



TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker
Vol. 8, No. 2, March - April 2024

Comparing Israeli-Turkish Relations: The 1990s versus post-October 7

Dr. Jonathan Ghariani

The Madrid Peace Conference (October 1991) and the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (September 1993) enabled a rapprochement between Ankara and Jerusalem to develop. This *entente cordiale* culminated in a strategic partnership in the form of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on military cooperation. The MOU entailed joint military exercises, the sale of advanced Israeli weapon systems to Turkey, and intelligence sharing. The mounting tensions between Syria and Turkey was the main facilitating factor behind this level of strategic cooperation.

The situation would change however, following Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip (2008-9). Diplomatic ties reached their lowest point in the aftermath of the 2010 Mavi Marmara flotilla incident, resulting in the termination of the military partnership. At the same time, Ankara's links to the Hamas terrorist group thawed significantly, and Turkey began to harbor members of its leadership.

Despite attempts by both sides to mend ties, relations between Ankara and Jerusalem were once again shattered following Hamas' massacre in Israel's south on October 7th when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly expressed support for the terrorist group and unleashed a venomous attack against Israel. This article compares Israel-Turkey relations during the 1990s partnership and its current state in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

The Israeli-Turkish Military Partnership: The Golden Years

In February 1996, relations between Israel and Turkey had reached an all-time high with the signing of the Military Training and Cooperation Agreement (MTCA) which stipulated cooperation between all branches of the Turkish and Israeli armed forces.¹ Provisions included measures for strategic dialogue, mutual visits, the transfer of military know-how, and intelligence cooperation.²

A second agreement was signed in the defense industry, research and development (R&D), and technology transfer (details however remain confidential until today).³ Accordingly, Israel would also upgrade the Turkish Air Force fleet of F4 and F5 fighter jets and sell state-of-the-art Popeye stand-off missiles to Turkey.⁴ By the end of 1998, the total amount of Israeli weapon sales to Turkey had reached \$1 billion.⁵

The agreement also covered a joint Israeli, Turkish, and US naval exercise known as Reliant Mermaid, which was first inaugurated in January 1998. The purpose of the drill was to practice search and rescue (SAR) exercises and to bolster coordination and interoperability between the three navies.^{6 7}

Throughout the second half of the 1990s, the Turkish military oversaw state foreign and defense policy, which remained firmly aligned with the West. Then, especially due to their support to the Kurdish PKK, Turkey considered both Syria and Iran to be a threat and therefore forged an alliance with Israel for strategic and security reasons. Apart from that, European countries restricted arms supplies to Turkey due to human rights concerns giving Ankara no choice but to enhance its ties with Jerusalem.

Things Start to Change

In 1996, a coalition government headed by Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi - RP) and the center-right True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi - DYP) of Tansu Çiller, was formed in Turkey. Erbakan was known to be a vocal critic of Israel

and many Refah leaders openly stated that once in power, they would reorient Turkish foreign policy and upgrade ties with Arab and Islamic countries. Prior to being voted in, Erbakan and his Islamist Welfare party lambasted their country's military ties with Israel and explicitly called for the abrogation of the Israel-Turkish memorandum of understanding on military cooperation.⁸ In 1980, shortly after Israel moved to annex the east Jerusalem, Erbakan organized a Jerusalem Liberation Day. He and his Refah party would then denounce Turkey's pro-western foreign policy and advocate for Ankara's withdrawal from NATO and the bolstering of ties with Islamic countries.⁹

Despite Erbakan's virulent rhetoric and his opposition to Ankara's partnership with Israel, relations remained intact due to the military's grip on Turkey's foreign policy and indications that it would not tolerate any changes.¹⁰

Beyond the shared trade and military interests between Israel and Turkey, the main drivers prompting the strategic alliance were Syria and Iran, seen by both as belligerent and volatile adversaries. As the Syrian regime provided support for terrorist organizations such as the PKK, Hamas, and Hezbollah, it was seen as a common security threat by Ankara and Jerusalem.¹¹ More specifically, Syria provided Abdullah Öcalan, head of the PKK, with a haven in Damascus. In South Lebanon, Turkey tacitly supported Israel's military actions against the PLO since the PKK guerillas were directly trained by the Palestinian terrorists.¹² In addition, there had also been territorial disputes between Turkey and Syria since 1939, when France ceded Hatay/Alexandretta province. In the aftermath of the local referendum in 1938 the province decided to join to the Republic of Turkey. Nevertheless, despite the decision Syria still claims the province as its own sovereign territory.¹³

October 7 and the Breakdown of Turkish-Israeli Relations

Relations between Turkey and Israel became increasingly strained after Operation Cast Lead and further deteriorated following the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident. A rapprochement began from 2020 due to Ankara's growing regional and international diplomatic isolation and the deterioration of its economy. This process was later made official by the Israeli President Isaac Herzog's visit to Turkey in 2022 and reached its climax with the summit between the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Erdoğan on the sideline of the September 2023, UN General Assembly meeting.

However, a month later, following Hamas orchestrated October 7 massacre in Southern Israel everything changed. A day after the massacre in Israeli towns, Erdoğan called for restraint by both sides. Despite Hamas' open brutality and its violation of the accepted international law-based norms of war, Erdoğan refused to condemn the terrorist group, yet initially offered to mediate between the warring parties. However, once the Israeli government declared a total war in response to Hamas' atrocities, Erdoğan denounced Israel and verbally attacked the Jewish state while openly supporting and even praising Hamas.

Prior to the war, Turkey and Israel envisaged collaborating in exploring the eastern Mediterranean natural gas reserve as an alternative natural option for European countries to Russian gas.¹⁴ Erdoğan has not completely severed ties with Israel, but has taken steps to downgrade trade and economic relations by removing it from the list of export target countries.¹⁵ These trade countermeasures are unprecedented as the economic ties between the countries had traditionally been unaffected during past crises.

On October 28th, during a major event dubbed 'Rally for Palestine', Erdoğan also harshly denounced Israel, calling it a war criminal state and referring to the terrorist group as 'mujahedeen' or 'resistance fighters.'¹⁶ This brutal verbal attack went beyond Erdoğan's past statements concerning Israel, and was followed by radical deeds. Following the decision of

then Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, Israel withdrew its ambassador from Ankara that was later reciprocated by the Erdoğan administration. During this time Erdoğan even hinted at declaring war on Israel and threatened to deploy Turkish troops to Gaza. Despite such threats, it is highly unlikely that Turkey would take such a belligerent step given its NATO member status and the strong opposition Erdoğan would encounter from fellow NATO members.¹⁷

In the past, Jerusalem had made numerous attempts to repair relations with Ankara during diplomatic breakdowns. However, Erdoğan's hostile behavior likely precludes such efforts in the near term. As a response, Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen recalled the diplomats stationed in Ankara and proposed reassessing Israel's ties with Turkey.

Turkey's relationship with Iran and its proxy, Hamas

In recent years, Turkey and Iran initiated a rapprochement despite major differences over Syria, as Tehran consider the US and Turkish military presence in the country as a threat to its hegemony.¹⁸ Both countries have publicly expressed support for the Hamas terror group located in the Gaza Strip, though Turkey's words have not been matched with concrete actions. Iran on the other hand, is its main financial and military backer.¹⁹

Erdoğan's AKP ideology is closely aligned with Hamas, both of which emanate from the Muslim Brotherhood. In the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident, Erdoğan initiated a rapprochement with Hamas, hosting the terror group's top brass such as Salah al-Arouri and allowing them to establish a foothold in Ankara. Both Khaled Meshal and Ismail Haniyeh made an official visit to Turkey in 2012.²⁰ Subsequently, Meshal and Haniyeh would frequently make official visits to Turkey and meet with Erdoğan. Despite Turkey's support to Hamas, Israel chose not to endanger its relations with Ankara and thus solely formed friendly relations with Kurdistan Regional Government while refraining supporting the PKK. Despite this reality, especially due to the diplomatic crises, during the last two decades Turkey used Israel as its scapegoat when accused Israel of supporting the PKK. The main unfounded claim is that both

Israel and the Kurds plan to establish greater Kurdistan and greater Israel.²¹ These accusations are baseless, as Israel has labeled the PKK a terrorist organization since 1997. Nevertheless, it remains one a convenient propaganda tool for Erdoğan.²²

Relations with Israel and the Palestinians

Erdoğan also uses the international arena as a battleground to confront Israel on the diplomatic front. On November 2023 during a meeting with UN Secretary General Guterres, Erdoğan denounced Israel's nuclear program and demanded that Israel sign the NPT and dismantle its alleged nuclear weapons arsenal.²³ Such a stance stands in sharp contrast with the 1990s entente era during which both countries converged on most issues pertaining to the Middle East as well as defense and foreign policy. At the time, the military held significant control in Turkey and in favor of working with Israel and the West, subsequently limiting Erbakan's ability to promote his anti-Israeli ideology. This all changed when Erdoğan assumed power and gradually diminished the military's intervention in civilian affairs, allowing his ideology to ascend.

Erdoğan's Islamist-oriented foreign policy stands in sharp contrast with Ankara's Western-oriented foreign policy of the 1990s. At that time, Ankara was diplomatically committed to the Palestinian cause, however never impeded the Turkish-Israeli military partnership. In fact, despite his hawkish stance on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Turkey welcomed the election of Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 as he strongly advocated for robust ties between Jerusalem and Ankara.²⁴

During the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Turkish-Israeli military partnership was impervious to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis since the Turkish military - and to a lesser extent, the foreign ministry - oversaw Turkish defense and foreign policy. The alliance was also reinforced by the common enemy of Syria. Such a convergence of interests is lacking in today's geopolitical context. At the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, a Turkish and Israeli

rapprochement could have been envisaged, since the two countries opposed the Asad regime and Iran's involvement in Syria. Turkey openly backed the Syrian rebels.

This shared goal however was short lived, as by 2016, Turkey initiated a rapprochement with Iran and Russia which *de facto* ruled out an Israeli-Turkish partnership on Syria.²⁵ Given Erdoğan's volatile and unpredictable foreign policy and the diverging interests between Jerusalem and Ankara, a formal Turkish-Israeli military reconciliation along the lines of the 1990s entente is unlikely to be repeated, however a complete collapse of ties is equally unrealistic given the economic and trade interests at stake for Turkey. Asked by the opposition whether Turkey would sever relations with Israel, Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan responded that Ankara's trade with Israel did not hinder its support for Palestinians. He added that although Israel and Turkey established relations 74 years prior, Turkey's commitment to the Palestinian cause has never wavered.²⁶ Still, such a possibility should not be completely ruled out.

Conclusion

The strategic partnership between Israel and Turkey forged during the 1990s entente era was enabled and significantly bolstered by the fact that Syria was perceived as a common threat to both countries, with the Asad regime supporting both the PKK (destabilizing Turkey) and Hezbollah (threatening Israel). Additionally, both Turkey and Israel have had territorial disputes with Syria, further reinforcing their shared interests. Despite various challenges encountered over the decades, the Israeli-Turkish alliance has remained robust, significantly reshuffling the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, as key regional actors including Egypt Syria Iran and Iraq saw this entente as a threat to the balance of power in the region.

By 2010, this strategic component of the relationship was significantly impaired, as Erdoğan's condemnation of Operation Cast Lead and the Mavi Marmara incident led to a substantial deterioration of the military relations between the two states. By 2021, relations had

improved significantly and on September 19, 2023, shortly before the October 7 pogrom, Erdoğan and Netanyahu met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session.²⁷ While Erdoğan had pledged to make an official visit to Israel, with the eruption of the war he instead unleashed a venomous verbal attack, publicly stating his support for Hamas.

Despite Erdoğan's belligerent rhetoric, it is highly unlikely that he will declare war on Israel as he had threatened nor completely sever diplomatic and trade relations as its economy and military are dependent upon this partnership. Given this negative trajectory and Erdoğan's historical volatility, no durable rapprochement can be envisaged in the foreseeable future and relations are likely to further deteriorate.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

Dr. Jonathan Ghariani completed his doctorate at University College London, in Hebrew and Jewish Studies. He is currently a visiting scholar at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African studies and was previously a visiting scholar at the Schusterman center for Israeli studies at Brandeis University. He was also a visiting scholar at the Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, where he spoke and published his research on Israel's historical relations with Morocco and Oman. His thesis focused on the diplomatic history of Arab-Israeli relations and geopolitical negotiations. He holds a master's degree in security and diplomacy at Tel Aviv University, Israel and a bachelor's degree in government diplomacy and Strategy from IDC Herzliya.

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 Jonathan Ghariani, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: 'The Golden Years', 1991–2000," *Israel Affairs*, 30:1 (2024), 5-24, esp. p. 5.
- ² Amikam Nachmani, "The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie," *Middle East Quarterly*, 5, no. 2 (1998), 19–29, p. 24.
- ³ Joshua Walker, "Turkey and Israel's Relationship in the Middle East," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 17, no. 4 (2006), 60-90, p. 80.
- ⁴ Jonathan Ghariani, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: 'The Golden Years', 1991–2000," p.5.
- ⁵ Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (King's College London School of Humanities, 2001), p.23.
- ⁶ Orhan Babaoglu, "[Reliant Mermaid Naval Exercise: Increasing the Peacetime Role of Navies](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Studies*, January 18, 2005.
- ⁷ Amikam Nachmani, "The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie," *Middle East Quarterly*, p. 27.
- ⁸ Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayari (eds.), *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 69.
- ⁹ Farah Naaz, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990's," *Strategic Analysis*, 3, no. 9 (1999), 1549-1560, p. 1558.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Ghariani, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: 'The Golden Years', 1991–2000," pp.10-11.
- ¹¹ Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente*, p. 31.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Joshua Walker, "Turkey and Israel's Relationship in the Middle East," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, p. 82.
- ¹⁴ Markind, Daniel, "[Another Mideast Casualty - Turkey/Israel Joint Gas Exploration](#)," *Forbes*, November 1, 2023.
- ¹⁵ "[Turkey Removes Israel from Export Target List](#)," *Globes*, January 23, 2023.
- ¹⁶ Gumrukcu, Tuvan and Huseyin Hayatsever, "[Turkey's Erdogan says Hamas is Not Terrorist Organisation. Cancels Trip to Israel](#)," *Reuters*, October 25, 2023.
- ¹⁷ Markind, Daniel, "[Another Mideast Casualty - Turkey/Israel Joint Gas Exploration](#)," *Forbes*, November 1, 2023.
- ¹⁸ "Turkey and Iran: Toward an 'Axis of Revisionism' Amid the War in Gaza?" *Middle East Institute*, November 2, 2023.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Gallia Lindenstrauss and Süfyan Kadir Kivam, "Turkish-Hamas Relations: Between Strategic Calculations and Ideological Affinity," *Strategic Assessment*, 17, No. 2 (July 2014), <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/antq/fe-2036312999.pdf>.
- ²¹ Daniel, Remi and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "[Lingering suspicions: From the Treaty of Sèvres to Turkey's reaction to the war in Gaza](#)," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, February 15, 2024.
- ²² Jonathan Ghariani, "Turkish-Israeli Relations: 'The Golden Years', 1991–2000," p. 6.
- ²³ Aviv, Efrat, "[Turkey Will Not Alter Its Anti-Israel, Anti-Western Position Until It Pays a Price for It](#)," *BESA Center*, December 24, 2023.
- ²⁴ Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente*, p. 32.
- ²⁵ Michalis Sarlis, "[Turkey's Regional Policy in the Shadow of the Gaza War](#)," *Turkeyscope*, December 14, 2023.
- ²⁶ "[Turkey-Israel Relations Do Not Harm Palestinian Cause, Turkish FM Says](#)," *Duvar.english*, December 6, 2023.
- ²⁷ Humeyra Paymuk, "[UN General Assembly: Erdogan, Netanyahu meet for first time as relations thaw](#)," *Reuters*, September 20, 2023, accessed January 24, 2024.