

# TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE ARAB SPRING

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*This article is a short analysis of how Turkey changed under AKP rule so that the regime no longer wished to have an alignment with Israel but, on the contrary, needed to treat Israel as an enemy.*

In order to understand the initial reasons behind the creation of the Turkish-Israeli alliance, one must also recognize why that alignment came to an end. The cause was not within the partnership itself nor was it due to the 2008/2009 Gaza War or the 2010 flotilla events; rather this resulted from the Turkish government's changing goals and identity. The "Arab Spring" has pushed forward this transformation in Turkey's rulers while also showing that the new strategy does not work.

What factors brought the two countries together? There were many, and they were well-rooted in the Kemalist republic, which began in the 1920s and is perhaps now coming to an end. The list below explains the aspect that created close cooperation and how this changed, thus leading to a collapse in the relationship.

## FACTORS LEADING TO THE CREATION AND DESTRUCTION OF THE TURKISH-ISRAEL ALLIANCE

### ***Secular Turkey Versus Muslim Turkey***

*Creating an alliance:* During the last half of the twentieth century, Turkey defined itself as a secular state. This means that it did not find its main identity with Muslim-majority states even though almost all of its citizens were Muslims. Consequently, it had much in common with the only other non-Muslim identity state in the region, Israel.

*Destroying an alliance:* In practice, the Turkish government under the AKP government redefined the country (implicitly if not explicitly) as a Muslim state. Thus, it put the emphasis on close relations with other Muslim-majority states. In turn, this means friends who strongly dislike or are even at war with Israel. The Turkish government's new friends were Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hizballah, that is, fellow Islamists or their allies.

### ***Turkish Nationalist Turkey Versus Muslim Turkey***

*Creating an alliance:* Before the AKP took power, Turkey defined itself as Turkish and nationalist. Therefore, putting that identity first, it found much in common with Israel as a fellow nationalist state, and far less with states whose national interests clashed with those of Turkey itself. The gap between Turkish nationalism and either Arab nationalism or Iranian Islamism could not easily be bridged.

*Destroying an alliance:* Redefining the country as having a predominantly Muslim identity made differences of national interest and people with Iran or with Arab states less important. What mattered was

no longer being a Turk, Persian, or Arab but the common identity of Islam.

### ***Foreign Policy Ambitions***

*Creating an alliance:* Turkey was a satisfied and not an ambitious power. This stance was symbolized in Ataturk's famous dictum: Peace at home; peace abroad. Thus, on the contrary, Turkey sought to defend itself against aggressive forces, including Iraq and Syria, Arab nationalism, and Islamism.

*Destroying an alliance:* Once Turkey sought regional leadership, or at least strong participation in regional blocs seeking hegemony, it had to please those it hoped would become the followers of Ankara. Not only did this require breaking the relationship with Israel, but it had to become an active enemy of the Jewish state. The need was to convince Arab and Persian Muslims that Turkey was as militant as they were.

### ***Common Enemies***

*Creating an alliance:* Turkey and Israel had common enemies in the Middle East. Israel also supported Turkey against the Armenian terrorist movements during the earlier part of this developing relationship and the radical Kurdish PKK.

*Destroying an alliance:* Israel's enemies were soon defined as Turkey's friends. There was thus no rationale for an alliance *with* Israel but rather Turkish participation in an alliance *against* Israel.

### ***Joining the West Versus Joining the Islamic World***

*Creating an alliance:* Turkey wanted to join the West, another one of Ataturk's concepts; a good relationship with Israel was an aspect of that profile.

*Destroying an alliance:* Turkey wanted to join the Islamic world; a bad relationship with Israel was an aspect of that profile.

### ***Focusing on Development; Pragmatism rather than Ideology***

*Creating an alliance:* Turkey sought to join the most advanced ranks of the economically developed world, a priority that dictated a pragmatic policy. Trade and cooperation to Israel opened a valuable market and access to high-technology products.

*Destroying an alliance:* Islamist ideology became more important, and the government was willing to pay a high price for its policy priorities in economic terms. This included a significant risk to Turkish relations with the United States and Europe, though the cost has thus far proved relatively low.

### ***Support of the Turkish Armed Forces***

*Creating an alliance:* The Turkish military supported the alliance with Israel. It saw Israel as an ally against common enemies—Iran, Syria, the PKK, revolutionary Islamists, and terrorists—as well as an admirable colleague whose professional work was good. In addition, the Turkish military viewed Israel as a source of weapons and technology that it wished to have access to. Even after coming to power, the AKP regime wished to keep the armed forces happy.

*Destroying an alliance:* The AKP regime succeeded to break the power of the Turkish military. Consequently, the generals' wishes no longer mattered. Given the switch of enemies, the rationale for the alliance with Israel was also undercut.

### ***Good Relations with the United States***

*Creating an alliance:* Israel was seen as a gateway to Washington because it had such good relations with the United States. Thus, Israel could be an advocate for Turkey in Washington, counterbalancing the Greek and Armenian lobbies as well as persuading Congress and other U.S. government institutions to pay more attention to Turkish priorities.

*Destroying an alliance:* With its new orientation the Turkish government was far less concerned with pleasing the United States. Given the Obama administration's distancing itself from Israel, Jerusalem seemed to have less leverage in Washington. Moreover, even when the Turkish government ignored or clashed with U.S. interests—notably in its closer relationship with Tehran—Washington did not punish it. Nor did the Obama administration inflict a cost on Turkey when Ankara had confrontations with Israel, thus destroying Ankara's incentive to return to a closer relationship with the Jewish state.

**EVALUATING THE COLLAPSE OF THE RELATIONSHIP** Given all the powerful changes in Turkish regime policy, it was impossible to maintain a strong relationship. In light of these powerful factors, such specific incidents as the December 2008/January 2009 Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip and the Gaza Flotilla, which included the deaths of nine Turkish citizens involved in attacking Israeli soldiers on one of the ships, were pretexts rather than causes for the declining relationship. It is especially important to understand how the Turkish regime helped create, encourage, and even direct the Gaza Flotilla. Essentially, the Gaza Flotilla was more of a covert government operation than some spontaneous event. Ankara knew that a confrontation would be inevitable and the regime wanted a confrontation to give it a rationale for doing what it wished.

In his later handling of the issue, Prime Minister Erdogan—as many Turkish political figures and media outlets noted—sought to inflame rather than defuse the situation. This behavior also had domestic motives, as the country was united behind the regime on both religious and nationalist appeals. Israel became a useful scapegoat at a critical moment, when the regime was going to decisive elections, breaking up the army, and consolidating its control over the country.

It was clear during the negotiations with Israel that Prime Minister Erdogan did not want a solution. He demanded not only an Israeli admission of guilt and compensation but also a complete end to the Israeli sanctions on the Gaza Strip, a political issue that lay outside the flotilla confrontation and which he knew Israel would never accept. He refused even to consider Israel's offer of regrets and voluntary compensation for relatives of those killed. Before the “Arab Spring” began, the “Israel-Turkish Spring” had already ended.

### ***The “Arab Spring” and the Turkish-Israeli Relationship***

How did the political developments of 2011 in the Arabic-speaking world affect this issue? In the short-run, it seemed to confirm the correctness of the Turkish regime's policy shift. Namely, Islamism was

advancing; pro-Western regimes were being challenged or overthrown. Turkey seemed set to be a leading power in the region. The AKP government appeared to have bet on the right horse in the race.

Nominally, the expressed policy was friendship with all neighbors. In fact, however, the anti-Israel policy and open sympathy toward Islamism would enhance the regime's increasingly obvious ambition to be a leading power in the region. The "Turkish model" was much complimented and copied.

Yet what is the "Turkish model"? Is it one of a moderate Muslim democracy or for a stealth Islamist government pretending to be moderate but showing its teeth as it becomes more securely fixed in power? If minarets were the new system's missiles and democracy were a streetcar that one could get off in order to arrive at the Shari'a station, this was quite different from a pro-Western government democracy that enhanced regional stability.

The changes in the region were widespread. Islamist governments were already in power in Iran and the Gaza Strip. Syria was allied with the Iran-led Islamist bloc. A government in Lebanon was dominated by Islamist Hizballah and the clients of Iran and Syria. Revolts in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia brought tremendous political gains for Islamist forces there as well. Turkey, for its part, enjoyed—or seemed it was about to enjoy—good relations with all of these forces.

Since that point, however, things have begun to go wrong. It should be stressed that the Turkish government never adopted a generally "pro-Arab" strategy. The focus was on strong relations with fellow Islamist governments and groups. Consequently, Arab nationalist or traditionalist forces—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf emirates—were suspicious of Turkey, viewing it as too close to their enemies. In this sector, Turkey's anti-Israel policy brought no—or at least no further—benefits.

Next came the Syrian revolt. Turkey seemed to be in a good position, even being asked by the United States to broker the composition of the Syrian leadership in exile. The Syria crisis, however, required choices for Ankara. Backing the overthrow of the government meant breaking with Iran, Hizballah, and the Syrian regime itself.

Ankara had now embroiled itself in a conflict with the eastern, Shi'i Islamist bloc. These countries and movements did not care that Turkey was anti-Israel, because it viewed the Turkish regime as opposed to their own interests. Thus, from the starting point of maintaining good relations with all neighbors, the regime's ambitions had led it into three conflicts: with Israel, with the moderate Arab states, and with the Shi'i Islamist bloc.

What of the fourth front? Here is where the Turkish regimes hoped to make gains: with the new Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, as well as Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Had Ankara found a secure new set of allies to replace Israel? The answer was "no." There are several explanations for this.

First, an alliance with Turkey brought little of value to these Sunni factors that often had a strong, or at least growing, Islamist flavor. What could Turkey do for them? They cheered the Turkish regime's harsh words and broken ties with Israel, but since this was a *fait accompli*, these Sunni Arabs had no incentive to give Turkey anything, and they did not need to get anything more from it. Ironically, the shared moderation of the past—say, between Turkey and Mubarak's Egypt—was a more useful bond. The mutual battle against Islamists, radical Iraq, and radical Syria had been an important strategic commonality. Now that was gone.

Second, despite the Islamism found in many quarters, they regarded the Turks as Turks, not Arabs. Regardless of the common factor of Islam—the doctrine of a united umma—Sunni Arab Islamists were by no means lacking nationalist and ethnic content as well. In Egypt and Tunisia, it was the army—nationalist and Arab—ruling, not the Islamists. Moreover, these generals could not help but notice what had happened to their counterparts in Turkey, a fact which did not make them friendlier.

Third, the Sunni Arab Islamists soon had their own power and no longer needed an outside sponsor like Turkey, or Iran for that matter. The Muslim Brotherhood wished to rule the Middle East; why then should they view themselves as strategic followers of the Turks?

Fourth, and most important, the Turkish regime revealed its own ambitions. It was no secret to the Sunni Arabs, nationalists and Islamists alike, that Ankara increasingly saw itself as the leader of the region. The “neo-Ottoman” concept could not have been more worrisome for them. After all, they did not have fond memories of the Ottoman Empire and certainly did not want its return in some form. If there were to be a caliph, he must be Arab, not Turkish. In short, the Turkish regime overplayed its hand, scaring and frightening the Sunni Arabs, just as it had antagonized the Shi'i Arabs.

By the end of 2011, then, the regime that had abandoned its alliance with Israel and then its alliance with Iran and Syria, found itself with no reliable ally in the entire Middle East.

### ***The End of Alliance: Who Lost the Most?***

The alliance with Turkey was extremely important for Israel. Yet, arguably, the Turkish regime's decision to turn toward hostility cost Ankara more than Jerusalem. Why was this so?

First, the breakdown had little material effect on Israel's strategic interests. As noted above, Turkey's nominal support for Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hizballah did not change anything on the ground, though of course it had a psychological and diplomatic impact. Second, financially, Turkey lost more than Israel did. Israeli tourism, a very lucrative benefit, fell off sharply as Israeli visitors reported both public and official hostility. Moreover, Turkey could no longer buy Israeli weapons or get Israeli help in upgrading weapons, actions that had strengthened the country's military. Yet keeping the army happy was no longer a Turkish government priority. Third, Israel responded to the loss of the Turkish alliance with the development of a warmer relationship with Greece and Cyprus. This was reinforced by the discovery of massive natural gas fields in the Mediterranean, which brought together Israeli and Cypriot interests.

Benefits from Turkey's national interests from the Muslim orientation were not clear. There were no dramatic economic gains such as far higher trade or massive investments. While Turkey's entry into the European Union was already doubtful and there were many factors leading to opposition, the view that the country was going down a more Islamic path and stirring up trouble in the region seemed to be the last nail in the coffin ending any hope that it would ever be able to join.

In contrast, however, there were domestic political gains for the AKP government, which used the stirring up of nationalism, religious sentiments, and even a measure of antisemitism to increase its internal popularity and support at the ballot box. Due to the unique aspects of the Obama administration, the Turkish regime did not suffer because of its behavior, including the hostility toward Israel. Might a successor to Obama, however, change to a policy of viewing Turkey's regime as a problem, even an enemy?

This raises the final question about the changes in the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Is this a temporary switch? In other words, the hostility will remain as long as the AKP regime is in power, but once it loses office—if this occurs—could some of the objective circumstances lead Turkey back to an alignment with Israel? These forces would include Western hostility toward a Turkey allied with revolutionary Islamism, the lack of benefit of the current policy, embroilment in Middle Eastern quarrels and antagonism from the Arab world and Iran, subversion within Turkey by radical Islamist forces, and other problems. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Turkey-Israel alliance is finished, at least for the lifetime of the Turkish government under the AKP.