

Philip Robins

Turkish-Israeli Relations: From
the Periphery to the Center



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THE EMIRATES OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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the Periphery to the Center**

Philip Robins

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List of Abbreviations

ACRS	Arms Control and Regional Security
AIPAC	American-Israel Public Affairs Committee
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DYP	Dogru Yol Partisi (True Path Party)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa conference
MIT	Milli Istihbarat Teskilati (National Intelligence Organization)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSC	National Security Council
PKK	Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
REDWIG	Regional Economic Development Working Group
RP	Refah Party (Welfare Party)
UN	United Nations (Organization)
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Turkish-Israeli Relations: From the Periphery to the Center

Philip Robins

Introduction

As recently as 1991, Israeli-Turkish relations were low-key and constrained, with diplomatic representation formally confined to that of Second Secretary status, the result of Ankara's protest against Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem in 1980. Yet, by the spring of 1996, this relationship had been transformed. An Israeli-Turkish axis had emerged, developing so far and so rapidly as to make a profound impact on the power relations and the psychology of power in the region. In the words of two of the Arab World's leading security commentators, the Israeli-Turkish security relationship is 'the most important politico-strategic development [in the Middle East] since the Gulf War.'¹

What is noteworthy is not just the distance travelled by Turkey between these two positions. It can be argued that neither position actually conforms to what one would have expected of Ankara's foreign policy towards Israel. Following the regional turmoil from 1955-59, spanning the Baghdad Pact years and its aftermath (a turmoil in which Turkey not only found itself involved, but also to which it was a significant contributor) Ankara decided largely to disengage itself from the politics of the Middle East. It consequently evolved a handful of key principles to guide its policies. These included non-interference between states, and the development of bilateral relations with all states in the region.² Neither of these, however, has provided an explanatory, let alone a predictive guide to the mood swings in Turkey's relations with Israel.

It is the aim of this study to seek to understand the dynamics at work in the contemporary Israeli-Turkish relationship. To do so requires some

knowledge of the historical backdrop to the relationship, especially in relation to the key periods in Turkish foreign policy. Moreover, it is also necessary to examine in some detail the bilateral relationship, both during the 'subterranean' years of 1985 to 1991, and the period between 1991 and 1995, when it appeared as though the two countries might be capable of a broad-based relationship that was not perceived in the region as being a source of threat. The analysis will then focus on the crucial year 1996, when the military dimension of the ties became the main focus of the relationship, as well as its aftermath. Finally, a tentative assessment will be given of the longer term potential for Israeli-Turkish relations.

Historical Context

Turkey opposed the United Nations' 1947 plan to divide historic Palestine and thus it voted against the creation of Israel. In doing so, Turkey lined up against the US and the Soviet Union, and alongside the handful of Arab members of the UN. But Ankara did not act out of Islamic solidarity, as was generally reported at the time, let alone a residual, historical empathy for the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. First and foremost, Turkey's actions were systemic, and based largely on the fear of the spread of Soviet power, stemming from the expectation that Israel would become an *entr  e* for Moscow into the region. Hence, Turkey's calculation had much more to do with the emerging politics of global confrontation rather than specific regional interests.

Turkey briefly continued to refuse to recognize Israel after the UN vote, and there was a ban on Jewish emigration to Israel.³ However, Ankara did not persist with such a position for long. Here too, global rather than regional interests prevailed. In pursuit of a strategic relationship with the West in the emerging Cold War, Turkey allowed its opposition to soften. In March 1949, Turkey formally recognized Israel, conveniently citing the changed circumstances emerging out of the first Arab-Israeli conflict. With the Arabs weakened and preoccupied with their independence struggles, the new approach appeared virtually cost free. In 1950, Turkey's recognition was

formalized with the appointment of a Minister Plenipotentiary to Tel Aviv, this *de jure* recognition contrasting with Greece, which limited its recognition to the *de facto* level. In 1952, Israel and Turkey upgraded relations by exchanging ambassadors.

Turkey allowed its participation in the bipolar struggle between the West and the Soviet bloc to further influence its regional strategy in the 1950s. It consequently pursued a Middle East policy that was ill-informed and lacked judgement. Rather than attuning itself to the national aspirations of an Arab world grappling with the last vestiges of European colonialism, Turkey insisted on seeing the new politics of the region strictly in terms of an East-West paradigm. Consequently, Ankara tried to inflict the anti-Communist Baghdad Pact on an obviously reluctant region.⁴ With unrest in Jordan and the 1958 revolution in Iraq leaving the Arab element of the strategy in tatters, Adnan Menderes' Turkey lurched towards David Ben Gurion's ethnically informed strategy of an anti-Arab 'alliance of the periphery.' Though the periphery alliance was an informal one, the cognitive convergence that it represents identifies it as the high water mark of Israeli-Turkish relations over their first four decades.⁵

By 1964, the predominance of extraneous factors in Turkey's Middle Eastern strategy had dissipated. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the 1964 Cyprus crisis revealed the limitations of US support for Turkey where Washington's larger interests were involved.⁶ Furthermore, in its pursuit of diplomatic support at the UN over Cyprus, Turkey began to take the newly emerging states of the developing world more seriously. For Ankara, the numbers game began to matter, and the Arabs offered more potential votes in international forums than solitary Israel. This did not make Turkey *parti pris* in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, Turkish policy during the 1967 war and its aftermath was exemplary in terms of even-handedness, displaying an 'independent, flexible, dynamic and diversified approach.'⁷ For Ferenc Vali, the author of a major study of Turkey's foreign relations at the time, this 'benevolent neutrality' was an example of 'diplomacy at its best,' when Turkey was able 'to express sympathies toward the Arab states involved in the [1967] war without offending Israel.'⁸

Ankara, however, found it increasingly difficult to maintain a neutral position in the face of the active petro-diplomacy of Saudi Arabia in 1973 and the new-found wealth of the oil-producing states of the Middle East in the 1970s. The advent of Arab financial power was to exert a strong psychological effect upon Turkey. This was to inhibit Turkish policy towards the Middle East for the next two decades. Consequently, in January 1975, Turkey recognised the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians, and in November 1975, voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism. It was against a backdrop of unfavorable oil prices, and in spite of Egypt's emerging separate peace pact with Israel, that on December 2, 1980 Turkey 'vigorously protested' against the Israeli Knesset's decision to declare united Jerusalem its so-called 'eternal capital' by reducing diplomatic representation to Second Secretary level.

The Long Road Back (1985-1993)

In the same way that Turkey regarded the US as taking it for granted in the early 1960s, so Turkey began to bridle at the apparent complacency of the Arab World in the early 1980s. Both experiences helped to precipitate a change in direction. Promises of Arab financial assistance had failed to materialize. No Arab state was prepared to join Turkey in recognizing the so-called 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,' which was declared in 1983 and until today has been recognized solely by Turkey. By 1986, the oil price slippage seen earlier in the decade, had turned into a wholesale collapse and this more than anything drew attention to the fragility of Arab power.

Simultaneously, the cost of improving ties with Israel was falling. In 1985, Israel completed its withdrawal from all of Lebanon, save the so-called 'security zone' in the south. By this stage, incremental steps were being taken to reintegrate Egypt into the Arab fold, without obliging it to relinquish its separate peace with Israel. It was against this backdrop that Israel approached Turkey with the idea of having more experienced diplomats head one another's legations. Consequently, in 1985, Yehuda Millo, a scholar turned

diplomat of Minister-Councillor rank, took up the position of Chargé d'Affaires in Ankara. In autumn 1986, after a typical cautionary delay, Turkey appointed Ekrem Guvendiren, a diplomat enjoying ambassadorial rank, to be its new Second Secretary in Tel Aviv.

The remainder of the 1980s was a period of incremental improvement in bilateral relations between the two countries. In 1986, the Turkish national carrier, Turk Hava Yollari, commenced direct flights between Israel and Turkey. In the same year, the Israelis added a second diplomat to their mission in Ankara. Through an adroit series of small measures,⁹ the Israeli side built up the status and profile of its representation. By 1988, Turkish MPs, who had been strongly discouraged from visiting Israel two years earlier, were keen to make such trips. Access to the Turkish military, always problematic for small missions, became increasingly easier. By 1989, the Israeli representative was being received by the Chief of the General Staff, and the notion of military cooperation, especially in the area of joint defense industries production, had taken root.

As Israel set itself the objective of building up an 'infrastructure of normalcy,' anything became possible, as long as it was low key and non-controversial, and the Turkish side was given the time to feel its way. An excellent example was the political dialog which was initiated in 1986. The two sides built up the nature of the exchanges, in terms of venue, agenda and levels of representation over a two-year period. At first, the meetings took place on neutral territory in Geneva, were confined to bilateral issues and were limited in terms of participation to the respective Foreign Ministry research centres. Meetings then moved in stages to Istanbul and then to Ankara; participation was expanded to involve junior diplomats, then Directors-General, to be finally headed by Deputy Foreign Ministers. With the culmination of this process, the nucleus of a strategic dialog had commenced, with a broad agenda that ranged over the regional situation and included Russian policy towards the Middle East.

In spite of the incremental improvement in ties in the second half of the 1980s, these remained essentially subterranean. Senior Israelis realized that bilateral relations with Turkey were mortgaged to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and care was shown in ensuring that Turkey was not pressured or embarrassed. If further evidence was needed of the dangers of too high a profile in Israeli-Turkish relations, it came in September 1986, with the Neve Shalom synagogue tragedy in Istanbul.¹⁰ Consequently, Israel contented itself with discreetly improving bilateral ties, while enticing Turkey in the direction of better relations, notably by indicating its potential usefulness to Turkey in Washington.

Evidence of improving ties on several fronts is widespread from this time. There were signs of a take-off in bilateral trade, officially worth some US\$65 million in 1988, but probably amounting to double this figure. However, Turkish businessmen generally preferred to use front companies in Europe, such was their residual fear of the Arab secondary boycott. Similarly, joint venture concerns were established, largely in the agricultural and high tech fields, but with few functioning openly. Intelligence cooperation flourished, especially with respect to Lebanon.¹¹

In Washington, Israel began increasingly to assist Turkey between 1987 and 1989, though this was mostly performed indirectly, rather than through direct advocacy. Thus, for example, the Israeli lobby extended advice to the Turks on how to establish their own lobby activity, though this was adjudged not to be a success owing to the impatience of the Turks. Arguably, the greatest Turkish achievement in Washington during this period was the alteration of the traditionally pro-Greek stance of the Israeli lobby, to a position of neutrality between Greece and Turkey. In turn, Israel also increasingly urged Jewish groups in the US not to support the Armenian lobby in its pursuit of Turkey for the mass deaths of Armenians in Anatolia during the First World War. The pro-Israel lobby is even said to have played a role in actively assisting Turkey in the narrow defeat of an Armenian-inspired draft resolution to the Senate in 1989 denouncing the massacres,¹² although the influence of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in this activity should not be exaggerated.¹³

The low-key nature of relations was at least partially vindicated with the outbreak of the *Intifada* or Palestinian uprising, in December 1987. The subterranean relationship meant that little adjustment had to be made in the incremental improvements that had preceded the uprising. Thus, while cultural relations were affected,¹⁴ trade and tourism continued as before. Moreover, the low-key nature of the relationship also meant that the Turks did not feel obliged to use intemperate language as a way of covering their tracks, a point which again was noted and valued by Israel.

The *Intifada* made the Palestinians the central focus of the Arab-Israeli issue for Turkey. In its approach towards Israel and the Palestinians, Ankara tried to retain balance, and to use its endorsement as an inducement to encourage the PLO to moderate its policy. Nevertheless, Turkey's relations with Israel essentially remained in harmony with the Arab stand, the Turkish line being that whatever was acceptable to the majority of Arab governments would be agreeable to Ankara.¹⁵

The fact that the majority of Arab governments lined up with the pro-Western coalition against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and then either took part in or supported the Madrid peace conference with Israel in October 1991, helped to soften the context for Israeli-Turkish relations in the early 1990s. Indeed, relations did inch forward and the two countries finally re-established full, ambassadorial relations in December 1991. Ankara used as its justification the fact that participation in the multilateral track of the peace process, which commenced with a plenary session in Moscow in January 1992, required all non-protagonist participants to have full diplomatic ties with the central parties.

In turn, Israeli President Chaim Herzog visited Istanbul in July 1992, for the quinquennial celebrations of the Ottoman Empire's acceptance of Jewish refugees fleeing Spain; Shimon Peres subsequently visited in April 1993, to attend the funeral of President Turgut Ozal. Even as Turkish-Israeli relations began to emerge above ground, Ankara appeared to hold back as both trips only took place on an unofficial basis, though Herzog's visit did enjoy some

official trappings. At a diplomatic level, Ankara still seemed loathe to move bilateral relations too far above ground, in spite of the fact that Egypt, with its peace treaty with Israel, had been fully rehabilitated by the Arab League in 1989; despite the Madrid summit and the subsequent bilateral talks between Israel and its Arab neighbours; and notwithstanding the multilateral track of the peace process, which helped to normalize relations between Israel and the outer ring of Arab states. The psychological hold that the Arab World appeared to exercise over Turkish diplomacy towards Israel had still not been broken.

But increasingly, this rarefied diplomatic world was divorced from the practical and material realities of the relationship, which thrived openly. There had been a rapid increase in the number of Israeli tourists visiting Turkey, topping the 45,000 mark in 1991 and rising to 160,000 a year later, as cheap packages to Turkey's Mediterranean resorts became accessible to the Israeli mass market. In 1992, those Israeli tourists were estimated to have spent US\$250 million. By 1995, some 300,000 Israeli tourists visited Turkey, benefiting the Turkish economy by US\$300 million. Nearly 3,000 Turks were by then working in Israel as migrant laborers, as Israel sought to diversify its casual labor needs away from the Palestinian population of the Occupied Territories. However, direct bilateral trade tended to shadow the diplomatic track, with only a modest increase being recorded, as trade volume rose from US\$157 million to US\$197 million and then to US\$202 million from 1991 through 1993.¹⁶

Making the Breakthrough (1993-1996)

There had been some signs that Ankara was edging forward diplomatically in its relationship with Israel before the Oslo breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian track of the peace process. The Turkish Foreign Ministry's Deputy Under Secretary, Bilgin Unan, visited Israel in October 1992, an important trip in terms of protocol. There was a reciprocal exchange of visits by the respective tourism ministers, Abdulkader Ates and Uzi Baram, in June 1992 and July 1993. During the former's visit, a tourism agreement was

signed, the first public bilateral accord for many years, that helped to facilitate air charter traffic.

Juxtaposed with this tentative willingness to increase diplomatic interaction, was the significant hurdle posed by the first visit by a Turkish Foreign Minister to Israel. The Turkish predicament somewhat resembled that of the Japanese, who around this time were also agonizing about how best to improve relations with Israel without degrading their links with the Arab world. By 1992, the Turks had decided that they would proceed with such a visit. As always, it took some time longer for the Turks to muster the *sang froid* necessary to actually go ahead with the visit, and the first two attempts to make the trip, both proposed during Hikmet Cetin's tenure as Foreign Minister, were postponed. On the second occasion, the Foreign Ministry axed the Israeli leg of a regional tour almost literally at the last minute, when Cetin was already in Jordan, in response to and in protest against Israel's so-called 'Operation Accountability' in south Lebanon. Interestingly, the Turkish press expressed impatience at this excessive diplomatic sensitivity, and criticized the government,¹⁷ a reaction that was not lost on Israeli officials. In retrospect, Ankara appeared to have miscalculated in postponing the visit. Turkey had missed an opportunity by not undertaking the visit shortly before the public revelation of the Oslo process at the end of August 1993, thereby failing to associate itself with a historic breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Cetin eventually paid his first visit to Israel on November 13-15, not long after the Israelis and Palestinians had signed the Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn in September 1993. Now that the Turks had finally managed to cast aside the psychological inhibitions of publicly doing business with the Israelis, the two sides embarked upon a fast and furious diplomatic love affair. The sudden surge in cordial bilateral relations should not be viewed as a surprise. The Turkish foreign policy elite had long viewed Israel as being 'like us.'¹⁸ Elites on both sides shared political values of secularism and democracy,¹⁹ they shared a common identification with Europe and the West, and they shared a common set of threat perceptions,

from problematic neighbors to terrorism. The speed with which relations improved once the initial psychological obstacles had been overcome is testimony to the importance of the notion of identity in Middle East alliances.

When the breakthrough eventually did take place, its effects were significant, whether measured in terms of high-level visits, in which important symbolic milestones occurred with a regularity almost verging on the mundane, or the conclusion of new bilateral agreements. To illustrate the point, it is worth listing the high level political traffic during this time:

- Ezer Weizman visited Turkey in January 1994, the first official visit by an Israeli President.
- Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visited Turkey in April 1994.
- Tansu Ciller visited Israel in November 1994, the first official trip by a serving Turkish Prime Minister. (She was accompanied by nearly a quarter of the cabinet, including the ministers of foreign affairs, public works and housing, energy and natural resources, agriculture and village affairs, and transport, together with one state minister).²⁰
- Yossi Beilin, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister and close confidant of Shimon Peres, visited Turkey in May 1995.
- Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, together with state ministers Coskun Kirca and Ali Dincer, attended Yitzhak Rabin's funeral in November 1995.
- President Suleyman Demirel went to Israel in March 1996, the first such trip by a serving Turkish President (The earlier date for the trip, in November 1995, was postponed owing to Rabin's assassination).

In addition, there was considerable high-level traffic among officials and technical experts.²¹ There was also an attempt to consolidate the relationship rapidly, with opposition politicians being invited to Israel,²² a rash of

bilateral roundtable meetings, and academic exchanges. The numerous accords and agreements signed included a cultural agreement and Memorandum of Understanding during Weizman's visit; an environmental protection agreement during the Peres trip; an accord against drug trafficking, terrorism and organized crime in early 1995; and wide ranging economic agreements during Demirel's trip.

In exerting extraordinary efforts to consolidate the emerging new relationship at the beginning of this period, Israel had three areas in mind where bilateral interests were perceived to converge. First and foremost, was in the area of strategic consultation. This was regarded in Israel as being an element in the creation of a consultation forum to review common threats in the Middle East. Such a venture was driven by the perception of threats from Iran. For Israel, this was crystallized in alleged Iranian support for Hamas. Senior Israeli officials viewed Turkey as encountering similar problems in its south-east, with Iranian funds supposedly being channelled to mosques, imams and religious schools in that region. Here, Israeli experts perceived a bureaucratic schism in Turkey between the military, the Milli Istihbarat Teskilati or the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and the police, which broadly accepted this analysis, as opposed to the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Ministry and the Finance Ministry, all of which took a different view.

The second part of the Israeli vision for closer relations was to be that of economic cooperation, with high-level talks having already taken place on the subject in October and December 1992. In this area too, there was far from complete agreement. Ankara wanted to create a free trade zone with Israel. The latter was wary of this, fearing that the Turks simply saw it as a device with which to gain preferential access to the US market, a ploy that might cause difficulties in Israeli-US trade relations. At that time, Israel preferred to lay emphasis on economic cooperation through regional development, hoping to encourage Turkey to play a more active role within the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process, in particular, through its Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWIG).

The third element in the Israeli view of closer future cooperation was that of water. Israel was enthusiastic about Turgut Ozal's old 'Peace Pipeline' idea, one half of which would bring the Ceyhan and Seyhan waters to the Levant and Saudi Arabia.²³ The original idea had lapsed due to strategic and economic reasons. With the heady aftermath of Oslo appearing to address the former concern, Israeli officials were convinced that for a country like Saudi Arabia the idea also made economic sense when compared to the high costs of desalination. Israel was also keen on the transportation of Manavgat waters to the Israeli coast, with a range of potential water-born technologies suggesting the feasibility of the scheme.²⁴

In seeking to deepen the emerging relationship, Israel was undoubtedly assisted by US activities. Washington had repeatedly urged its ambassador to Ankara to push the Turks for an upgrading of formal relations in the late 1980s through to 1991.

As seen earlier, the sense of expectation in the new relationship felt by both Israel and the US was certainly reciprocated by Ankara. However, this was not necessarily in accordance with the agenda mapped out by Israel and the US. Turkey was much less interested in focusing obsessively on the Iranian threat, as the US, and to a lesser degree, Israel had done.²⁵ It was a constant element in Turkish foreign policy, even during the idiosyncrasy of the Ozal years, that Iran was a large and important neighbor and had to be managed, rather than contained or confronted. This approach did not necessarily dictate policy passivity. In 1989, for example, Turkey recalled its ambassador to Tehran for consultations after Iranian criticism of a Turkish court's decision to ban the wearing of headscarves by female students on university campuses, and a wave of anti-Turkish attacks in the Iranian media.²⁶ In reality, such problems quickly blew over, to be followed by a reassertion of the traditional caution in Turkish policy.²⁷ For Turkey, Iran was an issue to disengage from its relationship with the US and its budding ties with Israel rather than to use to solidify it.

If Ankara was cautious about Iran, it had fewer reservations about Syria. With regard to Syria, it was Israel's turn to opt for a more measured approach. Under Rabin and Peres, Israel was concerned that its strongly emerging relations with Turkey should not be allowed to jeopardize its peace talks with Syria. While the Israeli-Syrian track of the bilateral peace talks had yielded nothing between the Madrid conferences of October 1991 and 1993, the installation of a Labor-led coalition after the June 1992 Israeli general election meant that the possibilities of a breakthrough were looking more promising. The strategic emphasis placed on the peace process by both Rabin and Peres meant that it was undesirable that other factors, no matter how important, should risk hindering it.

In retrospect, we can see that an Israeli-Syrian breakthrough was close on two occasions, in August 1993 and January 1996, and Damascus is widely believed to have regretted not having pushed a little bit further to clinch a deal at the time.²⁸ But the fact is that a breakthrough did not take place, and the Labor government was cruelly mocked by supporters of Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, after his May 1996 election victory, for putting Assad's sensibilities before the emerging relationship with Turkey.²⁹ It was only with Peres' military intervention in Lebanon in April 1996, in the form of 'Operation Grapes of Wrath,' born of misconceived electoral tactics, followed by Netanyahu's election as Israeli Prime Minister, that Israel and Turkey could begin to view the Syrian issue in complementary terms.

The core of Turkey's threat perceptions, terrorism and the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan or Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), proved equally problematic for Israel between 1993 and 1996. Israel was guarded over the issue of the Kurds, a position that even extended to the PKK, in spite of the fact that the US had long identified it as a terrorist organisation. In general terms, Israel had no outstanding problems with any branch or faction of the Kurdish national movement. After all, the Kurds too were a non-Arab component of the population of the Middle East, and like the Israelis, were suspicious of some Arab powers. Moreover, there had actually existed, at various times, a very positive relationship between Israel and the Kurds, especially the Kurds

of northern Iraq. Indeed, Israel had assisted the Iraqi Kurds at several stages, notably in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in their struggles against the centralizing authoritarianism of the Iraqi state. Those in the Foreign Ministry and different branches of the security services that had been involved in aiding the Kurds in the past, had no appetite for what now appeared to be a gratuitous confrontation of the Kurds.

As far as the specific case of the PKK was concerned, Israel was rather light-handed in its public position, compared to most Western countries. Israel refused to condemn the PKK as a terrorist organisation, and refused to be drawn into a publicly enunciated policy on the issue of the creation of a Kurdish state. Instead, Israel was content to regard the PKK as an essentially internal affair for Turkey, therefore requiring no bilateral cooperation. Neither did Israel request direct and active assistance from Turkey in combating the Hizbollah, the Shia resistance movement in southern Lebanon. On the issue of covert action, President Weizman stated that Israel was unwilling to go beyond training and the exchange of information and intelligence.³⁰

Though Israel and Turkey wanted to improve bilateral relations between 1993 and 1996, such issues as Syria, the PKK and the establishment of a free trade zone prevented the relationship from developing rapidly on all fronts. Nevertheless, it is a measure of the warm atmosphere and reserves of goodwill prevailing at this time, that these policy misfits did not blight nor retard the relationship. There was one area, however, where the Turks did accept and embrace the Israeli-US vision for the future of the region. This was in the area of what became known as the 'new Middle East' (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsatiyyah*). This view, closely identified with Shimon Peres and his book of the same name,³¹ anticipated a region no longer divided by the hitherto defining regional issue, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and where peace, growing prosperity and increasing integration would characterize the future.

This vision of the future, and the status of its author, feted in the West as a statesman and the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, seemed to appeal

especially to Turkish leader Tansu Ciller, who was Prime Minister between June 1993 and February 1996. The attractiveness of the concept for Ciller may be seen in her unceasing desire to demonstrate closeness to Washington, while perhaps fantasizing about similar adulation. It also created some resonance in the Foreign Ministry. In March 1994, Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin would say: 'We believe that a new order is emerging in the Middle East' and 'We are resolved to collaborate in the creation of a new Middle Eastern order.'³² Some regional strategists struck a discordant note by contesting the notion that Turkey's geostrategic position would be improved if Israel concluded peace with its neighbors, especially Syria. However, this contingency was never tested, at least at that time.

From the Broad to the Narrow (1996 and Beyond)

Other Middle Eastern countries largely ignored the rapid expansion in diplomatic and civilian relations between Israel and Turkey that took place from 1993 to 1996. It was not until the more controversial issue of rapidly emerging cooperation in military affairs became public that alarm bells began to ring in the region. By that stage, it would prove to be very difficult to remedy the situation. The military cooperation agreements of 1996 fitted into a highly auspicious context of excellent bilateral diplomatic relations, underpinned by increasing human and economic interaction between the two countries.

Of course the impression should not be given that military ties between Israel and Turkey began in 1996. The previous five years had seen the careful cultivation of top Turkish officers by senior Israeli defense figures, beginning with the air force and expanding to include senior figures in the Turkish army and the broader defense establishment.³³ The regular, low-key interaction at the meetings of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) segment of the multilateral track of the peace process between early 1992 and summer 1995 was especially important in fostering mutual trust and friendship. It also brought the Israeli representatives into direct, business contact with the senior diplomats of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, who are usually assigned

to deal with such important policy areas as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) affairs, Europe and strategic planning. Their engagement helped to cancel out the residual caution of the Turkish diplomats of the Middle East Department in Ankara, who tend to be more Arab-oriented.

It was also during this period that the Turks began to use Israel as a supplier of defense equipment. Ankara began to place small-scale orders for non-high tech equipment, requests that Israel met speedily, confidentially and without fuss. This too helped to increase confidence, especially in view of the problems that Turkey was having with the human rights conditionality that arms suppliers as diverse as Germany and the US were imposing on its defense contracts at the time.

In an atmosphere resonant of the subterranean nature of relations that had prevailed in the late 1980s, Israeli-Turkish military cooperation began to accelerate, but out of the public eye. A secret security agreement was signed on March 13, 1994 dealing with the diversion of military technology to third countries.

This established the ground rules for future cooperation, and was followed by an unpublished accord on training exercises in 1995. A strategic dialog between the Ministries of Defense on political and military affairs followed thereafter, with the first meeting being held in September 1995. The Israeli side had expected the meetings to take place annually but the Turkish side requested that they be convened on a six monthly basis.

The Military Training Agreement

It was against this backdrop that the first of the three military agreements that were concluded in 1996 was signed. The military training agreement was concluded in February of that year, and in accordance with prevailing practice, remained confidential. It was signed by Deputy Chief of Staff, Gen Cevik Bir, on the Turkish side, and by David Ivry, at that time the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Defense on the Israeli side. The latter's

background as the commanding officer of the Israeli Air Force had helped him to forge strong personal relations with his counterparts in Turkey. That the signatories belonged to military and civilian institutions respectively is explained by the fact that the military in Turkey is not subject to the formal political control of the Defense Ministry, the Chief of Staff being only answerable to the Prime Minister. With the process of coalition-building after the December 1995 general election still incomplete, there was in fact no authoritative government in place at the time, with Tansu Ciller only continuing as Premier in a caretaker capacity. Even this notional degree of accountability was therefore missing, for practical purposes.

Under the accord, both sides agreed to hold air exercises eight times a year, four in each territory. The agreement included provision for ground staff training. It also granted Israel emergency landing rights in Turkey, thereby facilitating its ability to conduct aerial missions further afield. On the defensive, following widespread criticism from the Arab world, Ankara subsequently stated that Israeli aircraft would fly unarmed and without electronic monitoring equipment.³⁴ While Turkey would benefit from Israeli expertise and experience, Israel would have an opportunity to train in a large air space and over varied terrain.³⁵

Given the hitherto confidential nature of bilateral military agreements, it was as much of a shock to the Israelis as to the other nations, when the Turkish side revealed its existence in early April 1996.³⁶ Though circumstances surrounding the leaking of the agreement are confused, it seems clear that it took place as a result of a deliberate act by the Turkish military. The Israelis believe that the flamboyant General Bir was responsible for the decision to go public. In yet another example of confusion and uncertainty on the Turkish side, the Foreign Ministry seemed to be in the dark about elements of the agreement, when its existence became public knowledge, including when and how it would be made operational. In scenes reminiscent of the closing of the Iraqi oil pipelines in Turkey in August 1990, a Foreign Minister was to suffer the embarrassment of having his ignorance of the new realities of a policy change exposed in full view of the media. Having briefed

the press on Tuesday, April 16, 1996 that the military agreement did not allow the Israeli air force to train in Turkish air space or use its bases, the Foreign Ministry was obliged ignominiously to announce a day later, that Israeli military aircraft had arrived in Turkey and such exercises were indeed already taking place. It was not only the Foreign Ministry that was thus embarrassed, but also much of the civilian establishment. Even the Turkish Defense Minister, Oltan Sungurlu, had initially denied such a development.³⁷

It is an inescapable conclusion that the Turkish military's intention in leaking the existence of the accord was to make a strong political statement. That statement had two components, one being aimed at a domestic audience and one aimed at neighboring Syria. Domestically, this was an exercise in the demonstration of the virility of power. The Turkish military were making it clear to all political parties, and especially the Islamist Refah Party (or Welfare Party, RP), that they were sufficiently powerful to control the strategic direction of Turkish foreign policy, regardless of the makeup of the government or who occupied the premier's post. It should be noted that the RP had emerged from the December 1995 elections as the largest single party in parliament with 21.4 percent of the vote. It was this reality, together with the fractious and fragmented nature of the Turkish political parties that made coalition building so problematic.

For Syria, the leak contained a warning that Damascus ought to desist from allegedly backing the PKK, on pain of facing an alliance of superior military might operating on two fronts. Of course, both the Israeli and Turkish foreign ministries subsequently insisted on the polite diplomatic fiction that the accord was not aimed at any third party. The Turkish side even claimed that the accord was no different from the 20 or more other military training agreements concluded earlier with the likes of Albania and Macedonia, as though such Balkan minnows were comparable to a regional power like Israel. Such protestations rang hollow, with well-informed Turkish commentators confirming that the agreement was most definitely an attempt to intimidate Syria.

The destabilizing nature of the agreement was further amplified by the refusal of either party to publish the text, the Turks on the grounds that this was not the normal procedure and that Ankara was determined not to be seen to be buckling under the pressure of an Arab outcry.³⁸ Unofficial transcripts of the agreement did eventually surface in the press in Turkish in mid-May and in Arabic at the end of July, presumably as a result of official action, though the texts continue to lack formal authority.³⁹ Nevertheless, periodic revelations of further military cooperation, apparently not provided for in agreements in the public domain, such as the existence of joint Israeli-Turkish listening posts on Turkey's borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria, have continued to disconcert regional governments.

Subsequent actions by both sides appeared further to confirm the intimidatory nature of the training agreement. Turkey was equivocal in its reaction to 'Operation Grapes of Wrath,' Shimon Peres' desperate and tawdry 1996 election gamble on a military operation in Lebanon. Ankara only issued a 'belated statement' on the operation, and refused to condemn it. This was diplomacy of dubious worth, a fact that swiftly became apparent with the subsequent deaths of more than 80 civilians in the UN compound at Qana in an Israeli army attack.⁴⁰ Some six weeks after the agreement's revelation, with Arab criticism still sustained, and even the Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz apparently equivocal towards it, the Israeli ambassador to Ankara, Zvi Elpeleg, toured a sensitive border region between Turkey and Syria. Accompanied by bodyguards and embassy officials, he visited the controversial province of Hatay, which, as the Sanjak of Alexandretta, had become part of Turkey at the expense of French-controlled Syria in 1938.⁴¹ Whatever the objectives of the visit, it was not aimed at allaying Syrian fears of Israeli-Turkish strategic cooperation.

Refah and Subsequent Agreements

If the first military agreement turned out to be a defiant regional statement about the closeness of Israeli-Turkish relations, the conclusion of the second delivered a powerful message about Turkish domestic politics. The second of

the three military agreements to be concluded in 1996, the Defense Industry Co-operation Agreement, was signed on August 28. It thus came only a couple of months after an Islamist-led government was installed in Ankara, and in a context where the overtures of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu towards the new government had been spurned.⁴² Of even greater significance was the fact that the accord was signed less than two weeks after the new Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, had visited the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first leg of his first foreign trip in office, and the beginning of his attempts to signal a more rounded foreign policy that gave serious consideration to Turkey's relations with the Islamic world.

With Erbakan having raised the stakes in a highly public manner, the issue of military relations between Turkey and Israel became the barometer indicating who would most influence policy, the Islamist-dominated government or the Kemalist-dominated military. By the end of July, the signs did not look auspicious for Israeli-Turkish relations, with Erbakan's chief foreign policy adviser, State Minister Abdullah Gul, insisting that there would be no new military accord with Israel. The last minute postponement of a signing in early August seemed to confirm the worst fears of Israelis that bilateral relations were destined for a 'lower profile' under the Islamists.⁴³ With Erbakan away on his Asian tour for 10 days, the situation was in a state of flux for much of August. The Israeli defense establishment seemed powerless in the face of some opaque struggles within Turkey and had little choice but to await the outcome.⁴⁴

Once Erbakan had returned, however, the Turkish military was able to reassert its domination over the strategic contours of foreign policy, and the agreement was signed before the end of the month. Quickly realising his powerlessness to prevent the new agreement, Erbakan tried to minimize the extent of his defeat by embracing the accord. Sources close to the Prime Minister let it be known that not only did he know the full details of the agreement but also that he had made certain changes to the draft. It was vehemently denied that the agreement had been signed behind Erbakan's back.⁴⁵

The accord, which was the culmination of two years of effort, established the framework for wide-ranging cooperation over defense industry matters. The agreement's provisions extended from reciprocal visits to defense industry factories, through the exchange of technical expertise and technology transfer, to the active encouragement of each other's defense firms to trade with and invest in one another's activities. The accord also provided the necessary procedures for a program by which Israel would upgrade Turkey's F-4 Phantoms, together with its F-5s. It was a contract on this particular, high cost deal that was to be the subject of the third of the military agreements, concluded on December 5, 1996.

If Erbakan's position on the August agreement was obscured from sight, his vigorous opposition to the aircraft upgrade was obvious to all. Perhaps it was a case of choosing his fight carefully or perhaps Erbakan's greater public activity in this case was based on the fact that as Premier, he would be expected to add his signature to a successful contract. It is certainly true that Erbakan had a better chance of derailing this project rather than the second agreement. Negotiations between the two countries had, after all, been going on since 1994. During the previous autumn, it was reported that even the incoming head of the Turkish air force, Ahmet Corekci, had been against proceeding with the upgrade.⁴⁶ Turkish concerns over the financing of the deal, together with doubts about the cost effectiveness of the project, in view of the age of the aircraft concerned, helps to explain much of the delay.⁴⁷

Erbakan argued hard against the contract at the appropriate committees, in turn eliciting hostile criticism from the Turkish General Staff. However, with his junior coalition partner, Tansu Ciller's Dogru Yol Partisi (True Path Party, DYP), prepared to proceed with the contract and the military implacable, continued opposition could have resulted in the downfall of the government. Either way, there was no doubt that Erbakan was under 'extreme pressure' from the Turkish military.⁴⁸ In order to avoid a clash with the top brass, Erbakan was obliged to execute a U-turn. He was left protesting that he would strive to ensure that Turkish firms be given priority within the upgrading program as a way of trying to save face.⁴⁹

Primacy of Military Relations

By 1997 Israeli-Turkish ties had gone seriously awry. A broad and flourishing relationship at the diplomatic and popular levels had been distorted by the manner and means of the revelations about military cooperation in the previous year. Examples of civilian cooperation and interaction appeared to pale. Increasingly, the relationship was perceived widely as being merely a function of military affairs.

The nature of the high level interaction after 1996 seemed to justify this narrowing preoccupation over the months ahead. Once again, the Turkish generals' ideological defiance, aimed at both domestic and regional consumption, was critical to the public diplomacy. As Anton La Guardia, the Jerusalem correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, noted at the time, the Turkish military establishment 'kept up its anti-Islamist policy...by signalling deeper strategic ties with Israel.'⁵⁰

Three examples vividly illustrate the point. First, on February 24, 1997 the Turkish Chief of Staff, Ismail Hakki Karadayi, paid his first visit to Israel on a three-day trip, returning home to go straight into the crucial February 28 meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). The outcome of the meeting involved the issuing of an ultimatum by the Turkish military to the RP-led coalition for the implementation of a long agenda of anti-Islamist measures. As such, it marked the beginning of the army-inspired end for Erbakan's Islamist-led coalition.

Second, the eventual collapse of the Erbakan-led government in June 1997 coincided with the visit of a five vessel naval battle group to the Israeli port of Haifa following the *Denizkurdu-97* (Sea Wolf-97) exercises.⁵¹ Third, on January 7, 1998 Israeli, Turkish and US vessels took part in *Reliant Mermaid*, a controversial air-sea rescue maneuver in the eastern Mediterranean. In spite of the benign presentation of the cooperation, the joint naval search and rescue exercises were similar to naval operations of a military nature aimed at the interdiction of an enemy vessel.⁵²

In more substantive terms, the Israeli-Turkish military interaction came increasingly to be dominated by two elements. First, close and detailed joint threat assessments. Second, Turkey's military procurement needs, with increasing encouragement being given to Israeli defense companies to bid for some of the ambitious procurement needs of the Turkish armed forces, with sums as large as US\$150 billion to be spent over a 25 year period being bandied about by the Turkish General Staff.⁵³

The May 1997 round of the strategic dialog marked a major expansion of the combined threat assessment exercise. In this important activity, the military participants clearly eclipsed their civilian counterparts on the Turkish side. Thus, the hapless Turkish Defense Minister, Turhan Tayan, was clearly outranked by Cevik Bir, or 'little Ataturk' (as he had come to be known fondly, within certain Israeli circles) who arrived for the meeting with a delegation of 26 officers. One example among many, of the central importance of procurement matters, was the trip by the Israeli Chief of Staff Gen Amnon Lipkin-Shahak to Turkey in October 1997. During the visit, Israel improved its positioning of the Merkava-3 tank as the solution to Turkey's aim to acquire 800 main battle tanks, at an expected cost of some US\$4.5 billion.⁵⁴

From the conclusion of the three defense agreements onwards, the two sides seemed to do relatively little to reassure the rest of the region as to their limited and peaceful intentions. There were some gestures. For example, the '1' was dropped from the *Reliant Mermaid* joint exercise to imply that it was not necessarily to be the first of a series of cooperative naval activities. However, the de facto '2,' under the name *Reliant Mermaid 99*, underlined the shallowness of this move. There was also a brief charm offensive by the Turkish Foreign Ministry towards the Arab World in the spring of 1998.⁵⁵ Greater effort was made by Ankara to placate the enduring suspicions of Cairo in particular,⁵⁶ a reflection of the value that both Israel and Turkey placed on the importance and Western-orientation of Egypt. The absence of a commensurate effort to placate other leading regional players in turn reflected a matter-of-fact approach to relations with much of the Arab World.

Even the strenuous efforts with Cairo were of limited success. In turn, Turkish officials and commentators often found Egypt's failure to be entirely convinced by their periodic reassurances a matter of some frustration and even resentment.

In contrast, the Turkish side, and notably the military, seemed to glory in an assertiveness that on occasion veered close to truculence, let alone foolhardiness. In December 1997, for instance, in a piece of diplomatic defiance that even exceeded Turkey's normal standards, the Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai was welcomed to Ankara, even as President Demirel led a Turkish delegation to a high profile Islamic Conference Organization (ICO) summit in Tehran. The summit was to be a triumph for Iran, coming a matter of days after the failure of the US-backed Middle East North Africa summit (MENA) in Doha. It signalled the regional diplomatic rehabilitation of Iran, despite Washington's vain attempts to discourage its allies in the region from making the Tehran gathering a success. Demirel left the conference prematurely, following sustained criticism of the direction of Turkish regional policy. He therefore did not stay for the final communiqué, which indirectly criticized Turkey's close relations with Israel and appealed to Ankara to reconsider. Mordechai's hosts in the military had therefore at a single stroke managed to identify their country with a discredited and fast fading US strategy, while simultaneously exposing Turkey's head of state to intense pressure at a major multilateral gathering.

A second example of such reckless bravado came in June 1998, when the Turkish military leaked the attendance of a Jordanian delegation at the Defense Ministry strategic dialog meeting that was taking place in Tel Aviv.⁵⁷ In doing so, the military accomplished little other than to embarrass a weakened state, whose ties with Israel were already under great pressure, due to the fact that the Arab-Israeli peace process was languishing dangerously. It also exposed the Jordanian leadership to further pressure at a domestically difficult time, as the kingdom began to wrestle with the onset of a protracted and uncertain succession. In taking such a course of action, there were echoes

of 1955, when Turkish cajoling of Jordan to join the Baghdad Pact, subjected the country to intense domestic pressures.

Finally, Turkey could not resist the temptation to use the growing regional discomfort at its emerging military relationship with Israel to pressurize Syria into expelling the PKK insurgency leader Abdullah Ocalan in October 1998. Turkey made little secret of its willingness to use military force if necessary to oblige Syria to comply,⁵⁸ and the Turkish press was full of sensational graphics illustrating the various options for attack. Though Syria did not face any associated threat from Israel during the crisis, with Yitzhak Mordechai actually withdrawing forces in order to demonstrate that it was not actively involved, the Israeli-Turkish agreements formed the strategic context to the crisis.⁵⁹ Indeed, just weeks after his retirement and just over a year after its resolution, Gen Bir was to brag that the Israeli-Turkish military agreement had 'paved the way for [the] resolution of the Turkish-Syrian crisis.'⁶⁰ Against a backdrop of a sustained and bellicose public diplomacy, Syria accepted Turkey's demands to expel Ocalan and cease aiding the PKK, in an agreement concluded on October 20.⁶¹

There is evidence to suggest that since the summer of 1998 some Israeli policymakers have been growing uncomfortable with the boldness of the Turkish generals. In an atmosphere more reminiscent of the 1993-95 period, there have been concerns that Israeli and Turkish interests do not directly coincide and that Israel is forced to bear the consequences of unforeseen Turkish actions, especially related to the Kurdish issue. Two elements have been most startling for Israelis: Turkey's use of military pressure against Syria over Ocalan; and the attacks on Israeli missions in Europe after the capture of Ocalan by Turkish commandos in Nairobi in February 1999. In one of the foreign mission protests, Israeli security guards shot dead three Kurdish supporters of the PKK when they tried to force entry into the Consulate-General in Berlin. However, with plausible accusations that the Israeli external intelligence agency, Mossad, had aided the Turkish authorities in locating Ocalan prior to his capture being widely believed in the region, there is no discernible evidence of a reduction in levels of cooperation.

By 1999, as a direct result of the decisions and public conduct of 1996, Israeli-Turkish relations were regarded as dominated by military relations. The powerful defense establishments of the two countries are the bureaucratic drivers of the relationship. Both have strong vested interests in maintaining the centrality of the ties, the Turkish generals for ideological and strategic reasons, the Israelis primarily for matters of commerce. The foreign ministries of the two countries, Israel's rather more than Turkey's it has to be said, may periodically agonize about the effect that the military relationship has had on relations with third countries, but this has seldom been channelled into anything more than symbolic action, reflecting the relative bureaucratic balances at home.

Conclusions and Prospects

Looking back over some fifty years, Turkish-Israeli relations have generally been low key and of little significance. This, however, does not form an accurate guide to the potential for the future. The trauma of the Baghdad Pact years, the need to garner diplomatic support in international forums, together with the economic imperative of developing strong relations with the oil-exporting countries of the Middle East at a time of abnormally high prices, all historically specific circumstances, help to explain the underdeveloped nature of the relationship in the past. Perhaps the best example of unfulfilled potential is a comparison of Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Turkish relations during the 1980s. For much of that decade, there was the extraordinary situation of Turkey having formal relations with Israel that were inferior compared to Egypt, even though Israel and Egypt had the inauspicious background of having fought four major wars against one another over the previous four decades.

In the early 1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations assumed increasing diplomatic and commercial importance, especially after the Middle East peace process began to bear fruit. By the end of 1995, the two countries might have looked forward to a broad-based relationship with a solid bilateral grounding and eliciting relatively little by way of regional alarm. Instead, the year 1996

became pivotal, marking the time when the direction of the relationship (and equally importantly, the perception of the relationship, both at home and in the region) was transformed. Since then relations have neither been low-key nor unimportant. Rather, Israeli-Turkish relations have been distorted and reduced, in terms of perceptions at least, largely to a function of military and security relations. Such important areas as human interaction, which helped to lead the improvement in bilateral relations, now appear as little more than froth.

What of the future? Israeli-Turkish relations have been transformed rapidly during the last decade, but could they metamorphose with equal profundity over the next? There is more than negligible interest in the fact that in Israel at least, there was a debate among foreign policy and security experts, even before the electoral defeat of Netanyahu, as to how strong and stable bilateral relations actually were. The re-election of a Labor-led government in May 1999 and the re-emergence of serious attempts at Israeli-Syrian peace-making during the winter of 1999-2000 have raised questions anew about Israel's ability to pursue both a Turkey and a Syria strategy simultaneously. So what are the implications of Israeli-Turkish relations for the Middle East over the next ten years? It is to these two questions that the final reflections will be addressed.

First, it is most unlikely that Israeli-Turkish relations will return to the deep freeze that characterized much of the past. The circumstances which helped to create such an atmosphere are most unlikely to reappear, from the Arab-Israeli dispute as the defining historic cleavage in the region to the irresistible force of Arab petro-power. The Turkish economy, with its export-oriented vitality, is in any case much less vulnerable to the latter than it was in the 1970s. Furthermore, the mutual identification and empathy that has long characterized the Israeli and Turkish elites, it may be assumed, has strengthened, as the opportunities for regularized interaction have grown. With the position of Kemalist and Ashkenazi elites looking increasingly embattled at home in their respective countries, it is more, rather than less likely that they will reinforce European and secular ideas as prized parts of a national identity that will guide the selection and treatment of foreign allies.

If the general parameters of the relationship are unlikely to return to an earlier, most inauspicious climate, can the intensity of the post-1996 ties be sustained beyond the tenure of the individuals with whom the strategy is most closely identified? In Turkey, there are already signs that it can endure. The controversial former Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Cevik Bir, who was most publicly identified with the military relationship with Israel, retired in 1999 and General Ismail Hakki Karadayi, the chief who presided during 1996 (and without whose blessing it is unlikely Bir could have done what he did) retired a year earlier. Though the flourish of General Bir's public diplomacy, so evocative of Turgut Ozal in the 1980s and early 1990s, may have passed, there is no evidence that in substantive terms his successors are, in any way, less wedded to a close relationship with Israel. With military relations having been founded originally on the air forces of the two countries, and stretching back to 1991, there has already been much continuity within the context of changes in personnel.

In Israel the situation is less clear-cut, but only slightly so. David Ivry, the architect of the relationship on the Israeli side, still wields tremendous influence, though in being appointed as Israel's ambassador to Washington he has lost his vantage point at the heart of the Israeli defense establishment. Nevertheless, the military perspective is still well represented at the center of power. First, through the seamless reinvention of senior generals as politicians, such as cabinet member Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who, when he headed the army, was influential in the development of bilateral military ties between 1996 and 1999. Second, through the coterie of retired senior security figures with whom the new Israeli Premier, Ehud Barak, himself a former Chief of Staff, has surrounded himself.

It may be the case, that at some stage, some of the younger, more civilian-oriented politicians in Israel adopt a more critical perspective towards Turkey, perhaps in some way akin to those of their European counterparts. Arguably, a harbinger of such a trend came with the Turkish furore in 2000 over the proposed inclusion of the 'Armenian genocide' in Israeli school history textbooks. Should such a trend take root, one might

eventually envisage a greater element of human rights conditionality creeping into Israeli arms sales. Such a situation though, is likely to be some considerable way off.

Of greatest importance to the future bilateral relationship is likely to be a third factor, that of national interests, as defined by individuals, governments and institutions. Undoubtedly, both countries believe that they are reaping practical and tangible benefits from the current relationship. For Israel, there are four main advantages: first, and arguably the most important, the relationship with Turkey has opened up a growing market for military related exports at a time when arms markets around the world are contracting; second, the military training agreement has allowed Israel more effectively to project its military power in the region, for instance through pilot training in large areas characterized by varied and difficult terrain; third, Israel has high hopes of purchasing potable water from Turkey to alleviate the worsening situation at home;⁶² fourth, Israel has allied itself with a country of relatively significant and growing power, and positioned itself so that it can influence the threat perceptions and strategic decisions of that country. Moreover, Israel has harvested such advantages with little cost in terms of negative consequences for other regional relationships.

For Turkey, the direct, tangible benefits of the post-1996 relationship with Israel are less clear-cut. This is especially the case, if one considers that Ankara is the junior partner in the relationship; it is much easier for Israel to influence Turkey than vice versa. There are some definite benefits for Turkey: assistance in training; conditionality-free military hardware procurement; help in lobbying in Washington; economic opportunities through Israel, either in terms of free trade access to the US market or joint venture tie-ups with the former Soviet south, although the potential of the latter seems hitherto to have been greatly exaggerated. However, these tend to be somewhat nebulous benefits, with the outcomes uncertain or less easy to quantify. In the case of lobbying assistance, expectations may far exceed what Israel and its friends in the US are either able or willing to deliver. Israel may also balk at the transfer of technology as it affects non-conventional weapons and sophisticated missile delivery systems.

Of all the contingencies that may well test the relationship, the most obvious continues to be Syria, even after the death of President Hafez Al-Assad. The consolidation of the succession to his son Bashar would reawaken the possibility of a successful conclusion to peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, with the effective involvement of Lebanon. The prospect of a breakthrough between Israel and Syria in 1993 and 1996 caused much concern in Ankara. Much is potentially at stake for Turkey: the prospect of having to face a Syrian military without the overriding strategic preoccupation of Damascus over Israel to the south;⁶³ the loss of Israeli intelligence cooperation over Lebanon; an end to Israeli-Turkish military exercises and finally, the removal of Syria from the US State Department list of perceived sponsors of terrorism, possibly heralding a return of Kurdish insurgency activities from Syrian soil. There is, therefore, hardly any consensus in Turkey that the successful conclusion of an Israeli-Syrian peace (and hence an Israeli-Lebanese peace) is in Turkey's best interests.

A second issue that could potentially sow disharmony in the Israeli-Turkish relationship is the Kurdish issue. Many senior Israelis were aghast at the fact that the Kurdish issue almost led to war between Syria and Turkey in October 1998, a conflict that would have been uncomfortably close to Israel. Moreover, senior Israelis were also surprised and disconcerted by the outburst of Kurdish anger against Israel in the context of the capture and repatriation of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to Turkey in February 1999. Israel's natural inclination may well have been to use its old links with the Kurds to reassure the Kurdish national movement in Turkey that it would play no substantive role in the conflict. In case such or similar contacts were to take place and to become known to the Kemalist authorities in Turkey, it is just the sort of issue that could blight Israeli-Turkish relations.

Of course, it would be misleading to suggest that Israeli-Turkish relations are either brittle or that such contingencies would necessarily precipitate their collapse. It is salutary, for example, to note the enduring nature of the Iranian-Syrian relationship despite numerous predictions of its imminent demise, although that appears theoretically less plausible than Israeli-Turkish

ties. Furthermore, one of the telling elements in Israeli-Turkish relations has been their cordial nature since the early 1990s, in spite of certain policy misfits. Indeed, the relationship does have an enduring feel.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are potential future issues that could bring Israel and Turkey closer together. At the top of this list are two subjects. First, perceived threats from militant groups, whether originating from or inspired by Iran, from Osama bin Laden and his followers and imitators, or from particular groups such as Hamas, Hizbollah in Lebanon or what now remains of Hizbollah in Turkey. Indeed, it is as well to underline that both Israel and Turkey share a fixation with the issue of terrorism.

A second commonly envisaged danger is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the region, especially when harnessed with sophisticated medium and long-range missiles. For Israel, the Iraqi Scud missile attacks during the 1991 Gulf War illustrated the continuing threat from WMD, even if Israel succeeds in making peace with all its immediate Arab neighbours. Turkey has no indigenous WMD program, nor does it have a missile or anti-missile program, having chosen historically to put its faith almost exclusively in the NATO nuclear umbrella. In their strategic dialog, Israel has already convinced Turkey of the dangers of WMD programs which Iran, Iraq and Syria are all believed to have. Consequently, Israel and Turkey have discussed cooperation in missile development programs. If substantive cooperation is developed in such a strategic arena, and both sides prove capable of managing their relations in the context of both Israeli-Syrian peacemaking and the Kurdish issue, there is every prospect that the enhanced Israeli-Turkish relationship, with military affairs at its heart, will remain an integral part of the Middle East landscape for years to come.

Notes

1. H. J. Agha and A. S. Khalidi in *The Struggle for Iraq: Saddam and After*, an unpublished report undertaken under the auspices of St Antony's College, Oxford, 175.
2. For a Turkish perspective on the major principles governing Turkey's Middle East policy, see Seyfi Tashan, "Contemporary Turkish Policies in the Middle East: Prospects and Constraints" in *Dis Politika* (Foreign Policy), vol. XII, nos.1-2 (June 1985).
3. This lasted between November 1948 and early 1949. Walter F. Weiker, *The Unseen Israelis: The Jews from Turkey in Israel* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), 21.
4. And it was Turkey, contrary to Britain (as conventional wisdom would have it) that tried to inflict the alliance on the region, in spite of the increasingly ominous omens. Thus, it was Ankara that tried to bounce Jordan into the alliance in 1956, rather than a reluctant General Templar. Similarly, it was the efforts of Turkey that did so much to persuade Iran into membership.
5. For a further discussion of the 'alliance of the periphery' from an Israeli perspective, see Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York, NY: Norton, 2000), 186-217.
6. As part of a negotiated end to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US agreed to remove the Jupiter missiles from Anatolia without reference to the Turkish state. During the Cyprus crisis, President Johnson, in his infamous 'letter' to the Turkish government, threatened to withdraw strategic support for Turkey if it were to intervene militarily in Cyprus.
7. Orhan Soysal, "An Analysis of the Influences of Turkey's Alignment with the West and the Arab-Israeli Conflict upon Turkish-Israeli and

Turkish-Arab Relations, 1947-77" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 1983), 320.

8. Ferenc A. Vali, *Bridge Across the Bosphorus* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 308.
9. For example, both the senior and the junior Israeli diplomats in the Ankara mission were promoted during their postings in the second half of the 1980s, to none of which the Turkish side objected. The former was promoted from Minister-Counsellor to Minister rank in 1988; the latter was formally promoted twice from Attaché to Second Secretary to First Secretary, although the Attaché rank was a presentational convenience in recognition of the level of diplomatic representation that prevailed. By 1990, the notion of Second Secretary representation had become a quaint anomaly.
10. In this attack by a suicide squad, 22 worshippers were killed. It was described as the first such incident in the five centuries that the Jewish community had lived in Istanbul.
11. Interview with a senior US diplomat on May 9, 1990.
12. Private discussion meeting with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Under Secretary, Tugay Ozceri, at Chatham House, London on October 19, 1989.
13. Interview with then US ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz, on June 9, 1998.
14. The gossamer sensitivity of the Turkish foreign policy elite extended to the area of cultural diplomacy. For example, when the Ankara-based Foreign Policy Institute (FPI) decided to invite the leading Israeli academic Itamar Rabinovich (later to become Israeli ambassador in Washington and head of the Israeli delegation to bilateral peace talks with Syria) to speak in spring 1990, the first time it had ever issued such an invitation to an Israeli, it was deemed prudent to clear the invitation

in advance with the Foreign Ministry. The invitation was intended both to indicate displeasure with the Arabs, presumably Iraq and Syria, while also restoring a modicum of even-handedness in a set of relationships perceived to have tilted too much in favor of the Arabs. Interview with the director of the FPI, Seyfi Tashan on May 7, 1990.

15. Interview with a senior Turkish diplomat in Ankara, March 15, 1989.
16. State Institute of Statistics, Prime Ministry, *Turkiye Istatistik Yilligi*, 1996 (Statistical Yearbook of Turkey), 523.
17. A few commentators were inclined to give Cetin the benefit of the doubt, such as Sami Kohen, who called the third cancellation 'justified to a certain extent' (*Milliyet*, August 3, 1993). Others, like Ertugrul Ozkok, disagreed, calling it a reversion to the 'timid' foreign policy of the past, and noting that Turkey had gained nothing from showing solidarity with the Arabs in the past (*Hurriyet* report reprinted in *Middle East Mirror*, July 30, 1993).
18. Interview with retired Ambassador Zaki Kuneralp in Istanbul, May 17, 1989.
19. The perception of shared values prompted three Turkish academics to develop the notion of 'like-minded states' as an important category in the Middle East international relations sub-system, which they tried, less plausibly, to extend to include other regional actors: Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian entity. See Ali Carkoglu, Mine Eder and Kemal Kirisci, *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-2.
20. It should be mentioned that Ciller also courted controversy by visiting Palestinian leader Faisal Hussaini in Orient House in East Jerusalem, thereby pointing to a continuing even-handedness in Turkish policy. However, the muted nature of Israeli dissatisfaction expressed over Ciller's balancing attempt makes it clear that the Israeli government remained pleased with the overall outcome.

21. For example, the Israeli Director of Security, Asaf Haffetz in October 1994, Israel's naval commander, Admiral Ami Ayalon (soon to be appointed as the new head of the internal intelligence, the Shin Beth) in November 1995, and the Under Secretary of the Turkish Foreign Ministry Onur Oymen in January 1996.
22. For example, Bulent Ecevit, whose outmoded Third Worldism comes close to rivalling Mumtaz Soysal and Necmettin Erbakan and who was identified with a soft line towards Saddam Hussain during the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis, was invited to Israel for five days as the guest of the Israeli Foreign Ministry.
23. See Seyfi Tashan, "Water Problems in the Middle East and How They Could be Alleviated," in Erol Manisali (ed.) *Turkey's Place in the Middle East* (Istanbul: Middle East Business and Banking Publications, 1989).
24. For more details, see Hugh Pope, "A 200-ton Jellyfish Could Save the Day for Thirsty Millions," in *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 1990.
25. For a contemporary discussion of Iranian-Turkish relations, see Suha Bolukbasi, "Turkey Copes with Revolutionary Iran," in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* vol. XIII, nos 1 and 2 (Fall/Winter 1989).
26. *Turkish Daily News*, May 19, 1989.
27. A good example of Turkey's patient perseverance in the face of Iranian provocations could be seen in 1989. Ankara was tolerant; first, to gratuitous national insults from Tehran, such as the Iranian Prime Minister refusing to pay his respects to the memory of Ataturk; second, towards direct interference in domestic affairs, allegedly paying Turkish girls to wear headscarves; third, at the violent actions of Iranian agents against émigré nationals based in Turkey.

28. Interviews held with foreign diplomats in Damascus, December 1996.
29. See for example the editorial in *The Jerusalem Post*, June 13, 1996, which wrote about Labor's 'obsession with avoiding anything that might irritate Assad and cause him to withdraw from the peace process,' in the context of a general celebration of Israeli-Turkish relations.
30. *Turkish Daily News*, January 26, 1994.
31. Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993).
32. George E. Gruen citing Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin's 'A Statement on his Visit to Israel' in his "Dynamic Progress in Turkish-Israeli Relations" in *Israel Affairs* vol.1, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 58.
33. Alain Gresh claims that the 'impetus for the alliance' (if Israeli-Turkish military co-operation can really be conceived of in such terms) came from the Turkish generals rather than from Israel, as is perceived in the Arab World in general and Damascus in particular. In fact, a careful reading of the build-up of the relationship indicates the greater complexity of the situation. It is therefore probably more accurate to say that it was the defense establishments of both countries, increasingly perceiving a convergence of interest, which pushed for the same end, albeit in contrasting ways. Other bureaucratic interests in both countries, notably the respective Foreign Ministries, were altogether less enthusiastic. For Gresh's argument, see "Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations and their Impact on the Middle East" in *The Middle East Journal* vol. 52 (Spring 1998).
34. *Turkish Probe*, no. 175, April 19, 1996.
35. Oxford Analytica Daily Brief, "Israel/Turkey: Military Nexus," April 15, 1996.
36. The initial reaction of the Israeli side was surprise at the leak. See Steve Rodan in *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, June 22, 1996.

37. *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, April 20, 1996.
38. Interview with senior Turkish diplomat, Ankara, September 26, 1996.
39. *Aksiyon* magazine, May 18-24, 1996 and *Al-Safir*, July 29, 1996. For a translation in English see BBC/SWB/ME, July 31, 1996.
40. *Turkish Daily News*, April 15, 1996.
41. *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, June 1, 1996.
42. *Jerusalem Report*, September 19, 1996.
43. See for example, the Israeli mass circulation newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*, August 4, 1996 in BBC/SWB/EE, August 5, 1996.
44. One journalist even writes of David Ivry waiting in stony silence in the Defense Ministry for a sign of whether the agreement would indeed be signed. See Steve Rodan writing in *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, August, 24, 1996.
45. *Turkish Daily News*, August 30, 1996.
46. *Turkish Daily News*, September 7, 1995.
47. The total cost of the contract to Turkey, with interest payments, is US\$900 million, representing US\$800 million for the 54 F-4s and US\$75 million for the 48 F-5s. The last of these upgraded F-4s, is scheduled to be delivered to Turkey by 2008, but owing to metal fatigue, the planes are expected to end their working life in 2010. See Amikam Nachmani, "The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie," in *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1998.
48. *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, December 14, 1996.
49. *Turkish Daily News*, December 6, 1996.
50. *Daily Telegraph*, May 2, 1997.
51. The flotilla consisted of a frigate, a submarine, two destroyers and a supply ship. See *Milliyet*, June 17, 1997.

52. *Jane's Defence Weekly*, December 17, 1997.
53. *Turkish Daily News*, February 7, 1998.
54. *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, October 25, 1997.
55. A prime example of this was a joint seminar on Arab-Turkish relations, convened by the Turkish embassy and Abdul Majid Farid's London-based Arab Research Centre, in which the author participated. Held in London on April 2, 1998, the seminar attracted high-level diplomatic participation from Ankara and Cairo, in addition to presentations by academic experts.
56. Much greater efforts were made to explain to Egypt's leadership that Cairo need have no fear of the Israeli-Turkish military accord, than for any other Middle East state, with the first such assurances by the Turkish Foreign Ministry dating back to the leaking of the training agreement. The overtures towards Egypt intensified in 1997, culminating at the end of the year in an attempt by Turkey's top brass to claim that it was operating a policy of balance between Egypt and Israel. If such assertions failed to convince Cairo, it was presumably because Israel had a series of formal military agreements with Turkey while Egypt did not.
57. *Jane's Defence Weekly*, June 10, 1998.
58. Official Turkish statements virtually taken at random suggest as much. See, for instance, the Chief of the Air Force, Gen İlhan Kilic: 'We are a country that loves peace. But we do not let our national interests get harmed'; Ambassador Suha Umar in saying that Turkey was considering all options: 'Military, political and economic sanctions and whatever it is'; an announcement by the Turkish parliament, signed by all nine parties, demanding that Syria eject Kurdish rebels or 'face the consequences'; Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz: 'We are not trying to spark a war. But we (the government) are determined if necessary to ask the parliament's consent for possible use of force.'

59. An editorial in the *Jordan Times*, for example, stated: 'There is little doubt that an Israeli-Turkish axis has rendered Syria more vulnerable to Israeli dictates.' See edition dated October 8-9, 1998.
60. Gen Bir made the remarks during an address to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 26, 1999. See the report by Levent Onar, *Policy Watch* no. 422 (November 5, 1999).
61. The agreement took the form of the signed minutes of two days of meetings in southern Turkey involving security and political officials from the two sides. See Reuters, October 21, 1998.
62. Bilateral negotiations appeared to enter a new level of seriousness in June 2000, over the purchase of 50 million cubic metres of Turkish water. See *Israel Line* (daily Internet bulletin of the Israeli Consulate in New York) of June 22, 2000, citing *The Jerusalem Post* (undated).
63. Turkish strategists tend to view such threats not singly but in the context of regional alliances. One of the most powerful strategic doctrines developed in the 1990s has been the 'two and a half wars' concept of former Foreign Affairs Ministry Under Secretary Sukru Elekdag. He has developed the proposition that Turkey must be prepared to fight on two and a half fronts at any one time, with the most likely enemies being Greece, Syria and the PKK (representing the one-half).

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Dr Philip Robins is the University Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Oxford and Fellow of St Antony's College, posts that he has held for over five years. Prior to that, he spent almost eight years at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London, where he served as Head of the Middle East Programme. He has also worked as a journalist based in the region. From 1994 to 1995, he was a visiting professor at Bosphorus University in Istanbul.

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