

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

**THE UNDERLYING REASONS OF DETERIORATION OF TURKISH-ISRAELI
RELATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE GAZA BLOCKADE AND THE
FLOTILLA INCIDENT**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP Justice and Development Party

EU European Union

IDF Israeli Defence Forces

IHH Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

OPEC Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

PKK Kurdistan Workers' Party

PLO Palestine Liberation Organization

PM Prime Minister

TAF Turkish Armed Forces

UN United Nations

U.S. United States of America

ABSTRACT

The Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2008/2009 and its attack on the Turkish humanitarian flotilla in 2010 cannot by themselves explain the recent deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. The deep reasons underlying it seem to be grounded more in the domestic developments in Turkey and the continuing stagnation of the Middle East peace process, which have pushed towards a further escalation of the crisis between the two countries. This essay will thoroughly analyze the nature of the Turkish-Israeli crisis and explain in what way the factors identified have contributed to the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in the recent years.

INTRODUCTION

Since Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2008/09 and its raid on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to those in blockade in 2010, the relations between Turkey and Israel have entered into a phase of a protracted crisis. The latter has reflected the differences in both countries' Middle Eastern policies and domestic developments. Turkey has come up with a very harsh rhetoric, both official and public, condemning the Israeli actions in the Gaza. Followed by the harsh criticism of the Gaza blockade by the Turkish officials, the tensions were even further heightened by the large anti-Israeli protests in Turkey. In the second half of 2009, Turkey did not give its consent to the Israeli participation in the NATO air maneuvers. Furthermore, the Israeli Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan went as far as suggesting that Israel should be suspended from the United Nations (Zaman, 2009). The relations between the two countries, however, hit the lowest point following the 'flotilla incident' or the Israeli attack on the humanitarian flotilla (particularly on the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara*) carrying aid to those in blockade in May 2010, as a result of which nine passengers onboard the vessels were killed and many others were wounded. Turkey, whose citizens comprised the largest number in the flotilla and among the casualties, came up with very harsh rhetoric condemning the Israeli act against the peaceful civilians onboard the ships as 'a crime against humanity'. As stated by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan during a speech to the Turkish Parliament; "in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the heart of humanity has taken one of her heaviest wounds in history. The aid ships, from the humanitarian heart, these flowing aid ships have been hindered with guns, by violence, despotism" ("Turkish Prime Minister's Speech on Israeli Attack on Aid Flotilla", 2010).

The Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip and the following ‘flotilla incident’ signaled the lowest point in the relations between the two countries since the 1990s when they had started to cooperate at “a level close to strategic partnership” (Szymanski, 2010, p. 182). Though since then Turkish-Israeli ties have witnessed a number of fluctuations, however, they have never seemed to be as strained as in the aftermath of these two infamous developments. They seriously undermined Turkey’s role as a major regional player and a chief mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict, indirectly questioning the legitimacy of Turkey’s new foreign policy designed under the rule of Justice and Development Party. The main target of this policy has been to advance Turkey’s role as a chief mediator in major regional conflicts; whereas these events came to be serious impediments for attaining that target. However, as this essay further suggests, the shift in Turkish foreign policy towards Israel was not merely guided by the strategic goal of enhancing the country's regional profile, but also by the coming onto stage of Political Islam with the rise to power of the AKP, which became dominant both in Turkey's domestic politics and foreign affairs. Based on its Islamic roots, the AKP tried to find a moral foundation in the Muslim world (which would help to advance its foreign policy), this, in turn, seriously undermining the vestiges of its strategic partnership with Israel.

On the other hand, the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ resulted in a further stagnation of the Oslo Peace Process, eliminating one of the main reasons which had brought about the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, and leading to even a deeper crisis in the relations between the two countries.

So, this essay will argue that the domestic changes in Turkey, namely, the coming onto stage of Political Islam with the rising to power of the Justice and Development Party; Turkey’s new foreign policy aiming at enhancing Turkey's regional profile and the continuing stagnation of the

Oslo Peace Process resulting from the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ brought about a serious crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

So, for the purpose of this study, the following research questions were formulated.

RQ1: Why did Turkish-Israeli relations change after the 2008/09 Israeli blockade of the Gaza and the 2010 ‘flotilla incident’?

RQ2: Has Turkey’s unusually harsh response, both official and public, to Israel’s offensive against Hamas in Gaza and its raid on the humanitarian flotilla been merely a reaction to Israel’s policies or has it been triggered by other broader implications?

HYPOTHESIS

H1: The domestic changes in Turkey, namely the rising to power of the Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party, along with the new foreign policy direction, adopted under the AKP, aiming at enhancing the country's regional profile, came to seriously undermine its partnership with Israel and resulted in a shift in the mutual relations between the two countries.

H2: The continuing stagnation of the Oslo Peace Process, as a result of the 2008/09 Gaza blockade and the 2010 ‘flotilla incident’, further escalated the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the analysis of secondary data, e. g. scholarly literature, journalistic articles and reports, as well as Internet and media sources.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In order to find out and explain the deep causes underlying the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel, this essay will go through the following stages. First of all, it will present a comprehensive review of previously conducted scholarly research to find out and summarize what has already been done in the field and what can be the added value of this research. Then, the first chapter will continue to discuss the foreign and security policies of both Turkey and Israel in a broader regional context in order to set up some basis for the further analysis of the development of their mutual ties. The second chapter will dwell upon the gradual development of the mutual partnership between the countries since 1990s, to see what kind of operational environment led to the development of strategic ties between them, what were the factors responsible for the fluctuations in their mutual ties and whether those fluctuations caused a serious harm to Turkish-Israeli partnership prior to the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’. The third chapter will go on to closely and thoroughly analyze the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ and their protracted impact on the relations between the two countries. The fourth and the last chapter will go deep into the reasons of deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in the aftermath of these infamous events. And finally, the conclusion will present the analysis of the research findings trying to determine the true nature and the underlying reasons of the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Turkish-Israeli crisis brought about by the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ has been determining the evolution of the two countries’ bilateral relations in recent years. The reasons underlying the crisis seem to be much deeper than those constantly articulated by the authorities of the two countries. As stated by many scholars and academics, the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel has been more a function of structural causes and changing strategic environment in the region than simply the private intentions of the two actors. Although it is more the Turkish government that has been slowly changing its strategy vis-à-vis Israel, however, Israel is also stated to have intensively pushed Turkey in that direction with a number of egregious tactical mistakes. Now let us look at some scholarly articles and reports to see how the current state of crisis and its underlying causes are analyzed and explained by experts in the field.

In his article “Adventures in Causal Analysis: The Whys of Turkey’s Deteriorating Relations with Israel” (2011), Ilter Turan, a well-known Turkish academic, discusses the impact of the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ on the Turkish-Israeli relations expressing the deep concern that these relations are deteriorating at such an alarming rate that it may be quite difficult to improve them in the foreseeable future. The author states that one of the main reasons responsible for the current crisis between the two countries is the failure of Turkish attempts to build peace by cooperative efforts with Israel, therefore, Turkey is currently heading towards a more competitive strategy to achieve the same end. The article argues that the infamous events, namely, the blockade of the Gaza and the raid on the humanitarian flotilla, came to prove that the Israeli government can no longer be trusted to stick to its commitments and that it has no intentions to make peace with its neighbors. According to the author, although the deterioration

of Turkish-Israeli relations may be also partly due to Turkey's current domestic developments, however, he states that it could be very difficult to develop a persuasive argument to prove this.

The view that the current crisis could be ascribed to Turkey's new foreign policy developed under Justice and Development Party is further developed by Soli Ozel in his article "Turkey-Israel relations: Where to Next?" (2010). According to the article, under AKP, a vision began to take shape in Turkey that the latter should be engaged with all the parties in the region without privileging any one of them. This aimed at generating regional stability and economic integration around Turkey and creating enough space for its diplomacy in all troubling developments. The author also presents some details from the current state of relations between the two countries adding, however, that one should be very careful in order not to jump to simple conclusions about these relations. He is convinced that as in the majority of cases in this situation also "the periodic eruption of crises is a more function of structural causes and the changing strategic environment in the region than the proclivities of the principal actors" (Ozel, 2010, p. 2).

Another proponent of this view is Karen Kaya, a contractor for the Foreign Military Studies Office of the US, who in his article "Changing Trends in Israel-Turkey Security and Military Relations: Their Perspectives" (2011) argues that the recent trends in relations between Turkey and Israel are the product of the structural changes in the two countries' operational environments. The article thoroughly analyzes changes both in security and military relations between the two countries and identifies several factors of the operational environment that influence their mutual ties. It further analyzes these factors from both Turkish and Israeli perspectives identifying a correlation between the progress of the Middle East peace process and the bilateral relations of the two countries. According to the article, the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel may be also partly due to the rise to power of AKP and its new

foreign policy of “zero problems with our neighbors” which seeks to make Turkey a regional leader and a chief mediator in the Middle East peace negotiations.

The causes of the recent deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations are also closely analyzed in the article “Crisis in Turkey-Israel Relations” (2010) written by Adam Szymanski. According to him, the weakening of the two-way relations and the present crisis between Turkey and Israel should be mainly attributed to changes taking place in the international arena. Szymanski discusses several factors as the most important determinants of the continuing escalation of Turkish-Israeli tensions. First of all, he mentions, that whereas in the 1990s Turkey and Israel had similar perceptions of the threats coming from the neighboring Arab countries, now this is gone, with Turkey adopting a new foreign policy doctrine seeking to resolve problems in relation with its neighbors. “A perceptible improvement in the country’s relations with Iraq, Iran and Syria was accompanied by widening differences in relations with Israel, which stuck to the traditional isolationist doctrine in its Middle Eastern policy” (Szymanski, 2010, p. 182). Contributing to the crisis, according to the article, were also Turkey’s internal/domestic determinants. These determinants included the use of Turkish citizens’ strong support for the Palestinians by the Turkish government as a means of mobilizing the electorate prior to 2009 local elections, diverting attention from problems connected with Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and, finally, boosting the country’s image in the Arab world. Two other important determinants further mentioned in the article are Turkey’s historical affinity for Palestine (part of the former Ottoman Empire) and the ideological profile of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamic roots. According to the article, the crisis was even further fuelled by the differences over relations with Turkey within the ruling coalition in Israel, with Minister Barak and PM Benjamin Netanyahu constantly emphasizing the importance of maintaining

mutual contacts with Turkey and other politicians led by the Foreign Minister Lieberman not considering relations with Turkey as a priority and seeing no chances for any compromise on the Palestinian issue. The author finally concludes that although a return to the quality of relations of 1990s is an unlikely prospect, however, in order to be able to, at least, prevent the further escalation of the crisis and pave the way for future compromise on Middle Eastern issues both countries need to make serious attempts to eliminate the influence of their internal/domestic constraints.

In the article “Turkey’s Strategic U-Turn, Israel’s Tactical Mistakes” (2010) the crisis between the two countries is viewed from a slightly different perspective. According to the author, Ankara’s strategic shift started, first and foremost, after it decided to align itself with Israel’s two implacable enemies, Iran and Hamas. It is further stated that “given [their] unflinching opposition to Israel’s existence, Turkey’s support for them cancels out, in effect, its alignment with Israel” (Bengio, 2010, p.1). One of the main reasons for such a new Turkish policy, according to the article, was the rise to power of the AKP government with its Islamic ideological and political orientation which, together with the downsizing of the Turkish military’s influence, fostered a closer alignment with Iran and delivered a severe blow to Turkey’s strategic alliance with Israel. However, as stated in the article, Israel’s tactical mistakes also had a huge role in pushing forward the crisis. Namely, its military offensive in the Gaza (without making Turkey aware beforehand), declarations by Israeli officials of their opposition to any mediating role played by Turkey in the dispute between Syria and Israel and, above all, the flotilla affair and the death of the Turkish citizens prepared an ample ground for the crisis.

A number of scholarly articles consider ‘emotionalism’ and the national sentiments of the two countries as equally important determinants of the recent crisis between them. In his article

“Turkey and Israel: the Wrong Crisis at the Wrong Time” (2011) Oded Eran, the director of the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University and a veteran of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, states that, considering the demand of the Turkish authorities for an apology from the Israeli side as a precondition for conducting a future dialogue with it and the Israeli refusal to do so, one can have an impression that “personal sentiments and emotions are at the core of the decision making [both] in Ankara and Jerusalem”. According to him, what is required at the present moment, considering the volatility of the region, is “mature political leadership able to rise above events and inflated sentiments such as “national pride” (Eran, 2011, p. 11). Before coming to this conclusion, Eran briefly analyzes the development of mutual ties between Turks and Jews starting even before the establishment of the Jewish State up to the deterioration of their relations as a result of the recent developments. Besides the Israeli blockade of the Gaza (also known as ‘Operation Cast Lead’) and its following attack on the Turkish humanitarian ship Mavi Marmara, another development, according to Eran, that has even further accelerated the deterioration of relations between the two countries, has been the publication of the UN Secretary General’s Committee Report (the Palmer Report) surrounding that infamous ‘flotilla incident’. As Turkey refused to verify the conclusions around the incident presented in the report, the tensions between the countries even further escalated.

The impact of the Palmer Committee Report on the further escalation of Turkish Israeli tensions is also presented in the article “Turkey and Israel: Brinkmanship and the Grand Strategy of the Erdogan Government” (2012) written by Ben Lombardi, another expert in the field. Lombardi mentions that the recent announcements by the Turkish officials stating that Turkey does not accept the Palmer Commission’s findings that the Gaza blockade is legal indicate that Turkey is now prepared to challenge Israeli policy even more directly. The author further continues to

discuss what he considers to be the main drivers of Turkey's policy towards Israel after the Gaza blockade and the 'flotilla incident'. First of all, he thinks that the confrontation with Israel is a means for Turkey to push a larger regional realignment and create an increased space for its diplomatic maneuvering. This is mainly achieved through "generating new and friendly expectations of Turkish policy among the region's Arab governments" (Lombardi, 2012, p. 11). The second driver of Turkey's policy towards Israel, according to the author, is rooted in the imperatives of its domestic politics; namely, the end of the era of the military determining the foreign relations in Turkey and the rise to power of Islamist Justice and Development Party. However, Lombardi thinks that there is a great risk concerning the brinkmanship Ankara is playing with Tel Aviv. He, particularly, refers to Erdogan's announcement that Turkish naval vessels will accompany any humanitarian vessel attempting to sail to Gaza. According to him, in order to avoid a future clash, either Turkey must go back from this decision or Israel should avoid using force to prevent the breaking the of Gaza blockade.

The role of national sentiments in triggering the recent crisis between Turkey and Israel are also discussed in Amberin Zaman's article "After Gaza: Rising anti-Semitism in Turkey" (2009). It addresses the question whether Turkey's harsh response to the Israeli actions in the Gaza was just a natural and expected reaction to Israel's policies or whether it mirrors the recently rising anti-Semitism in Turkish society. The article states that, comparing the results of the 2008 Pew Global Attitudes Survey with those of 2004, one can see, in fact, how rapidly anti-Jewish sentiment is rising in Turkey. However, the author further states that as the chorus of anti-Israeli sentiment grow louder, a growing number of Turkish officials and commentators start to speak against anti-Semitism as "Turkey's emerging clout in the Middle East stems out not only from its efforts to reach out to Iran and its long neglected Arab neighbors, but above all due to its close

ties with Israel and the United States" (Zaman, 2009, p. 3). The author, thus, concludes that anti-Semitic sentiments should not prevail over Turkey's strategic ties with Israel.

Another article that provides a critical assessment of the recent crisis between Israel and Turkey is "Israel, Turkey and the Gaza blockade" (2011) written by Daniel Benoliel. The article analyzes the Turkish-led position adopted by many governments worldwide, including Arab governments, as well as human rights NGOs and some organs of the United Nations, in their joint critique of the Israeli actions in the Gaza. After separately evaluating both countries' behaviors in the recent events, the article states that Turkey has come up with quite weak legal reasoning when framing Israel's legal regime as "belligerent occupation law, absent armed conflict towards Hamas-led Gaza, thereby missing the opportunity to assess Israel's adherence to the laws of armed conflicts more accurately". So, the article concludes that when denying Israel's lawful right to self-defense, Turkey has failed to correctly analyze Israel's application of the laws of armed conflicts towards Hamas. However, the article fails to discuss the deep reasons underlying such a harsh Turkish policy towards Israel; it only focuses on the inaccurate analysis of the situation by the Turkish side.

Thus, the causes of the recent Turkish-Israeli crisis identified in the current literature are manifold. Although changes in the structural environment of the region and the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey are among the most frequently cited determinants of the crisis, however, there is no real consensus on the subject. Besides, there seems to be a need for stronger and more persuasive arguments to back up the positions advanced by scholars and show in what ways the factors constantly mentioned in the literature have contributed to the Turkish-Israeli crisis.

CHAPTER 1: FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES OF TURKEY AND ISRAEL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

1.1 TURKEY'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East has been generally characterized as an evolving one. Its deep foundations lie in the legacy of the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who, from the very first days of its establishment in 1923, developed two fundamental goals for the new republic: modernization and westernization. Despite Turkey's long historical relationship with the rest of the Islamic world, Ataturk directed the country away from it and towards more secularization. As a result of a series of domestic reforms to bolster the new direction of the country, Turkey experienced an almost complete break with its past both in its internal and foreign spheres. Although Ataturk's influence cannot be stated to be 'unshakeable', however, his legacy still endures, and any changes in Ankara's foreign policy orientation should be examined against this background (Carley, 1995).

To analyze recent and contemporary Turkish foreign policy, it is essential to go back and discuss some of the most significant domestic reforms that were implemented by Ataturk. "Rejecting the Ottoman-era claims to the Middle East was certainly one of the more revolutionary decisions Ataturk made, and also one of the most pragmatic [ones]" (Danforth, 2008, p. 85). His lack of interest in Middle Eastern affairs, besides being the product of his broader foreign policy, also reflected the fact that in the aftermath of World War I, the Middle East was largely under European political control, and there were very few independent states with which Turkey could have established friendly relations. So, it could not pursue a Middle Eastern policy that was separate from its relations with the European states as, aside from the ideological prejudices that the Kemalists could have against the Islam or Arabs, "the strategic imperative to focus directly

on European affairs was compelling” (Danforth, 2008, p. 85). Besides, the Ottomans’ defeat in the war, the following Hejaz rebellion and the rise of Arab nationalism were still other factors that would make Ataturk’s imperial ambitions towards the Middle East as clearly unrealistic. So, as stated by Danforth (2008), Ataturk’s foreign policy towards the Middle East should be more ascribed to the historical constraints he operated under rather than to the features of his nationalist ideology.

One of the most important domestic reforms implemented by Ataturk to reinforce the new republic’s movement away from the Islamic world and towards western civilization was the secularization of the government and, to a certain extent, of society. The political power was now proclaimed to come from the Grand National Assembly and, for the first time in Turkish history, it was not bound to religious ideology. Other powerful reforms towards modernization that pulled Turkish politics and society more firmly from its previous orientation were the reform of the alphabet (the removal of the Arab script) and the elimination of Islam as the official religion from the Turkish constitution (Carley, 1995). Alongside these basic dynamics during the early years of the Republic of Turkey, “[its] relationships with the Arab world and Israel were subjected to great and sometimes emotional swings between enthusiasm and deep distrust” (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 1). A lack of planning or thinking about the region was still another characteristic of Turkish policy, a problem that continued for several decades, at least till the end of the Cold War.

Turkey’s ignorance and lack of enthusiasm towards the Middle East continued for many decades after its establishment. After the end of World War II, when Turkey’s strategic significance to the United States and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as the only member of the western alliance to border the Soviet Union considerably increased, its relations with the

Middle Eastern countries continued to take a back seat in its foreign policy agenda. “Turkey created a Cold War role for itself as a US-backed regional gendarme, opposing itself to countries in the Middle East that were often aligned with the Soviet Union” (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 1).

Turkey’s role as an agent of American policy in the Middle East appeared to be confirmed to the new nationalist Arab governments when, in 1955, it pushed for the establishment of the Baghdad Pact, a US-backed attempt which aimed to bring the nations of the region into an alliance against the Soviet Union. By 1958, Turkey had also signed a secret accord with Iran and Israel, joining forces against the Arabs. The Arab response to Turkey’s attitude was summarized by Egypt’s President Nasser who publicly declared Turkey as *a persona non grata* in the Arab world. However, Turkey again started to open up to the Arab world after 1964 when the United States refused to provide Ankara with support in the worsening Cyprus dispute. Another opportunity came with the oil boom of the 1970s, when the new Arab markets provided the foundations for Turkey’s first large expansion in its external trade. As stated by the International Crisis Group (2010), this was also accompanied with a rise of Turkish sympathy with the Palestinians, mainly based not on a shared perception of a Muslim identity but rather on a shared leftist ideology. However, the main motivation of Turkey’s sensitivity to the Palestinian cause is also stated to be rooted in a sense of economic interest (Robins, 2003). Yet, despite relatively expanded relations with Middle East, Turkey’s most significant political relationship continued to be with the West, as well as its principal trade relations (Carley, 1995).

During the late twentieth century, Turkey’s most problematic Middle Eastern relationships seemed to be with Syria, Iraq and Iran, the countries of its near abroad. With Syria they were at opposite poles of the Cold War, with Turkey belonging to the NATO camp and Syria being

mostly aligned with the Soviet Union. Another dispute was around the status of the Turkish province of Hatay (Syria had irredentist claims over the Hatay Province which had been annexed to Turkey in 1939). Besides, they also had a water dispute which intensified after the 1980s when Turkey started to build extensive dams on the Tigris-Euphrates river system, which resulted in a reduced amount of water flows into northern Syria. In response to Turkish actions, Syria used its political prestige as a leading Arab state to turn the Arab League and also the larger Arab world against Turkey. It also allowed Turkish Kurd militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to build up their military training camps in Lebanon and let the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan base himself in Damascus. However, the relations between Turkey and Syria started to gradually recover after reaching an ultimatum by the end of the 90s. After Damascus asked the PKK leader Ocalan to leave Syria, "Turkey switched to a policy of embracing its former Syrian antagonists, setting the stage for the extraordinary blooming of trade and political relations over the next decade" (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 3).

In contrast, Turkey had quite friendly relations with Iraq before the 1991 Gulf War, the two frequently cooperating especially on the Kurdish problem. However, after the onset of the war, with Turkey supporting the US embargo against Iraq, the relations between the two countries considerably deteriorated. The situation was made even worse for Ankara when, as a response to Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a security vacuum was created by the US over Turkey's border with northern Iraq which was accompanied with what might be the beginnings of an independent Kurdish state (Carley, 1995). After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey was faced with a new generation of challenges as the region was now under the threat of destabilization which could further lead to a Kurdish liberation movement. The fear of such a movement brought about the Turkish parliament's refusal to the passage of the US troops through Turkey to Iraq on March

1, 2003, a decision which resulted in four years of crisis in Turkey's relations with Washington and the US-dominated regime in Iraq. However, in 2007 the US signed an entente with Turkey which also included a brokered understanding between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, in which the latter pledged solidarity with Ankara in its fight against PKK insurgents (International Crisis Group, 2010).

As for Iran, in the 1980s and 1990s it was seen by the Turkish security establishment as posing a vital threat to the existence of the Turkish state for supporting PKK terrorism and trying to export its theocratic regime to secular-democratic Turkey. However, later the resurgence of PKK terrorism in Turkey and the rise of a Kurdish movement in Iran since the 2003 Iraqi war seem to have united the two countries against the commonly perceived threat; both countries have an interest in the protection of Iraq's territorial integrity (Eligur, 2010). So, as one can clearly conclude, throughout the period discussed, the Kurdish problem has seemed to lie at the heart of Turkey's relations with Syria, Iraq and Iran, as fundamental shifts in these relations occurred only after either these countries stopped giving covert support to Kurdish militants or the threat of a Kurdish separatist movement was gone.

As for its relations with Israel, throughout the Cold War era, Turkey escaped from entering into close strategic partnership with it. This was due to several factors that limited its freedom in the conduct of its foreign policy. First, being a Muslim state and having close historical and religious ties with other Muslim states, Turkey was forced to demonstrate solidarity with them which, in turn, significantly determined the direction of its foreign policy towards the Middle East. From the very beginning, Turkey's negative reaction to the idea of a Jewish state much stemmed from the fear of alienating the Arabs and the rest of the Muslim world. Turkey did not grant an official recognition to the newly established Jewish state till 28 March, 1949 when Turkey's Foreign

Minister Necmettin Sadak stated that Israel was a reality which had been recognized by more than thirty countries and that the Arabs themselves were on the way to conducting negotiations with it. The Arabs themselves did not conceal their disappointment whenever Turkish policy was becoming pro-Israeli. For instance, in 1951 when Turkey joined the West to protest the decision of Egypt to ban the passage of Israeli ships through the Suez Canal, a serious crisis arose in Turkish-Egyptian relations. This and other similar incidents periodically forced Turkey to cool its relations with Israel avoiding any rapprochement and close strategic ties with it. The second factor which, from Turkey's perspective, made the rapprochement with Israel risky was that it could prevent Turkey from benefiting from Arab political and economic cooperation that was becoming increasingly important especially at the beginning of the 1960s, when Turkey became involved in a conflict with Greece over Cyprus. Turkey's dependence on oil and its desire not to be denied any economic opportunities that were opened to it in oil-producing Arab countries made it impossible to ignore the demands of the OPEC countries, which was to escape close strategic relations with Israel (Abadi, 1995). Still another factor which made the relations between the two countries obscure was the uncertainty regarding Israel's foreign policy orientation; and even Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's decision to support the United States during the Korean War did not completely eliminate Turkey's suspicions about Israel being a pro-Communist state. However, Ben-Gurion was well aware of this issue and convincing the Turkish government that Israel was not pro-Communist became a high priority in his foreign policy agenda.

However, Turkish foreign policy was also much affected by its political alliance with the United States and the NATO throughout the Cold War era. Paradoxically, this alignment with the West distanced Turkey away from the Soviet bloc and created a platform for relatively friendly

relations with Israel. At times, Ankara took overt steps in order to normalize its relations with Israel. For instance, in 1950 Turkey sent Seyfullah Esin, a Turkish *charge d'affaires* to Tel-Aviv, and in 1952 both countries appointed ministers. This seemed to be a part of Turkey's pro-Western policy which aimed at enabling Turkey to achieve full membership in NATO (Soysal, 1991). Another important factor which made friendly relations between Turkey and Israel possible was the secular nature of Turkey's politics which in part pulled it away from its Arab neighbors. As mentioned above, through a series of domestic reforms Kemal Ataturk had been able to reinforce the country's movement towards modern western civilization and secularization and away from the Islamic world; this later becoming an important factor fostering friendly relations between Turkey and Israel (Carley, 1995).

So, Turkey needed to keep a balance between the two objectives: first, establish normal relations with Israel required by its alliance with the West, and, second, maintain friendly relations with its Arab neighbors demanded by its economic needs and its historical and religious ties to the Arab world (Abadi, 1995). However, throughout the Cold War era, the second objective appeared to be much more central in Turkey's foreign policy and considerably limited the benefits to be gained from its possible strategic partnership with Israel.

1.2 ISRAEL'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

From the very first years of Israel's independence, a central pillar in its foreign policy became the so called 'periphery doctrine' which implied establishing diplomatic ties with 'periphery' states so as to counterbalance the economic and diplomatic isolation imposed on it by the neighboring Arab states. The mission of the doctrine was to prove an argument long held by the Israeli politicians, particularly, the first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion, that the

Middle East should not be considered as exclusively Arab or Islamic. The core essence of the argument was that the Turks, the Persians and the Jews were much more numerous in the Middle East than the Arabs, and that through contacts with the peoples of the outer zone they would be able to achieve friendship with the peoples of the inner zone, their immediate neighbors (Brecher, 1972). As written by Abba Evan, long before he became Israeli Prime Minister: “The Middle East is not exclusive Arab domain There are nearly as many non-Arabs as Arabs in the Middle East (the combined population of Israel, Iran, Ethiopia, Somalia, Turkey and Cyprus is 80.000.000); and the dream of a united Arab domain from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf offends the region's essential diversity” (Eban, 1965, p. 634). So, by its ‘periphery doctrine’ Israel aimed at escaping regional isolation that had resulted from its continuous disputes with the neighboring Arab countries. Turkey, whose location on the periphery of the Middle East gave it a huge strategic significance for Israel, became a central player in this doctrine. Israel was keenly aware of the many advantages inherent in Turkey’s impressive geopolitical, material and human resources; therefore, it directed huge diplomatic efforts towards establishing close and friendly relations with Turkey (Bir, Sherman, 2002).

Apart from its attempts to escape regional isolation, Israel had several other ambitions as well that were enclosed in its partnership with Turkey. First, Israel hoped that establishing close ties with “a Western aligned, Muslim-populated state—would dilute the religious element of the Arab-Israeli conflict” and help ease the tensions inherent in its relations with the surrounding Arab states (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 24). Arab nations have frequently emphasized the role of religion in their conflict with Israel stating that it is a religious conflict of the Muslims against the “infidel Jews” as they tend to call them. Such a religious perspective of the Arab-Israeli conflict further highlights the role of Turkey in the peace building process and, thus, justifies the

Israeli efforts aiming at a closer cooperation with Turkey. Second, Israel believed that a closer partnership with Turkey would help it strengthen its ties with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and with Europe as Israel's possible membership to NATO and friendly relations with European countries, in general, would help it further advance its own stance in the Middle East peace process. Now let us briefly discuss the major disputes involving Israel and the neighboring Arab countries so as to have a general idea of the direction of Israel's foreign and security policy in the region.

One of the major regional conflicts in the Middle East which still remains unresolved after two decades of intensive peace negotiations with the mediation of various international players, including Turkey and the United States, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From the Israeli perspective, the hostility between the two nations was brought about by Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians since the establishment of the State of Israel and even prior to it resulting in the death and injury of a great number of Israelis. After the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 terrorist actions launched in Israel became even more frequent and violent, as stated by the Israelis, and did not stop even after the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in 1990s marked by the Oslo Accord signed in 1993 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, 2007). The latter, formerly known as the "Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements" served as a basis for the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority for the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with the right of self-governance of their territory under the international observation and also called for the withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area of the West Bank. This status was to last for a transitional period of time up to five years and was to help reach a comprehensive peace settlement of the conflict. However, the Oslo Accord did not

quite contribute to the improvement of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and disagreements about core issues such as borders, settlements, refugees, security and so on, continue to dominate in the negotiation process even after two decades. Turkey and the United States, both being chief mediators in the Arab-Israeli peace process, seem to be on the same page regarding the preconditions for the conflict settlement they constantly cite; these are the permanent freeze of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and normalization of Arab relations with Israel without any further threats towards its security and survival (Zanotti, 2010).

The dispute between Israel and Syria is also one of the major conflicts in the region. It rose after the Golan Heights; the former Syrian land was occupied by Israel in the 1967 War. Israel justified its annexation of the Golan Heights by its victory in the war, while Syria arguing that as the United Nations forbids land acquisition through war, therefore, Israel's occupation is illegal. Both countries seem to have their own strategic interests concerning the territory. "The overarching dilemma connecting both the theoretical rationale and strategic rationale is how to satisfy Syria's territorial claims while satisfying Israel's security concerns" (Repko, 2007, p. 25). The conflict around the Golan Heights has become one contentious issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict, so, in order to build peace between the two countries and help advance the Arab-Israeli peace process, both countries' interests and concerns should be adequately answered. Besides the question of Golan Heights, there are some other issues of disagreement between Syria and Israel as well, such as hosting Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Mish'al in Syria and providing the Lebanese Hezbollah organization, which is another chief opponent of Israel, with military weapons. A conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces took place in 2006 as a result of abduction of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah from northern Israel. The United States urged Syria to intervene and make Hezbollah end the conflict, but Syria connected its national interests,

particularly the return of the Golan Heights, with the conflict resolution, thus, failing to successfully contribute to its settlement (Addis, 2011).

As for Iran, it is currently considered to be the predominant security challenge for Israel in the region. Israeli threat perceptions of Iran basically come from the latter's missile capabilities and rapid nuclear advances. Similarly important for Israel is Iran's increasing influence in the region due to such advanced nuclear capabilities which will severely limit the political and military maneuverability of both Israel and the US in the region. Threats from Iran of elimination of the State of Israel come all the time; Iranian leaders consider this to be their highest religious duty. The United States closely allies with Israel against this threat by putting sanctions on Iran that aim at targeting Iran's energy sector and urging it to step aside from its nuclear program. Some analysts even say that Israel is so worried by Iran's nuclear ambitions that it may launch an attack on its nuclear infrastructure. However, interestingly enough, for a long period of time the relations between Israel and Iran had been based on shared geopolitical interests leading to years of cooperation both before and after Iran's 1979 revolution. Their alliance has often been viewed as a counterweight to their Arab neighbors. Yet today, the Israelis view nearly every regional threat through the prism of Iran. The rivalry between the two countries has even further intensified after the geopolitical transformation of the Middle East marked by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the elimination of a common adversary of both Israel and Iran. The Iraqi War and other important events such as the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, in which Iran was able to successfully use its arms and tactics against Israel, came to reinforce the viewpoint that Iran was increasingly becoming the region's great power (Kaye, 2011). The Israeli-Iranian relations became even worse after the Egyptian Revolution, as the Iranian leaders started to publicly discuss their view of the transition of Egypt as a sign of rejection of all of its foreign

policies including its peace treaty with Israel (Addis, 2011, pp 10-12). In response, Israeli officials, particularly Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, publicly criticized such statements and expressed serious concerns that Iran will try to exploit the situation in every possible way particularly for expanding its regional influence (Addis, 2011, p. 2).

Israel's relations with Egypt since the 1979 peace treaty can be characterized as relatively stable. The peace treaty became the cornerstone of future cooperation between the two countries. Israel gradually withdrew from Sinai Peninsula which it had captured during the 1967 Six-Day War which significantly contributed to the normalization of Egyptian-Israeli relations. Although the diplomatic relations between the two countries have been far from being ideal even since the peace treaty and the return of the Sinai Peninsula mainly because of continuing Israeli control over the Arab lands, however, the peace process between the two countries has never been officially broken since 1979. After Hamas forcibly took control over Gaza in 2007, Egyptian government even closely cooperated with Israel by closing its Rafah crossing in order to prevent arms smuggling to Gaza through its border (Addis, 2011).

The conflicts discussed above have had a major role in determining the nature of relationship between Turkey and Israel. Israel has always seemed to attach great significance to the role of Turkey in its foreign and security policy. Therefore, Turkey's warming relations with Iran and Syria have greatly heightened its concerns; as this could have a negative impact on its relations with Turkey and further increase its regional isolation. Yet, before the 1990s Turkey did not seem to meet Israel's expectations and showed little interest in entering into a strategic partnership with it. However, a major shift in their relations occurred at the beginning of the 1990s when the countries started to cooperate at a level close to strategic partnership. Now the

essay will continue to analyze the true nature of Turkish-Israeli rapprochement since the 1990s and the factors responsible for it.

CHAPTER 2: TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS SINCE THEIR RAPPROCHEMENT IN EARLY 90s

In the early 1990s Turkey and Israel started developing diplomatic, military and economic cooperation which soon brought them to a level close to strategic partnership. The rapprochement between them was not merely dictated by the stance of either of the two countries toward third parties, but rather by the overall operational environment of the region which was the product of a number of structural changes, along with the needs and interests of each country, to be discussed below.

After the end of the Cold War the overall Turkish foreign policy towards the region became more active and multi-dimensional. As a result of a global restructuring of world politics Turkey finally started to reevaluate its relations with Israel. The first factor that urged Turkey to adopt a more security-based foreign policy and fostered Turkish-Israeli rapprochement was the perception on the Turkish side of its increasing isolation as a result of global and regional changes following the end of the Cold War. With the disintegration of Warsaw Pact, the future of NATO became very obscure. “Located on the edge of the NATO alliance and outside the EU”, Turkey became quite suspicious of the credibility and validity of its strategic security doctrines and whether it could still have any place under any “collective umbrella” (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 24). Besides, for Turkey, membership to NATO symbolized a membership to the West, thus, it was not surprising that “Turkey was one of the most vocal countries on the importance of the continuity of NATO’s existence” (Sandrin, 2009, p.3). Thus, facing with lots of uncertainty concerning its borders and identity and finding itself in an unstable environment surrounded by several so called “regional destabilizers” such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Iran; Turkey had to reformulate its foreign policy directions and seek for new alliances; in such a situation Israel

turned out to be the best candidate (Bac, 1998). However, as Sandrin argues in her article (2009), such a new foreign policy direction was mainly due to the increased role of the military in Turkey's foreign policy making process at least at the beginning of the 1990s. Due to its unique interpretation of historical events, the military tends to frame many security issues as "existential threats", thus, propagating the view that the country is surrounded by unfriendly countries and that "Turks have no friends but Turks" (Sandrin, 2009).

Another factor that came once again to confirm the fact that the region of the Middle East was becoming a major source of instability and had a huge potential to threaten global security was the 1990-1991 Gulf War. It came to emphasize the similarities between Turkey and Israel; two non-Arab states situated in a predominantly Arab region susceptible to common security dangers (Bac, 1998). "Turkey and Israel were on the same page regarding the necessity of the war and their support for the US" (Kaya, 2011, p. 2). The Gulf War not only further fostered Turkish-Israeli rapprochement but also demonstrated that Turkey could still be a very crucial player in the region for the West, despite the fact that its role as a buffer against the Soviet Union had already ended.

The end of the Cold War did not only bring security threats and dilemmas for Turkey; the perceived loss of its strategic importance to the West and the fear of isolation were accompanied by a number of opportunities as well; one of them being improving its economic and political ties with the Middle East. After a long period of 'cool relationship' between Turkey and Israel, the countries entered a zone of extensive trade relations which were formalized by a bilateral trade agreement signed in March 1993. The positive atmosphere also led to the establishment and strengthening of political and diplomatic ties, with an exchange of ambassadors and mutual visits of the officials of both countries. Still another opportunity came with the tightening of ties

in the spheres of military and security cooperation. At the time, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) was in need of modernization, technical know-how and new military equipment. Due to the purchase of a lot of modernized military technologies from Israel and cooperation on several air force projects, Turkey gained significant technical expertise and competence and became much more confident in addressing its major security issues. All these issues were addressed in “Strategic Cooperation Agreement” signed by the officials of the two countries in 1993. It included “cooperation in international and regional affairs in order to promote peace; cooperation in military technology transfers between the armed forces of the two countries; joint educational and cultural programs; and agreements to facilitate trade and investments” (Abadi, 2002, p. 11).

Another factor that gave Turkey more freedom in pursuing a pro-Israeli foreign policy was the evolving Israeli-Palestinian peace process marked by the Oslo Accord signed between the conflict parties in 1993. It removed “a previously severe stumbling block” in Turkish-Israeli relations and established a friendly environment for their rapprochement (Kaya, 2011, p. 2).

Following the Oslo Peace Accord, the Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin paid an official visit to Israel and after signing several documents with the Israeli officials (one of them being the “Strategic Cooperation Agreement” mentioned above), he announced that the Turkish-Israeli relations would be further advanced in all areas and the two countries would start to cooperate intensively in “restructuring the Middle East” (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 26).

The counterterrorist and the counterinsurgency war Turkey was fighting against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) at the time was still another factor contributing to further strengthening of Turkish-Israeli relations. In addition to Kurdish separatist terrorism, Turkey was also facing with two hostile neighbors, Iran and Syria, which had decided to provide logistical support to PKK. These countries thought that pursuing that direction they can gain a “bargaining chip in their

dealings with Turkey” and resolve their issues with Turkey to their best advantage (Kaya, 2011, p. 3). As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Syria’s issues mainly included sharing of the waters of Euphrates and Tigris rivers with Turkey. As for Iran, as an Islamic theocracy, it was in ideological contradiction with Turkey’s secular democracy. Besides, Turkey suspected Iran of supporting some radical Islamic terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah, to engage them in terrorist acts in Turkey. In such a situation, Turkey realized that diplomatic relations with either of the two countries were futile, so it had better develop another foreign policy track against their aggressive acts; this was the creation of “Turkish-Israeli axis” in the region that could be a counterbalance to “Syria-Iran axis” (Kaya, 2011, p. 3). The Kurdish problem lay at the core of Turkish-Iraqi relations, as well. So, as declared by Turkish Prime Minister’s office in July 1999, rapprochement with Israel had become a necessity for Turkey because of the hostile activities of the surrounding Arab states towards Turkey and their allegiance with Syria despite the support it provided for PKK. As stated in a report prepared by TAF Commander Halis Burhan in 1994, “Israel is ready for any kind of help against the PKK ‘as requested’ and that a military alliance with Israel would improve the TAF’s operations significantly” (Kaya, 2011, p. 3).

Other two factors that contributed to Turkish-Israeli rapprochement were the failure of democratization in Arab countries and the European unification. Both Turkey and Israel were Western aligned, secular democratic countries which made them outsiders to the Arab Middle East. According to one leading analyst in the region, Turkey and Israel share some “common sense of otherness” that distances them away from the non-democratic Arab regimes dominating in the region (Makovski, 1999). That “sense of otherness” even further deepened when those regimes failed to undergo the democratizing transition process that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe experienced in the early 1990s. As for the second factor, namely, accelerated process of

European unification, it strengthened both countries' "sense of marginality [and isolation]", as both had aspirations to membership to EU and "the partnership between them became a convenient fallback" (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 25).

The Turkish-Israeli rapprochement brought about by the global and regional changes (in the early 90s) along with individual needs and interests of each of the two countries thoroughly discussed above further developed into a close partnership that benefitted both countries. For Turkey, it was a good opportunity to significantly increase its influence and weight in the region mainly through its advanced involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Besides, Turkey needed Israel as a good source of technologically advanced military equipment which it was denied from other Western sources. As for Israel, strengthening ties with Turkey was a good opportunity both to increase its influence in the region and to advance its stance in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Besides, for a country having small territorial dimensions and being surrounded by such hostile Arab nations, "Turkey offered geostrategic depth" (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 25). As stated by Kaya, initially the Arab countries in the region were wary of the Turkish-Israeli alliance, however, soon they realized that "Turkey's influence over Israel might be something they could use to their advantage and started viewing this alliance in a more positive light" (Kaya, 2011, p. 4). Moreover, during periods when the peace process was stalled, there was consistently an increase in the diplomatic traffic directed towards Ankara, showing that Turkey had an important role to play in conducting peace talks with Israel. For instance, during the difficult days of the Second Intifada or Palestinian Uprising, Palestinian Authority's then-representative from Jerusalem Sari Nusseibeh had forced Turkish diplomats to be "soft" in their policy towards Israel, indicating that Palestinians considered Turkey to be a much needed third player to be turned to in case things did not go well (Kaya, 2011).

The strengthening ties between Turkey and Israel were multi-dimensional in their nature. Until 1996, Turkey seemed to favor economic, technical and cultural relations with Israel over military cooperation. However, the military coordination agreements signed between the countries in 1996 provided good opportunities for both countries. According to the agreements, the Israeli air force planes were given the right to use Turkish air space for training purposes and were upgraded with over fifty Turkish air force F-4 Phantoms. The countries started an intensive exchange of technical knowledge and expertise which even further strengthened their military relations (Bir, Sherman, 2002).

Bilateral trade relations, increasing steadily throughout the 1990s, reached nearly a million dollars in 1999. Already in 2002, Israel was considered to be Turkey's chief Middle Eastern export market. The level of civilian exchanges (including tourist, academic, professional and cultural) also drastically increased throughout this period. Already by the mid-1990s Israel was considered to be Turkey's most popular tourist destination (Bir, Sherman, 2002).

The fact that the gradually strengthening strategic ties were very critical to both Turkey and Israel was indicated by the political announcements of the senior officials of the two countries. For instance, the Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz stated in his speech in 1997 that the cooperation between the two countries was very important for keeping the balance of power in the region. Similarly, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in 1998 that close partnership between Turkey and Israel is important “in view of the volatile international security picture emerging after the downfall of the Soviet empire” (Inbar, 2001, p. 49). According to him, such regional security arrangements were needed in order “to induce stability where instability prevails” (Ibid, p. 49).

The rising Turkish-Israeli rapprochement seemed to overcome any fluctuations potentially threatening to harm the mutual ties of the two countries. Even the rise to power of Necmettin Erbakan, the head of the anti-Israel and Islamist Welfare Party in Turkey, in 1996, and his radical Islamic agenda both on domestic and foreign fronts did not “constitute a fatal blow to the relationship”. Erbakan considered Israel to be a “timeless enemy” and “a cancer in the heart of the Arab and Muslim world” (Bir, Sherman, 2002, p. 27). He accused Israel for trying to undermine the Islamic faith and even for causing economic difficulties in Turkey. Before coming to power, Erbakan promised to freeze Turkish relations with Israel and even to annul the agreements previously signed between the two countries. However, the military which, under the provisions of the Turkish Constitution, was charged with protecting the secular democratic legacy of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, did not let that happen. Not only were Turkish-Israeli military relations not jeopardized during Erbakan's tenure, but even several important military cooperation agreements were signed leading to further strengthening of their military ties.

The harsh criticism and condemnation of Turkey's growing alliance with Israel by the neighboring Arab countries at the end of 1990s did not bring to major shift in its relations with Israel, either. During the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1997, in Tehran, Syria, Libya, Iran, Iraq and Palestine accused Turkey of being part of a new US-sponsored regional security project that, according to them, intended to put the US and Israel as the basic actors of the Middle East. One statement announced during the meeting was that “Turkey has no right to imperil the security and stability of the region in order to appease world Zionism” (Bacik, 2001, p. 56). The underlying problem seemed to be in Turkey's deteriorating attitude towards Iran, Iraq and Syria for their support of PKK terrorism; however, instead of

seeking a duel directly with those countries, Turkey preferred strengthening ties with Israel as a way to solve its problems with those nations (Bacik, 2001).

However, even the recovery of Turkish-Syrian relations and, consequently, the improvement of Turkey's ties with the Arab world, starting by the end of the decade, did not seem to lead to any deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations despite the deep Israeli concerns. The challenges that Turkey had faced with its Arab neighbors (mainly around the issue of PKK) had been listed as one of the main factors contributing to Turkish-Israeli rapprochement. However, the gradual steady recovery of Turkish-Syrian relations did not appear to become a serious impediment in Turkey's further relations with Israel. On the one hand, this could even favor Israel, as Turkey could now become an admirable third party helping it to settle its issues with Syria. On the other hand, the role of the mediator could please Turkey even more; as it could significantly help to advance its position as a major regional player.

However, the rising strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel had to undergo a serious backward shift during the first decade of the 21st century resulting in a deep and protracted crisis in the relations between the two countries. The next chapter will be discussing the nature of this crisis and its impact on the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.

CHAPTER 3: THE DETERIORATION OF TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS: THE 2008/2009 GAZA BLOCKADE AND THE 2010 FLOTILLA INCIDENT

In 2002 the internal environment in Turkey changed; the moderately Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. Under the new government the Turkish foreign policy started to take a new shape. It became grounded in the concept of “zero problems with our neighbors” aiming at becoming a regional leader in the Middle East and successfully playing its role as a mediator in the region’s toughest conflicts. AKP’s new foreign policy required close engagement with its Arab neighbors which made it more sensitive to the Palestinian issue and, consequently, more critical of the Israeli actions (Kaya, 2011). Although Turkey’s sensitivity to the Palestinian question is not a new development, however, the new policy it embraced under Justice and Development Party forced it to consider this issue as a more significant area of responsibility and opportunity wherein to claim a constructive Turkish role in the Middle East (Aras, 2009).

Since the arrival of the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party in Turkey, the country embraced a significantly different perspective on its various policy priorities in the region. The AKP found it highly important to improve its relations with the neighboring Muslim countries, which had been viewed by the Kemalists as a burden on Turkey’s quest to become part of the West, both politically and culturally. After winning two national elections, the AKP acquired greater confidence in pursuing its foreign policy agenda along with its domestic Islamist dimension. However, initially, its new foreign policy direction did not seem to significantly interfere with its relations with Israel. Mutual visits of the officials of the two countries did not stop and they continued to cooperate even in the strategic field (Inbar, 2010).

The first indication of a Turkish policy shift towards Israel occurred after the latter assassinated the Hamas' founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in 2004. Following the incident, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came up with a harsh rhetoric condemning the Israeli forces for an "act of terror" and stating that the Turkish efforts of mediation between the Israelis and Palestinians would be significantly hindered as a result of this assassination (Zaman, 2009). "After the killing, everything has turned upside down in the region. We were really making efforts to prepare a ground for mediation between Israel and Palestine. However, the assassination has ruined all of these sincere efforts. They have spoilt everything", Erdogan said in his remarks on the impact of the assassination on Turkey's peace efforts ("Erdogan Rails against Yassin Killing", 2004).

A new era in the Palestinian question was opened with the victory of Hamas in the local elections in the Gaza Strip in 2005 and the following Parliamentary Legislative elections in 2006. The main concern of the international community, mainly the US and the EU, connected with Hamas was its denial to recognize the State of Israel and its constant threats to its survival and security. However, Turkey interpreted the victory of Hamas in a different way and even favored some form of diplomatic engagement with it. The Turkish position, as stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was that the results of democratically conducted elections should be respected by all the parties and that it would be against democratic principles to make attempts to weaken the newly elected order by imposing economic sanctions on the Palestinian administration. As stated by the Turkish policymakers, Hamas was seeking allies in the Middle East that could help to ease the political and economic blockade imposed on it by the international community; and if Turkey did not intervene, "the only possible entry for Hamas [would be] the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis" (Aras, 2009, p. 6). In the midst of all these

developments, an event that hit further turbulence in the relations between Turkey and Israel was the invitation of the Damascus-based Hamas' leader Khalid Mashaal to Turkey in 2005. A stream of criticism followed the news about the invitation, including from Washington that prompted Erdogan to back down. He canceled his meeting with Mashaal, instead leaving him in the hands of Turkey's then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, after which the crisis became somewhat defused (Zaman, 2009). Later, as a response to the critical comments, Gul stated that his team had advised Hamas to disarm, become more moderate and enter into diplomatic negotiations with Israel. However, "[the invitation] was still considered a faux pas, since it was unsolicited and provided Hamas with some degree of legitimacy" (Sandrin, 2009, p. 9).

Another event that caused Turkey to become critical of Israel was the Al Aksa Intifada or the Second Palestinian Uprising which started in 2000 and ended around 2005, resulting in thousands of casualties both military and civilian on both sides. Following the infamous Intifada, instead of trying to revive the peace process, Israel continued its settlement building activity followed by another infamous event, namely, its attack on Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 (following the latter's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers) which was again harshly criticized in Turkey and resulted in another backward shift in Turkish-Israeli relations (Kaya, 2011).

Although the events discussed above became serious impediments for the future development of Turkish-Israeli ties, however, neither of them resulted in a serious crisis in the relations between the two countries. If these relations withstood the rise to power of the AKP, the violent Israeli-Palestinian confrontations during the years of the Second Intifada (2000–2005) and the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 2006, then a question arises; what could be the true factors triggering the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations that had been able to withstand the previous pressure?

A major crisis in the relations between the two countries was brought about by the 2008/2009 Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip known as Operation Cast Lead. The offensive was stated to be targeted against Hamas in order to stop the rocket fire into southern Israel and overthrow or weaken the terrorist organization. As a result of the campaign, there were more than 1000 Palestinian deaths reported and much of the Gaza Strip's infrastructure was stated to be destroyed (Migdalovitz, 2010). The operation started hours after the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert returned from his visit to Ankara. "The Israeli leader could not intimate to his Turkish host that an attack was pending and Erdogan must have felt that his trust had been betrayed—or that he was being portrayed as someone who had been informed of the attack but did not attempt, or simply failed in his attempt, to avert it" (Eran, 2011, p. 10). Moreover, the operation took place in a period when the Turkish government had started to develop friendly relations with the Hamas government in the Gaza. As a result, Turkey became quite critical of the Israeli actions and the relations between the two countries started to deteriorate very rapidly (Eran, 2011).

Turkey came up with a very harsh rhetoric, both official and public, condemning the Israeli air campaign against the Hamas-controlled Gaza. In January 2009, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan gave a speech in which he severely criticized the Israeli actions calling them a 'crime against humanity' and stated that "Allah will punish it" (Lombardi, 2012, p. 12). Later he demanded that Israel be excluded from the United Nations for disregarding their calls to stop the fighting in the Gaza. On top of this, during the World Economic Forum in January 2009, Erdogan walked out of a debate with the Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos, Switzerland. His anger was initially directed against the format of the panel which did not allocate enough and balanced time to each of the panelists and did not give Erdogan the right to reply. However, the

root cause of his outburst was the refusal of the Israeli President to recognize the true amount of humanitarian damage resulted from the Israeli offensive in the Gaza and, also, his statements in defense of Israel as a state exercising legitimate right of self-defense (Ulutas, 2010). Erdogan's actions during the Davos conference made him a hero in the eyes of the Gazans, Iranians and Syrians. This event was also followed by wide Turkish public and media sentiments that included large anti-Semitic attacks and demonstrations in Turkey. Since this incident Israel has shaped a policy towards Turkey that can be called "the Davos syndrome" which combines "Israel's initial shock as a result of the Davos incident, its shaken trust in Turkey, its further isolation in the region, and Israel's perception of an increasingly critical attitude of the international community vis-à-vis Israel's policies towards the Palestinians" (Ulutas, 2010, p. 7). Following the Gaza blockade, Turkey initiated an intensive diplomatic campaign both at the regional and international levels to put an end to the Israeli actions. Erdogan paid visits to major Arab countries and talked to Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas during the first days of 2009. Addressing the international community, Erdogan stated; "the Palestinian and Gaza people, our brothers, can only be saved from their isolation when these embargoes are lifted" (Aras, 2009, p. 8). Erdogan's then top foreign policy adviser Ahmed Davutoglu met twice with Khalid Mashaal, following the offensive; the second meeting on the request of then French President Sarkozy for help from Erdogan. This means that Turkey had already started to mediate between Hamas and other international actors while maintaining regular contacts with the Palestinian Authority, as well as the United States and the European countries.

One serious consequence of the Gaza blockade for the Turkish-Israeli relations was the cancellation of the Anatolian Eagle, a joint Israeli-Turkish-American military exercise that had

been held regularly since 2001. According to Davutoglu, Turkey had to exclude Israel from the exercise because of the demands stemming from the Turkish society (Balci, Kardas, 2012).

Another infamous development in the aftermath of the Gaza blockade was a diplomatic incident in January 2010, widely covered by international media: Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon received the Turkish Ambassador, Ahmet Oguz Cellikol, in a humiliating manner. Although later the Israeli authorities publicly apologized for the incident, however, it became still another factor contributing to the deepening crisis in the Turkish-Israeli relations (Szymanski, 2010).

The relations between the two countries, however, hit the lowest point following the Israeli raid on the flotilla organized by the Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), on May 31, 2010, carrying humanitarian aid and construction materials with the intention of breaking the blockade of the Gaza Strip. As a result of the takeover operation by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), nine passengers onboard the Mavi Marmara, which was the leading ship of the flotilla, were killed, including eight Turks and one Turkish-American, and twenty-four were injured. Turkey considered the loss of lives of its nine civilians by its own ally as an unprecedented event.

The Turkish reaction to the raid and the resulting civilian deaths involved much inflammatory rhetoric. The harshness of the language used by the Turkish officials against the Israeli attack on the humanitarian flotilla was seen as an extension of the increasingly antagonistic rhetoric that had started during the 2008/09 Gaza blockade (Kaya, 2011). The Turkish official *opinio juris sive necessitatis* (opinion of law or necessity) was articulated in the two political speeches made one by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, during an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, and the other by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayip Erdogan,

during his speech to the Turkish Parliament (Benoliel, 2011). Erdogan was very harsh in his statements and did not even try to somehow conceal his resentment. About the future of Turkish-Israeli relations, he stated; “Losing Turkey’s friendship and partnership is a price itself to pay. We have always been in historical partnership and collaboration with the Israeli and Jewish people. I do so believe, those Israeli people who watched this bloody attack in tears, who strongly criticize it, do understand very well that this incident does not befit human dignity, is a great mistake, how a heavy hit strike it has been to the friendship of both countries” (“Turkish Prime Minister’s Speech on Israeli Attack on Aid Flotilla”, 2010).

The ‘flotilla incident’ came right before the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu was scheduled to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York to discuss the details of the proxy negotiations between Israel and Syria. This even further increased the Turkish resentment. Erdogan stated that at a time when they had been working so hard for peace, the path chosen by Israel could give a severe blow to any peace initiatives and further impede the Middle East peace process. Turkey recalled its ambassador back from Israel and demanded that Israel recognize its responsibility of the attack and give a public apology to Turkey, as well as an adequate compensation for the damages that had resulted from its ‘unlawful’ actions (Benoliel, 2011).

Another severe blow to the already deteriorated Turkish-Israeli relations came after the publication of the UN’s Palmer Commission Report in *the New York Times* which accused Israel for the use of an ‘excessive force’ against the humanitarian flotilla, however, legitimized the Israeli blockade of the Gaza. As stated in the report, “The naval blockade was imposed as a legitimate security measure in order to prevent weapons from entering Gaza by sea and its implementation complied with the requirements of international law” (Palmer Report, 2011, 4).

After the publication of the report, the Turkish government significantly escalated relations with Israel and even expelled the Israeli ambassador from Turkey. This was a huge blow to the diplomatic relations between the two countries. Soon Ankara initiated a number of sanctions on Israel in response to the Palmer Report and because of the Israeli refusal to apologize for the use of force to stop the Gaza flotilla. Besides the downgrading of diplomatic and defense relations, it came up with a set of initiatives against Israel at the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (Lombardi, 2012). Through such measures Turkey aimed at the internationalization of the issue to the extent possible to make Israel accountable before the international community for its actions. As for the Israeli side, they welcomed the report and stated that they would not apologize and would continue enforcing the blockade, signaling their readiness to face any consequences of deteriorated Turkish policy (Kardas, 2011).

In February 2011, Turkey made public its own investigation of the ‘flotilla incident’; and the UN Secretary-General received both Turkish and Israeli reports. The decision on the Turkish side to investigate the incident was in accordance with a Presidential Statement that had been issued at the UN Security Council meeting in June 2010 calling for an impartial, credible and transparent investigation of the attack conforming to the international standards (Benoliel, 2011). The Turkish report was quite consistent with the previously articulated Turkish view about the attack. Added to the Turkish resentment resulting from the death of its peaceful civilians during the Israeli attack were the totally opposing views of Ankara and Jerusalem concerning the various legal, political and military aspects of the incident. So, as a result of the ‘flotilla incident’, a serious crisis arose in Turkish-Israeli relations which came nearly to the brink of collapse.

However, Turkey’s unusually severe response both to the Gaza blockade and the ‘flotilla incident’ and the following shift in its foreign policy, do not seem to be merely rooted in Israel’s

actions, but rather in other broader implications, both domestic and regional. The next chapter will try to identify those factors responsible for the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations so as to be able to truly analyze the current crisis between the two countries.

CHAPTER 4: THE UNDERLYING REASONS OF DETERIORATION OF TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS

4.1 THE AKP AND TURKEY'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY

Turkey's new foreign policy orientation developed under the rule of the AKP, marked by the concepts of 'zero problems with neighbors' and 'Strategic Depth,' seeks to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the centre so as to maintain optimal regional and global independence and influence. This new foreign policy requires Turkey to court new alliances through prioritizing dialogue and cooperation over confrontation and coercion. Along this way, "the doctrines of 'Strategic Depth' and 'zero problems' provide a normative chapeau to the plethora of state and non-state interests that concomitantly push Turkey to develop deeper and stronger ties to its neighbors" (Walker, 2012). This new foreign policy has required Turkey to play up its Muslim identity so as to improve its relations with all its neighbors, particularly through warranting its former Muslim space in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. "As a result, the debate over Turkey's historical roots and its legacy as a successor state to the Ottoman Empire has been rekindled" (Walker, 2012).

Here a particular attention should be paid to the development of Turkish-Israeli relations under these doctrines. As stated above, through its new foreign policy, Turkey aimed at playing the role of a regional power and a 'model' in the Middle East , whereas every Israeli move against the Palestinians was seriously undermining Turkey's potential for such a role and forcing it to distance it away from Israel and side with the Palestinians. Particularly, the 2008/09 Gaza blockade and the 2010 'flotilla raid' came to seriously undermine Turkey's aspirations, thus, putting the future of Turkish-Israeli relations under question. Since the coming to power of the Islamic-rooted AKP, Turkey has been using Islam as a major platform for advancing its position

as a regional leader. Through its policy aiming at engaging the Middle Eastern actors, especially Syria, Iran and Hamas, rather than isolating them, it has significantly increased its stature in the Muslim world. And despite the deep concerns on the Israeli side especially connected with Turkey's close engagement with Hamas, the Turkish officials have constantly stated that Turkey has taken such a role just for the sake of regional peace (Kaya, 2011).

Continuing the same line of thought, the changing domestic politics in Turkey and, particularly, the shift in civil-military relations and the coming onto stage of Political Islam have gradually brought about a serious crisis in its relations with Israel. The emerging strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel in the 1990s was due to the dominant role of the military and the Kemalist elites in the country who, at the time, were able to successfully fight against the social forces of Political Islam in a so called "securitization process". Israel was considered to be an ideal partner for the restoration and strengthening of secularism in the country that could also help to increase state security against some "existential threats", as stated by the military. These threats, mainly coming from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), established "a fertile ground for the military for speaking on and defining threats to the territorial survival of the state" (Balci, Kardas, 2012, p. 106). Besides the PKK, another serious threat to Turkey's secular regime that came by the end of the 1990s, was the rising to power of Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Welfare Party, who provided fuel for allegations directed from the military against the government. So, the two 'major challenges to state security and survival, namely, Kurdish Separatism and Islamic fundamentalism', were successfully used by the military to increase its influence both in Turkey's domestic and foreign politics. "The armed forces viewed themselves as the protectors of the secular regime and they had toppled four governments, the most recent in

1997 when a coalition that included the Refah Party under Erbakan had been ousted” (Lombardi, 2012, p. 15).

At the beginning of the 2000s, the military agreements were still intact and well functioning and the “securitization process” was still on its way. The military personnel still continued to pay regular visits to Israel, however, the politicians increasingly started to disagree with the military about the priority of Turkey’s relations with Israel over its relations with other countries of the Middle East. Besides the political resistance to the ongoing securitization process, another obstacle for the military became the conditions put forward by the European Union in the membership accession process (it required a reduced role of the military in the country’s political affairs). This came to significantly limit the military’s role in Turkey’s domestic politics.

Besides, there were a number of other facilitating factors, as well, that contributed to the so called ‘desecuritization process’ and, thus, to the downgrading of the military’s role in the country’s domestic and foreign affairs. One important factor was the capture of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK in 1999. More importantly, Turkey’s European candidacy, confirmed in the Helsinki Summit the same year, was another unprecedented impetus towards domestic political change. “Despite the military’s misgivings, the EU’s legal proviso for membership significantly limited the military’s role in domestic politics”(Balci, Kardas, 2012, p. 111). These events were followed by an economic crisis in the country between 2000 and 2001, resulting in a prevailing supremacy of the economy over security issues, thus, providing space for the government, not the military, to act on domestic and international issues.

With the Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party rising to power in 2002, the era of the military for determining foreign relations of Turkey, especially with regard to regional affairs, seemed to be over. This became most evident in the slow demise of the strategic partnership

between Turkey and Israel “that was initiated and administered by the armed forces senior command, often without the government’s prior approval, and that never enjoyed broad public support” (Lombardi, 2012, p. 16). Yet, despite the criticism of the Erdogan government of the Israeli actions against the Palestinians, initially the AKP leadership tried to adopt positions that the military high command would also endorse. One illustration of this may be the fact that a year after condemning Israeli “state terrorism” in 2004, Erdogan made an official visit to Israel. However, over time, the government started to gain more confidence in its dealings with the military and started to “skillfully [repackage] its differences with the military into a confrontation between modernization and defense of the status quo” (Lombardi, 2012, p. 15). So, the role of the military started to be increasingly undermined and the AKP started to repeatedly triumph at different polls. After the AKP was reelected in July 2007 parliamentary elections and the armed forces were further unable to prevent Abdullah Gul from becoming President in August 2007, despite a very public campaign, it became evident that now the AKP leadership occupied a much stronger position in the country than the armed forces (Lombardi, 2012). Winning the two general elections showed that the Political Islam, in which the AKP is rooted, is no longer a marginal movement in Turkey (Sambur, 2009).

Since then the Islamic outlook of the AKP has been determining Turkey’s role in regional politics. The shift in its foreign policy, from Kemalism to neo-Ottomanism, has laid the foundations of its new foreign policy vision. As stated by Davutoglu in his book written in the mid-1990s when he was still holding an academic post, although the Islamic world has fallen behind the Western civilization economically and technologically, however, the Muslim civilization is inherently superior and it will become a “determinant civilization” as soon as it becomes possible to operationalize its core value structure (Lombardi, 2012, p. 10).

As stated by Inbar (2010), an important indicative of the Turkish behavior demonstrating an Islamic coloration in its foreign policy is its new approach to Iranian Islamic Republic which was once considered to be an anathema in Kemalist circles. In August 2008, Turkey welcomed the President of the Islamic Republic, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, for a formal visit. Moreover, the Turkish PM Erdogan decided to congratulate Ahmadinejad after he was reelected in June 2009, despite the claims that the vote had been rigged and calls from the EU, to which Turkey aspires to join, that the election should be investigated. Additionally, Ankara recently announced that it will not participate in any sanctions against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, in contrast with its NATO allies. So, Turkey's strengthening ties with Iran, and consequently the widening gap with the West, clearly indicate how the Islamic roots of the ruling party have become dominant not only in the country's domestic politics but also in its foreign affairs (Inbar, 2010).

The year 2009 is stated to indicate the tipping point in the influence of the military in Turkey's foreign affairs and, particularly, in its relations with Israel; after this year the AKP government was able to effectively take control of all the initiatives into its own hands (Lombardi, 2012). The essay has already discussed the serious crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations brought about by the Israeli blockade of the Gaza, demonstrated by a quick shift in their diplomatic and military relations. The exclusion of Israel from the joint military exercise "Anatolian Eagle" illustrated the military's obvious loss of initiative in relations with Israel "as well as the transformation of the civilian-military balance in favor of civilian political authority"(Balci, Kardas, 2012, p. 114). Additionally, when Israel asked Turkey to join the next military exercise at the end of April 2010, the military remained silent, showing once again that the era of the military determining the country's foreign affairs was over. The government rejected the request with Davutoglu later stating; "Yes, we cancelled last year's military exercises, and we will not do these kinds of

exercises if potential military tension exists in our region”. As stated by another government official following the Gaza flotilla attack in May 2010, the government had acquired a tendency not to give permission to any Israeli military flights as was usually done in the past (Balci, Kardas, 2012).

Another indicator of the influential role of Political Islam in determining the recent relations between Turkey and Israel is the growing relationship between the Erdogan government and the Muslim Brotherhood, which was brought into sharp focus after the Gaza flotilla incident. The Muslim Brotherhood which is stated to have given rise to some of the most notorious terrorist groups – from Al-Qaeda to Hamas, has been allowed by the AKP to freely operate on the Turkish territory, with its active support, as witnessed by the large number of conferences held in Istanbul and sponsored/attended by Global Muslim Brotherhood leaders. The cooperation between the Erdogan government and the Muslim Brotherhood seems to be rooted in their mutual interests. “Erdogan and the AKP were able to indulge the “neo-Ottoman” goals of reasserting a sphere of influence in former Islamic areas, while at the same time outmaneuvering the other Islamist parties and, as a bonus, satisfying Erdogan’s reported hatred of Israel” (Merley, 2011, p. 8). For their part, the Global Muslim Brotherhood was given the opportunity to operate freely out of a major state without any interference it encountered elsewhere in the Muslim world. As has been stated previously in the essay, the Gaza flotilla had been organized by the Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), however, there has been some evidence that the IHH was not acting alone but was an integral part of a Turkish Muslim Brotherhood network having strong links to the Global Muslim Brotherhood and the Turkish government. Besides, according to several reports, the IHH was not, in fact, humanitarian in nature. There have been multiple reports about

the terrorist activities of the IHH, including allegations that it was in possession of weapons and explosives, was recruiting soldiers for sending them into war zones such as Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia, and that during the Iraqi war it was providing aid to areas under insurgent control (Merley, 2011). Such evidence suggests that the humanitarian nature of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla is still questioned and, most importantly, that the Islamist outlook of the Erdogan government, demonstrated by its partnership with the Global Muslim Brotherhood, had a major influence on the development of Turkish-Israeli relations, particularly, on the backward shift in Turkish policy towards Israel following the 'flotilla incident'.

So, Turkey's current foreign policy is the culmination of a process that started when the AKP first came to power in 2002, and it has merely accelerated in the recent years as a result of the Israeli actions, namely, the 2008/09 blockade of the Gaza and the attack on the humanitarian flotilla in 2010. The new policy adopted by the AKP aiming at improving Turkey's regional profile, has been mainly driven by its Islamic outlook which has served as an ample ground for establishing friendly relations with the Muslim countries of the region. As recently stated by Davutoglu, Turkey is not an ordinary nation-state, but has the full potential to become a "trans-regional power" and unify and lead the Muslim World (Walker, 2012). This has been the central pillar and the driving force of Turkey's new foreign policy under the AKP.

4.2 THE CONTINUING STAGNATION OF THE OSLO PEACE PROCESS

The failure of the Oslo Accord signed between Israel and the PLO in 1993, marked by the continuing military engagement between the conflict parties, was still another important factor leading to further deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. After the Al-Aqsa Intifada or the Second Palestinian Uprising, from September 2000 till around 2005, the future of peace talks

over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became very ambiguous. Turkey, one of the chief mediators of the Arab-Israeli conflict, became quite concerned with the constant violation of the Oslo Peace Process and publicly expressed its deep disappointment about the continuing escalation of the situation. As stated by Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in the aftermath of the emergence of the Al-Aqsa intifada; “The Muslim world was deeply upset by the violent deeds against our Palestinian brothers after Friday's Prayer on October the 28th in Jerusalem, which Islam deems to be among the most sacred lands, following certain irresponsible provocations. Resorting to violence no matter for what purpose, and using weapons in sacred lands is totally unacceptable. It is our common wish that a fair agreement be arrived at as soon as possible so that such occurrences are never repeated and common sense presides in the region, our Palestinian brothers enjoy rights - as accepted by the international community - including the establishment of their own state” (Aras, 2002, p. 58).

Since the start of the Intifada, the Oslo Accords have been viewed with growing disfavor not only by mediating parties, but also by both the Palestinian and Israeli publics. In May 2000, before the start of the Intifada, a survey was conducted among the Israelis by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research of the University of Tel-Aviv which found out that seven years after the Oslo Accords and five months before the start of the al-Aqsa Intifada, 39 percent of all the participants supported the Accords, and 32 percent believed that the Accords would result in peace throughout the next few years. By contrast, the survey conducted in 2004, discovered that only the 26 percent of all the participants supported the Accords, and only 18 percent believed that the Accords would result in peace in the next few years. These results show that the Oslo Peace Accords have lost their credibility even among the Israeli public as a result of the continuing military confrontation between the Israelis and Palestinians.

In the aftermath of the al-Aqsa Intifada, Turkey started its own investigation of the escalation of violence in the occupied territories and prepared the Mitchell Plan which, however, had virtually no impact on the rising violence between the parties. This was also followed by letters sent from the Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to both Palestinian and Israeli leaders calling them to put an end to the armed conflict, but, again, without any success. At the height of crisis in 2002, the PM Ecevit denounced Israeli occupation of the Palestinian areas as “massacre”, however, later stating that the word had been mistakenly used in his speech. So, despite its efforts, Turkey was unable to successfully contribute to the easing of Israeli-Palestinian tensions, and this came to seriously undermine its aspirations for the role of a regional leader and chief mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Aras, 2002). According to a poll conducted in Turkey in October 2000, 71 percent of the Turkish society had an interest in Palestinian affairs and 60 percent demanded a more active role played by Turkey on behalf of the Palestinian people.

As has been stated in the essay, the Oslo Peace Process had been one of the primary factors contributing to Turkish-Israeli rapprochement in the 1990s. However, now when the Peace Process was failing, anti-Semitic sentiments were rapidly rising among the Turkish society and the Turkish media. As stated by an influential Turkish columnist Cengiz Candar in the first days of the Intifada, “Turkey cannot afford the shame to be the number one ‘military partner’ of the aggressor ‘military machine’ raising the anger of the region’s people” (Balci, Kardas, 2012, p. 112). The intensive and dramatic media coverage of Israeli atrocities against Palestinians was still another factor further escalating the tension that was rising in Turkish-Israeli relations.

The infamous events following the al-Aqsa Intifada, namely, Israel's assassination of the Hamas' spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin in 2004 and the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006, resulted in a wider Turkish public outrage against Israel's blatant violation of the international law and

“provided an impetus for the civilian government to speak out against the Turkish-Israeli alignment and the military agreements” (Balci, Kardas, 2012, p. 112). These developments also resulted in massive public protests against Israel and made some civil society organizations become more sensitive about the Palestinian question.

However, the mobilization of the Turkish public against the Israeli actions became more intensive in the aftermath of the 2008/09 Israeli blockade of the Gaza. Popular massive demonstrations followed PM Erdogan's harsh discourse and his walk-out from a conference in Davos, Switzerland, where he had a bitter exchange with Israeli President Shimon Peres (Ozel, 2010). The Turkish society was very much concerned with the Israeli violent actions against the Palestinians in the Gaza and forced their government to take serious measures to prevent the situation. As stated by Davutoglu; “[i]f your foreign policy, however sophisticated it might be, doesn't have a ground in public opinion, then that foreign policy is not sustainable” (Shadid, 2011)”. In this case, the Turkish harsh response to the Israeli actions in the Gaza was strongly supported by large masses in Turkey.

However, the anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic public sentiments in Turkey reached their peak following the Israeli raid on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in May 2010. Remarkably, many civil society organizations in Turkey called on the government to take action against Israel. In a poll conducted by the Sonar research group a year after the ‘flotilla raid’, 84 percent of the participants supported the general hardening of Ankara’s policy towards Israel as a response to its deadly raid on the Gaza-bound flotilla in 2010, while only 3.27 percent of the participants spoke for the Israeli attack on an aid flotilla on international waters. Also, according to the survey, forty-nine percent of the respondents approved the most recent measures implemented by the Erdogan government, while thirty-seven percent opposed them. The survey also

demonstrated a 15 percent increase in the public support for the AKP compared with the previous survey conducted in August 2010 (“Poll shows support for government’s Israel policy”, 2011). So, the results of the survey show that nearly half of the Turkish society has been convinced of the rightness of the Turkish government’s harsh response to the Israeli actions, and that the AKP can now be more confident in its policy towards Israel as the public support for it has considerably increased.

Another interesting fact is that recently even some pro-secular politicians in Turkey “have embraced an increasingly nationalist rhetoric that takes aim at non-Muslims, including Jews” (Zaman, 2009, p.2). This increasingly means that the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Israel should not be merely attributed to the Islamic roots of the AKP through which it has been advancing its regional profile, but also to the failure of the Oslo Peace Process that has mainly resulted from the continuing Israeli military engagement in the Gaza. As discussed above, the major events that contributed to the stagnation of the Oslo Peace Process were the al-Aqsa Intifada or the Second Palestinian Uprising, the 2008/09 Gaza blockade and the 2010 flotilla attack. They became serious impediments in the Middle East peace process, thus, further escalating the crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations.

CONCLUSION

The recent deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations and the resulting deep crisis between the two countries is the culmination of a process that seems to have started after the coming to power of the AKP in Turkey in 2002; and it has merely accelerated in the recent years as a result of the Israeli actions, namely, the 2008/09 offensive against the Gaza and the raid on the humanitarian flotilla bringing aid to those in blockade in 2010. The AKP has been using Islam as a major platform for advancing its foreign policy, aiming at establishing friendly relations with the neighboring Muslim countries and warranting its former Muslim space in the region. As has been demonstrated in the essay, the domestic developments in Turkey which followed the rising to power of the AKP, namely, the coming onto stage of Political Islam and the consequent shift in the civil-military relations in Turkey, combined with the new foreign policy aiming at making Turkey the chief regional mediator, brought about a gradual deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. Now when the AKP's Islamic outlook came to seriously determine the direction of Turkey's foreign policy and the military's role started to significantly downgrade, the future of Turkey's relations with Israel became very ambiguous. In fact, these factors played a significant role in the further deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations that followed the two infamous events discussed.

The failure of the Oslo Peace Accord indicated by the continuing military engagement between the conflict parties was still another key factor leading to further deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations. Turkey, being one of the chief mediators in the Arab-Israeli conflict and aiming to further extend that role, was seriously concerned about the constant violations of the Oslo Accord, starting from the Second Palestinian Uprising or the Al-Aqsa Intifada and reaching a peak after the Gaza blockade and the 'flotilla incident'. The gradually rising anti-Semitic

sentiments in the Turkish society, as a result of the Israeli actions against the Palestinians, also seemed to have a determining role in the hardening of Ankara's policy towards Israel.

Today questions are significantly rising on where Turkish-Israeli relations are heading to and whether the crisis between the two countries is temporary or it is going to deepen even further.

When evaluating the current state of affairs, particularly, the deep distrust and skepticism that has been taking shape between the countries, fears that the situation is going to even further worsen, start to play a constitutive role. However, despite the discouraging scenario, ways should

be worked out to overcome the current situation. First and foremost, what is required at the present moment, given the volatility of the region, is a combination of measures taken to restore the strategic dialogue between the two countries, even if some of their national interests clash.

This could be done by the constructive role of a third party or parties, most probably the US or Europe, as the conflict parties by themselves do not seem to be heading towards a political dialogue, so far. Although it may take time, however, given the recent events and the possible changes in the operational environment of the region, the need for a strategic dialogue should be highly prioritized.

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