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## Who Needs Whom? Turkey and Israel Agree on Normalization Deal

by Mohammed Alsaftawi

### ABSTRACT

Turkish-Israeli relations have been significantly affected by developments in the region. Relations started deteriorating after the 2008 Gaza war, culminating in the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident. It was not until 2013 that a drawn out process of normalization began, reaching an agreement in June 2016. This paper explores the domestic, regional, and global circumstances that led to the normalization between Turkey and Israel. It analyses the reasons for the protracted process between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's public apology to then Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan in March 2013 and the agreement reached in 2016. The paper argues that the domestically-driven repositioning of Turkish foreign policy after the stepping down of former Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu enabled the agreement, while the changed regional context and the relative isolation of both Israel and Turkey drove both countries to repair relations.

*Turkey | Turkey's foreign policy | Israel | Palestine*

keywords

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### Introduction

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey at the end of 2002, Turkish foreign policy has experienced a profound transformation, expanding cooperation with the Middle East and renewing focus on the Palestinian cause. Reflecting Turkey's desire to be a regional power, the new foreign policy which developed was multi-dimensional, based on independence, openness, improving regional relations with other states, and positioning Turkey in the role of a regional mediator. This role, as Andreas Michaelis has pointed out, was motivated by

the attempt to disguise the fact that one is a party to the web of relations one is operating within. I would like to call this the "camouflage approach." Turkey's goal is not only to mediate in the Middle East but to re-enter the Middle Eastern arena and to counterbalance Iran's increasing role in the region. This is a perfectly legitimate desire. Hence, Turkey's mediation is symptomatic of this desire.<sup>1</sup>

In assuming this mediating role, Turkey took a strong position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under the rule of AKP it declared its support for the Palestinians, particularly Gaza, from the outset by providing support on both the official and popular level.<sup>2</sup> From the Turkish perspective, criticism of the Israeli occupation was considered a useful policy to attract more supporters for the AKP both domestically

<sup>1</sup> Körber-Stiftung, *Conflict Management in the Middle East: Regional Solutions to Regional Problems?*, 142nd Bergedorf Round Table, Beirut, 20-22 March 2009, Hamburg, Körber-Stiftung, 2009, p. 49, [http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/bg/PDFs/bnd\\_142\\_en\\_text.pdf](http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/bg/PDFs/bnd_142_en_text.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew S. Cohen and Charles D. Freilich, "Breakdown and Possible Restart: Turkish-Israeli Relations under the AKP", in *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), p. 39-55.

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and abroad, and to enhance its influence and stature. Kemal Kirişçi has argued that "Erdoğan's criticism was likely more aimed at pleasing his public than disturbing relations with Israel."<sup>3</sup> Kirişçi furthermore asserted that

Given his constituency, for Erdoğan to ignore the Palestinians would be a serious political liability; speaking out in their defense lends him and his government credibility among the local public, even if behind the scenes he continues to uphold bilateral agreements and positive relations.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish-Palestinian relations further improved with the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) election in 2006. The Islamic background of both parties contributed to deepening this relationship. Despite Israeli opposition, there had been early contact with Hamas. Turkey recognised the results of the 2006 election and demanded respect for the decision of the Palestinian people. Additionally, despite the international boycott, Turkey continued to deal with the caretaker government led by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and tried to engage Hamas in regional and international politics, thus granting it legitimacy. This became evident when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated: "I don't see Hamas as a terror organization. Hamas is a political party."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the AKP claimed that by engaging Hamas it might be drawn away from its dogmatic past, towards more practical and "open-for-compromise" politics. In February 2006 a delegation led by Khaled Mashaal was officially invited to visit Ankara,<sup>6</sup> a move which was harshly criticised by the international community.

However, until the beginning of the 2008 Gaza war, Turkey continued to play this mediating role and maintained good relations with Israel. This was apparent during the Turkish official visit to Israel in January 2005, when Abdullah Gül said that "Turkey has a special responsibility to contribute to peacemaking efforts as the grandchildren of an empire that ruled Jerusalem in peace for 600 years and that had friendly historical relations with both Israelis and Palestinians."<sup>7</sup> However, following the Gaza war, Turkey took a different position and actually became part of the conflict, evident in Ankara's aggressive rhetoric towards Israel. The 2010 Mavi Marmara incident marked the lowest point in Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>8</sup> From

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Brandenburg interview with Kemal Kirişçi, 29 December 2004. Cited in Rachel Brandenburg, "No Longer Newlyweds: The Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy towards Israel", in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 2005), p. 11-12, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/173/no-longer-newlyweds-the-evolution-of-turkish-foreign-policy-towards-israel-winter-2005>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Charlie Rose interview with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in *Charlie Rose*, 11 May 2011, <https://charlierose.com/videos/15032>.

<sup>6</sup> Tulin Daloglu, "Hamas Leader Meshaal Pays 'Secretive' Visit to Turkey", in *Al-Monitor*, 21 February 2013, <http://almon.co/641>.

<sup>7</sup> Meliha Altunışık and Esra Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (November 2010), p. 376.

<sup>8</sup> The Mavi Marmara was organized by the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İHH) and aimed to break the Israeli siege on Gaza. It was loaded with

March 2013 onwards, serious negotiations took place between Turkey and Israel which culminated in the agreement of June 2016.

This paper analyses developments in the relations between the two countries by focusing mainly on explaining why the first attempts to normalize relations in 2013 failed, but an agreement could be reached in 2016. It argues that the recent domestically-driven repositioning of Turkish foreign policy has enabled the agreement, while the changed regional context and the relative isolation of both Israel and Turkey in the region have driven both countries to repair relations.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the first part briefly discusses the key parameters which shape the Turkish position on the Palestinian cause. In this context, the second part describes the attempts to reach a normalization deal between Israel and Turkey and the reasons that these attempts failed in 2013. In the third part, the paper explains how the domestic repositioning in Turkey made the agreement possible before it discusses the factors that drove the actors into the agreement, with analysis from three perspectives, those of Turkey, Israel and Palestine. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

### 1. The Turkish position on the Palestinian cause

Turkey under AKP rule has become a key player in Middle East politics, basing its new foreign policy on the concept of "strategic depth" which has transformed Turkey to a central country on the regional map, based on the fact that it is located at the heart of it. With this policy, Turkey's appeal as a soft power increased, especially in the early Arab Spring period, as Turkey appeared to be a model which could unite the "Western" democracy project and the "Eastern" political Islam project. As intense regional conflicts have inhibited cooperation in the region, Turkish foreign policy in recent years has been keen to play a third party role in mediation, especially in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In a speech the Chief of Staff İlker Başbuğ said: "Without a resolution of the Palestinian question, there could be no peace in the Middle East."<sup>9</sup> The Palestinian cause has thus become a priority issue for Turkish policymakers. Policy development on this issue has been affected by a range of key parameters at the domestic, regional, and international levels which will be briefly described.

At the domestic level, the common cultural and historical heritage from the Ottoman Empire, as well as a shared sense of Islamic belonging, binds Turkey to Palestine. Large segments of Turkish society support the Palestinian people against Israel which renders the Palestinian cause a magic bullet for winning voters. Moreover,

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relief supplies and humanitarian aid. Israeli navy forces targeted the Mavi Marmara and killed ten Turkish citizens, an act that according to Turkey offended its national honour.

<sup>9</sup> Meliha Altunışık and Esra Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts", cit., p. 373.

the ideological background and the Islamic roots of the AKP leaders themselves has made the Palestinian cause a fundamental part of the party's programme.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Turkey is a modern democratic nation that believes in the principles of human rights, public freedoms, human civilization and the right of peoples to independence, and thus interference in Palestinian affairs stems from a position that rejects the occupation of Palestine based on international norms and law.

Turkey has been vying to be seen as an influential country, and to boost its presence in the regional and global arenas. The Palestinian cause has been useful in entering both. As Meliha Altunışık has pointed out,

if you want to have popularity in the Arab world and if you want to be a regional power, you need to lead the Palestinian issue; Iran was doing the same thing and in the Lebanon war, Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad became very popular in the Arab streets. With the Gaza war of 2008, this has changed, and suddenly it was Erdoğan. I see that in the context of regional strategic competition.<sup>11</sup>

As long as the Palestinian issue is at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the AKP will endeavour to exploit this to maintain advanced relations with both, especially after Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring resulted in Turkey becoming more isolated from its neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, Turkey did not exceed the "acceptable" boundaries and harm Arab sensitivities, particularly regarding Egypt. Ankara acknowledged, as stated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, that the Turkish role can be helpful or complementary, but it cannot replace that of Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

AKP carefully crafted its position on the Palestinian cause with regard to the rules of the international political game, especially as Turkey is a member of NATO.<sup>13</sup> This membership imposed limitations which Turkey could not exceed. Turkish support to the Palestinians in the political, media, and financial fields was, for example, limited, since the financial assistance only consisted of aid and humanitarian relief projects, as well as infrastructure support. This support also could not exceed the vision of the "two-state solution" and the Arab peace initiative, or contradict the strategic interests of Western states.

<sup>10</sup> Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2008, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG726.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Meliha Altunışık on the Turkish Israeli Palestinian relations under the rule of AKP 2002-2015, 10 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release Regarding the Ceasefire Agreement between Israel and Palestine*, 21 November 2012, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-264\\_-21-november-2012\\_-press-release-regarding-the-ceasefire-agreement-reached-tonight-between-israel-and-palestine.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-264_-21-november-2012_-press-release-regarding-the-ceasefire-agreement-reached-tonight-between-israel-and-palestine.en.mfa).

<sup>13</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), "The Arabs and Turkey Present Challenges and Future Stakes", in *Doha Special Files*, June 2011, p. 5, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/13f444f7-168f-4b31-b317-f36bcd4338da>.

In conclusion, while the domestic and regional contexts represent factors that drove Turkey into a role sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, the international context has tended to mediate this effect. How did this play out in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident, in 2013 and 2016?

### 2. An unfulfilled opportunity for reconciliation

Turkish-Israeli relations began to deteriorate with the Gaza war in 2008. The Turkish leadership felt that Ehud Olmert, then prime minister of Israel, used his visit to Ankara in 2008 as a distraction from the war Israel had planned against Gaza. Turkey considered this as a serious affront to the Turkish state and its mediating role. According to Özlem Tür, "[t]his was the point at which, on the Turkish side, relations took a new turn."<sup>14</sup> This intensified in 2009 when Erdoğan had a public confrontation with then-Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos, and with the low-seat incident.<sup>15</sup> It was the conflict on the Mavi Marmara, however, which had the deepest impact on Turkish-Israeli relations which gradually snowballed into a major crisis. In Turkish eyes, the Mavi Marmara crisis was the worst incident of foreign troops killing Turkish civilians in their history. The Islamist Turkish elite used this opportunity to contribute to the escalation of the crisis.

Why was there no hurry to improve the relationship from either side at that time? Following the Mavi Marmara crisis, Israel tried to find an alternative to its relationship with Turkey and established new links with Greece and Cyprus. Additionally, Israel was not prepared to compromise on the blockade of Gaza or the Mavi Marmara crisis because the options on the negotiation table did not encourage it to back down. From the Israeli standpoint, both issues were utilised by the Israeli media to gain international and domestic sympathy. So there was little incentive for Israel to take a step back. It decided on a new policy for dealing with Turkey was based on a combination of outer and inner containment. Nimrod Goren explained that the

Israeli government members kept quiet and did not retaliate towards Erdoğan's statements and policies. The logic was to let Erdoğan play his game on his own, without reacting to his provocations. Israel believed that time will take its toll, and eventually Turkey would move on to other issues.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Özlem Tür, "Turkey and Israel in the 2000s: From Cooperation to Conflict", in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 2012), p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> In 2010, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon publicly insulted the Turkish ambassador in Tel Aviv, Ahmet Oğuz Celikkol, by sitting him in a lower chair and putting only the Israeli flag on the table.

<sup>16</sup> Nimrod Goren, "An Unfulfilled Opportunity for Reconciliation: Israel and Turkey during the Arab Spring", in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 2012), p. 132, [http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight-turkey\\_vol\\_14\\_no\\_2\\_2012\\_goren.pdf](http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight-turkey_vol_14_no_2_2012_goren.pdf).



Ofra Bengio argued that additionally Israel was cautious in dealing with the Turkish dispute to avoid an escalation of tensions with Turkey, as occurred in 1956:

Israel demonstrated that it had learned the lesson of the past: It avoided repeating its mistake of 1956, when it recalled its ambassador in protest against similar move by Turkey, only to find that it would take more than 30 years to return.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in past decades, for Israel, ties with Turkey in all fields were considered a source of pride and legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

However, during the Arab Spring the Turkish government, which was supporting the rise of political Islam, considered its relations and normalization with Israel as an embarrassment. In contrast to the previous policy of “zero problems with the neighbours”, the AKP was now ready to sacrifice its ties with Israel in exchange for leading the Middle East during the Arab Spring. A set of internal and external factors served to exacerbate this. Internally, there was the success of AKP in the 2011 elections for a third consecutive term, and the re-election of Erdoğan as Prime Minister. Externally, with the victory of the Ennahda party in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, it seemed that the political Islam project was on the rise. There was also an economic dimension. According to Stephen F. Larrabee, “the liberalisation of the Turkish economy has given a new economic dimension to foreign policy. In recent years, Turkey’s trade with the Middle East and Gulf region has increased significantly.”<sup>18</sup>

It must be clarified however that there was not a severing of all relations between the two countries. The bilateral talks did not cease and delegations continued to meet either publicly or behind closed doors. Ofra Bengio has underscored the depth of the Israeli-Turkish relationship despite all the obstacles:

They have never engaged in a war against each other, nor do they pose any sort of strategic menace to one another. Quite the opposite. Similarly, the generally positive historical bonds between the two nations have also contributed to this longevity. Thus, the strength and depth of the Turkish-Israeli bilateral relationship had been without parallel anywhere else in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ofra Bengio, “Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey: A View from Israel”, in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 2009), p. 54, [http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight\\_turkey\\_vol\\_11\\_no\\_2\\_2009\\_bengio.pdf](http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight_turkey_vol_11_no_2_2009_bengio.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen F. Larrabee, “Turkey’s New Geopolitics”, in *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (April-May 2010), p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> Ofra Bengio, “Altercating Interests and Orientations between Israel and Turkey”, cit., p. 54.

This is also evident in bilateral economic relations which were unaffected by this political crisis and continued to grow. In the words of Turcas CEO Batu Aksoy,

Turkey remains the safest energy corridor for Israel to sell its gas to global markets [...] we are talking about something that is more than a pipeline, something that can be a remedy for lingering political clashes with Israel and its neighbours.<sup>20</sup>

Some positive steps had also been taken by both sides such as Turkey sending planes to help fight forest fires in northern Israel in December 2010,<sup>21</sup> and Israel's offering of aid following the October 2011 earthquake in eastern Turkey near the city of Van.<sup>22</sup>

In parallel, the US made attempts to create a better atmosphere and re-establish renewed relations between the countries, to prevent further escalation of the difficulties which could lead to the deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship.<sup>23</sup> These attempts were serious, varied and intensive and led to Netanyahu's public apology to Erdoğan in March 2013 without, however, achieving an actual agreement despite being a first step to rebuilding the relationship. Turkey advanced three conditions for the normalization of relations with Israel: a formal apology for the attack on the Mavi Marmara, financial compensation for victims, and ending the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip. Israel had already approved the first two conditions for normalization in 2013, but the third necessitated a long and profound discussion between the countries. The ending of the siege was essential for Turkey, as otherwise the government would not be able to sell this agreement to their supporters within Turkey and in the wider Arab world, as Erdoğan sought to project the image of a protector of the Palestinian cause.

So, despite Prime Minister Netanyahu's public apology to Erdoğan and the continuing US pressure to rebuild Turkish-Israeli relations, there was no obvious evolution in the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Many academics, writers and journalists thought that once the Israeli apology to Turkey was made, Turkish-Israeli relations would normalize. However, the situation was more complex than the apology itself, as normalization proved to be linked to local and regional conditions. The chaotic political circumstances were not conducive for normalization, nor did the national interests of both countries align at that time. So what made the difference in 2016? It will be argued that the domestically-driven repositioning of Turkish foreign policy was necessary to enable normalization,

<sup>20</sup> Gabriela Özel Volfová, "Changes in Turkish-Israeli Relations. Implications for Regional Security Environment", in *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies (CEJISS)*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), p. 113, <http://www.cejiss.org/issue/2014-volume-8-issue-1>.

<sup>21</sup> "Israel Battles Deadly Forest Fire", in *Al Jazeera*, 3 December 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2010/12/20101238363661534.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Barak Ravid, "Israel Offers Aid to Turkey in Wake of Massive Earthquake", in *Haaretz*, 23 October 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.391552>.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Kaya, "Turkey and Israel in a New Middle East", in *FMSO Monographs*, July 2013.



while the changed regional circumstances allowed the normalization to take place.

### 3. Repositioning Turkish foreign policy

Before the 2007 election, decision-making in Turkish foreign policy involved three key players: first, the Prime Minister who is the head of the majority party in Parliament and is assisted by the Foreign Ministry; second, the institution of the Presidency, which enjoys a constitutionally indispensable role which de-/increases with the personality of its holder; and third, the military, specifically through its influence within the Turkish National Security Council. Two of these players gradually disappeared to the advantage of one player who drew all Turkish foreign policy together: President Erdoğan.

A decision-making crisis within the Turkish institutions had emerged in the presidency period of Abdullah Gül, when Erdoğan was Prime Minister. Despite belonging to the same party and intellectual and political project, and having a good personal relationship, Erdoğan's personality did not accept a partner or a rival in the decision-making process. This structural crisis intensified when Erdoğan became President, elected directly by the people, not by the Parliament. This represented "a significant step towards the personalization of power in the hands of Turkey's most powerful president," Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said in an interview with Voice of America on 13 May 2016. Erdoğan is on course to be the "most powerful person ever since Turkey became a multi-party democracy in 1950. He would be head of government, head of state, head of ruling party, pretty much head of everything in Turkey."<sup>24</sup> The removal of former Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu who shaped the contours of Turkish foreign policy from 2002 until 2015 from the leadership of the party and the government, demonstrated the imbalance in the relationship between the presidency and the Prime Minister in Davutoğlu's final days. This resulted in a shift in the role of the Prime Minister to being an implementer of the policies drawn up by the President, in contrast to the procedure in the period of Davutoğlu, particularly with regard to the negotiations with the European Union and the US.

Binali Yıldırım – Turkey's new Prime Minister – had a different approach: "we" instead of "I." He was one of the founders of the AKP, and the former Minister of Transport, Maritime, and Communication for more than 13 years. Yıldırım is one of the closest confidants of President Erdoğan and has been loyal to him since he was Mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> He is acutely aware that he prefers to use "we" instead of "I" when talking about achievements, unlike Davutoğlu.

<sup>24</sup> Onur Ant and Benjamin Harvey, "Erdoğan Tightens Grip on Turkey as Loyalist Set to Be Premier", in *Bloomberg*, 19 May 2016, <http://bloom.bg/1TlzASm>.

<sup>25</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "New Turkish PM Helps Erdoğan Revive 'Ottoman Glory'", in *Al-Monitor*, 20 May 2016, <http://almon.co/2o0g>.

Erdoğan needed to find a scapegoat to blame for the failures of Turkish foreign policy, and Davutoğlu – formerly considered “The Architect” of Turkey’s foreign policy – was a suitable candidate. The new Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım could credibly send different reconciliatory messages to four countries with which Turkey had been experiencing problems. He said:

Israel, Syria, Russia, Egypt [...] There can’t be any permanent enmities between these countries encircling [the] Black Sea and the Mediterranean. An incident happened with Russia. We, of course, won’t allow the violation of our right to sovereignty. However, it’s not right to stick to a single incident.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Significant turning point: Turkey and Israel agree on a normalization deal – Who wins and who loses?

Reconciliation has come closer to being realised after the failure of political Islam during the Arab Spring, the failure of the military attempts to overthrow the Syrian regime, the emergence of ISIS as a new international threat, the failure of Turkish foreign and defence policies, new Turkish-Russian tensions, and the end of the dream of reviving Turkey’s Ottoman heritage to become a regional power in the Middle East. A shift in global and regional politics left Ankara and Tel Aviv with no alternative option than to back down. However, what were the concrete incentives for the agreement – in other words, who wins and who loses from it? This question can be answered from three different perspectives.

##### *From the Turkish perspective*

As the Middle East is currently facing the breaking down of states and security systems, Israel remains one of the only stable states in the region leading to a willingness on both sides to mend fences. Meliha Altunışık argues that

Turkish-Israeli relations have always been based on interests; if they create some common interests, they normalise the relations, but if common interests are not enough, relations are not that close. It’s not like between Syria and Turkey – either very good or very bad. AKP is very pragmatic in that sense.<sup>27</sup>

Turkey will continue its intelligence cooperation with Israel on the Syrian war which is currently very important for both sides. Both states are also eager to develop common projects with respect to the sphere of energy. Furthermore,

<sup>26</sup> Fatih Çekirge, “Turkey’s PM Sends Reconciliatory Messages to Russia, Israel, Syria, Egypt”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 June 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=100597>.

<sup>27</sup> Author’s interview with Meliha Altunışık on the Turkish Israeli Palestinian relations under the rule of AKP 2002-2015, 10 June 2016.

Turkey has recently faced political, economic, and military problems which have had an adverse impact on its regional role. Therefore, Turkey can not be the source of peace and stability in the region it would have liked to be and has an urgent need for cooperation to fight against “terrorism,” and to tighten the screws on the PKK and the parallel state “Gülen movement” over which Turkey has become increasingly sensitive. In light of these challenges, the American Jewish community is one of the most important allies for Turkey, which has always supported the close relationship between Turkey and Israel, and which has worked to strengthen and to encourage close Turkish-Israeli ties. Dan Arbell, Senior Fellow at the Center of Middle East Policy at Brookings, for example, has pointed out that “Jewish organizations and lobbyists advised the Turkish government on ways to fight congressional attempts to pass an Armenian Genocide bill that would have included sanctions against Turkey.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, it is not easy to ignore public pressure in Turkey; the government will pay a high cost in terms of public relations such as losing credibility among its supporters, such as İHH, which organised the 2010 flotilla to Gaza and which has declared its clear objection to the agreement between Turkey and Israel. İHH has pointed out that an agreement foreseeing the use of Ashdod port “would not weaken the blockade, but rather lead to an official recognition of it.”<sup>29</sup>

### *From the Israeli perspective*

The fact that Israel and Turkey have common enemies – Syria and Iran are a particular threat to both countries – has also enabled the normalization. According to Mahmut Bali Aykan, “Turkish-Israeli relations are based on a rationale of joining hands against common enemies, so-called ‘rogue’ states, or countries that are seen as a mutual security threat,” including countries like Syria, Iraq and Iran.<sup>30</sup> Ege Seçkin, a senior analyst at IHS Country Risk, has emphasised that: “The reconciliation deal between Turkey and Israel is motivated partly by the increasing prominence in the region of their common rival, Iran.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Netanyahu and his government are seeking to achieve some victories which they can market as significant achievements to their followers. Netanyahu is trying to escape pressure from two sides: internally from the opposition and externally from the international community after the failure of all attempts to sign a peace agreement with the Palestinians and the increasing weight of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS). A senior Israeli official said that

<sup>28</sup> Dan Arbell, “The U.S.-Turkey-Israel Triangle”, in *Brookings Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Papers*, No. 34 (October 2014), p. 9, <http://brook.gs/2bmvHgz>.

<sup>29</sup> “İHH Declares Objection to Turkey-Israel Normalization”, in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 June 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nid=100904>.

<sup>30</sup> Mahmut Bali Aykan, “The Turkey-U.S.-Israel Triangle: Continuity, Change and Implications for Turkey’s Post-Cold War Middle East Policy”, in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer 1999), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Erin Cunningham and Ruth Eglash, “Israel and Turkey Announce Deal to Repair Relations After Six-Year Split”, in *The Washington Post*, 27 June 2016, <http://wpo.st/hHF82>.

The main matter in the agreement is providing immunity to Israel Defense Force soldiers from claims filed in the International Court of Justice. The other things in the agreement are connected to relations between ourselves and Turkey. They wanted us to lift the blockade on Gaza, and we rejected that. But we agreed to assist the population in Gaza. Our policy is to differentiate between the population and Hamas. The projects that we have approved deal with matters such as water, electricity and hospitals. In Gaza, there are worrying signs regarding the collapse of infrastructure there.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, having full diplomatic relations with Turkey, a Muslim country with an international position, is a top foreign policy objective from the Israeli point of view.

### *From the Palestinian perspective*

For Palestinians in general and Hamas in particular, the Turkish-Israeli agreement is a significant disappointment, especially since the Palestinian cause is experiencing a severe decline in importance at the international and regional level as a result of the Syrian war. The Palestinians expected Turkey under the leadership of AKP to continue its role as the guardian of the Palestinian cause, especially in the Gaza Strip, in light of the rhetoric of President Erdoğan on the issue.

However, Erdoğan and his party have tried to maintain relations with the Palestinians. Two days before the official announcement of the agreement, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal visited Ankara and met Turkey's President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Yıldırım. Erdoğan also had a phone call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in a push for normalization of Turkish-Israeli ties.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey has clearly followed its interests, and not its normative support of the Palestinian cause, after realising that Israel would not retreat from its stance on the siege on Gaza. As Amira Oron, chargé d'affaires of the Israeli Embassy in Ankara, said: "the Turkish media can sell to their people what they want, but we will make the humanitarian aid bigger and faster, no more, no less."<sup>34</sup> As part of the agreement, Israel will enable Turkey to set up infrastructure projects in Gaza, including the construction of a hospital, a power station, and a desalination facility. All the materials for these projects will be transported via Israel's Ashdod Port. The agreement confirms that the countries are ready to sacrifice ideology for the sake of their national interests.

<sup>32</sup> Barak Ravid, "Israel, Turkey Reach Understandings on Hamas", in *Haaretz*, 26 June 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Raphael Ahren, "Erdogan Slams Israel, But Insists Both Fatah and Hamas Back Rapprochement", in *The Times of Israel*, 28 June 2016, <http://toi.sr/299y2NJ>.

<sup>34</sup> See also Oron interview with Ali Ünal, "Normalization with Israel to Continue after Formation of Strong Gov't", in *Daily Sabah*, 29 August 2015, <http://sabahdai.ly/FT2d6R>.

As the agreement has been signed without the promised end of the siege on Gaza, the dreams of Hamas to strengthen its rule in Gaza have evaporated. Now, Hamas has even less room for manoeuvre and faces some challenging questions. Internally, Hamas confronts a real crisis between the military "Qassam" wing and the political wing, in addition to the pressing issue of Palestinian reconciliation and the failure to reach a solution with the Fatah movement to end the division. The only remaining hope for Hamas to end this crisis would be a new prisoner exchange, but this time through Turkish mediation. Hamas knows the positive domestic effect of making deals such as that concerning Gilad Shalit reached on 11 October 2011 through Egyptian mediation.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

The Arab Spring has represented a crisis of choice for Turkey, between economic interests, political relations, and moral commitments to democracy and the political Islam project. As a result of this crisis, Turkey has moved from a "Zero problem" policy to a "Zero friends, more enemies and more isolation" policy. The new vision of Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım – under the influence of Erdoğan – is to break Turkey's isolation and improve its ambitions after struggling with the definition and nature of Turkey's role during the Arab Spring. Being in urgent need of normalization with Israel, Turkey agreed to the normalization deal despite the continuing Gaza siege.

However, Turkey will stay in contact with Hamas but with a different communication strategy and a different structure of relations. This means that Hamas is still important in the Turkish equation and – vice versa – that Turkey still has sufficient influence to change Hamas' behaviour. In other words, Turkey could yet play a credible role in Palestinian reconciliation.

Under the AKP government, Turkish-Israeli relations have witnessed a lot of ups and downs. The recent development symbolises a significant change for both countries that have had to re-shape their own foreign policy, especially towards the Middle East. Despite the fact that Turkey and Israel are not yet free of problems, their relations will likely further improve and they will remain strategic allies, also thanks to the influence of the US in fostering and protecting their relationship.

*Updated 12 November 2016*

<sup>35</sup> The deal included that Israel released 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Hamas releasing Israeli captive soldier Gilad Shalit. See "Israel, Hamas Sign Deal for Soldier's Release", in *CNN*, 12 October 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/11/world/meast/israel-shalit-release>.

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