



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Rethinking Israeli-Turkish Relations

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel have existed on various levels for many years. Today, relations between the states hinge primarily on trade, as mutual distrust prevents any meaningful progress despite periodic attempts at an easing of tensions. But the Guardian of the Walls operation proved once again that anti-Israeli sentiments exist not only in Turkey's Nationalist/Islamist/Leftist circles but in Kemalist/secularist circles as well. The extent of anti-Israelism in Ankara is so extreme as to be difficult if not impossible to bridge. Israel should expect no change in this sentiment, not even during the first stages of a post-Erdoğan era.

This year we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Efraim Elrom, Israel's Consul General in Istanbul, who was abducted and murdered after three days in captivity by a radical leftist Turkish organization. At the time, the affair raised serious questions in Israel about the country's relationship with Turkey. Some members of the Israeli diplomatic corps criticized Turkey's attitude toward the affair: Ankara saw the Elrom affair as just another in a string of terrorist assaults, in contrast to Jerusalem, which viewed the saving of Elrom's life as top priority.

That was during the Cold War, and Turkish-Israeli relations have had their ups and downs over years ever since the establishment of the State of Israel. But the Elrom Affair, like other cases over the decades, highlighted the fact that relations have hardly ever been based on trust and true friendship.

One exception was the decade of the 1990s, during which Israel and Turkey cooperated on security issues and deepened bilateral relations. Israel signed pacts to upgrade Turkish tanks and sold Herons to Ankara. Yet even in the

1990s, it would have been far-fetched to call the Turkish and Israeli societies "friends."

Tourist relations—meaning visits by Israeli Jews to Turkey, as Turkish tourists have scarcely ever visited Israel—began to flourish in the 1990s and reached a climax in the first decade of the 2000s. Relations between the countries deteriorated seriously in 2008, after Erdoğan's attempt to mediate between Israel and Syria failed and Israel conducted Operation Cast Lead. Other incidents that soured relations were Erdoğan's "one minute" speech in Davos in 2009 and the Mavi Marmara and "low seat" incidents of 2010. Relations worsened even further after Operation Protective Edge in 2014, at which point almost no Israeli tourists were visiting Turkey. The relationship continued to disintegrate, reaching a nadir in 2021 with Israel's Operation Guardian of the Walls.

In parallel with the worsening of relations with Israel, Turkey established its so-called "Al-Aqsa tourism," in which Ankara sponsors efforts by Turks to visit the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem as tourists (making them practically the only Turkish tourists in Israel). Turkey wishes not only to establish itself as the Palestinians' defender but also to evict and replace Jordanian hegemony over the holy places of Islam within Israel. In view of these goals, Turkey has no interest in warming relations with Israel, despite positive noises coming from Ankara in December 2020.

Turkey's relations with other countries in the region are also relevant to the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Ankara and Cairo broke off relations after the 2013 overthrow of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi. Turkey is now hailing a "new era" with Egypt after years of tension. If 1) Ankara succeeds in calming its turbulent relationship with Cairo; 2) it continues to improve relations with Greece, as illustrated by a high-level meeting in Athens at the end of May 2021; and 3) Saudi Arabia maintains dialogue with Turkey to address their disagreements, Ankara might abandon all pretense of attempting or even wishing to warm relations with Israel. In fact, Israel might be a reason for an intensification of relations with the Saudis, as Ankara has discussed with Riyadh the possibility of strengthening bilateral ties specifically to oppose Israeli actions in Jerusalem and Gaza.

Turkey is one of the few Muslim-majority states to be a significant regional power, and one of the only such countries willing to engage with Israel on any level. Turkey can have a moderating effect on some regional actors and can theoretically serve as a channel between Israel and new regimes in the Arab world. Turkey is also important to Israeli trade, from civil aviation to hair transplant technology. Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel form a strategic

triangle, as evidenced in the recent dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. There are many reasons why good relations with Turkey are desirable for Israel.

The question is, are good relations possible? Judging from Turkey's response—across the ideological spectrum—to the Guardian of the Walls operation, Israel should not expect any change in Ankara's pro-Palestinian strategy, even in a post-Erdoğan era.

During the operation, Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) Ankara District Chairman Fahri Yıldırım and party members gathered in front of the Israeli Embassy in the Çankaya district with banners that read, "Down with Israeli Zionism, long live the Palestinian people." Yıldırım said, "We are here to protest Israel, which has been stabbing into the heart of the Middle East like a dagger since 1948."

Two bitter conclusions stem from Turkey's solidarity with the Palestinians during every military operation. First, anti-Israel sentiments in Turkey, inflamed by the Ankara government, have seeped into Kemalist circles and those of other non-natural supporters of the current administration. Second, anti-Israeli expressions in Turkey have now reached the nadir of denying Israel's right to exist. What should Israel expect next? The besieging of Jerusalem by the Turkish army, as some have called for?

There is of course no doubt that the Turkish government fans the flames of anti-Israelism in Turkey, but it might be too late for Israel to stem the surging antagonism that now prevails against it across most all segments of Turkish society. This unfortunate state of affairs is unlikely to improve, even in a post-Erdoğan era. Israel has no choice but to take this reality into consideration in its strategic planning for the future.

*This article was written in memory of Efraim Elrom.*

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