

## TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN A CHANGING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE PRESENT TEXT TRIES TO ANALYZE TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN THE NEW CONTEXT OF REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS. DESPITE AN HOSTILE ATTITUDE FROM ANKARA TOWARDS ISRAEL, THE SYRIAN CRISIS, THE KURDISH ISSUE AND BILATERAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS ARE JUST SOME OF THE MOST VISIBLE ASPECTS THAT CAN CONVINCED TURKEY TO REVISE ITS ATTITUDE TOWARDS ISRAEL. A CENTRAL ROLE IN THIS EQUATION CAN BE PLAYED BY SAUDI ARABIA, WHICH THROUGH ITS OIL POLICY MANAGED TO FORCE QATAR TO RETHINK ITS FOREIGN POLICY IN THE REGION WHICH INEVITABLY LEADS TO THE RISK OF ISOLATING TURKEY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.*

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**KEYWORDS:** GEOPOLITICS, SECURITY ARCHITECTURE, ISRAEL, TURKEY, STRATEGIC TRILATERAL, MEDITERRANEAN SEA, SAUDI ARABIA, SUNNI AXIS

### TURKEY-ISRAEL: THE HISTORY OF A FROZEN AXIS

The current regional context in the Middle East, where the Iranian nuclear issues, the expansion of Islamic State or fundamentalist Islamic terrorism represent the main themes in public discourse, brings to the general attention the possible set-ups of security architectures.

In **this regard**, the discussions between Israel and Turkey become legitimate both from the perspective of the two actors and from that of regional stability.

The foundation of bilateral diplomatic relations between the two states will be laid in 1949, Turkey being the first Muslim state that recognizes the existence of Israel, and starting from 1952 when Turkey had become a NATO member, the Ankara-Tel Aviv axis developed into a functional military relation.

The apex with regards to the cooling of bilateral relations was reached in 2010 when Israeli military forces attacked the Mavi Marmara flotilla, under Turkish flag, heading for the Gaza Strip where it carried, according to Ankara, humanitarian cargo for the Palestinian population. The Palestinian issue was already a focal point on the Turkish foreign agenda and the dialogue was getting ever more aggressive towards Israel, which had lead, one year before, in 2009, Erdogan to launch serious accusations against Shimon Peres, asking for the exclusion of the Jewish state from the UN.

The end of the 2000's has seen the rise to power by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), party that will dominate the political arena in Ankara until now, bringing a new

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stance in Turkish foreign policy by being more aggressive in the Middle East. Very eloquent was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision of naming as Foreign Minister Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu which replaced Mr. Ali Babacan, a pro-European politician that promoted integration in the European Union.

Turkey's refusal to back the war in Iraq in 2003 and the military intervention in Libya in 2011, the willingness to militarily intervene in Syria and the support expressed together with Brazil to lift the embargo on Iran are just some of the most important aspects of Ankara's foreign policy that directly collided with Brussels and Washington.

Of course, contradictions also existed in 1973 with Turkey's intervention in Cyprus but common interests kept U.S. and Turkey as strategic partners and as long as these interests will exist, the Washington-Ankara axis will be functional. Let us not forget that Turkey is the second largest army in NATO. The level of action and dialogue can vary according to context. In spite of all this, for the United States, the Turkish-Israeli cooperation is essential in regards to two key aspects: Israel's security and regional security, including the eastern Mediterranean. **Thus** we understand Obama's insistence on reconciling the two countries and the pressure exerted on Benjamin Netanyahu to express official apologies regarding the Marmara incident.

The apologies officially came in 2013 but did not lead to a change in bilateral relations, more so, tensions rose once more with the latest intervention in Gaza. The mutual attitude of the two states regarding the presence of their two leaders in Paris for the Charlie Hebdo march is even more conclusive.

According to a recent study performed in Israel in the fall of 2013, 71% of Jews consider Netanyahu's apologies a mistake. On the other side, a study performed in the spring 2013 shows that only 2% of Turks had a positive opinion on Israel at that time<sup>2</sup>.

Alon Liel<sup>3</sup> directly accused Davutoglu, naming him as the main cause of cooler relations between Turkey and Israel. In his opinion, from the primordial dialogues on the Palestinian crisis, to the present attitude, the Turkish minister has gradually reinstated Necmettin Erbakan's policy from the 70's. This is especially explained by Davutoglu birthplace, in the Konya region, a center of Islamic radicalism in Turkey, according to Liel. By contrast, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while he was mayor of Istanbul, kept tight relations with the Jewish community<sup>4</sup>.

For Ankara, the current relation with Israel is also backed by its interest in positioning itself in the region's geopolitics. Once a rogue state in the eyes of Arab states as a consequence of this relation, Turkey has built in these last years a policy that transformed it in a main economic actor, with hegemonic claims.

With regard to the Palestinian issue, the AKP has brought up its own course of action, by strengthening relations with Hamas at the same time getting closer to Al Fatah and trying to reconcile the two organizations<sup>5</sup>.

But this policy is a two edged sword because of the risk and losses that derive from the regional impetus.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, Merve Tahiroglu, *When Turkey has problems, Israel always gets the blame*, National Post, 3 iunie 2014

<sup>3</sup> Alon Liel served as a *Chargé d'affaires* of Israel in Turkey in the eighties and is the author of "*Demo Islam - Islamic democracy in Turkey*" (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Alon Liel, *The new PM in Ankara: The man who poisoned Israel-Turkey relations*, i24News 26 august 2014

<sup>5</sup> Bülent Aras, *Turkish-Israeli Relations after the Apology*, The German Marshall Fund of The United States, Analysis, 12 aprilie 2013,

[http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files\\_mf/1365800373Aras\\_AfterApology\\_Apr13.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1365800373Aras_AfterApology_Apr13.pdf)

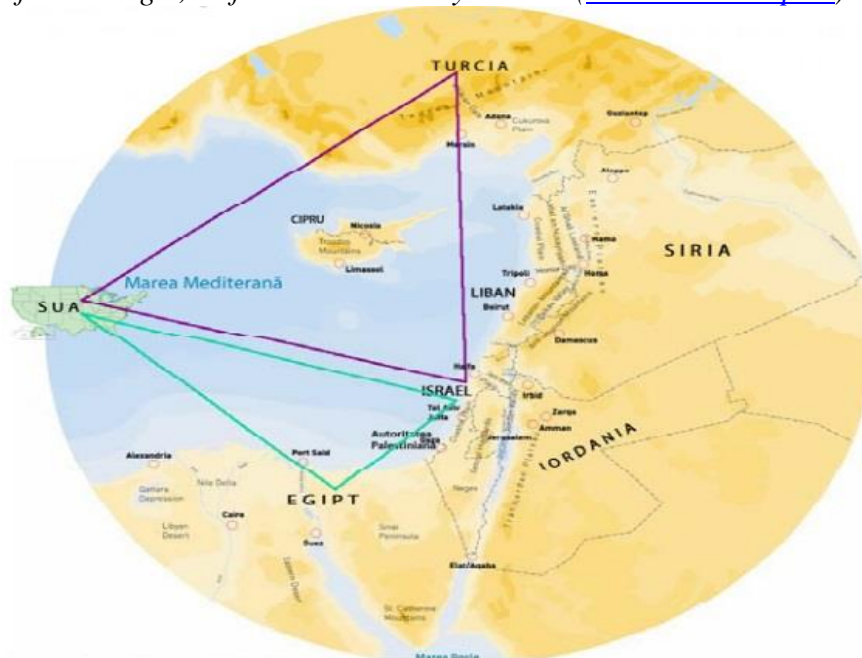
## GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Turkey became a NATO member state as a response from security threats from Greece and the Soviet Union, the latter being ever more interested in the Black Sea straits, and managed to remain a geostrategic pivot throughout the Cold War and into the present day, where it played an important role in the fight against terrorism, in the same time being a security corridor which separated Europe from the crises in the MENA space and the Caucasus.

Furthermore, being interested in regional stability and energy security assurance, the United States laid the foundation of two strategic trilateral axes in the Mediterranean Sea region: the Northern Trilateral with U.S.-Turkey-Israel and the Southern Trilateral with U.S.-Israel-Egypt.

*The two strategic trilateral axes in the eastern Mediterranean Sea*

Source: Center for Strategic, Defense and Security Studies ([www.cssas.unap.ro](http://www.cssas.unap.ro))



The disruption in the Turkish-Israeli relations and Turkey's refusal to participate in joint military exercises in the Northern Trilateral determined to growth of Greece's role in the Mediterranean, being invited along with America and Israel in Noble Dina military exercises.

For Turkey, diminishing Greece's growing influence, one of its traditional rivals, is becoming more important. At the same time, it would be deceiving to believe that Syriza's ascension on the political scene in Athens will marginalize Greece's interests in the Mediterranean.

Thus, Alexis Tsipras didn't hesitate to announce during a meeting with Israeli ambassador, Irit Ben-Abba, that relations between Greece and Israel will not be jeopardized, while the Greek foreign minister, Panos Kammenos, stated that his country intends to participate in joint military exercises with Israel, Cyprus and Egypt in order to assure regional security<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Ariel, Greece Planning Joint Military Exercises with Israel, In Arutz Sheva, 12 ianuarie 2015, available on <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/191241#.VOMn9VPy1EN>

*"We want peace but we are also ready to respond to any attempt against the national sovereignty or territorial integrity of the broader defense area of Greece and Cyprus, if necessary" Kammenos told reporters during an official visit in Cyprus<sup>7</sup>.*

### The New Gas Field on the Mediteranean Sea

Source: Sam Pepple & Matt Baker / Sample Cartography



These statements come as a consequence of Turkey’s interest for the gas resources discovered Israel’s and Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Beyond this, Turkey must be interest in becoming a transit state between Europe and energy resources coming from Israel, specifically because it wants to transform into an energy hub.

At the same time, the Israeli Air Force and Greek naval capabilities can turn into a fundamental duo in assuring Mediterranean security, mainly regarding the fight against terrorism<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, Turkey will not want his traditional rival to become influent in the Mediterranean while Ankara tries to fight back more and more firm allegations on backing the Islamic State.

### CONCLUSIONS

Security is Israel’s main objective in the relation with Turkey, which relies especially in intelligence exchanges but also on the necessity of having a partner in the dialogue with Hamas. What would be ideal for Israel is the construction of a non-peripheral security architecture along Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>7</sup> Ariel, Greece Planning Joint Military Exercises with Israel...

<sup>8</sup> George Proropapas, The new balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies, 23 octombrie 2014

On the other hand, breaking-up relations between Turkey and Israel leads to important geopolitical and geostrategic losses for Ankara and economic relations will exert pressure on them.

Despite the diplomatic situation, trade between the two states reached 5.6 billion dollars in 2014, while in 2009 trade was only 2.6 billion dollars<sup>9</sup>.

According to Sinan Ülgen<sup>10</sup>, the economic paradigm is different from political and diplomatic tensions which explain this relation that most analysts would not have predicted.

*“The Turkish economy is open to the world; therefore, goods are imported or exported according to the needs of the economy. If the state were to have a grip on the economy [as in socialist states], the opposite would be the case, as the state then determines the needs of the economy. Turkey has a liberal economy, so an increase in trade with Israel should be considered in light of these arguments<sup>11</sup>”* said Ülgen.

At the same time we see that Turkey and Israel, besides the Palestinian issue, have other common regional interests, such as: the provision of a stable Syrian regime which will not turn into a supplier for terrorism, countering Iranian influence in the region, the solving of the Kurdish issue, fighting the Islamic State. All these perspectives tell us that on the medium and long term, the prolonging of a frozen relation will affect the interests of both countries.

The risks of straying away from the secular roots of both states could make reconciliation harder on the short run. This is because on one hand Israel tends to follow a more radical form of Zionism that excludes negotiation with any actor that could endanger its existence and its security and on the other hand, because Turkey, led by the AKP, shows more and more signs of Islamizing<sup>12</sup>.

We believe that Ankara will have to reposition itself in the relationship with Israel, even if Erdogan’s Turkey will never match the same level of relations with Israel, prior to 2000. Economic, geopolitical and geostrategic interests exert pressure on mutual dialogue.

For all of these, Israel must adopt a constructive position on Palestine.

In this context, Saudi Arabia could be the catalyst of a new security architecture, more so with the pressure put on Qatar that determined Doha to reconsider its relation with Egypt. At the same time, Erdogan’s March visit to Saudi Arabia shows that Riyadh conducts a policy of consolidating a Sunni axis with a high probability of success.

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<sup>9</sup> Eliyahu Berkowitz, Despite Political Mishaps, Israel-Turkey Trade Flourishing, J.P.Updates, 10 februarie 2015, disponibil la <http://jpupdates.com/2015/02/10/despite-political-mishaps-israel-turkey-trade-flourishing/>

<sup>10</sup> Sinan Ülgen is a former Turkish diplomat who chairs the Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM)

<sup>11</sup> Berkowitz, Despite Political Mishaps, Israel-Turkey Trade Flourishing...

<sup>12</sup> Eric Walberg, Turkey-Israel Relations and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard, Global Research Canada, 30 septembrie 2011, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/turkey-israel-relations-and-the-middle-east-geopolitical-chessboard/26867>

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