

Turkey-Israel deal: A key to long-term reconciliation?

by Selin Nasi*

Turkey and Israel have finally restored diplomatic relations based on a reconciliation deal signed on June 28, 2016, following six years of a tumultuous negotiation process.

After agreement on the deal was reached, domestic audiences in both Turkey and Israel began focusing almost exclusively on the relative gains and losses. There are, however, more crucial topics requiring further attention such as the underlying reasons for the ruptures during the negotiation process, suggestions that the lingering political deadlock was deliberately cultivated by the leaders and questions as to whether the promises of the deal will succeed in compensating for the political and social damage caused by years of resentment.

Analyzing the causes that precipitated the downturn in Turkish-Israeli relations is necessary to provide a better understanding of the point reached by the parties with the signing of the deal, and helps us create a sound basis upon which to reconstruct bilateral ties. In a similar vein, evaluating the domestic and foreign factors that led to the rapprochement will shed light upon the countries' mutual expectations from the deal and, therefore, shape the future of the partnership.

The deadly assault on the Mavi Marmara aid flotilla in 2010, in which Israeli commandos killed 10 Turkish activists bringing aid to Gaza, is popularly identified as the breaking point in Turkish-Israeli relations, but the deterioration in bilateral ties actually started earlier.

When Turkey was engaged in mediating direct talks between Syria and Israel in 2008, then-Israeli PM Ehud Olmert visited then-PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara. Israel's decision to launch Operation Cast Lead in Gaza just three days after Olmert's visit was the first blow to bilateral ties.

The diplomatic spat between Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009 – going down in the annals of history as the “one-minute crisis” – was in fact an

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outburst of this frustration. Outraged that he was given just half the time to speak as Peres, Erdoğan not only accused the moderator of being biased, but also bashed Peres, saying, “When it comes to killing, you know how to kill!”

The “one-minute crisis” increased Erdoğan's prestige as a regional leader, particularly in the Arab world. It was an important development in the sense that it demonstrated how challenging Israel in the international arena and adopting the Palestinian issue could become a handy tool for rallying audiences at home and abroad.

In parallel to the destruction caused by Operation Cast Lead, anti-Israeli sentiments often intertwined with anti-Semitism began to emerge in Turkish society. Hate speech which targeted both Israelis and Turkish Jews, as well as the libelous portrayal of Israelis on TV series, shaped Turkish perceptions toward Israel and Jews in general in a negative way.

In early 2010, Deputy FM Danny Ayalon hosted Turkish Ambassador Ahmet Oğuz Çelikkol in his office to discuss the unfavorable coverage of Israel in the Turkish media. However, the outbreak of “the low chair crisis” revealed that Ayalon's intention was not to mend ties but to diplomatically humiliate Çelikkol by seating him on a low stool. Needless to say, the incident added fuel to the fire, while increasing anti-Semitism in Turkey.

Turkey and Israel somehow managed to weather the storm despite the downward spiral of bilateral relations, until the coup de grâce supplied by the Mavi Marmara Incident. Ankara immediately summoned Çelikkol back to Turkey, and a year after, frustrated with the findings of the Palmer Report released by the UN in 2011 – which criticized Israel's excessive use of force, yet legitimized the naval blockade – downgrading its diplomatic ties with Israel to the level of chargé d'affaires.

Role of domestic factors

From a Turkish perspective, Turkish-Israeli ties were pushed to the breaking point not only due to regional developments; domestic factors were also at play, including the perceived shift in foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the cultivation of Turkey's regional image and role, as well as the relative power of individuals over institutions in terms of decision-making.

By the elections in 2007, the AKP had gained much administrative experience. The implementation of reforms within the framework of the EU membership process had, until then, diminished the role of the military in Turkish politics, while enabling the AKP to consolidate its power within the political sphere. This paved the way for the leaders to follow a multilateral and proactive foreign policy line defined within the framework of the Strategic Depth doctrine advanced by then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, which placed a nuanced emphasis on Turkey's Islamic identity and Ottoman past.

Meanwhile, Turkish leaders' reliance on a tiny circle of trusted advisers led to the emergence of a decision-making structure on foreign policy that excluded experience and wise counsel while fostering approval of the leader instead. This concentration of power paved the way for the political elites to use foreign policy issues as an instrument for domestic mobilization, erasing the already contentious division between domestic and foreign policy.

In addition to this, Turkish foreign policy drifted in an ideological and sectarian direction with Turkey's newly defined role as a regional leader and “the protector of the weak” within the framework of the Strategic Depth doctrine. To a certain extent, at least until the Arab Spring ebbed, Turkey received praise from the international community as a secular Muslim country with a dynamic young population, growing economy, and proactive foreign policy based on the promotion of multilateral dialogue. The growing confidence of Turkey's leaders encouraged them to undertake bold steps in the international arena. However, once the balance between East and West was abandoned in favor of giving precedence to the Middle East, including overt support for pro-Muslim Brotherhood governments in the region, the cost of deteriorating ties with Israel decreased. At the same time, however, Turkish political leaders realized that challenging Israel was key to winning sympathy in the Arab world. As such, political rhetoric that openly targeted Israel and Israeli leaders ad hominem became a part of everyday life.

This is why Turkey appeared in no haste to resurrect relations with Israel in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident. Since the two countries succeeded in insulating economic relations and trade from political disputes, some even claimed that the resentment between the two countries was fabricated.¹

However, structural forces were also at play, and albeit at a slow pace, conjunctural developments in the region have soon pushed the two countries closer for damage control and reconciliation. All the same, the US never ceased its backstage efforts to effect a diplomatic breakthrough.

After the Mavi Marmara incident

In the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey presented three conditions for normalization: an apology for the incident, compensation for the Mavi Marmara victims and the lifting of the Gaza blockade.

In 2013, an apology came from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a phone call mediated by American President Barack Obama. The two leaders reportedly agreed to normalize relations and exchange ambassadors.² During the same conversation, Erdoğan reportedly agreed to drop legal cases against IDF

¹ “Türkiye-İsrail ticareti kriz dinlemiyor,” *Radikal* (23 July 2011) available at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/ekonomi/turkiye-israil-ticareti-kriz-dinlemiyor-1061068/>

“İsrail'e Haddini Bildirdik mi? İsrail İle İlişkilerde Ekonomik Boyut,” *İnternet Haber* (13 July 2014) available at: <http://www.internethaber.com/israile-haddini-bildirdik-mi-israil-ile-iliskilerde-ekonomik-boyut-1227075y.htm>

Fehim Taştekin, “Sahi İsrail panikledi mi?” *Radikal* (22 Mayıs 2014) available at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/fehim-tastekin/sahi-israil-panikledi-mi-1194433/>

“AKP İsrail'den vazgeçemiyor!” *Evrensel* (20 July 2014) available at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/88604/akp-israilden-vazgecemiyor>

²“Mavi Marmara: İsrail, Türkiye'den özür diledi,” *BBC Türkçe* (22 March 2013), available at: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2013/03/130322_israil_turkiye_ozur

officers and soldiers in connection with the incident. In return, Netanyahu promised Erdoğan to ease the blockade over Gaza as long as the security situation remained peaceful.

Though the diplomatic exchange of ambassadors did not materialize, negotiations continued in an on-and-off manner. Over time, the two parties agreed upon the amount of compensation to the families of the Mavi Marmara victims and largely reconciled their differences regarding the Gaza blockade. However, both domestic and international developments hampered a lasting deal.

The Gezi Park protests in late May 2013 and the graft probes of December 17-25, 2013 probes shifted the attention in Turkey from international to domestic politics. By February 2014, when Erdoğan complained that Netanyahu was delaying the deal, he had a point, as Israel's cautious stance toward domestic uncertainties in Turkey was among the factors that caused the delay. Unexpected political developments in the region, however, would also stall the process further.

Israel's Operation Protective Edge in July 2014, for example, triggered negative reactions from Turkey – as well as from the international community – due to the civilian destruction it caused in Gaza. In Turkey, conservative circles held Turkish Jews responsible for Israel's operations against the Palestinians in Gaza and even called for pogroms to target Turkish Jews as payback against Israel. These unpleasant developments naturally shelved the negotiation process.

From enemies to “two countries which need each other”

In 2015, regional dynamics started to nudge the two countries closer.

In June of that year, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) invaded Mosul, taking 49 people hostage, including the Turkish consul-general. The terrorist organization, which had gained reputation for its brutality, soon seized large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria, eventually becoming Turkey's next-door neighbor.

The nuclear negotiations with Iran were doubtlessly a major factor, fostering rapprochement between Turkey and Israel.

Faced with the perceived US retreat from the Middle East, containing Iranian influence in the region brought Turkey and Israel closer as they aligned with the Sunni bloc under the leadership of Saudi Arabia.

Unlike Turkey, Israel largely managed to break its regional isolation in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead by separating the Palestinian issue from other regional issues while engaging with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

In contrast, Turkey's Syrian policy, an all-or-nothing gamble on ousting Bashar al-Assad, categorically collapsed. Ankara's ideologically oriented foreign policy reduced flexibility and the ability of the country's leaders to adapt to the course of regional developments, culminating in Turkey's regional isolation – which the government attempted to dress-up as “precious loneliness.”

As a country, which aspired to be a regional leader, Turkey woke up to see that it had no ambassadors in Israel, Libya, Syria and Egypt by 2015. Unable to shape regional developments in its interests, Turkey realized that revising its foreign policy had become a necessity.

The Arab Spring hit Turkey not only politically but also economically. In addition to the loss of the Libya market, Turkey's trade routes to the Middle East were severely disrupted due to military clashes in Iraq and Syria. Worse, strained relations with Egypt under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which led to an Egyptian decision not to renew a roll-on/roll-off agreement with Turkey, dealt another blow to Turkish traders searching for a path to the Middle East.

Against this background, the first seeds of the revision in foreign policy were planted during Erdoğan's visit to Riyadh in March 2015, where he met Saudi Arabia's new leader, King Salman. Salman reportedly mediated between Erdoğan and el-Sisi, who happened to be in Riyadh during the same time, though his initiatives yielded no results. Turkey found a common ground with the new Saudi king, who held a moderate stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood. The two countries had a shared interest in ousting al-Assad in Syria and containing Iranian hegemony in the region. Thus, Turkey agreed to lend support for Riyadh's military campaign in Yemen, which indirectly targeted Iran.

The next step in the revision came with a meeting between Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu and the Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Dore Gold in Rome in July 2015, with negotiations soon resuming in an effort to reconcile over the conditions set in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara incident.

Turkey's decision to open its bases to anti-ISIL coalition forces in July 2015 could be considered the third leg of the revision. Toward the end of the year, Turkey also reinvigorated its membership process with the EU – even if it was just the result of contentious bargaining over the future of Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, Turkey seemed to be on track to restore its relations with the West while mending frayed ties with the countries in its neighborhood.

However, it was the downing of a Russian war jet in November 2015 that truly spurred on Turkish-Israeli negotiations. The crisis with Russia led Turkey to seek alternative partners to compensate for political and economic losses. Dependent on Russia for more than half of its natural gas and a third of its oil, Turkey was concerned about sharing a similar fate as Ukraine. The need to diversify energy resources also meant it was time to find a path to Israel's door.

On December 15, 2015, Turkish and Israeli delegates in Switzerland announced a preliminary deal to normalize relations. Under the agreement, Israel agreed to establish a compensation fund for the Mavi Marmara victims in exchange for Turkey dropping all claims against Israel. The two countries also agreed that Saleh Arouri, a senior Hamas leader based in Turkey, would be extradited and that talks would begin on laying down a natural gas pipeline from Israel to Turkey.

On December 22, Turkey extradited Arouri, yet the signing of the final agreement was stalled due to the two sides' disagreements pertaining to the lifting of the Gaza blockade and the future of Hamas offices in Turkey.

Before delving into the details of the final agreement, however, it is useful to reflect upon the security dimension of the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement. The escalation of ISIL attacks on Kilis near the Syrian border and the insurgency in Turkey's southeast required a reassessment of Ankara's defensive and offensive capabilities. Due to imminent threats at home and abroad, as well as to upset that the US Congress was failing to deliver to Turkey much-desired armed drones, Israel appeared to be the ideal military partner thanks to its missile defense technology (Iron Dome) and armed drones.

Cooperation against terrorism has also been a driving motive bringing the two countries closer. The diplomatic dialogue established between Israel and Turkey in the wake of an ISIL attack in Beyoğlu (Istanbul) that killed three Israelis helped break the ice. Subsequently in May 2016, Turkey lifted its NATO embargo on Israel and signaled its intention to forge a form of military cooperation. But despite mutual gestures of goodwill from both sides, we had to wait until late June until the final agreement was reached.

No agreement possible without concessions

The main stumbling block in the negotiations was the blockade on Gaza. For Israelis, the issue is one of security, because the lifting of the blockade would pave the way for the uncontrolled flow of weapons to Hamas, along with materials to be used in the construction of terror tunnels.

As for Turkey, aside from the humanitarian dimension, there was a domestic political cost attached to protecting Palestinian interests and supporting Hamas. It is for this reason that Israel and Turkey struggled to find a magic formula that would satisfy their constituencies at home without alienating their allies.

Both leaders presented the agreement as a political victory, even though both sides had to make concessions to find common ground. As details of the agreement's fine print trickled out, it became clear Turkey had been forced to settle for only a partial lifting of the blockade, as Ankara will send humanitarian goods to Ashdod port to be delivered to Gaza over land after Israeli inspection. While many criticized the government for bowing to Israel's demands, it was thanks to this agreement that the government sent humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in 2016.

Within the terms of the agreement, Turkey started conducting humanitarian projects in Gaza such as constructing a hospital, power station, and desalination station.

Israel, on the other hand, showed flexibility on the issue of Hamas offices in Turkey, which many Israelis saw as a political and security defeat. Accordingly, the agreement allows Hamas to operate offices in Turkey, but only for political activity.

As for the contentious topic of compensation, Israel committed to depositing 20 million USD into the fund. However, the agreement included a provision that the money would only be released after Turkey's parliament passes a law to drop the charges against Israeli military officials.

In line with the legal procedures, Israel transferred the compensation money to the account of the Turkish Justice Ministry in October 2016, and a month later, a court in Istanbul decided to drop the cases related to the Mavi Marmara incident.

The way forward

Without a doubt, the exchange of ambassadors between Israel and Turkey in late 2016 constitutes an important milestone in terms of normalizing relations between the two countries. But, the question of how Israel and Turkey will henceforth handle the normalization process is equally critical and will shape the course of bilateral relations. Restoring trust at both the political and societal level is essential for deepening political, economic and military cooperation.

From a Turkish perspective, when rapprochement with Israel can be assessed in conjunction with other Turkish efforts at revising foreign policy. It is an indicator of a more realistic, pragmatic and interest-based approach in Turkish foreign policy, which is a direct result of pressing security needs. In this respect, reconciliation with Israel parallels the policy goals set by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, who said: "We would like to increase the number of our friends and decrease the number of our enemies." The rapprochement with Russia, as well as signals of a coming rapprochement with Egypt and perhaps Syria, suggest this policy could be here to stay.

But the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which has historically always been the weak spot in Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations, still has the potential to rock the boat and trigger a crisis between Ankara and Tel Aviv. On December 23, 2016 the UN Security Council passed a resolution demanding an end to illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It cannot go without notice that the Turkish authorities preferred to remain silent on the issue, which can be interpreted as a sign of avoiding crisis with Israel.

Yet, changes might happen under the presidency of Donald Trump. During his election campaign, Trump

declared his intention to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He also picked David Friedman as the next US Ambassador to Israel. Friedman is known for his pro-settlement stance and for being a staunch opponent of the two-state solution. If Trump follows through on his promises, then the upcoming period will be a stress test for Turkish-Israeli relations.

In that case, the voices of those upset by the terms of the Turkish-Israeli agreement will become louder. Contrastingly, maintaining channels of dialogue will help the two countries manage their problems in an effective way.

Overall, regional developments and shared interests have created suitable ground for the re-establishment of Turkish-Israeli relations on a realistic basis. Doubtlessly, hopes for energy cooperation have also been a major force driving Turkish-Israeli reconciliation. Common interests may encourage actors long at odds with each other to overcome their disputes and thus contribute to the security and stability of the region.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GPoT Center, Mitvim Institute, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue Publication Series

Upon the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the Israeli and Turkish governments in June 2016, and the start of a new chapter in bilateral relations, participants in the ongoing policy dialogue between Mitvim - The Israeli Institute of Regional Foreign Policies and the Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center were asked to offer their thoughts on the lessons that can be drawn from the recent period of diplomatic tension, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing this bilateral relationship in the coming years.

Supporting Israel-Turkey Reconciliation:

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