

 MDC The Moshe Dayan Center
for Middle Eastern and African Studies  TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker
Vol. 6, No. 2, March - April 2022

Contents

From the Editors	1
Türkiye and Israel: Optimism must prevail.....	2
A U-Turn in Israeli-Turkish Relations: The Fall of Ikhwanism and the Rise of the Abraham Accords Challenges to Turkey's Military Deployments Abroad	6
Endnotes.....	10

From the Editors

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is happy to present a double issue for the March-April 2022 edition of our bimonthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. This issue focuses on Israeli-Turkish relations. The first article, written by HE Dr. Hasan Murat Mercan highlights the strong historical relationship between the Jewish and Turkish nations and discusses the prospects for further normalization between Turkey and Israel. The second article, written by Dr. Gökhan Çinkara, explains the current decline of Ikhwanism and the rise of the Abraham Accords and its possible impact on the Israeli-Turkish relations. Recently, the Turkish government has adopted the spelling of Turkey as Türkiye in all English-language publications. This has been used in our first essay.

Türkiye and Israel: Optimism must prevail

HE Dr. Hasan Murat Mercan

The history of Jews in Anatolia and the former territories of the Ottoman Empire extends back thousands of years. But the defining moment in the relations between Turks and Jews came in 1492, when Sultan Bayezid II welcomed the Jewish people to Ottoman lands, following their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. This momentous decision and the exodus that ensued, made İstanbul a center of Jewish life in Europe. It also cemented the role of Jewish people in the Empire, and the tradition of co-habitation of different Ottoman *millet*s, namely of Muslims, Jews and Christians. However, this was not the first, nor the last time that the Turkish people extended a helping hand to Jews, persecuted for their identity.

During his attendance at a special service in the historic Neve Shalom Synagogue in İstanbul on 10 March, President Isaac Herzog of Israel was presented with a gift from the Turkish Jewish Community.

That gift was a replica of a royal decree (*ferman*) from Sultan Abdülaziz – one of the rulers of the Ottoman Empire – addressed to *kazasker*, the judicial authority of that time. The order aimed to provide protection for Jews in the Empire against the re-surfaced allegations of blood libel, a centuries old anti-Semitic canard. In the face of increased violence targeted at Jews in the mid-1800s, the Sultan acted to provide legal protection to prevent false incriminations or judgements against Jews.

As President Herzog recalled while sharing his family's history in that special service in İstanbul, Türkiye again became a safe harbor for those who fled from the crimes of Nazis in Europe during the Second World War.

Prominent members of the world Jewry, as well as Turkish diplomats living or serving across the conflict lines in Europe, helped hundreds of Jewish families to flee the crimes of Nazis, often issuing Turkish passports to hide their identities. For their humanitarian work, the Turkish diplomats were honored by several international organizations—including the United Nations. The Turkish Jews requested that Yad Vashem in Jerusalem recognize certain Turkish diplomats who

saved Jews during the Second World War as “Righteous Gentiles”. In fact, a plaque in their honor was unveiled by Yad Vashem on May 13, 1996, in Har HaZikaron, Jerusalem.

Moreover, during the Second World War, Türkiye served as a corridor of safe passage for many Jews fleeing Nazi Europe. Türkiye’s location assured that Jews would seek to use it as an escape route to Palestine, especially after the Turkish Government permitted various rescue committees to operate from İstanbul and maintained its neutrality in the early periods of the war. Also, the Turkish government’s welcoming of the Jewish refugee academics in 1933-1939 from Nazi Germany and employing them in institutions of higher education saved the lives of Jewish intellectuals while contributing to Turkish society and scientific advancement.

Today, Türkiye’s Jewish citizens continue to enrich and contribute to the Turkish Republic, as it approaches its centenary. Throughout our history, Türkiye has never been, nor would it ever be a source of expulsion of Jews from their homes. In no period of Turkish history, there existed a so-called “Jewish question”. Neither antisemitism, nor bigotry of any kind against Jews have ever found roots in Anatolia.

Remembering this history is necessary to better understand the significance and the symbolism of the first Presidential visit between Türkiye and Israel in 14 years. President Herzog brought a visible message of peace and partnership from the moment his plane, marked with these very words, landed in the Turkish capital Ankara on 9 March. President Herzog and his delegation received a warm welcome by President Erdoğan, similar to the reception late Haim Herzog received when he visited Türkiye 30 years ago, to mark the 500th anniversary of the exodus from the Iberian Peninsula to the Ottoman Empire.

Both Presidents defined the visit as a new milestone in the relationship between the two states. The relationship witnessed periods of highs and lows since Türkiye’s recognition of Israel in 1949. Presidents Erdoğan and Herzog struck a strong and optimistic chord on improving the bilateral and good neighborly relations. They spoke of their shared goal to revive political dialogue, foster regional cooperation, and adopt a resolute stance against all forms of hate.

The Turkish and Israeli peoples should support their presidents to realize this vision and to seize the opportunity to constructively transform Turkish-Israeli relations, based on mutual trust and interdependence. Here is why this is needed:

There is no room for complacency for both countries when it comes to:

- managing regional dynamics that contain, *inter alia*, (a)symmetrical security threats and challenges,
- the need to further secure and diversify energy supply routes,
- promoting inter-cultural synergy as a bulwark against Islamophobia and Antisemitism and all sorts of hate crimes.

Turkish-Israeli interaction offers more than a conventional regional partnership in the face of malign actors and trends. Conventional partnerships are for a particular issue, be it against a threat or for an objective. Conventional partnerships have expiration dates. Türkiye and Israel, on the other hand, share a common neighborhood, heritage, and not least, a common future.

Dealing with malign actors and their activities throughout our region is a particular area for enhanced coordination. Turkish-Israeli partnership would be effective to further curb destabilizing moves in broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Transparent Turkish-Israeli engagement on regional affairs would lead by example in terms of prioritizing dialogue and diplomacy. In addition, we should not lose sight over the potential gains a structured Turkish-Israeli partnership would bring about to the regions beyond MENA, such as the Caucasus, Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

A more robust regional security cooperation between the two, with a specific focus on fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, will also have an added value to both countries' national security.

Great power competition is becoming the dominant trend in today's world. This competition, which runs the risk of confrontation, writes off the so-called value of proxy-led spheres of influence. Inter-regional and intra-regional alliances are becoming all the more relevant as great powers have begun to rely on capable, willing and reliable state partners. Regional actors being

able to cooperate with each other against this backdrop will have the upper hand for two reasons: for better positioning their individual security as well as aligning their interests to protect themselves from the pitfalls of confrontation.

There is thus an untapped potential for Türkiye and Israel to explore venues of cooperation and joint lines of effort to strengthen Trans-Atlantic interests. The era of great power competition requires inter-state alliances and partnerships to be cherished and nurtured. That is why revived cooperation between Türkiye and Israel should also be encouraged by the United States. This, with the participation of other regional partners, may pioneer shaping a new international system in the years ahead.

Over the past decades, we have witnessed on multiple occasions that no state is in a position to handle contemporary challenges on its own, regardless of the capabilities and means it possesses. Resumed Turkish-Israeli rapprochement will certainly be a game-changer that will also shape the developments in the Middle East resulting from the great power competition.

Recent and ongoing conflicts have demonstrated yet another vulnerability in our region's lack of diversified energy supply routes. It is high time to abandon unrealistic plans on extracting regional energy deposits and start looking at genuine models for cooperation of sharing and transporting the region's resources. Turkish-Israeli reconciliation will undoubtedly provide fresh impetus to the exploration, production, transportation and marketing of hydrocarbons, in particular natural gas.

It is natural to expect that Türkiye and Israel will not see eye to eye on every issue after just one high-level visit. Some remaining divergences, including on the issue of Palestine and the future of Palestinians, will not disappear overnight. But Turkish and Israeli geostrategic interests dictate a close and multi-layered partnership. Türkiye and Israel should be able to build on their commonalities and foster a sustainable dialogue, while setting aside their diverging opinions.

As Dag Hammarskjöld, second Secretary-General of the UN once said, "we are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put into it is ours."

Dr. Hasan Murat Mercan is the Ambassador of Türkiye to the United States.

A U-Turn in Israeli-Turkish Relations: The Fall of *Ikhwanism* and the Rise of the Abraham Accords

Dr. Gökhan Çinkara

Introduction

After the failed 2016 normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey,¹ a new diplomatic rapprochement began recently, which was marked by the visit of Israel's President Isaac Herzog to Ankara in early March. The sincere messages of friendship that the leaders exchanged with each other implied that any problems or disagreements between the two countries were not structural or institutional. These messages indicate that the main dynamic behind Turkey's desire to restore relations is its insistence on overcoming its conjunctural problems with Israel. However, it should be added that there are some external factors that go beyond the institutional dimension of bilateral diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel.² The trajectory of these factors will determine the future in terms of how far the relationship between the two countries will deepen.

The New Regional Balance After the Arab Spring

The transformation of social identities after the Arab Spring is a critical issue. The most practical way of defining the Arab Spring is a popular reaction against the concentration of economic and bureaucratic resources in the hands of the one-man regimes that were established after the independence processes. Such regimes evolved into nation-states, and ended up being manipulated and monopolized by the elites following the rise of modern nationalism. Consequently, these developments and surge of *Ikhwanism* – the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood – pushed the Middle Eastern monarchies and Israel to form a common front against this new phenomenon. As the new order created by the Arab Spring collapsed in the Middle East, it was replaced by a new diplomatic initiative (also known as Abraham Accords) orchestrated by President Donald J. Trump and adopted by Israel and the Gulf countries. The main objective of this initiative, led by Israel and the Gulf, was the diplomatic isolation of Iran

and its containment by military means. This development is the harbinger of many new developments and/or structural transformations throughout the region.

There is a strong tendency among the Gulf elites, and in part in their societies, to separate the case for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the politics surrounding diplomatic relations with Israel. The onset of the Abraham Accords also heralds a transformation in the value systems of the Gulf elites. The evolution in ethos emphasizes national identity. Yet it is now clearly understood that pure national interests, not religious and ethnic obligations, determine the formulation of diplomatic policies. Not only do identities and transnational institutional engagements prevent nationalization in the social structure, but they also lead to the dissolution of the ability of the state to act independently. It is possible to say that the diplomatic process with Israel has intensified by leaving this path of each state pursuing its own interests. For this reason, it should be underlined that the determining factor in Turkey's relations with Israel should be examined through the lens of newly formed national identities. It can be said that Turkey's institutional and personal avoidance of the Ikhwanist ideas, as a transnational movement that can undermine its national identity, may facilitate Turkish integration into the Abraham Accords axis.

The New Directions in Turkey's Foreign Policy

We can summarize the two main features of the relations between Turkey and Israel as fragility and instability. If we neglect the strategic deepening and institutional collaborations that were seen for a short time in the 1990s, we are now dealing with a relationship that is highly dependent on regional developments and the Palestine problem in particular.³ Hence the question is: is this status quo subject to change?

From the start of relations between Israel and Turkey circa 1949, Turkish decision-makers have had to consider regional concerns and sensitivities in their approach toward Israel. The fact that the relationship continued despite these considerations implies that this delicate relationship will continue for the foreseeable future. Although there seems to be no change in the approach towards Israel among the elites and society in Turkey, some significant geopolitical shifts are

taking place at the regional level. These shifts inevitably force the elites to make decisions that are quite disconnected from the foreign policy rhetoric that is constructed bilaterally with their societies, as in the past. The inability of Turkey to adapt gradually to the changes seen in the process of the Abraham Accords is also due to the political discourse, which works to preempt change in some cases. This is related to the leaders' desire to signal the feeling that they are taking a step back in foreign policy to the voters. For this reason, the rhetoric has tried to keep up with the new regional balances by introducing very sharp turns at key moments.

The popular mobilization that emerged and accelerated after the 2011 Arab Spring reinforced the conviction of many leaders that the current political regimes and even the old regional order could not continue as is. The ruling elite in Turkey was no different. It embraced the belief that social dynamics are the main determining factor in politics. But the problem lies with the fact that the social structure is not uniform, and when its demands do not seem to be consistent, they are overlooked. The government's strategy became invest in the institution and ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, as if it were a hegemonic power, and embodied popular discontent. Ultimately, social dynamics led to differences of interest between Israel, which desired to maintain the status quo in the region, and Turkey, which preferred an agenda of reform based on popular demands.

It should be noted that the Arab Spring did not change regional politics as expected, and even, ironically, opened the door to a renewal of nationalism.⁴ Namely, young and reformist cadres began to replace the traditional elites of the Gulf monarchies. They turned to social reforms at home rather than any aggression in foreign policy. This social reform effort resulted in the sharp purge of established elites at home who could have resisted it. The elites in Turkey reacted to this process, too, for a while. The Gulf elites, however, did not see Ikhwanism as geopolitically significant. In fact, we can call them territorial nationalist elites in this sense. At the same time, nationalism gained steam both in Israel and in the Gulf in the wake of the Arab Spring. A similar phenomenon occurred in Turkey. It would be correct to read Erdoğan's warm-up tours to the region from this perspective. At the end of the day, we can conclude that the winner is country-bound (national) nationalism, and the loser is Ikhwanism.

It may only become clear over time whether the current Turkish rapprochement with Israel will maintain its course or not. This is because a series of crises or set of opportunities expected to occur during the process of rapprochement will define and limit the attitudes and positions that actors on both sides can take. The pre-receptive mechanism has been mentioned. This mechanism will come into play in the event of a crisis and prevent the relations of the two countries from deteriorating. At present, both sides appear to be in the initial phase of reorienting relations, which involves getting a feel for the other side.

The crisis of Turkey's ideological and geopolitical domination project progressed in conjunction with the worsening of the economic situation in the country.⁵ The growing scale of the economic crisis in Turkey has increased the importance of creating an alternative outlook for decision-makers. In other words, strategies started to be developed due to the necessity of focusing on foreign policy instead of internal dynamics that do not allow any political capital in domestic politics. Another effect of the economic crisis is that voters' ideological orientations loosened, for instance, by embracing the need for urgent and practical solutions rather than ones that adhere strictly to ideology. Consequently, President Erdoğan is starting to take bold steps in foreign policy, about a year before the elections. Because, in the already established relationship between his voter base and Erdoğan, the priorities of both sides have changed due to the worsening of the economic situation. Current polls indicate that the upcoming elections will be difficult for Erdoğan, hence he is looking for ways to reduce the general economic dissatisfaction by trying to re-establish a sense of trust in the Turkish economy not only with respect to global markets but also among his electorate by building an appropriate foreign policy.

Over the past decade, the ethos-centered structuring of foreign policy was antithetical to a pragmatic and interest-based approach. The search for concepts such as "precious loneliness" or "moral foreign policy" was important in terms of determining the limitations of Turkish foreign policy. These obligations, on the other hand, began to lose their meaning and become dysfunctional amidst the changing balance of regional alliances after the Arab Spring. With the emergence of the Abraham Accords, new centers of regional geopolitics have formed around Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey's efforts to adapt to these new

centers and institutionalization processes will take time. However, the political system and bureaucracy in Turkey prefer to root their policy preferences toward the Middle East in partnerships with the new power balances that are now concentrated and centralized in the Gulf.

Dr. Gökhan Çinkara is a researcher, a columnist, and an analyst. He is the CEO of Ankara Center for Global Politics. He is an assistant professor at Necmettin Erbakan University, previously he was a researcher at Ankara University on Comparative Politics, Political Parties, Constitutional Institutes, Political Sociology, Intellectual History, Israeli Studies. He was a visiting researcher at Brandeis University in 2018 and a visiting researcher at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2016/2017. Çinkara received his PhD in political science from Ankara University.

All rights reserved to the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University. Materials may be republished for non-commercial use only, with attribution to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

Notes

¹ Isabel Kershner, "Israel and Turkey Agree to Resume Full Diplomatic Ties," *New York Times*, 26 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/israel-and-turkey-agree-to-resume-full-diplomatic-ties.html>

² Gokhan Cinkara, "Interpreting Turkey's Current Diplomatic Rapprochement Toward the Gulf," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW)*, 22 March 2022, <https://agsiw.org/interpreting-turkeys-current-diplomatic-rapprochement-toward-the-gulf>

³ Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004).

⁴ Ryan Bohl, "A New Brand of Nationalism Takes Root in the Middle East," *Stratfor: Rane Worldview*, 4 September 2020, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/new-brand-nationalism-takes-root-middle-east>

⁵ Ayla Jean Yackley, "The Turkish Inflation Hits 20-Year High of 54%," *Financial Times*, 3 March 2022.