

Israel-Turkey Relations after the War in Gaza

Summary of the 4th Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue of the Mitvim Institute and the GPoT Center

In cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Istanbul; November 2014

On November 20th, 2014, [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) and the [Global Political Trends \(GPoT\) Center](#) held their 4th policy dialogue. The dialogue took place in Istanbul, with the cooperation of the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#), and the participation of various think-tank directors, diplomats, journalists and students. Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Arad Nir, and Yoav Stern represented the Mitvim Institute. The dialogue focused on the impact of last summer's war in Gaza upon Israel-Turkey ties, and the chances of rapprochement between the two countries considering the current geopolitical circumstances in the Middle East. This paper summarizes the central positions that were raised by participants during the course of the dialogue.

A. Positions presented by Turkish participants

Turkey tends to link its bi-lateral relations to conflicts involving a third-party. For example, **Turkey perceives Israel-Turkey relations through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**, and Armenia-Turkey relations through the lens of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The war in Gaza seriously damaged the chances of normalization between Israel and Turkey. The incentives for normalization (including the topic of natural gas) were not strong enough to bring the two parties together before the war. Turkey has interest in reaching a natural gas deal with Israel, but given the other gas sources at its disposal Israeli gas is not a critical issue. After the war, these incentives seemed even less relevant, as **the Palestinian issue is more important to the Turks than gas**. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan cannot ignore what is taking place today in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Under such circumstances, he is not interested in getting close to Israel.

Today, there is no public pressure in Turkey to reach a settlement with Israel. **There are a few businessmen close to the government that are trying to bring the two sides together**, in order to make a gas deal possible. Such a deal is economically feasible, but not politically. The restoration of ties is going to take time, and it appears as if it may have to wait until some new incentive materializes.

The geopolitical circumstances (in Syria, and the Eastern Mediterranean) were supposed to bring Israel and Turkey closer together and increase their motivation for cooperation. However, in practice this has not happened. **Israel is perceived as interested in maintaining the status quo in the region, as opposed to Turkey who supports reforms and transition** into a post Sykes-Picot era.

The two countries have different positions regarding key regional issues: **Syria** - Israel is not troubled by the continuing chaos, while Turkey wants to promote a new order in the country; **Egypt** - Israel supports the old-styled regime, while Turkey supports the process of change and democracy; **Cyprus** - Israel's pact with Cyprus only enhances anti-Israel sentiments in Turkey.

The recent wave of violence in Jerusalem is degrading Israel-Turkey relations even further. However, Turks do not know enough about what is really happening in Jerusalem, and rumors get blown out of proportion and trigger sharp political and public reactions, some of them anti-Semitic.

In Turkey's eyes, Israel repeatedly treats the Palestinians problematically. This in turn **feeds anti-Israel rhetoric that promotes Israel's negative image in Turkey.** Turkish criticism - especially following the war in Gaza - is not only directed towards Israeli politicians, rather upon the State of Israel. **More and more Turks believe that Israel's actions against the Palestinians reflect its true character as a state, and doubt whether it can ever change.** Israel is seen as a state that is not interested in peace, and as a result there is no motivation in Turkey to fill the role of mediator in Arab-Israeli relations. It seems pointless. Only a change in the political leadership could perhaps improve Israel's image in Turkey.

In Turkey there is also skepticism regarding the expectation that it assists in moderating Hamas. From the Turkish perspective, this expectation willfully ignores Israel's actions and pins all responsibility for the conflict on Hamas' shoulders. **The international community should act to moderate Israel, and only then can Turkey be expected to do the same regarding Hamas.**

One of the participants in the policy dialogue, a **Turkish citizen from Arab-Israeli origin, spoke about Turkey's position vis-à-vis the Palestinians.** According to him:

The Palestinian issue has undergone a process of Islamization in Turkey, and many in Turkey now relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a religious war. But this is not what the conflict is - it revolves around other issues as well. **Turkey sees Hamas as the most significant Palestinian actor and supports it, but needs to embrace a more holistic approach and also extend support to other Palestinian groups.** The majority of Palestinians are interested in building a secular state, and not a religious one, and Turkey could support them in this process. Given Turkey's connections with Palestinian society, it could also play a role in internal Palestinian reconciliation. **Turkey needs to use its relationship with Hamas in order to de-radicalize the organization, and condemn acts of violence.**

Today, Turkey's attitude towards the Palestinian issue is focused almost exclusively on the question of the Temple Mount and Israel's military blockade of the Gaza Strip. Turkey needs to engage in other issues that are also important to Palestinians:

- Participate in attempts to resolve the **Palestinian refugee issue**. To this end, Turkey could cooperate with a country like Jordan, where many Palestinian refugees are based;
- Assist in the construction of **Palestinian state institutions**, by cooperating with the European Union, which is investing a considerable amount in this process. This could also benefit Turkey-EU relations;
- Strengthen **Palestinian civil society** by encouraging Turkish activists to volunteer in Palestinian NGO, similar to European activists. Short of TIKA (Turkey's official aid agency), there is almost no Turkish presence on the ground.

B. Positions presented by Israeli participants

Israel and Turkey had **three opportunities in recent years to fix their relationship: in 2011, in 2013, and in 2014. But each one was missed.** At the end of January 2014, a draft agreement was drawn up that received support from the professional ranks in Israel. The terms of this agreement were quite similar to those drawn up in 2011, with exception to the amount Israel would pay in compensation. However, **Netanyahu asked that Erdoğan - as a condition for signing the draft - promise to refrain from verbally attacking Israel again.** The Turks refused, and Netanyahu did not sign.

During the last few years, Netanyahu and Erdoğan understood that they could benefit from rehabilitating the relationship between the two countries. They showed a readiness to move forward in negotiations and make compromises. Despite this, they did not succeed in signing an agreement. **Today, after the war in Gaza and after Erdoğan's severe verbal assaults upon Israel during the military operation, the chances of reaching an agreement are even less likely.** Netanyahu and Erdoğan do not trust one another, and the connection between Israel-Turkey relations and the status of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become even more evident. Israeli increased cooperation with Egypt and Cyprus has also reduced Israel's motivation to make progress with the Turks.

Improving ties with Turkey is not a priority for the Israeli public either, and there is no public pressure upon decision makers. However, despite the political stalemate, **Israel and Turkey still cooperate with one another in other areas - both in business and civil society.** Despite the difficult circumstances, normalization between Israel and Turkey is still possible. **Over the last decade the two countries did experience workable relations, even when Erdoğan was in power,** and earlier this year Turkish politicians spoke positively about the possibility of reaching an agreement with Israel. While no one expects a return to the old days, there is room for progress.

Israel-Turkey relations have experienced ups and downs over the years, and at times rapid upheavals occurred. **Even in the current environment positive developments can surprisingly take place,** but it seems like it will be some time before relations are repaired. **The upcoming election season, both in Turkey and Israel, is unlikely to contribute to the softening of attitudes in either country.** However, there are messages being relayed between the two sides, mainly due to economic interests. Israeli and Turkish businessmen, with interest in a deal over Israel's natural gas, understand that such a deal could be made possible only after a political breakthrough between the countries. Therefore, they are now trying to promote such a breakthrough.

During the policy dialogue it was mentioned that **Erdoğan may be ready to reconsider his position** regarding Israel for the sake of importing Israel's natural gas, even if it is not critical for Turkey to do so. Exporting gas via Turkey is also a good option for Israel. **The Israeli leadership could alter its stance and sign the draft agreement** that Netanyahu did not sign in early 2014. This could bring about a breakthrough. Another possibility that was raised during the dialogue was changing the order of the normalizing gestures that the two sides have been discussing since 2011. For example: **Turkey could preemptively send its ambassador back to Israel before the signing of an agreement**, in order to overcome the distrust Israeli leadership feels towards Erdoğan.

In the absence of an agreement, **Israel should play a moderating role in easing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean**. At present, Israel has chosen to cooperate with the Cypriot-Egyptian-Greek alliance, which Turkey perceives as a threat. Even if this serves Israeli interests, Israel should try to avoid engaging in a regional zero-sum game. It should consider how it can contribute - formally or through the business community and civil society - **to increasing regional cooperation, advancing the Cyprus peace process, and improving ties between Turkey and Egypt**.

Turkey, for its part, needs to approach the Israeli issue more practically and less emotionally. It must take on a moderating role as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalates. That does not mean that Turkey must stop criticizing Israel in a legitimate manner. The King of Jordan, for example, is one of Israel's sharpest critics, but also hosts diplomatic meetings (including with Israel's prime minister) for the sake of avoiding escalation. Turkey could also **host informal dialogues** between Israelis, Palestinians, and representatives of other Arab states. The fact that **Erdoğan did not condemn the November 18 attack on the Jerusalem synagogue, was a missed opportunity** for a Turkish step that would have been interpreted positively in Israel. On the upside, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, did condemn the attack.

At an official level, **Turkey would find it difficult to play a positive role between Israel and the Palestinians**. This is not only due to its deteriorating ties with Israel, but also because **Turkey is too close to Hamas** and distanced itself from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Israel accuses Turkey of allowing Hamas terrorists to establish headquarters in its backyard. This image of Turkey as a partner of Hamas prevented it from playing a mediating role during the summer's war. The Islamic State phenomenon is also damaging Turkey's image, due to its (and Hamas') affiliation with political Islam. **Turkey needs to respond to this phenomenon, construct a viable framework for political Islam, and clarify what is legitimate and what is not.**

Israel and Turkey are both progressing in a more religious-nationalist direction that is less tolerant of minorities. This places them on a collision course. **Their policies in light of regional events are also vastly different.** Israel is turning its back on the Middle East. It sees the region as dangerous, does not see itself as a part of it, and makes no effort to join it - even on the level of teaching Arabic to its own population. Turkey, however, is trying to connect more with the Middle East, in addition to other regions. It sees itself as a country that bridges East and West, highlights its rich history, and advocates for innovation. This is an approach that Israel should adopt as well. It will create **a set of shared values for Israel and Turkey, upon which new narratives and new cooperation can be built.**