Turkey and Israel:
A Chronicle of Bilateral Relations

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As someone who personally experienced the first downgrading of diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey in 1981, and kept close track of the second downgrading in 2010, I naturally feel great satisfaction at the present time with the return to normalization of diplomatic ties between the countries. In both instances, in January 1992 as well as in July 2016, much hard work was needed to mend the relations between the countries, work that testifies to the efficacy of diplomacy in healing even harsh bilateral crises.

Nevertheless, a heavy cloud still hovers over the Israel-Turkey relationship due the changes that transpired in the Turkish democracy throughout recent years. We get the distinct impression that the link that connected Israel and Turkey over the years – the pro-Western, modern democratic link – is loosening and may even tear completely one day. The escalation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the deep stagnation of the peace process will place a heavy burden on the bilateral ties, mainly on Ankara's part.

Not many people recall how a rather tempestuous affair developed between Turkey and Israel, from as far back as 1949. *Hüseyin Yalçın*, the Turkish representative to the 1949 Armistice Agreements, was very impressed by what he saw in the newly created country of Israel. He succeeded in convincing Turkish leader İsmet İnönü that Israel was no "ordinary" Middle Eastern state, but a state with a modern, Western orientation. İnönü, a sworn Kemalist, was convinced and in March 1949, formal diplomatic ties were formed between the two countries.

The years 1949-1955 were the "honeymoon years"; surprisingly, the Turks strongly embraced Israel. This was expressed in economic trade ties, cultural exchanges athletic competitions, and even important military links.

The first crisis after the short honeymoon was generated by the military coup d'état in Iraq, even though the latter was pro-Western. Following the coup, Turkey decided that its relations with Iraq were more important than those with Israel. Turkey did not suspend relations with Israel but instead, concealed them and emptied them of content. The situation changed during the 1958 counter-revolution in Iraq, when a communist regime was re-instituted. Turkey withdrew from the Baghdad Pact and looked once again to promote its relations with Israel.

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In 1958, Turkey and Israel signed the Alliance of the Periphery. Today this alliance is public knowledge, but at the time it was kept secret for about a quarter of a century. This alliance was signed by non-Arab parties in the region: Israel, Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. It focused on military and intelligence issues, and did not contribute much to the development of civil relations between Israel and Turkey.

Three events severely damaged Israel-Turkish relations: The domestic conflict that raged in Cyprus in 1963-1964; the Six Day War in 1967 and its ramifications with regard to control of Jerusalem; and, mainly, the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the energy crisis in its wake. By the second half of the 1970s, very little remained of the impressive diplomatic relations that had prevailed in the 1950s between the countries.

Nevertheless, despite all the crises and diplomatic blows between Israel and Turkey, one element stubbornly survived: the very existence of diplomatic relations.

The Jerusalem Law and its ramifications

The shaky relations between the two countries received a sharp blow in July 1980, due to the Jerusalem Law that was passed in the Israeli Knesset. Turkey debated whether to continue its diplomatic ties with Israel or break them off, as demanded by Libya, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Following the passing of the law, Turkey downgraded diplomatic representation in Ankara and Tel Aviv to the lowest possible level: second secretary. Today, in retrospect, we call this the first downgrading of relations.

It was my luck to be appointed Israel's Second Secretary in Ankara, thus heading Israel's diplomatic delegation to Turkey. I arrived in Turkey in 1981 to find a military regime headed by General Kenan Evren, who was taking his first political steps following the coup that took place on September 12, 1980. At the time, Turkey was in the grips of a deep economic crisis. For example, the only way we could get hold of coffee to drink was to get it through the diplomatic mail (it was not sold in the local stores). Diplomatic relations were completely frozen; there were no official visits and no cultural or athletic ties, only very limited trade ties. The only people I could meet were academics and journalists, and one contact person was assigned to me by the Foreign Ministry: Ümit Pamir, later to become the Turkish ambassador to the UN.

A turn for the better took place in 1985. Israel withdrew from Lebanon after remaining there for three years in the course of the First Lebanon War. Meanwhile, Turkey's situation also improved: its economy stabilized with the end of the energy crisis and due to wise fiscal policy adopted by (civil) Prime Minister Turgut Özal. These developments had a gradual but decisive influence on relations with Israel. Real cultural, tourism and trade ties began to be formed.

The peace process and its ramifications

The Madrid Conference that took place in 1991 generated a real turning-point in Israel-Turkey bilateral relations. The willingness of the Arab world to sit down at the negotiations table with Israel, gave Turkey the pretext for upgrading its relations with Israel. At the end of the year, it was decided to upgrade diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level. Israel's temporary chargé d'affaires in Turkey (formally, second secretary) Uri Gordon became a full ambassador, as did his Turkish counterpart in Tel Aviv, *Ekrem Güvendiren*. Simultaneously, Turkey also upgraded the PLO representation on its territory to an embassy.

The year 1992 was a turnaround year regarding many different aspects of the Israel-Turkey relationship. That year was the 500th anniversary of the arrival in Turkey of the Jews who were expelled from Spain, and Turkey decided to prove to the world how well it treated the descendants of those immigrant Jews. This was one of their tactics to deflect international criticism directed at them regarding the Armenian issue, as well as their treatment of the Kurdish minority. Therefore, Turkey suggested to Israel to join them in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the absorption of the Jews expelled from Spain, and Israel accepted the offer. The success of the festivities symbolized another step forward in strengthening relations between the two countries.

Much has been written about the decade from 1992 to 2002, an unprecedented honeymoon period regarding the depth and scope of diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey. The deepening of relations was expressed in both civilian and military spheres, and extended from the government level down to the hearts and minds of the public. The Oslo Accords, which at first were perceived as a process that would lead to Israeli-Palestinian peace, also naturally helped to deepen the relationship.

This honeymoon period reached its peak after the earthquake that hit Turkey in 1999. Israel quickly offered its help and embarked on a large-scale aid project. It soon became clear that Israeli assistance on the ground saved many lives, and thanks to the support of diaspora Jewry, aid was also given to many thousands of people who became homeless due to the quake. In the village of Adapazarı east of Istanbul, Israel set up a refugee center and even a school for the newly homeless. Turkey became one of Israel's closest friends, on both the official and public levels. Israeli television conducted a fundraising program for the Turkish earthquake victims, the Israeli public contributed generously, and the Turkish public responded with much warmth and appreciation.

Question marks began to surface again above the bilateral relations, when the Second Intifada broke out in 2000. I paid a visit at that time to Ankara, as per the request of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, where I was told the following: "These pictures of a Palestinian boy opposite an Israeli tank, cannot continue. These days, every Turk has a television in the living room and our Muslim population will not be able to continue the warm relationship with Israel. If pictures like these continue to appear on our television screens, diplomatic relations will suffer." Nevertheless, the warm, intensive bilateral relationship continued until the end of 2002 (at least).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

On November 3, 2002 the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the general elections in Turkey. The victory at the ballots reflected not only a change in regime, but a real revolution. While the new leader's hostile attitude toward Israel was immediately visible, the positive attitudes of the government and the public toward Israel did not change quickly. In retrospect, it was the elimination of Hamas heads Sheikh Yassin and his successor Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi in March-April, 2004, which signaled the turning point for the worst. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began releasing a series of anti-Israeli statements that left no room for doubt, and he famously accused Israel of committing "state terror."

The change for the worse halted rather suddenly in 2005. Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül paid a visit to Israel at the beginning of March 2005, to assess whether the Israeli government was really serious about withdrawing from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank. A meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon convinced him, and at the beginning of

May, Prime Minister Erdoğan came to Israel leading an enormous delegation. The Turks made it clear that the withdrawal would lead to a positive change in diplomatic relations and this, indeed, happened. The withdrawal from Gaza and a number of localities in the northern part of the West Bank in August 2005, generated a change that ultimately led to a renewal of trust and credibility between the countries. Also, a Turkey officially mediated between Israel and Syria from February 2007 to December 2008. The willingness of the State of Israel to entrust such a sensitive mission as this to Erdoğan's hands, testified to the quality of the diplomatic relations and high levels of trust and credibility that had developed between Prime Ministers Ehud Olmert and Erdoğan in those days.

The talks with Syria were conducted secretly for more than a year and were revealed to the public in May 2008. Much has been said about the collapse of these talks and with that, the collapse of Israel's relations with Turkey at the end of December 2008. I well remember that Saturday morning at the end of December 2008, the day of Israel's aerial attack on Gaza at the beginning of the Cast Lead campaign. I knew that Turkey and Hamas shared a "special relationship" and knew, from a first-hand source, that Erdoğan had a deep connection to the Gaza Strip, its residents and mainly its leaders of that period. Thus I turned my attention that morning to what was transpiring in Turkey, following the Israeli attack.

Even I was amazed at the speed with which the Turks responded. It again proved the strength of the relationship between Erdoğan and his supporters, and the extent of his mobilizing skills. Immediately after the scope of the Israeli attack became clear, tens of thousands of Turks thronged the streets of Istanbul in a demonstration of hatred toward Israel. Someone in the highest Turkish echelons made the decision to give free rein for the eruption of Turkish hatred. The Turkish fury over the Cast Lead operation, in the government as well as the public, was a portent for the most severe diplomatic crisis that was to take place between the two countries.

The famous Davos incident took place only a short time later (in January 2009), in which Erdoğan blamed Israel for murdering children when he sat on a panel together with President Shimon Peres. The incident again paved the way for the Turkish public to follow suit against Israel. Erdoğan continued to attack Israel verbally, using rhetoric appropriate for an enemy country and certainly not for a country with which Turkey shared diplomatic relations for sixty consecutive years. The Turks were enraged by the Israeli attack on Gaza, and the Israelis began to develop anger at Erdoğan's betrayal. Thus Erdoğan became (to the Israelis) one of the most hated of the world's leaders, second only to the dreaded Ahmadinejad from Iran. But even this crisis period had its peak: the incident of the Turkish flotilla, which tried to break the Gaza Strip blockade.

The *Mavi Marmara* incident took place on May 31, 2010 and I remember it well. In the days prior to the sailing of the *Mavi Marmara*, the Israeli media reported that the IDF would impose a media blackout on the ship. But to my surprise, on the evening in which the ship neared our shores, I could see everything taking place on it on my home computer screen, via the IHH (Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Aid) site, the organization that backed the flotilla. Close to midnight, while the Israeli navy sent warning signals to the *Mavi Marmara*, a fighting atmosphere permeated the ship. Even my non-professional eyes could discern the inflammatory atmosphere and the ship's preparation toward the arrival of the IDF.

I went to sleep at two a.m. with a very bad feeling in my stomach that got even worse when Channel Two correspondents woke me up at seven in the morning. The IDF takeover of the

ship caused casualties – a total of ten people ultimately died. This was the first violent confrontation that had ever taken place between the modern Turkish republic and the State of Israel. Although the two countries had held differences of opinion and disputes on numerous and diverse regional issues, this was the first time that the IDF initiated a military action that resulted in the deaths of Turkish citizens. And all this happened twelve years after an IDF delegation had saved a large number of Turkish civilians who were injured in an earthquake.

The *Mavi Marmara* incident exacerbated the already-existing crisis in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Three weeks afterwards, Turkey recalled its ambassador *Oğuz Çelikkol* to Ankara, and Israel followed suit with its ambassador. Turkey later announced a downgrading of relations to the second secretary level: this was the second time it did so, some thirty years after the first.

At this point, diplomatic relations between the sides were marked by signs of harsh hostility. Erdoğan released a series of a statements that sounded as if they were sent straight from Tehran, and Israeli leaders responded in kind. Despite the absolute political and diplomatic freeze, civilian trade relations continued as usual, but tourism from Israel to Turkey sustained great losses and cultural exchanges almost completely disappeared.

Turkey demanded that Israel apologize and even pay compensation, but Israel vehemently refused – until March 2013. At that time, US President Barack Obama visited Israel and forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to apologize to the Turkish prime minister over the phone. The negotiations to reach a reconciliation agreement extended over more than three years. Finally, in July 2016 the draft of an agreement for restoring bilateral relations was cobbled together. This included the payment of compensation to the Turkish families of the victims, and the removal of the Gaza blockade for Turkey alone. In late 2016 and early 2017, ambassadors were exchanged and ministerial visits were resumed.

What does the future hold?

Turkey has changed completely since the country's honeymoon period with Israel in the 1990s. The real affection Israel received from past Turkish leaders such as Süleyman Demirel, Tansu Çiller and Mesut Yılmaz – has disappeared. Erdoğan and his advisors remain coldly aloof and suspicious toward Israel. And even among the Israeli leadership, it is hard to find someone nowadays who is really fond of President Erdoğan and his administration. The reconciliation agreement was the result of intersecting interests alone. For example, Turkey has managed to isolate itself in the region over the last decade and needed the reconciliation more than Israel. Meanwhile, Netanyahu in Israel is grappling with an important problem surrounding the export of natural gas, and Turkey has started to emerge as a possible, even desired, export destination. Thus circumstances were ripe for a marriage of convenience, a relationship that no one knows how long will last.

As strange as it may seem, bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey in the coming years may well be influenced by what happens to the Palestinians and Kurds. The US and European countries (especially Germany) who 'supervised' the rickety relations between Ankara and Jerusalem from afar, will only play second fiddle.

The Palestinians, mainly the Hamas movement, have always struck a raw nerve in the Turkish presidential palace; evidently they will continue to do so in the future. Another round of fighting between Israel and Hamas (this time, perhaps, under the leadership of Defense Minister

Avigdor Liberman) is almost certain to send the Turkish ambassador scurrying back to Ankara once again. The US would (again) find it difficult to prevent this. By contrast, should the peace process be jump-started, it may well improve Turkish relations with Israel, especially if such peace process would include Hamas in some shape or form.

The loosening of the ties connecting Turkey to the West also serves to make the Turkish-Kurdish issue a very tricky one. If and when a serious confrontation will erupt between Turkey and the Kurds, the US would find it very difficult not to align politically with the Kurds; until recently, such a confrontation was viewed as extremely unlikely. Israel would also have to take a position on this convoluted issue. By contrast, a Turkish-Kurdish reconciliation, like an Israeli-Palestinian one, would be much welcomed in the Western world.

If, indeed, the Turkish democracy continues to weaken in the near future, Israel is likely to slow down any deepening of diplomatic relations with Ankara. Israel would also be far more hesitant to lay a gas line between the two countries and sign a long-range agreement to export gas to Turkey. The signing of such a strategic deal with today's Erdoğan constitutes a weighty issue, a decision not to be taken lightly. Erdoğan's actions in Turkey and outside it will also influence the US stance on the gas-export issue, especially since the American *Noble Energy* company is involved in the transaction.

In any event, it seems that no great love story will develop between Israel and Turkey in the apparent future. Nevertheless, after almost eight years of severe crisis, even the mere storation of full diplomatic relations constitutes an important step forward.

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