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# Politics of National Honor in Turkish-Israeli Relations: An Alternative Account of the Recent Tensions

Özlem DEMİRTAŞ-BAGDONAS\*

## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to complement the ideological and rationalist accounts of the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in the last decade by focusing on the role of honor politics in exacerbating the tension between Turkey and Israel. Claims to “greatness” and/or “exceptionalism” have made both countries very sensitive to humiliation, while their reciprocal gestures defying each other’s claimed authority and superiority have further aggravated the tensions. Both countries’ desire to place themselves on a higher moral plane and preoccupation with national honor, although it was accentuated differently and gained varying degrees of public resonance in each country, have made it increasingly difficult for both Turkey and Israel to reach a compromise.

**Keywords:** International Crises, Politics of National Honor, National Pride, Exceptionalism, Turkish-Israeli Relations

## Türkiye-İsrail İlişkilerinde Milli Onur Siyaseti: Yakın Geçmişteki Gerginliklerin Alternatif Bir Muhasebesi

## ÖZET

Bu makale, son on yılda Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerindeki bozulmaya dair yapılan ideolojik ve rasyonalist açıklamaların önemli, ama tek başına yetersiz olduğu savından hareketle, iki ülke arasındaki kriz sarmalının büyümesinde milli onur siyasetinin önemini vurgulayan tamamlayıcı bir analiz sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. “Büyüklik” ve “istisnacılık” iddiaları, Türkiye ve İsrail’i aşağılanmaya karşı oldukça duyarlı hale getirirken, birbirlerinin otorite ve üstünlük savlarına meydan okuyan davranışları, iki ülke arasında varolan gerginlikleri daha da arttırmıştır. Her ne kadar onur söyleminin siyasetler tarafından vurgulanışı ve bunun ülke çapındaki yansımaları bakımından Türkiye ve İsrail arasında farklar olsa da, iki ülkenin de kendisini ahlaki açıdan diğerinden üstün bir mertebeye yerleştirme isteği, Türkiye ve İsrail’in bir uzlaşmaya varmasını giderek zorlaştırmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Uluslararası Krizler, Milli Onur Siyaseti, Milli Gurur, İstisnacılık, Türkiye-İsrail İlişkileri

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## Introduction

During the 1990s, Turkey and Israel considered each other to be valuable partners with shared views and common threat perceptions towards Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They signed several trade and military treaties, resulting in a significant increase in the trade relations, extensive military cooperation and joint military exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the early 2000s witnessed numerous diplomatic crises between the two countries, leading to a dramatic scaling-down of bilateral diplomatic and military ties and resistance to compromise in a way never observed before. The relations reached a nadir with the May 2010 Israeli commando raid on a Turkish boat *Mavi Marmara*, part of an international flotilla that aimed to break Israel's blockade of Gaza Strip, which resulted in the deaths of eight Turkish citizens. While Turkey escalated its sanctions on Israel upon Israel's refusal to apologize for the incident, Israeli officials repetitively expressed their reluctance to acquiesce to Turkey's mounting pressures. In March 2013, the apology crisis seemed to have finally come to an end with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's statement of regret for the loss of lives during the IDF's *Mavi Marmara* raid. Nevertheless, bilateral relations still remain strained. Given the regional significance of relations between Turkey and Israel, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of what accounts for the remarkable downhill slide in the relations between the two countries in the last decade and their persistent reluctance to compromise until very recently.

In answering this question, some scholars have stressed the role of changes in Turkey's domestic context and the ideological affiliations of the new government, i.e., the pro-Islamist and pro-Palestinian tendencies on the part of the Justice and Development Party (Turkish "*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*" or AKP)<sup>2</sup>, while others have highlighted the role of the changing international context in the early 2000s and the divergence in the way Israel and Turkey sought to pursue their interests in the region in light of these developments.<sup>3</sup> Some also have underlined the role of socio-economic factors, noting that since the role of the public opinion and civil society in Turkish foreign policy increased after the 2000s, the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations was almost inevitable in the absence of a significant level of interdependence between Turkey and Israel, i.e., weak economic ties between the two countries and the absence of an influential pro-Israeli lobby in Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

1 Dietrich Jung and Wolfango Piccoli, "The Turkish-Israeli Alignment: Paranoia or Pragmatism?", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 31, No.1, 2000, p.95; Efraim Inbar, "The Resilience of Israeli-Turkish Relations", *Israeli Affairs*, Vol.11, No.4, 2005, p.591.

2 See, for instance, Banu Elgür, "Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations (December 2008-June 2011): From Partnership to Enmity", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.48, No.3, 2012, p.429-459; Efraim Inbar, "Israeli-Turkish Tensions and their International Ramifications", *Orbis*, Vol.55, No.1, 2011, p.132-146.

3 Tarık Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations: A Structural Realist Account", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.15, No.2, 2010, p.273-288; Hasan Kösebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations: What Is Its Strategic Significance?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol.17, No.3, 2010, p.36-50; Nimrod Goren, "An Unfulfilled Opportunity for Reconciliation: Israel and Turkey during the Arab Spring", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No.2, 2012, p.121-135.

4 Gökhan Bacık, "Turkish-Israeli Relations after Davos: A View from Turkey", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.11, No.2, 2009, p.31-41; Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations", p.276-77.

As the authors of the above-mentioned studies generally agree, taken separately, none of these factors alone suffice to explain the recent deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations, so all of them need to be considered for a comprehensive account. What is missing in the picture, however, is the significance both Turkey and Israel ascribed to the protection of their national prestige, pride, and honor in their interactions, which have contributed to the daring moves on the part of both countries and impaired efforts for reconciliation. Particularly noteworthy in the duel of rhetoric between Turkey and Israel following each diplomatic crisis is the persistent refusal to comply with the other's demands and willingness to incur costs and risks to preserve their national honor. This essay argues that both states' claims to moral superiority and their competitive definition of their national honor, albeit accentuated differently and having attained varying degrees of public resonance in each country, have contributed to the further deterioration of the ties, making negotiation and cooperation between the two countries more difficult. In making this argument, this article particularly focuses on understanding Turkey's critical stance towards Israel especially after 2008, and its mounting demands from Israel until March 2013, while it also offers a preliminary analysis of Israel's refusal to concede to Turkey's pressures.

The article will first examine the changing Turkish-Israeli relations by focusing on the ideological and rationalist accounts of the recent tensions. The following theoretical section, drawing on sociological and classical realist accounts, will conceptualize national honor and pride as an important driving force for conflict and risk-prone behavior. The article will then turn to demonstrate the sources as well as the importance of national pride and honor for Turkey and Israel. Finally, the last section will re-examine the recent tension in Turkish-Israeli relations by introducing the politics of honor to the debate.

### **Ideological Factors for the Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations: AKP's Islamic Background**

A number of studies identify the so-called Islamism or Islamic world-view of the AKP elite as one of the key reasons for the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in the 2000s. While ideological factors on the Israeli side presumably played a role in the diplomatic crises between the two countries, the literature on Turkish-Israeli relations exclusively focuses on the Turkish side in explaining the role of ideology in the recent tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations. Therefore, this section will examine the arguments advanced regarding the role of the Islamic worldview of the AKP elite in the diplomatic crises between Turkey and Israel in the last decade.

These accounts refer to the fact that most of the leading cadre of the AKP had been members of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (Turkish "*Refah Partisi*" or RP), which was disbanded by the order of the Turkish Constitutional Court in 1998 for violating the secularist principles of the Republic. Necmettin Erbakan, the chairman of the RP and the prime minister (1995-1997), was not only opposed to the Customs Union Agreement with the EU and developing strong ties with Israel, but also expressed on several occasions his desire to establish an Islamic Union under Turkey's leadership. Although the

AKP elite asserted their loyalty to secularism and put in motion an extensive democratic reform package in order to facilitate Turkey's entry to the EU, many observers read some of the controversial foreign policy moves of the new government as the resurgence of the pro-Islamism of Erbakan's RP with a new face. Particularly noted in this context were the AKP government's moves to enhance Turkey's hitherto-damaged ties with Syria and Iran until 2010, hosting of the Hamas delegation headed by the leader in-exile Khaled Mashal in 2006, as well as PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's harsh criticisms of Israel after the Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008 while taking the side of the Sudanese elite in the case of Darfur. In this regard, the gradual loosening of ties with Israel came to be seen as a natural result of AKP government's plans to ensure its power *vis-à-vis* the military elite and facilitate the conditions for Turkey's emergence as the leader of the Muslim world through taking a stance against Israel, as the RP had once dreamed of.

Indeed, the argument that the AKP elite's views on foreign policy are filtered by their pro-Islamic world view and their sense of Muslim solidarity cannot be easily disregarded, especially if one takes into consideration the values-laden discourse of the governmental elite, and the Turkish PM's categorical rejection that Muslims could commit crimes against humanity. One must also concede to the fact that the ruling AKP elite's increasing references to the shared Islamic values in the recent years, as well as the Islamist origins of the AKP, raised suspicions among the Israeli elite about the goals of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. In this sense, the ideological background of the AKP government could be argued to have played a role in the tensions between Turkey and Israel, even if the Turkish government did not rebuke Israel exclusively for religious/ideological reasons. Yet, one of the problems with reducing the AKP's foreign policy goal to Islamism that is mainly geared against the West and Israel is that the AKP has also been pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy and had relatively unproblematic relations with Israel until 2008. In various meetings conducted in the Middle East, the current foreign policy elite of Turkey has not only made references to the shared Islamic values but also underscored the importance of upholding democratic and secular principles along with the necessity to tone down the anti-Israeli resolutions of the Organization of Islamic Conference.<sup>5</sup> If the pro-Islamic worldview did not prevent the AKP government from pursuing a pro-EU, pro-NATO, and until 2008, relatively better relations with Israel, the ruling elite's ideological tendencies and the religious world view cannot be seen as the sole determinant for the deterioration of relations between both countries.

Israeli parties seem to be divided along the conservative-right/left-liberal lines in terms of Israel's stance towards Turkey, especially after the *Mavi Marmara* incident. While the right conservative elite in Israel, such as the PM Benjamin Netanyahu from Likud and the FM Avigdor Lieberman from Yisrael Beiteinu, argued for a firm stance on the part of Israel towards Turkey, the Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak from the center, was critical of Netanyahu's uncompromising stance *vis-à-vis* Turkey. In contrast, turning to the Islamist-secularist divide does not help making sense of the recent crises between

5 Inbar, "The Resilience of Israeli-Turkish Relations", p.603.

Turkey and Israel.<sup>6</sup> There was a consensus among both the government and the opposition parties in Turkey on the stance to be taken against Israel in the recent diplomatic crises, which indicates that the policy towards Israel cuts across the ideological spectrum of the parliament and is independent of political affiliations.<sup>7</sup> One might interpret Erdoğan's harsh criticism of Israel's Gaza operation and his reference to the Old Testament: "thou shall not kill" at the Davos meeting of 2009 as driven by his religious affiliations and tendency to support the religious brethren against Israel. Yet, both the nationalist and the secularist parties in Turkey stood behind this move, since it was regarded as a "hopeful sign" that the government would not pursue a submissive foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> While Erdoğan's accusation that Israel was conducting "state terrorism" for its assassination of the Hamas leaders in April 2004 has been similarly taken as an indicator of the government's anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian stance,<sup>9</sup> criticism of Israeli policies has by no means been limited to the AKP elite.<sup>10</sup> Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon's 2010 attempt to humiliate the Turkish ambassador by seating him on a lower chair and the *Mavi Marmara* incident were considered by Devlet Bahçeli, the chairman of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), as "humiliating assaults on the nation as a whole,"<sup>11</sup> and he criticized the government for not being able to make Israel apologize and defend the nation's honor.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, the speaker of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Birgül Ayman Güler, called on the government to do all that was necessary to "enhance the nation's honor" when Israel refused to apologize for the *Mavi Marmara* incident.<sup>13</sup> The chairman of the party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, went further to accuse the government of pro-Israelism, since it did not end military relations with Israel all at once after the event and later agreed to Israel's admission to the OECD and the building of the NATO's missile-shield in Turkey, which he said serves Israel's regional interests.<sup>14</sup>

While ideological explanations for the conflict are useful in understanding the fragility of the Israeli-Turkish relations over the last decade, it fails to provide a satisfactory account of the form of the diplomatic gestures that escalated the tension between the two countries and the content of the responses to the crises. Second, there was disagreement among the parties in Turkey over the extent of the measures to be taken against Israel. Nevertheless, the countrywide consensus on the need to take a clear and urgent stance against Israel that would enhance Turkey's national honor shows that the issue came to be regarded as a national matter and acquired an almost security-like character.

6 Kösebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations", p.43.

7 Oğuzlu, "Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations", p.277.

8 "Bir Davos 6 Yıllık İlkesizliği Örtmez", *Radikal*, 3 February 2009.

9 Eligür, "Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations", p.430.

10 Oğuzlu, "Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations", p.277.

11 "Bahçeli: Türkiye Uçurumun Kenarında", *Radikal*, 13 January 2010; "Muhalefet AKP'ye Kızdı", *Radikal*, 1 June 2010.

12 "Bahçeli: Kimin Şerefli Kimin Şerefsiz Olduğu Ortaya Çıktı", *Radikal*, 28 December 2010.

13 "CHP: Füze Kalkanı İsrail'i Korumak İçin", *Radikal*, 6 September 2011.

14 "Kılıçdaroğlu: Hükümet Topal Ördek", *Radikal*, 8 September 2011.

## Rationalist Explanations for the Conflict

The realist accounts of the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations in the 2000s mainly emphasize the diverging threat perceptions of each country and the decreasing dependence of Turkey on the Israeli arms transfers. While in the late 1990s, both countries saw their partnership necessary to eliminate their sense of regional encirclement and deal more effectively with the threats posed to their national security by PKK and Hizballah,<sup>15</sup> with the changing international context of the early 2000s, both countries began to hold diverging threat perceptions that weakened their once-strong strategic partnership.

The PKK's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire from 1999 to 2004 abated the urgency of Turkey's counterterrorism measures against the PKK. Turkey's resolution of its major problems with Syria and Iran after 1998 and the support it received from the US and the EU in its fight against the PKK after the 9/11 attacks also decreased Turkey's need for Israel as a strategic ally in the region.<sup>16</sup> Second, after the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the resumption of PKK's insurgency, Turkey was increasingly wary of the possibility of the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, while Israel remained preoccupied with the threat coming from Iran and Syria to its security and began to provide military support to the Iraqi Kurdish Administration to counterbalance the power of the Shiite groups in the country.<sup>17</sup> What fueled Turkey's concerns regarding Israel's regional policy were the never-acknowledged allegations that Israel also provided military support to the PKK and that Israel was behind the PKK's rocket attack on Turkey's naval base in Iskenderun shortly before the *Mavi Marmara* incident.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Israel grew increasingly suspicious of Turkey's rapprochement with Syria and Iran, negotiations with Hamas, and support for the democratization measures in the context of the Arab Spring, so it sought to establish new partnerships on its periphery, mainly with Cyprus and Greece, to overcome its sense of isolation and insecurity in the region.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Israel also grew wary of Turkey's demand that Israel lift the naval blockade on Gaza as one of the conditions for the normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations, since it feared that without a maritime blockade the terrorist groups could easily smuggle weaponry into Gaza by sea.<sup>20</sup> This was arguably part of the reason why Israel had refused to apologize for the IDF's violent means of stopping the *Mavi Marmara* and resisted calls to remove the blockade even after the apology was finally issued in March 2013.

While these are strong explanations for the weakening of Turkish-Israeli security cooperation, the recent crises in relations cannot be fully explained by security-centered

15 Meliha Altunışık, "Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the Post-Cold War Era", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.36, No.2, 2000, p.181.

16 Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: Rise of the Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol.30, p.29-57; Oğuzlu, "Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations", p.282.

17 Kösebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations", p.46.

18 Ibid., p.47.

19 Goren, "An Unfulfilled Opportunity", p.126.

20 Dan Williams, "Israel says Fence-mending with Turks does not end Gaza Blockade", *Reuters*, March 23, 2013.

motivations and Turkey's rapprochement with the countries Israel considers to be potential threats to its security. First, the Assad regime's violent response to its opponents in Syria after March 2011 and Turkey's overt support for the Syrian opposition put an end to the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement that had long worried Israel. The escalation of the Syrian conflict did not only make the coordination between Turkey and Israel necessary – the rise of the Islamist extremist groups within the Syrian opposition also made it increasingly important for Israel to gain Turkey's support so that it could discourage the jihadists from provoking Israel.

Second, Turkish-Iranian relations have also never evolved into extensive security cooperation, as was the case between Turkey and Israel in the late 1990s. Although Turkey did not regard Iran as an existential threat, it considered Iran's moves to support the Shiites in Iraq, and more recently the Assad's regime, as a serious obstacle to its goal of emerging as a regional power.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that Turkey has declared support for Iran's right to nuclear energy, it has also been wary of the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons capability.<sup>22</sup> Israel also saw Turkish airspace significant for a possible pre-emptive attack against Iran, even though the likelihood of Turkey's support for yet another conflict on its borders is not likely.

Third, it is not clear why Turkish-Israeli military cooperation withstood the above-mentioned suspicions on the part of each country towards the other and their diverging security perceptions until the break out of the Gaza War (2008-2009). Israel's *Operation Cast Lead* in Gaza took place at a time when Syria and Israel were close to beginning direct negotiations, under the supervision of Turkish diplomats in Ankara.<sup>23</sup> While making efforts to serve as a mediator between Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts since 2005, Turkey had to pursue equally cordial relations with all sides to the disputes.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, while national security concerns admittedly played a role in Israel's refusal to concede to Turkey's demands in the aftermath of the *Mavi Marmara* incident, one cannot present a symmetrical national security-centered explanation for Turkey's mounting pressures on Israel.

Other rationalist accounts for the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations include Turkey's hopes to enhance its regional status and popularity by means of siding with the Palestinians, as well as to increase its leverage *vis-à-vis* the West by capitalizing on its mediator status in the conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> A one-sided, pro-Israeli policy

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21 Kösebalaban, "The Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations", p. 46.

22 Mustafa Kibaroglu and Barış Çağlar, "Implications of a Nuclear Iran for Turkey", *Middle East Policy*, Vol.15, No.4, 2008, p.65.

23 Meliha B. Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, p.573.

24 Meliha Altunışık and Esra Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search for a Third Party Role in Arab-Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.15, No.3, 2010, p.373; Bülent Aras, "Turkey's Rise in the Greater Middle East: Peace-building in the Periphery", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, 2009, p.37.

25 Joshua Walker, "Turkey and Israel's Relationship in the Middle East", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol.17, No.4, 2006, p.85; Tarık Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.9, No.1, 2008, p.7.

could arguably hinder Turkey's ability to consolidate its status and mediate the disputes in the region, get further access to the rising Middle Eastern markets and attract foreign direct investment.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, recent surveys suggest an increase in Turkey's popularity and a general appreciation for Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East region.<sup>27</sup> Yet the data shows that there has not been a corollary translation of this rise in popularity into improved trade relations. Despite the fact that Turkey's total trade volume remarkably increased with Iran, Iraq and the Gulf countries in the last decade, the total trade between Turkey and the Arab world decreased by 18 percent between 2008 and 2010, at a time when Turkey's relations with Israel were already sour.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, if Turkey's primary goal is to enhance its regional standing, Turkey's pursuit of a deliberate anti-Israeli policy does not seem to be a rational means to do this, since an overwhelming majority of the population in the Middle East also thinks Turkey should take an active role in the mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>29</sup> While the recent tensions in Turkish-Israeli relations have severely hampered Turkey's ability to serve as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute,<sup>30</sup> this has arguably led to the loss of one of the bargaining chips Turkey has used *vis-à-vis* the West.

It is also possible to provide a rationalist explanation for the repetitive crises in Turkish-Israeli relations after 2008 by focusing on the Turkish government's response to public opinion, which has not only recently but traditionally been pro-Palestinian, rather than pro-Israeli. While a survey conducted in 2010 indicated that the Turkish public's feeling of affinity towards Palestinians ranked much higher than that towards Israelis,<sup>31</sup> 82 percent of those surveyed in another public poll carried out in 2004 agreed with Erdoğan's accusation that Israel was pursuing state terror.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore unclear why the Turkish public's pro-Palestinian sentiments did not play a similar role in the government's policies in 2004, for instance, as it did after 2008. Despite the negative opinion of the Turkish public towards Israel, both countries signed new agreements concerning the modernization of Turkey's military equipment, and the total trade volume between the two countries rose by 135 percent, rising from US \$1.4 billion in 2002 to US \$3.3 billion in 2008.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the Israeli government's policy *vis-à-vis* Turkey can also not be accounted for by its responsiveness to Israeli public opinion, which was favorable towards

26 Altunışık and Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy", p.580; Oğuzlu, "Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations", p.281-82.

27 Mensur Akgün *et al.* "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2010", İstanbul, TESEV Yayınları, 2011; Mensur Akgün and Sebiha Senyücel Gündoğar, "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2011", İstanbul, TESEV Yayınları, 2012.

28 Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's 'Demonstrative Effect' and the Transformation of the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.13, No.2, 2011, p.38.

29 Akgün *et al.* "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2010"; Akgün and Gündoğar, "Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı 2011".

30 Altunışık and Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search", p.384.

31 *Ibid.*, p.375.

32 Bülent Aras and Salih Bıçakçı, "Europe, Turkey and the Middle East: Is Harmonization Possible?", *East European Quarterly*, Vol.15, No.3, 2006, p.377.

33 "Turkey-Israel Trade Volume Rises by 135 pct under AKP Government", *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/finance/10898837.asp>.

an Israeli apology for the *Mavi Marmara* incident.<sup>34</sup> Despite public calls to the contrary, the Israeli government steadfastly refused to bow down to Turkey's demands on the matter, stating on many occasions that an Israeli apology was out of question.

This suggests that while the ideological and rationalistic accounts cannot be disregarded in the analysis of the recent crises in Turkish-Israeli relations, they fall short of explaining the insistence on the part of both governments not to backtrack from their initial positions, as well as the particular form and the content of their responses to the crises. In an attempt to shed light on this aspect of the tension between Turkey and Israel, this article will focus on the role of honor politics and feelings of humiliation in the development of the crises between the two countries. Before turning to discuss the current crisis in terms of politics of honor, let us first examine how the honor motive drives state behavior.

## **National Honor and International Crises**

Despite a great number of works published on honor in cultural and anthropological studies, contemporary studies in international relations have not shown much interest in analyzing how honor shapes state behavior.<sup>35</sup> However, a survey of earlier sociological and philosophical works that contributed to the theoretical foundations of realism help identify honor as a suitable basis for analyzing international conflict situations. While some modern realists acknowledged the role of prestige as a useful instrument for attaining security and power,<sup>36</sup> as Daniel Markey shows, classical realists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes conceptualized states' and men's pursuit of glory, reputation, prestige, and honor as universal drives and a principal cause of international conflict.<sup>37</sup> According to these accounts, states are not merely interested in accumulating power, wealth, and security, but are also motivated by the desire to preserve or enhance their international

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34 Shashank Joshi and Aaron Stein, "The Turkey-Israel Rapprochement", *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2013.

35 It must be added here that there is a vast literature on the concepts such as self-esteem, social identity, and ontological security that account for situations where states are prone to competitive and conflictual relations with others due to their preoccupation with their relative status. See, for example, Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.235-36; Brent J. Steele, "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War", *Review of International Studies*, Vol.31, No.3, 2005, p. 519-40; Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.12, No.3, 2006, p.341-70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, New York, Routledge, 2008; Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations*, Vol.24, No.1, 2010, p.3-23.

36 John H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951, p.4-5; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.30-31; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 6th ed., New York, Knopf, 1985, p.95.

37 Daniel Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism's Roots," *Security Studies*, Vol.8, No.4, 1999, p.126-172.

reputation (prestige), and receive public acknowledgement of their superior status (glory), which can propel them towards pursuing daring and conflictual policies even at the expense of their rational interests.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on Socrates' *Republic*, Richard Ned Lebow similarly identifies three psychic drives for human behavior which he then applies to international politics: appetite, reason, and spirit.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to the instrumental reasoning that takes place in the first two, Lebow argues that the consideration of spirit involves the pursuit of self-esteem, honor and autonomy; revenge for all affronts to one's honor or social standing; and the readiness to engage in a risky behavior to confront impediments to one's autonomy.<sup>40</sup> Based on these accounts, it is possible to define international politics not as merely driven by states' pursuit of profit or security, but also by their desire to have their self-ascribed superior worth recognized by others, which leads them to compete with one another for international standing.<sup>41</sup>

Honor is generally defined in terms of one's inclination to have a self-image as righteous, praiseworthy, powerful, and autonomous, the desire to have a public reputation for a willingness to incur costs or risks in defending one's territory, family, and/or religion, as well as the preoccupation with one's relative social status.<sup>42</sup> This makes actors particularly sensitive to insults, shame and humiliation inflicted upon the members of the group, and to any acts of transgression that would cause a demotion of one's standing.<sup>43</sup> This is especially the case for states that claim a great power status and/or moral superiority, who feel the most humiliation when the actions of other actors are found to be demeaning to their self-ascribed status.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the pursuit of honor does not only make agreements harder to reach,<sup>45</sup> but also propels states to be conflict- and risk-prone in their behavior and unwilling to abide by the demands voiced by other states. While considerations of honor may prompt one to demand an apology or refuse to issue it, failure to apologize and refusal to comply with others' demands might also be taken as a great challenge.<sup>46</sup> This makes cooperation difficult even when there are compelling mutual security concerns.<sup>47</sup>

Barry O'Neill defines a challenge to national honor as a "communicative act" that seeks to demote the target state's status and lower its "face" by humiliating a state represen-

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38 Ibid., p.156.

39 Richard Ned Lebow, "Fear, Interest and Honour: Outlines of a Theory of International Relations", *International Affairs*, Vol.82, No.3, 2006, p.437.

40 Ibid., p.431.

41 Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.20.

42 Barry O'Neill, "Mediating National Honor: Lessons from the Era of Dueling", *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, Vol.159, 2003, p.1; Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999, p.245.

43 Joshi, "Honor in International Relations", p.8-9; Jerome Neu, *Sticks and Stones: The Philosophy of Insults*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.35.

44 Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, p.69.

45 O'Neill, "Mediating National Honor," p.1.

46 O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, p.177.

47 Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, p.72.

tative, flag, or any symbol seen as the embodiment of the nation,<sup>48</sup> thereby asserting one's dominance over the other state.<sup>49</sup> Yet one must acknowledge that even in cases where humiliation is not intentional, or even if the interstate tensions are primarily driven by rationalist/ideological considerations, the interactions between the two states can easily turn into a game of challenges if one of the parties interprets the former's act as an assault on the national honor. Thus, the initial step of the politics of national honor is characterization of the act by state representatives as demeaning to the target state's status or self-ascribed identity. This is followed by mutual counterchallenges, as well as insistence on one's own terms or refusal of the other's demands which render making compromises rather difficult for both parties.

Such challenges have domestic ramifications as well. When elites identify a particular act of any state as an assault on the national honor, they claim a special right to act upon the detected humiliation. The honor-based representation of elites also presupposes a unified nation, in the sense that the feeling of humiliation is shared by the nation as a whole. Domestic challenges to these representations are hence at odds with the particular form of these representations, which seek to have a "rally-around-the-flag" effect and place the issue above public discussion. In this regard, the politics of honor has similar intrastate dynamics as the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization, where depicting an issue as an existential threat places it above politics and public discussion, calling for immediate measures to eliminate the threat.<sup>50</sup> This is not to suggest that "rally-around-the-flag" is automatic. The "success" of the elites in legitimizing their positions depends on the degree of agreement among different societal groups to the representations articulated by the elites. While domestic consensus may be facilitated by the ease with which dissenters or skeptics can be accused of ignorance of one's national honor or moral weakness,<sup>51</sup> state responses to these "assaults" nevertheless depend on the specific conditions in each country, and the salience of counterdiscourses in each society.

While examining the domestic dynamics of honor politics is equally important, the following analysis will primarily focus on the inter-state dynamics of honor politics. Since the sensitivity of the elites to certain assaults stems from a particular understanding of a nation's history and image, the task ahead then is to examine the historical narratives and the national images the elites of both countries relied upon and the sources for their sensitivity to humiliation.

## **Sources of National Honor and Pride in Turkey and Israel: Claims of Exceptionalism**

Turkey's imperial past and a number of exceptionalist historical narratives have served as a significant source of national pride and paved the way for a competitive understanding of national honor in Turkey. These have not only shaped the contemporary portrayals of

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48 O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, p.110, 145.

49 Neu, p.vii.

50 Barry Buzan *et al.*, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, London: Lyne Reinner Publisher, 1998, p.23-25.

51 Leo Parla, *National Honor*, New York, Macmillan, 1918, p.8.

Turkey as a potential great power, but also made the Turkish elite particularly susceptible to feelings of humiliation when Turkey's self-ascribed status is disregarded by other states. As in the cases of other states with an imperial heritage, "being reduced from a vast empire to extinction"<sup>52</sup> led to a post-imperial trauma on the part of Turkey and the resulting impulse to revive the past glory of the Ottoman Empire.

A number of exceptionalist historical narratives were constructed during the early Republican period, which depicted Turkey as a model for the oppressed nations for its successful resistance against imperialism. These also presented the Turkish language as the source of all other languages and the Turkish nation as the carrier of civilization and as "unbeatable" and "intrepid" soldiers by birth.<sup>53</sup> The nationalist narrative in the 1990s redefined Turkey's "greatness" and "unique" characteristic in terms of its strong state tradition and superior military culture, referring to the Turkish nation's experience of having founded sixteen states, along with Turkey's potential to increase its power in the vast continent of Eurasia. On the other hand, the Islamist/nationalist discourse relied on Turkey's historical experience in unifying the Muslim world under its authority. The conditions of the post-Cold War order also enhanced the appeal of the so-called neo-Ottomanism, i.e., the renewed interest in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>54</sup> From this perspective, the Turkish elite emphasized Turkey's ability and responsibility to reclaim its hegemony in its surrounding area, stemming from the history of "governing" and "ordering" the region for centuries.<sup>55</sup> The Turkish elite's calls for expanding Turkey's influence from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China, Central Europe and the Middle East, and for making Turkey a global actor in the 2000s, were thus predicated on the goal of reviving Turkey's "greatness".

While the AKP elite and, particularly, the present Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, expressed their discomfort with being associated with neo-Ottomanism, there has been an upsurge in these arguments during the AKP period. In his book *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu describes Turkey's Ottoman past as a unique source of multiculturalism, an example of peaceful governance, and a valuable guide for present Turkish practices.<sup>56</sup> For Davutoğlu, the Ottoman heritage endows Turkey with a great sense of responsibility that motivates its present actions.<sup>57</sup> In his vision, Turkey is neither a bridge, nor a frontier, nor "an ordinary country, which sits at the edge of the Muslim world or the West" but a "central country"<sup>58</sup> that could emerge as one of the great powers of the world through being at peace with its own past, feeling self-confident due to its exceptional past, making use of cultural and historical ties with the countries in its surrounding region and becoming a key actor in mediating international disputes.

52 Mustafa Aydın, "Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.35, No.4, 1999, p.156.

53 See *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce, Milliyetçilik*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2009, passim.

54 Graham Fuller, "Turkey Faces East: New Orientations toward the Middle East and the Old Soviet Union", Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 1992, p.13.

55 Lerna Yanık, "Constructing Turkish "Exceptionalism": Discourses of Liminality and Hybridity in Post-Cold War Turkish Foreign Policy", *Political Geography*, Vol.30, No.2, 2011, p. 84.

56 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001.

57 Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy, *Foreign Policy*," 20 May 2010.

58 Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No.1, 2008, p.78.

Besides its Ottoman heritage, several developments in the early 2000s served as additional sources of self-confidence and pride for Turkey: the start of the accession negotiations with the EU in 2005; the increased momentum in human rights and democratization reforms; its growing geopolitical importance due to its location at the heart of the East-West energy corridor; the fact that it had the highest cumulative growth rate, as well as the highest average annual growth rate in the Middle East between 2002 and 2007;<sup>59</sup> and lastly, the initial successes in Turkey's "zero-problems with neighbors policy" with Iran and Syria and in mediation attempts, especially in the case of Syria and Israel. In addition, Turkey's seemingly rising popularity in the region provided the desired legitimacy for the efforts to assert Turkey's power in the region, as well as gave rise to the articulations that defined Turkey as the "orderer" of the region. Davutoğlu's following remarks are worth quoting at length to show how similar assertions were reinforced by Turkey's growing self-confidence:

In all Middle Eastern societies, Turkey is not only seen as a friend and a sister country, but also a pioneer of a new idea that portends the future and a new regional order... Go to the streets of Cairo, Tripoli, Beirut, Tunisia, Jerusalem, and ask: 'What do you think about Turkey's Syrian policy?' Even before you ask, they will hug you and express their admiration for Turkey's honorable policy... AKP government has closed the era of traditional policy of wait-and-see, being dragged by the great powers, and serving as the speaker for others' agendas... Turkey is no longer a country that does not have self-confidence, seeking external permission for its domestic problems, let alone for making regional initiatives. Turkey is a central country in its region... A new Middle East is being born. We will continue to be the owner, pioneer, and servant of this new Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

Being assured of the moral and societal legitimacy of Turkey's role has increased the Turkish elite's sensitivity to challenges to Turkey's self-image and national honor. Erdoğan's speech, delivered shortly after a Turkish plane was shot down by Syrian air defenses in July 2012, is illustrative of this tendency: "We would not hesitate to put into their place those who attempt to test Turkey's greatness."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Israel's Gaza operation in 2008 was taken as a challenge to Turkey's role as the "peace-maker" and "orderer" of the region. Erdoğan's responses to the operation did not only define Israel's act as a crime against humanity but also revealed Turkey's sensitivity towards others' perceptions of its self-acclaimed status and regional role. Israel's failure to issue a prior notification to Turkey about the operation and its timing were regarded by Erdoğan as a "disrespectful behavior towards Turkey" and an "insult to Turkey's mediating role."<sup>62</sup>

One could similarly refer to the exceptionalist narratives in Israel to make sense of its recent challenges to Turkey and its refusal to accommodate Turkey's demands. As opposed to Turkey, where an important source of exceptionalism rests on its imperial

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59 Altunışık and Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search", p.374.

60 "Davutoğlu'ndan Net Mesaj," *Radikal*, 26 April 2012.

61 "Erdoğan: Hadlerini Bildiririz," *Radikal*, 27 June 2012.

62 "Gazze'de Yapılanlar Ciddi Bir İnsanlık Suçu," *Radikal*, 29 December 2009.

heritage, the exceptionalist narratives in Israel are primarily based on the sense of encirclement and the unique traits of the Israeli population in overcoming the imminent threats inflicted upon them. One of those that reveals an inherently exceptionalist view suggests that the Jewish people have exceptional and superior cultural characteristics that set them apart from the rest.<sup>63</sup> This moral exceptionalism was well-represented in the statements of David Ben Gurion, the founding father of Israel. In one of his speeches in 1950 he stated: “We are perhaps the only ‘non-conformist’ people in the world.... We do not fit the general pattern of humanity: Others say because we are flawed. I think [it is] because the general pattern is flawed, and we neither accept it nor adapt to it....”<sup>64</sup>

There are also other accounts that do not rest on an inherent exceptionalism but on the specific challenges the state of Israel and the Jewish people in general have faced throughout history. The narration of the Jewish history in terms of victimization, isolation, and long suffering, the trauma of the Holocaust,<sup>65</sup> and the experience of the Arab-Israeli wars shortly after Israel’s declaration of independence, have led to a portrayal of Israel as a vulnerable country which faces unique threats to its existence<sup>66</sup> and which must take the necessary measures to prevent another Holocaust.<sup>67</sup> The historicization of the Holocaust as an unprecedented case of victimization that is incomparable to other genocides<sup>68</sup> and as a unique “fusion of collective humiliation and mass destruction”<sup>69</sup> has also contributed to the sensitivity among the Israeli elite towards humiliation and criticisms directed at Israel. Moreover, there are cases where the idea of national security exceptionalism merges with inherent exceptionalism. For instance, the construction of Israel as a perennial victim does not only inescapably place Israel on a higher moral plane, it also paradoxically sets in motion such claims that emphasize the extraordinary capabilities of the Jewish nation “to outlive its enemies” and Israel’s military skills that paved the way for victories against much larger armies.<sup>70</sup> Ben Gurion’s following speech delivered to Israeli youths captures this synthesis:

You ... know that we were always a small people, always surrounded by big nations with whom we engaged in a struggle, political as well as spiritual; that we created things that they did not accept; that we were exceptional....

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63 Gil Merom, “Israel’s National Security and the Myth of Exceptionalism”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.114, No.3, 1999, p.411.

64 Quoted in *ibid.*

65 Dov Waxman, *The Pursuit of Peace and the Crisis of Israeli Identity: Defining/Defending the Nation*, New York, Palgrave, 2006, p. 46

66 M. Shahid Alam, *The Israeli Exceptionalism: The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 6.

67 Mira M. Scharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2005, p.31, 68.

68 Gavriel D. Rosenberg, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections of the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol.13, No.1, 1999, p. 29.

69 Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol.25, No.1, 1996, p. 66.

70 Alam, *The Israeli Exceptionalism*, p.5–10.

Our survival-secret during these thousands of years ... has one source: our supreme quality, our intellectual and moral advantage, which singles us out even today, as it did throughout the generations.<sup>71</sup>

Hence, one could argue that the honor-based considerations apparent in the contemporary conservative political elite in Israel stem largely from these defensive narratives which merge the image of a “victim” with that of a “hero”. This seems to contrast with the dominance of the image of a “master” as depicted in the Turkish narratives. This said, it must be noted that the element of moral superiority seems to be present in both.

Furthermore, as Amir Lupovici argues, the contemporary state identity of Israel also rests on Israel’s being the only democracy in an area surrounded by authoritarian regimes,<sup>72</sup> which also came to be taken by the Israeli elite as a matter of prestige and a source of national pride. This narrative depicts Israel “as a beleaguered Western outpost in the Islamic heartland, the only ‘democracy’ in the Middle East, [and] a small heroic country constantly forced to defend itself against terrorist attacks by Muslims.”<sup>73</sup> References to Israel’s being the only “free” country in the Middle East, as well as to the unique characteristics of the Israeli nation in confronting the challenges to Israel, are particularly common in the Israeli PM Netanyahu’s speeches.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Turkey’s consideration of Hamas as a democratically-elected political party to be negotiated with for a peace process, rather than as a terrorist group, and the Turkish elite’s accusation of Israel of crimes against humanity, did not only heighten Israel’s security concerns but also aroused suspicions regarding the ideological motives behind the AKP elites’ foreign policy in the Middle East. It also challenged the above-outlined exceptionalist narratives, triggering the moves on the part of the conservative Israeli elite to save Israel’s “face”.

## **The Role of Honor Politics in the Turkish-Israeli Crises**

The tension between Turkey and Israel after Israel’s military strike against Gaza in 2008 culminated in a showdown during the Davos Summit on January 29, 2009. Erdoğan’s public condemnation of Israel’s Gaza attack at an international summit was praised by the Turkish elite and media as a “brave”, “admirable”, and an “honorable” act for showing no fear to take the side of the oppressed.<sup>75</sup> In his initial remark following the incident, Erdoğan said: “We are advancing towards the strong and great Turkey that we have long yearned for.”<sup>76</sup> Erdoğan’s furious walking off the stage during the summit was triggered by not being allowed by the mediator to speak as long as his Israeli counterpart. Considering the mediator’s intervention not merely as “the humiliation of the Prime Minister of Turkish Republic” but also as an insult to the whole Turkish nation and “an inappropriate act

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71 Quoted in *ibid*, p. 411.

72 Amir Lupovici, “Ontological Dissonance, Clashing Identities, and Israel’s Unilateral Steps towards the Palestinians”, *Review of International Studies*, 2011, p. 15.

73 Alam, *The Israeli Exceptionalism*, p. 22.

74 Merom, “Israel’s National Security”, p. 411.

75 “Arınç’tan 15 Başbakan’a Taş: Tembel Ev Kızları,” *Radikal*, 9 October 2009

76 “Davos Kahramanı’ İstanbul’a Döndü,” *Radikal*, 30 January 2009.

that is disrespectful to Turkey's greatness," Erdoğan claimed that his gesture was primarily "for the protection of Turkey's national honor, dignity and international reputation", since "a shy and timid policy would not suit a country like Turkey."<sup>77</sup> Denying that his act was driven merely by his emotions, he also rationalized his pursuit of the country's honor by stating that "only by pursuing an honorable policy can we protect the country's national and international interests."<sup>78</sup>

Israel's challenge came in mid-February, when Israeli General Avi Mizrahi argued that Turkey was in no position to claim moral superiority towards Israel, having massacred Armenians during the First World War, repressing Kurds, and occupying Cyprus.<sup>79</sup> Although an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman said that Mizrahi's statements did not represent Israel's official view, Mizrahi's remarks presented a clear challenge to Turkey's historical narrative that depicted the Ottoman heritage in terms of multiculturalism and tolerance, as well as its self-image as a country that fully respects human rights and international law.

The relations came to a new low with Turkey's October 2009 decision to exclude Israel from the regularly held *Anatolian Eagle* military exercises, and the two of Turkish TV channels' broadcast of the controversial *Ayrılık* (Separation) and *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves) series which portrayed the Israeli soldiers as brutal killers of the Palestinian civilians in the Occupied Territories.<sup>80</sup> As in the Mizrahi case, the incident was taken as an assault on the Israeli nation as a whole, despite Turkish authorities' attempts to differentiate Turkey's official position from the message both series conveyed. The depiction of the Israeli soldiers as capable of such atrocities challenged the Israeli claims to moral superiority over Hamas and its status as an exemplary democracy in an area of turmoil. For Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Lieberman, Israel's response had to be assertive to "preserv[e] the national honor of the State of Israel."<sup>81</sup> At a heads of mission conference held in Jerusalem in January 2010, Lieberman reportedly told the Israeli ambassadors to "stop turning the other cheek" whenever Israel is insulted, and said: "Terms like 'national honor' have value in the Middle East. There is no need to provoke or exaggerate, but there must not be an attitude of obsequiousness and self-deprecation, and the need to always justify the other side."<sup>82</sup> The so-called "low-chair" crisis erupted shortly afterwards, when Ayalon chose the assertive diplomacy over the submissive one in his meeting with the Turkish ambassador Ahmet Oğuz Çelikkol. During the meeting, he told the cameraman in Hebrew: "Pay attention that he is sitting in a lower chair ... that there is only an Israeli flag on the table and that we are not smiling."<sup>83</sup> Ayalon's revanchist act caused a

77 "Başbakan Davos'ta Diplomatik Davranmış", *Radikal*, 3 February 2009.

78 Ibid.

79 Yossi Melman and Barak Ravid, "IDF: Officer's Criticism of Turkey does not Represent Official View", *Haaretz*, 14 February 2009.

80 İlker Aytürk, "The Coming of an Ice Age? Turkish-Israeli Relations Since 2002", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.12, No.4, 2011, p. 679.

81 David Widler, "Detiphing Hebron", *Jerusalem Post*, 27 January 2010.

82 Ibid.

83 Barak Ravid and the Associated Press, "Peres: Humiliation of Turkey Envoy does not Reflect Israel's Diplomacy," *Haaretz*, 13 January 2010.

public outrage in Turkey and led the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs respond with the statement that: “it is not incumbent on any party to categorize Turkey in terms of its rank in morality.”<sup>84</sup> When the Turkish authorities were not satisfied with Ayalon’s initial expression of regret for the event, Ayalon reluctantly issued a second apology, stating that he had no intention to humiliate the Turkish people for whom Israel had great respect.<sup>85</sup>

The discursive duel between the two countries following the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010 showed that the crisis over the reciprocal acts of humiliation had not been resolved with Ayalon’s apology. Turkey considered the *Mavi Marmara* incident as an act of “state terrorism” and a “cause for war”<sup>86</sup> since the ship was still in international waters when it was stormed by the Israeli commandos. Israel, on the other hand, defined the event as a planned provocation, arguing that the Israeli soldiers acted in self-defense upon being attacked by the pro-Palestinian activists. Turkish elite described the incident as an unforgivable assault against the whole Turkish nation. The opposition party leaders urged the government to save Turkey’s face, honor, and pride by making Israel pay for its actions.<sup>87</sup> Two days following the event, Erdoğan demanded that Israel immediately lift its “inhumane blockade of Gaza” and said: “[t]hey have once again showed to the world [...] how good they are at killing people.”<sup>88</sup> Erdoğan also declared that Turkey would “stand tall” and “not let anyone toy with [Turkey’s] national honor.”<sup>89</sup> When Israel refused to apologize for the incident and when the UN’s Palmer Commission report failed to delegitimize the Israeli blockade of Gaza, while condemning Israel of excessive force against the flotilla, Turkey undertook radical diplomatic measures against Israel, expelling all Israeli diplomats under the second secretary status, suspending trade and bilateral military contracts, closing its airspace and military airports for the use of Israeli aircraft, and declaring that relations would not be normalized until Israel apologized, paid compensation to the families of the deceased and injured activists in the incident, and lifted the naval blockade on Gaza.<sup>90</sup> Erdoğan also declared the government’s desire to escalate sanctions on Israel and deploy the Turkish Navy to break the blockade, and asserted: “We don’t care if it costs \$15 million or \$150 million. We will not allow anyone to walk all over our honor.”<sup>91</sup> In this regard, national honor was defined by the Turkish elite not only in terms of a selfless act on the side of the oppressed, but also in terms of keeping up Turkey’s stance toward Israel at any cost.

If “making Israel apologize” was seen in Turkey as the restoration of Turkey’s national honor and the acknowledgement of its superior standing *vis-à-vis* Israel, “refusing to apologize” and challenging Turkey’s claimed authority and moral superiority meant the

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84 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Release Regarding the Attitude of Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister During His Meeting With Turkey’s Ambassador to Tel Aviv,” No.7, 12 January 2010.

85 Ravid and the Associated Press, “Peres”.

86 “Erdoğan: Mavi Marmara Raid was ‘Cause for War’,” *Today’s Zaman*, 12 September 2011.

87 “Muhalefet AKP’ye Kızdı,” *Radikal*, 1 June 2010.

88 “No one should Test Turkey’s Patience, PM Erdoğan Warns,” *Today’s Zaman*, 2 June 2010.

89 “Erdoğan: Kim Ne Derse Desin, Yola Devam,” *Radikal*, 13 June 2010.

90 “Moving to ‘Plan C,’ Turkey Suspends Trade with Israel,” *Israel Hayom*, 6 September 2011.

91 The Associated Press, “Erdoğan: We will not Let Israel Disrespect Turkey, No Matter the Price,” *Haaretz*, 7 September 2011.

same for some in Israel. Especially PM Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman have made this clear from the very beginning in framing their refusal to apologize in terms of the protection of the country's national honor, while accusing Turkey of being the neighborhood's bully, pursuing an aggressive policy, and supporting terrorism. Deputy Speaker of the Israeli Knesset Danny Danon even demanded that "Turkey must apologize to the State of Israel for its actions in support of terrorism and its involvement in the flotilla, not vice versa."<sup>92</sup> In an article published in *The Washington Times* he also stated:

Turkey should apologize for encouraging the sending, under false pretenses, of anti-Israel activists into the country's sovereign territory. Furthermore, Turkey has been using the flotilla as an opportunity to establish itself as a superpower within the Muslim world. The Turkish government also should apologize for turning the flotilla incident into a platform intended to present Israel as aggressive and barbaric...Turkey's continued involvement in organizing the activists is a further attempt to delegiti[mize] Israel and exacerbate the Israeli-Palestinian problem. It is time for the flotilla's supporters to recognize this deceit and call for an end to its hypocritical campaign against Israel, the only true democracy in the Middle East. To help achieve this goal, the United States and other allies should start by leading the call for Turkey to apologize to Israel for its repeated insults and provocations.<sup>93</sup>

This was in line with the views of PM Netanyahu, who underlined that Israel had nothing to apologize for and that the improvement of relations "should not come only at the expense of Israel's interests."<sup>94</sup> In the same vein, expressing Israel's reluctance to give concessions or receive edicts from Turkey, Foreign Minister Lieberman stated: "We didn't need to bow our heads at these unjustified attacks. There is also justice and national honor that we need to protect."<sup>95</sup> Lieberman went further to assert that "we simply cannot afford to apologize to Turkey for the flotilla incident. Even if our life depends on it."<sup>96</sup>

The Israeli government's attempt to identify the issue as a matter of national honor had some resonance within the country. An Israeli journalist Haim Shine wrote: "The days when Jews were like defenseless sheep led to the slaughter are over, never to return again. Israel's leaders made a good choice when they decided not to apologize to Turkey and upheld Israel's honor."<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, there have also been critical views over the government's refusal to take responsibility for the IDF's *Mavi Marmara* raid for it further enhanced Israel's isolation in the region.<sup>98</sup> The Defense Minister Ehud Barak was among

92 Eli Brdnstein Eric Bender, "Israel Rejects Ultimatum: Netanyahu is Determined not to Apologize," *Maariv*, 1 September 2011.

93 Danny Danon, "Why Turkey should Apologize to Israel," *The Washington Times*, 12 August 2011.

94 "Lieberman: Israel has no Reason to Apologize to Turkey," *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 July 2011.

95 Shlomo Cesana, "Abbas needs to say Israel will be here Forever", *Israel Hayom*, 28 September 2011.

96 Bradley Burston, "The Holocaust means never having to say you're Sorry", *Haaretz*, 5 June 2011.

97 Haim Shine, "Capitalizing on a regional vacuum", *Israel Hayom*, 6 September 2011.

98 See, for instance, Zvi Bar'el, "When it comes to Israel and Turkey, stupidity is also a strategic asset", *Haaretz*, 17 August 2011.

those that did not agree with Netanyahu's categorical refusal to apologize for it contributed to the escalation of the tensions, while he also added that if an Israeli apology should be issued, this should not be for the Gaza blockade or for Israel's use of force, but for the 'operational errors' during the raid.<sup>99</sup>

Notwithstanding these criticisms, honor-based statements mostly prevailed over the rationalist explanations in the discourse of the conservative elite in Israel. This was also evident in the arguments made in favor of the tourism boycott against Turkey. In October 2010, the Israeli Tourism Minister Staz Meshezhnikov urged all Israelis to boycott Turkey as their travel destination upon Turkey's declaration of Israel as a strategic threat. Meshezhnikov stated that Turkey might be significant for Israel's interests, yet it must be boycotted "for the protection of their country's national honor."<sup>100</sup> In September 2011, another controversial event brought the same calls back to the scene, when 40 Israelis flying with Turkish Airlines were strip-searched by the Turkish security forces upon their arrival in Turkey.<sup>101</sup> Calling for the need to boycott Turkey for its "humiliating" behavior, Zvulun Orlev, an MP from a right-wing political party Jewish Home, stated that "there is no reason to support or provide revenues to the state that insults, swears at, and threatens Israel."<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Miri Regev, an MP from the Likud party, said: "The relationship with Turkey is important, but even more important is to maintain our national honor."<sup>103</sup> Despite the clear negative consequences of this decision on Turkish tourism, the Turkish government refused to apologize for the incident, stating that the event was a response to the intense interrogation of the Turkish citizens in Tel Aviv Airport a week ago, and that "reciprocity was a basic principle in international customary procedures."<sup>104</sup>

The significance attached to the defense of national pride and honor, and the resulting resistance to compromise have further escalated the tension between Turkey and Israel, which culminated with Israel's cancellation of a \$141 million contract to supply Turkey with an advanced aerial intelligence system in December 2011, and Turkey's opposition to Israel's participation in NATO's 2012 Chicago Summit. The gridlock in the bilateral relations was finally broken by Netanyahu's apology to Turkey in March 2013 for the operational errors during the raid, which was immediately accepted by the Turkish authorities. Given the fact that the Turkish government's stance towards Israel since 2008 had not been challenged by either the media or the opposition parties in Turkey, as was the case in Israel, and given the international pressure on Israel especially after the Palmer report, it was not unexpected that an attempt at a revision of the initially defended position would initiate from Israel, rather than Turkey. The honor-duel could indeed at

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99 Hillary Leila Krieger, "Barak raises prospect of apology to Turkey", *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 July, 2011.

100 The Associated Press, "Tourism Minister urges Israelis to boycott Turkey", *Haaretz*, 31 October 2010.

101 Ravit Naor and Eli Brdinstein, "Dozens of Israelis have been searched in Turkey: They stripped us down to our underpants", *Maariv*, 5 September 2011.

102 Eric Bender, "Right-wing Knesset members initiate a tourism boycott of Turkey - to maintain national honor", *Maariv*, 5 September 2011.

103 *Ibid.*

104 Şebnem Arsu, "Turkey: More Sanctions Against Israel", *New York Times*, 7 September 2011.

some point give way to a *modus vivendi* in the face of an ongoing conflict in Syria. On the other hand, given the prevalence of honor-based statements in Turkey, it was also not surprising that this event came to be represented in the Turkish media as a confirmation of Turkey's greatness and Israel's acknowledgement of Turkey's superior position. The religious conservative *Yeni Şafak* stated: "We made [them] apologize."<sup>105</sup> *Posta*, one of the largest mainstream dailies in Turkey wrote: "You are great, Turkey."<sup>106</sup> Arguably, this very tendency to frame the Israeli apology as such could be one of the reasons for the radical decrease in the Israeli public's previously voiced support for the apology.<sup>107</sup> Hence, despite the apparent resolution of the apology crisis and the increased weight assigned to material considerations on the part of both countries, it seems that the politics of honor will be present in the scene both at the interstate and intrastate levels.

## Conclusion

Many scholars have referred to the role of the rationalist calculations and the Islamist agenda of the AKP government in explaining the crises in Turkish-Israeli relations during the past decade. This article has argued that rationalist and ideological accounts are important but not sufficient to understand the way in which the conflict escalated and the reluctance of Turkey and Israel to make compromises. While rationalist and ideological factors elucidate the mutual suspicions between both countries and the fragility of the bilateral relations, the escalation of the tension cannot be exclusively explained by ideological and materialist calculations. As this article showed, the view that Israel's actions should not be condoned cut across different ideological camps in Turkey. Similarly, while there were attempts on the part of both countries to base the defense of national honor on the protection of their national interests as well, the public statements by officials in both countries that their national honor would be protected at any cost indicate that considerations of honor were prioritized over the pursuit of material interests. An uncompromising stance increased Israel's isolation in the region and led to a suspension of its military sales to Turkey. Conversely, Turkey's demand for an Israeli apology as a minimum requirement for the normalization of relations came at a price as well: the subsequent lack of Israeli cooperation with regard to the Syrian conflict, decreased tourism revenues, and the loss of the strategic advantage Turkey once had *vis-à-vis* other countries in the Middle East in serving as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this regard, an honor-centered approach is more useful than a rationalist one in making sense of the previous gridlock in the relations.

This article argued that the impasse in Turkish-Israeli relations was due to the two states' preoccupation with asserting their authority *vis-à-vis* each other and competition for moral superiority, triggered by their claims to a great power status and/or exceptionalism. Turkey's sensitivity to the Israeli challenges stemmed from a particular

105 "Özür Dilettik", *Yeni Şafak*, 23 March, 2013.

106 "Büyüksün Türkiye", *Posta*, 23 March 2013.

107 Elad Benari, "Poll: Israelis Believe Apology to Turkey Was a Mistake", *Arutz Sheva* 7, 9 July, 2013.

narration of Turkish history and a representation of Turkey's role in the region as a rising "great power", the "owner" and the "peace-maker" in the Middle East. Since Israel's actions were viewed as a challenge to Turkey's self-ascribed roles in the region, Turkey's reactions focused on reasserting its denied status. A perfect symmetry was not visible in the case of Israel, where the image of a victim as well as a hero was apparent, rather than the image of a master as present in Turkish narratives. Second, the Israeli government's competitive understanding of national honor and refusal to apologize did not reflect the opinion of the majority of the Israeli elite or the population. In this sense, there was a difference between the rates of success in the politics of honor pursued in both countries at the domestic level. Yet, the Israeli government's sensitivity to the Turkish accusations should be interpreted in the context of its inclination to equate any moral or legal criticism directed at Israel with disregard for the nation's tragic past, Israel's right of existence, as well as its self-ascribed status as an exceptional democracy in the Middle East. As the elites in both countries defined the protection of their national honor in terms of making no concessions on their positions, the politics of national honor turned into a zero-sum game, leading to subsequent attempts on the part of the elites of both countries to humiliate each other, thereby exacerbating conflict.

In this regard, one can identify two important roles the politics of honor play in international relations. First, the politics of honor serves to create a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect among the public and to place an issue above public discussion, thereby legitimizing the measures to defend the country's honor. Second, honor politics exacerbate interstate tensions and reduce space for compromise. It becomes more difficult to de-escalate the tensions once a challenge is framed as an assault on the country's honor, especially if national honor is defined in terms of keeping one's stance at all costs. Focusing on the honor politics has a larger explanatory reach, particularly in cases where ideological divides within the country are not conducive to making sense of the interstate tensions and where the costs of conflictual relations with another state outweigh its benefits.

Does this mean that, once honor-based motivations are in place, a settlement between Turkey and Israel is no longer conceivable? While this article focused on the reasons as to why honor politics made a mutual compromise between Turkey and Israel more difficult, it is possible that Turkey and Israel find a *modus vivendi*, as they did after Israel's March 2013 apology, as a result of the changes in domestic and international conditions, or a revision of their self-images. Insults wear off, albeit with difficulty, so honor politics may well be replaced by concerns over security and wealth, just as material calculations were relegated to the secondary status in the midst of both countries' reciprocal acts of humiliation. Secondly, as Sikkink and Finnemore argue, the desire to gain pride and self-esteem can also explain norm-following, as well as conflict.<sup>108</sup> States may seek to avert challenges that wittingly or unwittingly attempt to lower their "face" not only by means of counterhumiliation or avoidance, but also through what Goffman called a "corrective process": by apologizing or forgiving.<sup>109</sup> Thirdly, one needs to take into consideration the

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108 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change", *International Organization*, Vol.52, No.4, 1998, p.903-4.

109 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior*, New York, Pantheon

degree to which the politics of honor pursued by the governments resonates with the public. A revision of policies is possible, as the Israeli apology showed, when alternative discourses are easily voiced and shared by a considerable part of the population. Even though Turkey and Israel seem to have come to a common understanding after the resolution of the apology crisis, they are yet far from acting as allies in the region. In the light of what has been written, it is safe to argue that this could take place only when both countries share a mutually-agreed definition of their relative status and a mutually-inclusive definition of their national honor, both at the inter-state, as well as at the domestic level.

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