



## **DEBATE: How Serious Is the Israeli-Turkish Rapprochement?**

**Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos**

BESA Center Online Debate No. 19, August 5, 2020

**Q:** Israel and Turkey appear to be making progress in terms of rewarmed their bilateral ties. Roey Gilad, Chargé d’Affaires at the Embassy of Israel in Turkey, published an article in *Halimiz* suggesting that the two countries could cooperate in Syria as well as in the fight against COVID-19. Other media outlets, including *The Jerusalem Post*, have also published stories on a potential rapprochement between the two states, though challenges and obstacles certainly remain.

BESA joins the debate by posing the question: How serious is the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement?

**Respondents: Amikam Nachmani, Michael Harari, Defne Arslan, Anna Ahronheim, Can Cirnaz, Burak Bekdil, Mark Meierowitz, Gallia Lindenstrauss, Angelos Athanasopoulos**



Professor Amikam Nachmani, Department of Political Studies,  
**Bar-Ilan University**

The special relations between Turkey and Israel that lasted from the 1990s through the early 2000s were marked by open strategic cooperation and strong Israeli lobbying on Turkey's behalf, mainly in the US but also among EU members. This open cooperation was dramatically different from the countries' clandestine relations, which were often flatly denied by Turkey and euphemistically referred to by Israel as "mistress syndrome" relations.

Future relations between the two countries will likely be quite different. Ankara does not need Israel to lobby on its behalf—it fares quite well without it, particularly in Washington. More significantly, the early 2000s saw Israelis grow increasingly reluctant to lobby for Turkey, and that reluctance became a crucial element in the crisis that eventually eroded bilateral relations. This decline was not a direct product of the Mavi Marmara crisis of June 2010, as it began well before that incident.

Relations between Israel and Turkey first began to deteriorate in 2004-05 following growing hesitation among Jewish lobbies to "explain" Turkish policy vis-à-vis the Armenian genocide to American media and decision makers. Ankara's reaction to that reluctance represented a crossroads in Turkey-Israel relations. One could almost hear the sigh of relief in Turkey: at long last it could get rid of this awkward relationship. If Israel was no longer going to smooth Ankara's path in Washington, there was no longer any need to maintain good relations with it.

Ankara's view was that Jewish and Israeli lobbying for Turkey was a form of blackmail. For years, the Turkish regime preferred anti-Israeli policies to pro-Israel and had no real interest in close contacts with it. But because it needed Israeli and Jewish help, Turkey was forced to curtail its true anti-Israeli policies.

On March 2, 2009, Ardan Zenturk wrote the following in an article entitled "Will the US Turn Its Back on Turkey?" in the *Star* (emphases added):

Will the Obama administration declare Turkey a "committer of genocide" this April 24 (the anniversary of the Armenian genocide)? I don't know.

At a certain point in Turkey's Middle East policy, those who are pushing the government to turn against Israel might welcome this development, in order to say "we told you so." Personally, I wouldn't care. On the contrary, I would just thank God and be glad that **the blackmail which has been imposed on us for so many years had ended.**

We were blackmailed into having good relations with Israel. We were repeatedly told that Israel would help us in Washington to thwart attempts to

define World War I killings of Armenians as genocide. ... Finally [we hold] the potential to reduce the importance of Israeli lobbying in the US on behalf of Turkey. **Finally we might be independent of the need for Israeli lobbying on our behalf in Washington. It is so good to get rid of this blackmail!**

Matthew Bryza, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs (2005-09), defined the change in Turkey's status and the implications this change held for the nations of the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey, he said, had become a superpower in the region and the US can neither ignore it nor pressure it. An article in *Milliyet* from July 1, 2009 entitled "The US Can't Pressure on [sic] Turkey over Cyprus" said (emphasis added),

When Greek Cypriot administration Parliament Speaker Marios Karoyan asked Bryza to put pressure on Turkey on the issue [of Cyprus], Bryza replied, "The US can't do it [...] If this were the '70s, '80s or '90s, it could, but the **US putting pressure on Turkey now is out of the question.**"

There are still issues that call for Turkish-Israeli cooperation, including Syria, Iran, energy, the Kurds, terrorism, and more. These issues might generate an exchange of (non-military) intelligence behind closed doors. Private traders, businesspeople, tourism, energy exploration and transportation, and so on might yield limited joint ventures—but open strategic relations involving deep lobbying will not recur.



**Michael Harari, Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and former Israeli ambassador to Cyprus**

The relationship between Israel and Turkey in the last decade (since the Marmara incident in 2010) is in an ongoing slump. The signing of the normalization agreement in June 2016, which settled the Marmara affair, did not restore confidence between the countries or trigger a resumption of high-level dialogue. It's been two years that diplomatic representation in the countries has been at the level of a Chargé d'Affaires rather than ambassador, a partial indicator of Ankara's response to the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem and what Turkey defines as sharp Israeli measures during clashes with the Gaza Strip.

In the past few weeks, there have been reports of attempts to thaw the relationship, for example with regard to the issue of economic water demarcation in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. It is highly doubtful that these reports have a solid foundation, and in any case, the chances of advancing such a dialogue are quite low.

The main challenge lies in the fact that it is difficult for the two countries to find mutual interests. Their deep disagreements center around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel's possible application of sovereignty to parts of the West Bank (which exacerbates tensions on the Palestinian issue), and Ankara's support for political Islam, whether in the Palestinian arena (Hamas) or in the Middle East in general.

Moreover, Israel has tightened relations with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt around a wide range of political, economic, and energy issues, and they are conducting regular dialogues at the highest levels. A fascinating illustration of the current array of forces is the Libyan arena: Israel has common ground with Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, the UAE, and even Saudi Arabia in support of General Haftar, while Turkey and Qatar back the Islamic-supported national consensus government.

An important and perhaps restraining factor is the impressive trade volume that has continued between the two countries through the years. But at the same time, the potential for Israel to export gas to Turkey is slim considering the deep mistrust between the two leaderships, the pandemic-induced collapse in energy prices, and Israel's growing relationship with Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt.

The prospects for improving relations between the two countries are low at present, given their deep differences of opinion and the absence of common political-strategic interests. Yet it remains important to continue to look for ways to restore political dialogue.



**Defne Arslan, Atlantic Council Representative;  
Director, Atlantic Council in Turkey**

There has been a lot of coverage recently regarding a possible rapprochement between Israel and Turkey, which used to be close allies—and as the saying goes, there's no smoke without fire.

Turkey's growing role in Libya may have fed these rumors, as did a recent piece published in the Turkish media by Israel's Charge d'Affaires for Turkey, Roey Gilad. He argued that two countries have common goals and called for a mutual reinstatement of ambassadors.

While all this was happening, there were also unverified reports suggesting that Israel might sign a separate deal with Turkey on the East Med issue as well as a tweet saying Israel is proud of its diplomatic ties with Turkey.

Turkey and Israel have gone through a series of stages since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. Despite the challenges, both countries have much to gain if they work together as regional powers. Resuming a diplomatic relationship at the ambassadorial level could be a wise move to start working out the differences.

Israel's flagship air carrier El Al, which suspended its flights to Turkey in 2010 following the Mavi Marmara incident, landed in Istanbul this May, and Turkey has reportedly given it approval to operate twice a week between Istanbul and Tel Aviv. Its first flight was to collect medical equipment aid destined for the US.

Despite their troubled relationship, trade has never stopped between the two countries. The resumption of El Al flights to Turkey can increase bilateral trade volume even more. According to the Turkish Statistics Office, bilateral trade volume was \$4.7 billion in 2015 and \$6.1 billion in 2019, and there is room to grow further.

I do believe there are several common areas of cooperation including trade, tourism, energy, and technology. In particular, cybersecurity in the energy sector and renewable energy can be good fields in which to cooperate, as well as East-Med gas at a time when gas prices can no longer sustain such an expensive underwater project.



**Anna Ahronheim, Military & Defense Correspondent, *Jerusalem Post***

Ten years after the Mavi Marmara incident caused an unprecedented diplomatic crisis between former allies Israel and Turkey, there has been talk that the two may once again be growing closer over shared concerns and interests.

Six years after Ankara broke off relations with Jerusalem following the 2010 incident, Turkey and Israel normalized ties and sent ambassadors to their respective capitals. Those ties cooled once again, however, after the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem in 2018.

It is now two years later and not much has changed. There are still no ambassadors in the respective capitals and the countries are still outwardly hostile toward one another. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues to spew anti-Israel vitriol and turns a blind eye to top-level Hamas operatives continuing to operate on Turkish soil. Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu continues to push forward with plans to apply Israeli sovereignty to large swaths of territory in the West Bank and Jordan Valley.

Nevertheless, there have been some optimistic signs regarding a possible resurgence of ties between the two.

Turkish spy chief Hakan Fidan and his Israeli counterpart Yossi Cohen have met several times over the past year. During the coronavirus pandemic, Turkey allowed the export of medical aid to Israel, and an El Al cargo flight landed in Turkey. There is also talk that officials from the two countries have been meeting to discuss shared interests in the Mediterranean.

Both Turkey and Israel, who are active in Syria, are facing a common enemy in that war-torn country: Hezbollah. The two countries are also actively drilling in the Mediterranean Sea. While Erdoğan's moves in the area have been aggressive, Israel did not sign a declaration by France, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and the UAE condemning Ankara's actions in the eastern Mediterranean.

And despite the hostile language thrown around between the two, both Jerusalem and Ankara understand that their strong trade (estimated at \$5 billion in 2018) will help keep both rulers in power, especially during the post-pandemic economic crisis.

But with Netanyahu continuing to grab as much right-wing support as he can muster and with Erdoğan championing himself as gatekeeper of the Palestinian cause, there is no way the two countries can get past the sovereignty issue without setting off another crisis in bilateral relations.



**Can Cirnaz, Foreign News Editor, *Milliyet***

The state of Turkish-Israeli relations has been questioned many times over the last five to six years in both countries. States like Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus also need to know if the signs of a potential reconciliation are genuine, as their interests in the region are very much related to the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

Turkey's gas exploration activity in the East Mediterranean is much contested. The agreement between Turkey and the government in Libya, which controls only the (important) western part of the country, met with great opposition in the region.

If this agreement materializes, the activities of Greece and Cyprus in the East Mediterranean might suffer. Other countries like France, Egypt, and the UAE have their own reasons to be disturbed. Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the UAE recently published a condemnation of Turkey's gas exploration activities off the coast of Cyprus. This was no surprise. What was surprising is that Israel, which partnered with these countries in the East Med Project, was not a signatory to this condemnation. For many, this was a clear sign that Jerusalem is interested in reconciling with Ankara.

Turkey and Israel shared a long history of military cooperation. The ties between the Turkish and Jewish peoples are much older than that. The two countries also have common enemies in Syria. These are all sound reasons for a rapprochement. However, I believe the recent developments in Libya present the biggest opportunity.

In the past few weeks, the tide has turned in the Libyan civil war. The government in Tripoli was in a very difficult position until help arrived from Turkey. It has now switched from defending to attacking, and it now is entirely possible that the Tripoli government will win the war.

If Turkey can make a similar agreement with Israel about gas exploration, this can create a Turkey-Israel-Libya triangle that might benefit all the participants immensely.

Turkey and Israel have still many unresolved issues, but recent developments might have created an interesting opportunity for both of them.



**Burak Bekdil, Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and *Defense News* and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum**

In any rapprochement scenario, one key parameter would be Turkey's (predictable) reaction to Israel's possible application of sovereignty to parts of the West Bank.

It might be useful to recall the Turkish reaction to Israel's post-1967 and post-1980 Jerusalem moves. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was just 13 years old in the first case and 26 in the second. He is probably anxiously waiting for the sovereignty proposal to go ahead, as he is cornered at home due to a looming (and potentially punishing) economic crisis as well as foreign policy challenges. He will not miss an opportunity to consolidate his conservative/Islamist voters.

"Normalization" looks to me a distant possibility. How would Turkish Islamists explain normalization with an Israeli government formed on the basis of the sovereignty plan? Another point to keep in mind is the unfortunate fact that the Palestinian dispute has long been an inseparable part of Turkish-Israeli relations. The deep personal dislike (to put it mildly) that has developed over the years between Erdoğan and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu has become a more institutional than a personal factor. As one government source in Ankara put it: "(Deputy PM Benny) Gantz is not an option we would run to shake hands with. The fact is there won't be normalization under the shadow of annexation."



**Dr. Mark Meirowitz, Associate Professor, SUNY Maritime College, New York**

The relationship between Turkey and Israel is like many marriages, which thrive despite challenges. There have been good times and extremely fraught times, yet each party very much wants to continue the relationship.

Turkey and Israel have been on a rollercoaster. The ups are very good, with the halcyon days of Turkish-Israeli cooperation on military, political, and trade relations. The Mavi Marmara incident set this back. Relations moved forward with an exchange of ambassadors; then there was a step backward and the ambassadors were withdrawn. This has been like Lenin's "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back". The Middle East version is a few steps back, a few steps forward, then calamity, then repair.

The Charge d'Affaires at Israel's Embassy in Turkey recently wrote a conciliatory article about common interests between Israel and Turkey, citing "using Israeli seaports for Turkey to export goods to Jordan, bilateral trade, tourism, energy, academic cooperation, investment and other subjects". He noted that Israel was "actively challenging Iranian military targets in Syria day in and day out" where Iranian militias "played a dominant part in the battle over Idlib where more than 50 Turkish soldiers lost their lives".

Also, an area of hope is the Eastern Mediterranean, where resources should be shared fairly among Israel, Turkey, Greece and all the residents of the island of Cyprus, both Greek and Turkish. Israel should insist that the Eastern Med parties get together and develop a plan for sharing resources amicably among all the parties involved. Working out such a plan will go a long way to improving the relationship between Turkey and Israel.

Turkey and Israel must also work out a procedure to resolve disputes. A great first step would be to return their ambassadors to their respective posts.

A good relationship between Turkey and Israel is indispensable to peace and security in the region and the world.



**Dr Gallia Lindenstrauss, Senior Research Fellow,  
Institute for National Security Studies**

In May 2018, when Turkey recalled its ambassador in Tel Aviv and told the Israeli ambassador in Ankara to depart, it did not present any conditions under which the ambassadors would return. There was thus no formal impediment to their return, but two years have passed with no breakthrough on this issue. The formation of a new government in Israel, after a year and half of political crisis, could have been seen as a good opportunity for a possible rapprochement. However, if the new Israeli government is set on proceeding with the application of Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank, it is highly probable that any potential thaw in relations will be short-lived. If, on the other hand, the Blue and White party, which is part of the coalition government, manages to convince PM Benjamin Netanyahu to delay those plans and even to return to negotiations with the Palestinians, this might create a more positive atmosphere in which there will also be a relaxation of tensions between Jerusalem and Ankara. Still, the mistrust that has developed over the years between Netanyahu and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has worsened considerably. As long as they are the leaders of their countries, it is unlikely that a significant change in Turkey-Israeli relations will occur.



**Angelos Athanasopoulos, Editor-in-Chief, Politics, To Vima, Athens**

In a May 21 essay for the Turkish online publication *Halimiz*, Israel's Charge d'Affaires in Ankara, Roey Gilad, proposed that the two countries cooperate on Syria and seize the opportunity to work together in fighting COVID-19. The Israeli diplomat said the two sides don't have to agree on every issue, but they unquestionably share common concerns. He also called for a mutual reinstatement of ambassadors.

Is a thaw between Turkey and Israel possible? What would be the repercussions for Greek-Israeli relations? In the same context, how would such a rapprochement affect the geopolitical geometry created in the Eastern Mediterranean since 2010 in the form of the trilateral partnerships of Israel-Greece-Cyprus and Greece-Egypt-Cyprus?

A renewed effort for a Turkish-Israeli rapprochement will not be easy. Of course, "Never say never" is a pivotal motto in international relations. It is not clear if a reset is desired by either of the two national leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Benjamin Netanyahu. The "strategic schism" created after the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010

left deep scars. The good old days of the bilateral friendship of the 1990s, built around strong military ties, look distant.

The resumption of cargo flights by El Al to Turkey after 10 years sounds good but should not be taken out of proportion. The most probable evolution track for Turkish-Israeli relations will be transactional. Trade volume remains high. Intelligence cooperation will continue as it happens everywhere in the world and especially in the Middle East, even among direct adversaries. The two sides could also accommodate themselves in Syria.

For Athens, the most important aspect as far as a possible Turkish-Israeli rapprochement is concerned is Tel Aviv's stance on the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. How would Israel react to a "hot incident" between Athens and Ankara? This is the \$1 million question. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically altered calculations on regional energy cooperation and on the East Med gas pipeline project. Greek elites insist that bilateral relations with Israel possess their own dynamic and should not be considered anti-Turkish. However, if "Never say never" is valid, Athens should stay ready for readjustments.