

Turkey's Quiet Revolution and Its Impact on Israel

Ofra Bengio

Ofra Bengio is a senior lecturer at the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University and a senior research fellow at the university's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. Her fields of specialization include contemporary Middle Eastern history; modern and contemporary politics of Iraq; and Turkey and the Arabic language. Prof. Bengio is the author of numerous books and essays, including, together with Shmuel Regolant, The Turkish–Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders (2nd ed. 2010). This article is adapted from her talk at an ICFR seminar on “Israel and Turkey: Where to From Here” in November 2008.

Since 2002, Turkey has been undergoing a quiet revolution that has had far-reaching ramifications on the region in general and on Israel in particular. In that context, Israel's Operation Cast Lead was merely a catalyst that affected Ankara's relations with Israel. In fact, three factors coalesced to produce a change: The “mind”—the present foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu; the “power”—the AKP *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [the Justice and Development Party] and its leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan; and the “spirit”—ideological changes that embrace large sectors of Turkish society. Although some Israeli pundits have opined that it is time to eulogize the special relationship between Turkey and Israel, all is not lost.

The quiet revolution has had an impact on both Turkey's domestic and foreign policies. This is a fact that Israel, and indeed the whole world, must recognize. In the domestic realm, we can observe this phenomenon in the following areas: Islam is taking root, but unlike the Islamic revolution in Iran, in Turkey it is a soft brand of Islam that is evolving. Furthermore, the AKP sets out to present a model in which Islam and democracy can coexist.

Kemalism and its most important advocate, the army, have come under attack. The marginalization of the army in both domestic and foreign policies is actually the result of a kind of vendetta to pay the army back for its quiet coup in the mid-1990s against Necmettin Erbakan and his Refah party.

On the socioeconomic level, the AKP's success in overcoming the severe economic crisis that had paralyzed Turkey for years gained it the support of the powerful

business community. In some ways, this is reminiscent of the way in which clerics behind the Iranian Islamic revolution were backed by the merchants of the bazaar.

For the first time in Turkey's history, on the political level, an initiative to solve the Kurdish problem in a peaceful manner is being taken, and it is the AKP that is behind it. In so doing, it is acting against the will of the army, the nationalists and other important sections of Turkish society.

Externally the changes are even more apparent: The architect and moving spirit behind Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine is Ahmet Davutoglu, who was described by an Arab commentator as a "Turkish Metternich."

Davutoglu made his debut with his now-famous book, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu*, [Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position] published in 2001.¹ That volume, which by 2009 had been published in thirty-one editions, gained him great popularity both among intellectuals and policy makers. Indeed, most Turkish intellectuals talk about Davutoglu with great admiration. Davutoglu was first given the post of foreign policy adviser to Erdogan and then was named minister of foreign affairs. Together with a groundbreaking essay that he published in early 2008, Davutoglu put forth a new vision for Turkey that forever altered the paradigms of Turkey's foreign policy.² The most salient point of Davutoglu's essay was its critique of Turkey's policies in the 1990s, which turned it into a frontier country and alienated Arab and Muslim countries.

On the whole, the period that predated that of the AKP was described by Davutoglu as one driven by "siege mentality." This worldview, he argued, was based on an "amalgam of insecurity, antagonism, confrontation and shortsighted realism." Moreover, this mentality "was used to construct and justify authoritarian elements in Turkish politics."³

Davutoglu proposed the new "Strategic Depth Doctrine" which is based on the following major pillars:

- Turkey should aspire to change its status from a central power to that of a "global power." Its unique geostrategic position and the legacy of its Ottoman past should enable it to reach this position by the next decade.
- It should engage regional countries in order to achieve "zero problems" with its neighbors and to enhance Turkey's stature in the region, and thus in the world.
- Thanks to its various geostrategic assets, Turkey should change its foreign policy orientation from that of a security-oriented country to that of an economic-oriented one—what political scientists call the "de-securitization" of Turkish foreign policy.⁴

- Turkey should strengthen its economy through economic deals with Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Davutoglu went as far as to state that “Turkey needs Iranian energy as a natural extension of its national interests.”⁵
- As an up-and-coming actor Turkey should play the role of mediator in the conflicts in the world in general, and the Middle East in particular. (One result of such an endeavor was the establishment of the forum of “Alliance of Civilization,” which was headed by Turkey and Spain. Two important aims of this forum were to counter the well-known theory of the “Clash of Civilizations” propounded by Samuel Huntington and to “create a legitimate space for its [the AKP’s] survival in Turkey’s domestic political sphere.”)⁶

Turkey’s new vision and proactive policies in its own backyard should enhance its acceptance to the EU, as Ankara will become an important economic, strategic and political player. Its new role will also help it develop relations with the US on a new basis: that of mutuality and not the asymmetry that characterized the first sixty years of relations.⁷

Interestingly, Israel does not even exist in the new vision. It should be noted, however, that in the book he published earlier in 2001, Davutoglu argued that Israel was taking the initiative in its ties with Turkey, while the latter remained passive. He further stated that this situation prevented Turkey from opening up to its neighboring Arab countries.⁸

All these transformations had a very negative impact on relations with Israel. In order to analyze this change, we need to put it in a historical perspective and compare the situation today to that of the 1990s.

Much like in the biblical Land of Egypt in Joseph’s day, we are witnessing the unfolding of seven good years followed by seven bad years: In the 1990s, Israeli–Turkish relations were constantly improving, while in the first decade of this century, the opposite has been the case.

But unlike in the Bible, the causes are neither natural disasters nor God-inflicted punishment. A combination of domestic, regional and international factors tipped the balance, first in favor of Israel and then against it. One of the most important factors militating in favor of rapprochement between Turkey and Israel in the 1990s was the 1991 Gulf War.⁹ Turkey and Israel were in agreement as to the necessity of the war and their support for the US. The Turkish military, which was at the apex of its political power, played a leading role in reaching out to Jerusalem. Turkish–Syrian hostility provided another motive, as Damascus was considered a common enemy that needed to be kept in check. Similarly, Iran’s Islamic Republic was perceived as posing a serious threat to both countries. On

the positive side, it appeared that the Palestinian issue was well on its way to resolution, removing a severe stumbling block in Ankara–Jerusalem relations.

The *volte face* of the 2000s comes as a backlash to the 1990s. In the new vision, the view of Israel as an asset has changed, and it is now seen as a burden. In fact, friendship with Israel came to be identified with the negative phenomena of the 1990s, such as the “siege mentality,” the alliance with the Turkish military and its soft coup against Erbakan and his Islamist party in 1997, and other anti-Islamic and anti-democratic trends.

Most important of all, the common threats, or at least the perception of them, which drove the two states together, have changed dramatically. Syria was no longer an enemy, but a strategic partner for Ankara. Iran is perceived as an ally to the Islamic AKP rather than a threat.

At the same time, the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly the outbreak of the second intifada in fall 2000, and the more recent conflict with Hamas in Gaza, severely damaged Israel’s image in Turkey. To make matters worse, the 2003 US–Iraq war sparked a deterioration in Ankara’s relations with Washington, and also had negative effects on Turkey’s perceptions of Israel’s role in the region, especially regarding Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).¹⁰

Turkey’s recent initiative to mend fences with Armenia meant that Israel’s role as a lobbyist in Washington for the Turkish cause (consistently downplaying the Armenian genocide) became redundant. Similarly, the AKP’s initiative to peacefully solve the Kurdish domestic problem removed another common Turkish–Israeli interest, that of fighting terror. Moreover, Israel did not fit into the grand strategy of opening up to the countries of the region for ideological and economic interests.

Israel could have salvaged its important position if it had played according to Ankara’s rules and contributed to the success of Ankara’s mediating efforts between Syria and Israel and between Israel and the Palestinians. At least, that is how Turkey saw things. However, the war in Gaza put an end to Turkey’s rather messianic mission of establishing “order and security” in the region. The shattering of Ankara’s new vision on this score, together with the deep sympathy that the Turks felt toward the Palestinians, served to further fertilize the anti-Israel trend in Turkey. The fact that Israel chose Egypt and not Turkey for mediation with Hamas was seen as another slap in Erdogan’s face.

To be sure, Erdogan's stance and his daily attacks on Israel together with the strengthening of ultranationalist and Islamist tendencies, as well as the rise of antisemitism, greatly contributed to this turn of events.¹¹ The anti-Israel spirit gained momentum in the Turkish street, which is the worst of all developments as far as Israel and the Turkish Jewish community are concerned.

Coming against the backdrop of the severe global economic crisis, Erdogan used his growing popularity in the Muslim and Arab world to deepen ties with those countries at the expense of Israel.

Finally, US President Barack Obama's visit to Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia—but not to Israel—signaled to Ankara the downgrading of Israel's importance to Washington. This impression was further reinforced by Obama's initiatives toward Iran and Syria, Israel's archenemies.

Thus, both on the rhetorical and practical levels, the AKP government turned Israel into a whip with which it could lash out at its domestic rival, the army, and its external antagonist, the West.

Although Turkish–Israeli relations are in the throes of severe crisis, one should evaluate events dispassionately. Turkey is the only country in the region with which Israel has enjoyed uninterrupted relations throughout its sixty years of existence. The quality and scope of these relations are still unparalleled with those of any other country in the region. For the most part, relations between Ankara and Jerusalem have been steady, despite occasional ups and downs. What problems did arise had mostly to do with third parties, especially the Palestinians. Thus, after the Oslo agreement in 1993, relations began to flourish, but after Israel's military operation in Gaza, initiated at the end of 2008, they began to deteriorate. Should a breakthrough occur in the peace process, relations with Israel might yet improve. Despite the ongoing crisis, Turkey has not withdrawn its ambassador from Israel.

Even now, there are voices in leading newspapers, Jewish voices among them, which dare to criticize the Turkish government for the change in its stance toward Israel.¹² In Turkey, itself, the picture is neither so bleak, nor black and white, as some would have us believe. There are differences within the ruling elite, such as between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gül, who has more moderate views. Moreover, Foreign Minister Davutoglu's vision has been criticized as overly ambitious. The Turkish political system does have some mechanisms for checks and balances in policy. Most important of all, however, is the fact that the Kemalist opposition, and especially that of the army, are still forces to be reckoned with.

After the cancellation of Israel and Turkey's military exercises in October, Arab newspapers referred to Ankara as "the new Turkey" and the regional developments as "the new Middle East"—obviously one very different than that envisioned by Shimon Peres in the 1990s.

To be sure, Turkey's policies towards Israel have undergone a sweeping change. Still, Israel should not play into Ankara's hands and further worsen relations. Israel does not have the luxury of being able to alienate such an important country and adding it to the long list of its enemies. If Israel cannot win the sympathy of the leadership, it should certainly try to ease relations on the socioeconomic level. After all, for all the huge transformations in Turkey, there are still some deeper factors that can unite the two societies: shared values such as democracy, the aspiration to be part of the West and the need to protect secularism.

Since Turkey's foreign policy is now more economically than security oriented, Israel should place greater emphasis on that aspect of relations than it has in the past. Turkish intellectuals describe relations between Turkey and Israel as being shallow and one-dimensional, with an emphasis on strategic relations rather than on people-to-people ties.¹³ As an example, Iker Aytürk drew attention to the fact that there are almost no Hebrew books in the libraries of Ankara.¹⁴ Indeed, he suggested that like the Demirel Foundation, which was established at the Moshe Dayan Center in Tel Aviv University to encourage Turkish studies, Israel should set up something similar in Turkey to encourage the study of Hebrew.

For all the difficulties, Israeli officialdom should demonstrate greater sensitivity in order to override the crisis. The alternative is total isolation.

Postscript, late December 2009

Developments in the relationship between Turkey and Israel in the time that has elapsed since this text was composed only corroborate its main point, namely, that despite the negative developments in the last year, there are still elements in the two countries that are desirous and capable of ameliorating the situation. Thus, Israel's Industry, Trade and Labor Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer went on an official visit to Ankara in November 2009. President Abdullah Gül met President Shimon Peres in Copenhagen in December and the two agreed that the former "friendly and stable" ties between the two countries would be restored. Defense Minister Ehud Barak is expected to pay a visit to Turkey in January 2010, while President Gül promised to visit Israel some time in the future. Thus the two states seem to be willing to bury the hatchet, but just how long that will take remains to be seen.

Notes

- ¹ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul, 2001).
- ² Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's foreign policy vision: An assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, XI:1 (2008), 77–96.
- ³ Ihsan Dagı, "Editor's notes, *Insight Turkey*, XI:3 (2009), III.
- ⁴ Gökhan Bacık, "Turkish–Israeli relations after Davos: A view from Turkey," *Insight Turkey*, XI:3 (2009), 34 .
- ⁵ Davutoglu, "Turkey's foreign policy vision: An assessment of 2007," op. cit.
- ⁶ Ramazan Kılınç, "Turkey and the alliance of civilizations: Norms adoption as a survival strategy," *Insight Turkey*, XI:3 (2009), 58.
- ⁷ For further discussion on this doctrine, see Joshua W. Walker, "Learning strategic depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine," *Insight Turkey*, IX:3 (2007), 32–47.
- ⁸ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, op. cit., p. 426.
- ⁹ For the impact of the 1991 Gulf War on Turkey, see Amikam Nachmani, *Turkey: Facing a New Millennium* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 16–29.
- ¹⁰ On the impact of the Kurdish issue on relations, see Efraim Inbar, "Israel's New Strategic Partners: Turkey and India," *Studies in National Security*, No. 77 [Hebrew] pp. 8–9.
- ¹¹ Rifat Bali, "Present-Day Anti-Semitism in Turkey," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism*, No. 84 (August 16, 2009).
- ¹² "An acrobat who plays with more than one ball is impressive, but there is also the possibility that the ball will fall and disappear. These days Turkey is giving such an impression." Quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, November 6, 2009.
- ¹³ Bacık, op. cit., pp. 31–41.
- ¹⁴ Iker Aytürk, "Between crisis and cooperation: The future of Turkish–Israeli relations," *Insight Turkey*, XI:3 (2009), 74.