

Editor: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Vol. 3, No. 2, November 2018

Can Music act as a Diplomatic Tool in Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement?

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Since the formation of bilateral relations in 1949, Turkish-Israeli relations have been characterized by ups and downs. Despite being the first Muslim country to recognize Israel, Turkey nevertheless refrained from direct ambassadorial level contact with Israel until 1991. This step bore fruit especially in the field of military cooperation, and to a certain extent among the Israeli public. However, in Turkey the diplomatic “honeymoon” never penetrated to the person-to-person level.

The 2002 rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) has also raised concerns about the quality and future of bilateral relations. Until the gradual elimination from the political arena of the Turkish Armed Forces (Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri – TSK) – which was considered as the dominant force acting behind the scenes to boost bilateral relations– Israeli-Turkish relations maintained the essentially positive nature that was characteristic of the 1990s.

In 2009, the picture began to change dramatically, when then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Israel of committing war crimes after a heated debate with the late Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum, held that year in Davos. As a result of this unprecedented confrontation, bilateral relations deteriorated steadily. The most

important reason for this phenomenon was Turkey's agenda of attaching the continued health of the Israeli-Turkish diplomatic relationship to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This worldview was reflective of the broader Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, and paved the way for severe political tensions manifested in an exchange of inflammatory comments and a series of crises such as the Mavi Marmara flotilla and the so-called "low-chair" incident. While all these matters can certainly be considered as the focus of Turkish foreign policy, it should be also noted that Erdoğan administration has utilized the friction between the two states to bolster its public approval domestically, especially during election campaigns. Inevitably, this policy dramatically damaged Israel's reputation in the eyes of the Turkish public.

Official anti-Israel rhetoric also provided encouragement to those who engage in overt anti-Semitic expression. According to a public opinion poll commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 2015, anti-Jewish attitudes and beliefs are held by 71 percent of the adult Turkish population.¹ Another recent survey entitled, "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy," conducted by the Center for Turkish Studies at Kadir Has University in 2018, reveals that 54.4% of survey participants perceive Israel as the "second most serious threat" to Turkey, after the US. Meanwhile, 56.3% do not support the normalization of relations with Israel.² In addition to public perception, the display of an anti-Semitic discourse, including threats of violence, has increased in social media and even in some national media outlets.

Despite such political escalation, people-to-people relations have not yet deteriorated to the point of no return. For instance, the bilateral trade between the two countries has witnessed a significant boost in recent years.³ In the first quarter of 2017, for instance, Turkish exports to Israel increased by 20 percent while Israeli exports to Turkey rose by 45 percent.⁴

In addition to resilient trade relations, cultural and musical exchange has emerged as another important aspect of people-to-people relations that has managed to be isolated from political

tensions. In recent years, a growing number of Israeli musicians such as Yasmin Levy, Mor Karbasi, Riff Cohen, Dudu Tassa, Mark Eliyahu, and Yinon Muallem have regularly performed in Turkish cities, particularly in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. In doing so, they have succeeded in reaching out to a significant number of Turkish music lovers. Despite increasing anti-Semitic sentiment in Turkish society, concerts given by Israeli musicians attract great attention from Turkish audiences; it seems that music's power to connect both peoples has become particularly important, especially in times of political strife.

Yasmin Levy, a passionate interpreter of Ladino songs, is one of the most well-known Israeli singers to perform in Turkey. She has given numerous sold-out concerts, and has accumulated a significant number of Turkish fans. In addition to solo performances, she has performed duets with well-known Turkish singers, such as İbrahim Tatlıses, Kubat, and Koray Avcı, and covered one of the most unforgettable Turkish pop classics "[Firuze](#)." On the Turkish side, in 2005, Ferhat Göçer, a popular Turkish singer, covered a 15th century Sephardic song, "[La Rosa Enflorese](#)," also known as "Los Bilbilikos," with Turkish lyrics. His performance of the song "[Yastayım](#)" gained huge popularity, reaching millions of Youtubers as well. Even though most Turkish listeners do not know the song was originally sung by Sephardic Jews at the Shabbat and Jewish high holiday festival tables, the spirit of the music seems to profoundly touch the hearts of many.

The Istanbul-based "[Light in Babylon](#)", founded in 2010 and composed of Israeli, Turkish and French musicians, can be considered to be another significant example of how music is a powerful way for musicians to contribute to conflict resolution and overcome ethnic and religious boundaries. Indeed fRoots Magazine's [endorsement of this band](#) as "a celebration of the cosmopolitan traditions both of Istanbul and the Sephardic Jewish community" also highlights the group's potential as a bridge-builder between the peoples. Performing their songs mainly in Hebrew in the heart of Istanbul's entertainment zone, İstiklal Avenue, the

group has interestingly been able to attract the attention of a larger, global audience. Today, the group has fans from all over the world including in Turkey, Israel, Iran, Palestine, the US, Europe, India, and Pakistan. The band has also caught the attention of Turkish media outlets, and has appeared on many national TV channels, thanks to their emphasis on international pluralism and on “peace in the Middle East.”

There are a number of Israeli artists besides Light in Babylon who have been able to capture a Turkish audience. Among the most popular today are Mor Karbasi, who is acclaimed as the “new diva of Ladino music,” and French-Israeli singer Riff Cohen, who performs songs in French, Hebrew, and Arabic. However, it should be noted that such affection is not a one-way street: the Israeli artists have expressed their deep appreciation for their Turkish audience. Israeli rock musician Dudu Tassa, who performed two concerts with his band the Kuwaitis in Ankara and Istanbul in December 2017, emphasizes that the Turkish audience was “very warm” towards his music by stating that “the music was heartily accepted by the audience who danced during the whole concert.”⁵ Ariel Qassis, an Israeli *qanun* player playing for Dudu’s latest project, has been travelling between Turkey and Israel for 17 years. He finds the Turkish audience “very curious” and sees the Middle Eastern themed music as an important bridge between the two peoples. Ariel is also a member of [The Ottomans](#) ensemble, playing Turkish music at the Shafa Bar at the heart of the Jaffa flea market every Monday; these concerts often develop into belly-dancing parties. Ariel states that “the place is filled with people every Monday. In fact, many Israeli songs are originally a version of Turkish songs, therefore, they are warmly accepted and admired by the Israeli audience.”⁶

Given the presence of the Turkish-Jewish community in Israel, Turkish music and Turkish musicians have always been familiar and indeed popular among the Israeli public. İbrahim Tatlıses, who is known as the “Emperor of Arabesque,” is one of the most well-known Turkish singers in Israel; he delivered a massive, sold-out concert in Eilat in 2005 and

performed alongside such Israeli singers as Sarit Hadad. Unlike many others, Tatlıses's music has reached a certain level of mass-penetration: it is not uncommon for Israeli taxi drivers to sing a Tatlıses song upon learning that their passenger is from Turkey. One may also observe, for example, a poster of Orhan Gencebay, who is considered among the notables of Turkish Arabesque music, hanging on the wall of a music store in Jaffa.

It is obvious that cultural and musical exchange between two countries steadily continue despite political and diplomatic difficulties. Decision makers in both countries, however, seem to have yet to realize the unifying power of music. Mümin Sesler, a Turkish musician who lives in Israel for almost 30 years and has been involved in numerous collaborative music projects, complains about not getting any kind of support from both the Turkish and Israeli sides. He stresses that the Israeli Culture and Sport Ministry and the Turkish Embassy in Israel are reluctant to support a cross-cultural collaboration among musicians and do not provide support neither financial nor diplomatic such as easing visa requirements for musicians.⁷

Although there is no easy solution in sight to the political tension between Turkey and Israel, it seems that music and musicians can play significant roles in building relations at the people-to-people level through mutual cultural and musical exchanges. Music offers a universal common language for those who do not understand Ladino, Turkish, or Hebrew. People just want to have fun and those who come together at a concert neither talk about politics nor about Erdoğan and Netanyahu. Given the fact that this musical and cultural exchange is currently limited only among the Turkish and Israeli urban middle-classes, policy makers should realize the power of music in bringing people together and put more effort into extending cultural ties to the masses of both societies. Non-government organizations, whose aim is to establish more channels of communication and dialogue between the two countries, may also play a role in organizing cultural events and festivals which could be a medium for

discovering constructive reconciliation efforts. Music is a powerful way of tapping into one's core emotions, which are universal across cultures.

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Notes

¹ ADL Global 100. (2015). *An Index of Anti-Semitism*. Retrieved from <http://global100.adl.org/#country/turkey/2015>.

² Kadir Has University, Center for Turkish Studies. (2018). *Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://ctrs.khas.edu.tr/sources/CTRS-TDP-2018_vfinal.pdf.

³ Eroglu O., Altun, I., Altun, M. (2016). *The Political Crisis in Turkey-Israel Relations and Economic Interdependence*. Paper presented at the 37th International Business Research Conference, Las Vegas, USA.

⁴ Jerusalem Post. May 16, 2017. *"Turkish Industrial Leaders Call for Trade Increase with Israel."* Retrieved from <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Turkish-industrial-leaders-call-for-trade-increase-with-Israel-490952>.

⁵ An e-mail interview conducted by the author with Dudu Tassa, 27 October 2018.

⁶ An e-mail interview conducted by the author with Ariel Qassis, 27 October 2018.

⁷ An e-mail interview conducted by the author with Mumin Sesler, 4 November 2018.