

# Israeli-Turkish Relations

## Current Trends and Future Perspectives

*Maxime Gauin*

### *From Cordiality to Alliance (1949-2009)*

Zionism was the least problematic national movement for the Ottoman Empire, as it never organized any armed revolt. Quite the contrary, Theodor Herzl (its main leader during the 1890s and 1900s) was firmly determined to negotiate with the Ottoman government instead of attacking the Empire. As a result, it left in today's Türkiye no recollection comparable to those of the Greek (1821-1829), Bulgarian (1876-1878), Armenian (1894-1896; 1914-1915) and Arab (1916) revolts.

The government of Ismet İnönü decided to recognize Israel de facto in 1949, namely after the victory of the Israeli army and the signature of an armistice between Israel and its Arab neighbors, then de jure in 1950. During the Democrat Party decade (1950-1960), Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and even more President Celâl Bayar Sr. were in favor of cooperation with the Jewish state—a fact not without importance for today, considering the high opinion of these two historical figures held by both the AKP ruling party and the opposition İYİ Parti. In 1954, Menderes even recommended to the Arab government to recognize Israel, facing a vehement refusal. From the Israeli perspective, Türkiye was one of the three components of the strategy of the peripheral alliances, elaborated by 1957 (the others being Iran and Ethiopia), after the Suez crisis of 1956.

The result of this convergence of interest was the signatures of the agreements of 1958 against “Soviet infiltration and radicalism in the Middle East”—“radicalism” being a diplomatic word to designate the Egyptian and Syrian governments (who officially merged in 1958, creating the short-lived “United Arab Republic”). Cooperation between the Mossad and the Turkish MIT was reinforced, as was agricultural cooperation, a

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crucial field for Türkiye, which still had a rural majority. Another important factor, from the Israeli perspective, was the community of Israelis citizens of Turkish origin. Since the beginning, they have been supportive of their former country, something unique for a predominantly Muslim country until the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991. Neither Turkish nor Azerbaijani Jews had moved to Israel because they had been expelled or because of pogroms.

The polite, albeit often hidden, cooperation of the two Western-oriented countries of the Eastern Mediterranean continued for decades. The Turkish government did not sever its diplomatic relations after the Six Day War (1967) or the Yom Kippur War (1973), in spite of its dependence on Arab oil. Meanwhile, most of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (another key space for the projection of Israeli strategic depth) ended their diplomatic relations with Israel.

The importance for the two partners for each other drastically reinforced during the 1970s. Indeed, Ethiopia turned Communist (and, as a result, anti-Israeli) in 1974, Iran became Islamist (and, as a result, even more anti-Israeli than Ethiopia) in 1979. Also at the end of 1970s, the MIT discovered the collaboration of the Palestine Liberation Organization with the PKK (Kurdish separatist terrorists). At the same time, Jewish Turkish industrialist Jak Kahmi emphasized the importance of the Jewish American organizations, especially to counter the Armenian and Greek lobbying at the U.S. Congress. Kâmuran Gürün, general secretary of the Turkish MFA from 1980 to 1982, fully defended Kahmi's ideas and, after intense debates in the Turkish administration, the Kahmi-Gürün line was adopted in 1981.

The first concrete consequence of this rapprochement became visible during the Israeli operation against the PLO and allies camps in Lebanon in 1982. The MIT was also part of the operation, as far as targeting the Armenian Secret Army for Liberation of Armenia (ASALA, another partner of the PLO) was concerned. Hagop Hagopian, ASALA's main leader, together with his second-in-command, Monte Melkonian, barely escaped. However, ASALA's networks in Lebanon were destroyed. During the premiership (1983-1989) and presidency (1989-1993) of Turgut Özal era (and thereafter), Alparslan Türkeş, the founder of the MHP, was constantly pushing the Turkish government to reinforce its links with Israel and the Jewish American organizations, until his death in 1997, and personally worked with Jak Kahmi. At the end of 1990s, the Turks were the ones who introduced the Azerbaijanis to the main Jewish American associations.

During the same decade, the Syrian issue became increasingly important. Indeed, the Syrian government did not fulfil its written commitments of 1987 and 1992 to expel the PKK terrorists from its soil—quite the contrary. Meanwhile, Israel signed the first Oslo Agreement with the PLO in 1993 and a peace treaty with Jordan the following year. In 1994, Morocco and Israel commenced diplomatic dealings. As a result, Israel was much less isolated than during the 1950s and 1960s, but Syria remained an exception by its aggressive behavior towards both Israel and Türkiye. This was the background against

which the two countries signed a Military Training and Cooperation Agreement in February 1996, which was followed by a bilateral defense industry agreement in August of the same year.

By 2002 (even before the arrival of the AKP in power, but even more after), a major change took place: The economic dimensions of the bilateral relationship increased in importance for both partners, which was something unprecedented. On the military and political fields, however, the 2002-2008 period was marked by few changes, except the rise of Azerbaijan. In many ways, the bilateral relationship became a trilateral one.

### *Difficulties, Tensions, Attempts at Reconciliation (2009-2021)*

The situation became more complicated by 2009. Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert committed a psychological error during his meeting with his counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the end of 2008: He did not give him any sort of advanced notice of a major operation being planned against Hamas in Gaza (December 2008-January 2009). In 2010, precisely at the moment when the tensions were on the way to be eased for good, Israel employed inter alia unexperienced conscripts instead of having exclusive recourse to anti-riot police or special forces to enforce the Israeli-Egyptian naval blockade of Gaza, which was (and remains) under the control of Hamas (not for the first time, a flotilla of ships sailing from Türkiye had attempted to land on the Gazan coast; some of the casualties were Turkish citizens). The Israeli government regretted this error officially, but later. The political difficulties of 2010 happened precisely at the moment when the Turkish defense industry took a new dimension, with the onset of production of Bayraktar armed drones, of course, but also of Kirpi armored vehicles and Roketsan missiles. This change has reduced the external dependency of Türkiye on foreign arms, including vis-à-vis Israel.

That having been said, the political difficulties never undermined the burgeoning bilateral trade relationship (the civilian dimension)—also unaffected were joint cooperation efforts directed against the Islamic State terrorist organization and efforts to stem the flow of illegal immigration. There were even several political gestures by Ankara, such as the acceptance of Israel as a NATO observer in 2012. On the other side, like before, all attempts to pass resolutions for the “recognition of the Armenian genocide” failed at the Knesset (in 2010, 2012, and 2018, for instance). Israelis of Azerbaijani origin (especially Lev Spivak, president of the Azerbaijan-Israel International Association, as well as Arye Gut, spokesman of the same association) and Azerbaijan-oriented politicians, such as Avigdor Lieberman, played a key role in these parliamentary defeats.

A first attempt at reconciliation took place in 2016, and the Israeli government sent to Ankara its first female Muslim diplomat, Rasha Athmany. Regardless, new problems quickly emerged, in spite of exchanges, including on Azerbaijani soil (in 2018, for instance,

Erdoğan and Lieberman happened to be in Baku at the same time). President Ilham Aliyev explained in 2022, at ADA University, that he and his government had worked for reconciliation between its two partners. In addition to this key factor, a prominent role was played by Israeli President Isaac Herzog, elected in 2021, and who very quickly established a high level of mutual trust with Erdoğan. Also on the Israeli side, the Naftali Bennett government (June 2021-December 2022) had chosen a pragmatic perspective vis-à-vis Türkiye and, initially, had a Muslim Arab party in its coalition, for the first time in Israeli history—something Erdoğan could only consider positively. On the Turkish side, Erdoğan was deeply disappointed by the negative Arab reactions to the Turkish army's operation in Syria in October 2019.

### *A Pivotal Moment, Cheered On by Baku (2022-2023)*

The Turkish-Israeli reconciliation was marked by Herzog's spectacular visit to Türkiye in March 2022, and soon a very concrete element was added: the dismantling of an Iranian network in Istanbul, which had been planning to assassinate Israeli and Turkish-Israeli businessmen in reprisal for the elimination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps senior commander Hassan Sayyad Khodaei that had recently taken place. Coincidence of the calendar, an Istanbul court sentenced in July of the same year 14 persons (Iranian and Turkish citizens) for the assassination, in 2019, of Masoud Molavi-Vardanjani, a former Iranian intelligence operative who had fled to Türkiye in 2018 and had accused, on a Telegram channel, top Iranian leaders of corruption. The investigation and the trial concluded that the crime had been ordered by Iranian intelligence.

The most remarkable thing, perhaps, is that the return of Benjamin Netanyahu in power did not affect the reconciliation at all. Indeed, the tensions had taken, until 2021, a more and more personal turn. But both leaders have decided to turn the page—perhaps this also had something to do with Azerbaijani mediation. It is true that the common interests of Israel and Türkiye are obvious. In January 2022, the U.S. announced their withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline (“EastMed”) project, burying it. As a result, Türkiye became the main alternative for the exportation of Israeli gas to Europe. Erdoğan stated on 19 September 2023, about his personal meeting with Netanyahu:

I told him, ‘first, you make your visit [to Türkiye]. Then, I will visit Israel with my delegation.’ And we agreed. We will take these steps without delay, and we will start our works on energy, including joint drilling. We will start to implement the energy transmission lines not only to Türkiye but to Europe via Türkiye.

In addition to what has been already announced, Israel could share its experience in renewable energy with the Turks, and, as a result, increase the spread of renewables in that country. Although nothing has been announced in the civilian nuclear field as of the time of writing, nothing excludes this option from being examined in the future. Beside the field of energy, while bilateral trade never suffered on account of the political

tensions during the 2010s, it is obvious that the reconciliation effort can only benefit the expansion of economic exchanges. This is the sense of this part of Erdoğan's statement on 19 September: "we have discussed about our potentials. We have also explained that establishing a mechanism with the involvement of some of our ministers would be useful to boost our cooperation in different fields." This would be particularly welcome for the Turkish economy, in the context of inflation, the decrease of the value of the country's currency, and so on.

Politically speaking, the Iranian regime is considered by Israel to be an existential threat, not only because of its inflammatory rhetoric, but also because of its nuclear program, its ballistic missile capability, and its proxies (particularly the Lebanon-based Hezbollah). On 22 September 2023, Netanyahu reiterated his consistent stance: "the concern about the Ayatollah regime having nuclear weapons, their aggression in the Mideast, the terror they foment in the world shouldn't be only an Israeli concern, it should be a concern of all civilized nations."

At the same time, Iran is seen as becoming an increasingly active and aggressive rival for Türkiye, as shown the various arrests of Iranian agents on the Turkish soil, but also in the support extended by Iran to the Syrian branch of the PKK (this support has been increasing since 2021). Meanwhile, the tensions between Baku (the closest ally of Ankara) and Tehran never were so high than in 2021-2023, as demonstrated, for instance, by (unprecedented) Iranian military exercises near the Azerbaijani border in 2021 and 2022, and, more recently, by the attack against the Azerbaijani embassy in Iran on 27 January 2023. The fact that the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) is, since 2005, part of the Lebanese electoral alliance led by Hezbollah is not at all a negligible factor, neither for Ankara and Baku nor for Jerusalem—even less in considering the fierce opposition of the American branch of the ARF to the perpetuation of the sanctions and export restrictions regime against Iran.

Even more importantly, as a result of the lack of American support for the Saudi government, Riyadh proposed to Tehran to ease the political conflict between them, and the Iranian side was only too happy to accept. The visit of the Iranian foreign minister to Saudi Arabia in August of this year, then the meeting between Saudi representatives and Iranian-backed Houthis, confirmed the modification of the bilateral relationship. Meanwhile, the Israeli government does not believe that the Biden Administration is likely to do anything similar to what the Trump Administration did by killing IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. Yet, such changes make Türkiye and Azerbaijan even more important for Israel. Moreover, the new Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan, who previously served as the country's Director of Intelligence (2010-2023), is a man highly appreciated in Israel, especially for the common fight against the attempts of Iranian agents to kill Israeli citizens, but also for his role in bringing about the bilateral rapprochement last year.

For the Turkish side, a return to the pre-2010 relations with various Jewish American organizations would be another positive outcome and actually seems desired. William Daroff, Chief Executive Officer of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, told *The Jerusalem Post* in September 2023 that the exchange with Erdoğan in New York was warm and engaging: “he reiterated his commitment to fostering a stable and productive relationship with the State of Israel and expressed his determination to combat antisemitism, which he labeled a ‘crime against humanity.’” Daroff added: “the hour-long conversation also touched on the upcoming visits of Prime Minister Netanyahu to Türkiye and President Erdoğan to Israel. The Jewish leaders present pledged their support for these visits and their dedication to further enhancing the relationship.”