to its security. Israel feels itself encircled by Iran and its associates, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas. The reasons why the Israeli security establishment puts Iran at the top of the threat list are various. One is that the current Iranian President Ahmedinejad supports the establishment of a Palestinian state in Israeli territory, rather than two independent states. Second, Tehran now offers all kinds of military aid to Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Third, Tehran thinks of the Holocaust discourse as the greatest fabrication the world has ever seen. Fourth, Tehran thinks that the solution to Middle East problems involves wiping Israel from the face of the map. Finally, the Iranian-backed Shiite influence has increased tremendously in the Middle East following the regime change in Iraq (Goldberg, 2009). In opposition to Ankara, Tel Aviv, particularly following the establishment of the coalition government led by Netanyahu, has seriously considered bombing Iran's nuclear facilities should international efforts fail to produce a radical shift in Iran's nuclear policies in line with Israel's expectations. That said, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to envisage Turkey and Israel in the same camp against Iran. Turkey is now a non-veto member of the United Nations Security Council and this places it in a quandary when the issue of punishing Iran for its nuclear policies comes onto the agenda.

The changing dynamics of Turkey's relations with the European Union since 9/11 have also affected the dynamics of Turkey's relations with Israel. Turkey's relations with the European Union have improved so much in recent years that the former no longer feels isolated from Europe. That Turkey was first declared a candidate country in 1999 and then accession talks formally began in late 2005 was critical in this context.

Some observers now hold the view that Turkey has been acting as a European country in its region despite its non-membership in the European Union (Öniş and Yilmaz, 2009). This particular situation appears to have reduced Turkey's need to see Israel as a potential ally that might help it compensate for isolation from the EU. The growing Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy has also inevitably led

Turkey to adopt a more pro-Palestinian attitude towards the resolution of the Arab–Israeli dispute. What Turkey wants Israel to do in this regard is to shy away from using excessive force, to accept the two-state plan as the only viable solution, to end the illegal settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and to withdraw from the territories it occupied during the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. These demands are shared by the European Union (Asseburg, 2009). The EU demand that Turkey align its foreign and security policies with those of the European Union as part of the accession process might have resulted in Turkey’s adoption of a more critical view of Israel. Turkey’s participation in the UN-led peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, alongside EU members, is exemplary in this regard (Oğuzlu and Güngör, 2006).

Under the government of the AKP, Turkey has adopted a more rational/instrumental than identity-related approach towards EU membership. That seems to partially explain why Turkey no longer exaggerates positive and negative developments on the road to membership to the same extent as during the 1990s. Turkey seems to have left behind the old approach of contemplating EU membership with a zero-sum mentality. In that outlook, Turkey would be either in or outside the EU. These two alternatives would imply diametrically opposing outcomes. If Turkey were in, it would be seen as European and its security would be assured. If Turkey were left outside, its non-European identity would be sealed for good and its security would be compromised. This outlook played a key role in the past when Turkey wanted to compensate for its isolation from the EU by moving closer to Israel. Unlike this understanding, Turkey’s recent approach towards membership has taken on a more instrumental than ideational tone suggesting that membership or the accession process would be valued to the extent that this adds up Turkey’s capabilities and serves its national interests.

Turkey’s relations with Israel were affected negatively by the deterioration in relations between Turkey and the United States during the George W. Bush presidency. As Turkey experienced a downturn in its relations with the United States in the wake of the war in Iraq in 2003, its relations with Israel also turned sour. The consensus view in Turkey is that Israel played a crucial role in the shaping of US policies towards the Middle East during this period, concerning the overthrow of Saddam’s regime by force, the promotion of democracy as a security strategy and the placement of the Syria–Iran duo in the axis of evil. Israel is also assumed to have played a vital role in the propagation of the idea that pre-emptive strikes should be launched against Iranian nuclear sites (Haaretz, 2009b). That the Bush administration did not hesitate to support Israel unconditionally against Hizballah in 2006 and Hamas in 2008 not only encouraged the Israeli leadership to avoid negotiations with the Palestinians aiming at the two-state solution but also reduced the need on their part to secure Turkey’s cooperation in the legitimization of Israel’s standing in the region.

Another factor to be mentioned in this context is the disparity between the way the Bush administration expected Turkey to behave in the Middle East and how Turkey defined its role in the region. The Bush administration simply wanted Turkey to act as the messenger of the West, carrying its messages to Hamas and other anti-American forces. However, this role has been seriously disputed by the AKP

leadership in that the current government thinks of Turkey as a regional power that should define its interests and policies itself, sometimes transmitting messages from the West to the East, sometimes the reverse, and sometimes trying to impose its own policies on others (Kohen, 2009). This role conception on the part of the AKP does not accord well with Israeli perceptions of Turkey's potential role in the Middle East.

In Lieu of Conclusions: Prospects for the Future

In making predictions for the future the first point to mention is that Turkey's hand seem to have been strengthened by the recent crisis in Davos, despite the fact that this episode had very negative consequences for bilateral relations, the most important of which is the erosion of trust between the two capitals. Why Turkey seems to have come out of this crisis in a more advantageous position than Israel is because Turkey's regional profile has increased whereas Israel's has declined. Israel's reasons for securing Turkey's strategic cooperation have increased. Given that Turkey was the first Muslim country that recognized Israel's sovereignty and that Turkey has been one of the key components of Israel's 'Alliance of Peripheries' strategy, Israel would not dare antagonize Turkey further. Turkey is still one of the most important outlets through which Israel could potentially escape its strategic imprisonment in the Middle East.⁵

Recent years have witnessed Turkey's growing self-confidence while the degree of Israel's loneliness in its region has intensified. It is now the case that Turkey has radically improved its relations with southern neighbours and this is unlikely to change in the years to come. The new foreign policy understanding of the AKP seems to have penetrated well into the Turkish foreign policy culture and most likely will outlive the current government.

Turkey's increasing capacity to manoeuvre in its environment might partially explain why of late Israel has adopted more cautious positions on issues sensitive to Turkey, such as the Cyprus dispute, PKK terrorism and the so-called Armenian genocide. On all these issues, Israel has taken the utmost care not to antagonize Turkey whereas Ankara has not minced its words on Tel Aviv's policies towards the Palestinians and regional issues. However, the growing need on the part of Israel to secure Turkey's support appears to have been misinterpreted by Turkish elites as licensing Turkey to harshly criticize Israel in almost every issue area.

From Turkey's perspective, Israel is valued due more to short- rather than long-term factors. Even though Turkey appreciates the help of the pro-Israeli lobbies in the context of its relations with the European Union and the so-called Armenian genocide issue, the impact of this lobby has somehow been overestimated to the neglect of the fact that western countries generally make their decisions on Turkey on the basis of pragmatic cost–benefit calculations. So long as Turkey was considered vital for the materialization of western strategic interests, the western nations took the utmost care not to antagonize Turkey.

In contemplating the future, one should also talk about the potential impact of the Obama administration on Turkish–Israeli relations. Thus far, the signals coming from Washington suggest that the United States will not give *carte blanche* to Israel

in its relations with the Palestinians and Iran. For example, Obama has adopted a very critical stance on Israel's settlement policies. The appointment of George Mitchell as the US special envoy for the Palestinian–Israeli dispute is another case in point. While this US decision was interpreted positively by the majority of Arabs, the Israeli body politic expressed alarm (Ali, 2009; Jerusalem Post, 2009). Besides, the Obama administration appears to have changed US policy towards Syria and Iran in that the US now wants to engage with these regimes through diplomacy. While this about-face in the US approach seems to be in full conformity with that of Turkey, it contradicts the essence of Israeli policies. The United States now even entertains the idea that Hamas needs to be courted. All these elements imply that Israel most likely will not receive unconditional US support, while its need to secure Turkey's cooperation will not lessen in the years to come. However, this change in US policy might paradoxically have encouraged Turkey's harsh attitudes towards Israel. The more the value of Israel to American policies in the Middle East was questioned, the less risky it became for Turkey to criticize Israel.

The recent improvement in relations between Ankara and Arbil (capital of the Kurdistan autonomous region of Iraq) may portend good for the future of Turkish–Israeli relations. The more positively Ankara and Arbil view each other, the less Turkey should be wary of Israeli intentions over the future of northern Iraq.

The changing nature of Turkish–Israeli relations might also affect the way that Israel defines its relations with Arab and non-Arab countries of the Middle East. It seems that the old 'Alliance of Peripheries' strategy will not survive, as the recent crisis with Turkey showed that the support of non-Arab countries should not be taken for granted (Ben-Ami, 2009). Unwanted as it has certainly been, deteriorating relations with Turkey might inadvertently lead Israeli strategists to conclude that true peace for Israel will come only through an improvement in relations with Arab neighbours.

Notes

¹ Erdogan urges world to recognize Hamas, *Presstv*, 1 February 2009. Available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=84347§ionid=351020202> (accessed 3 February 2009).

² It is worth noting that the Turkish military did not object to the cancellation of NATO's military exercise which would also include Israel.

³ Almost 70 per cent of respondents approve AKP's policies towards Israel. Turk Dis Politikasında Yon Degisimi ve Komsular ile Iliiskiler Algilama Anketi. Available at <http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/diger/Ad8jIAVq2RGF5HXpeiQk67m5gJrjeV.doc> (accessed February 2009).

⁴ The figures suggest that exports to Middle East have increased to 19 per cent whereas to Europe declined to 48 per cent.

⁵ Such views are especially shared by Turkish observers (see Akgün, 2009).

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