

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY AND ISRAEL: AN END TO THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?*

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Since the rise of AK Party to power, in November 2002, and the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu to the post of senior adviser on foreign affairs, the process of devolution of the strategic alliance with Israel began. Moreover, it should be noted that the dismantling is not the result of Turkish discomfort or dissatisfaction with a specific Israeli policy but the result of a specific, new strategic outlook: which is directly linked to Davutoghlu theory of how foreign policy should be handled, adopted by the AKP regime.

It is therefore possible to say that even though both countries are challenged by similar problems, and even though Israel would be interested in a continuation of the alliance with Turkey , and it is likely that some specific areas of cooperation will continue - the alliance does no longer exist.

Why, then, has an alliance of more than a decade, and whose origins stemmed from Turkey's recognition that the U.S. is the sole significant power, to whose centers of powers Ankara may gain access through Israel, is now considered to be problematic in the eyes of Turkey? The answer to this question is complex but clear:

1. The first reason for the change stems directly on domestic changes in Turkey: the Soviet collapse affected a process of change in Turkish politics which granted legitimacy to religious elements, with positive attitude to market forces. This enabled them to penetrate to the center of the political arena, and in the end, under the guise of reforms that have been required by the European Union, to rise to power through democratic means. The main

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beneficiary of this process has been the Justice and Development Party – headed by – Tayyip Erdoğan

Due to constitutional restrictions and concerns that they might be disqualified to run for elections, the party avoided open adoption of an Islamic agenda. However, the party has consistently been identified with a religious, conservative agenda, which it has maintained in varying forms of assertiveness to this day. It has mainly created an active discourse toward redefining identity.

Because of the strict constitutional restrictions that are in place in Turkey on domestic policies, the foreign policy arena has become the area in which an Islamic agenda was most likely to find unhindered expression. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict became the paradigm in this context, but it is not the only one. In a unique formulation, Erdogan and his associates, transformed regions like the Balkans, Cyprus, Israel and Palestine, into areas of potential Turkish influence.

2. The rise to power of new elements from the periphery resulted in an urgent need to develop a coherent strategy for the AKP and its leadership, since they rose to power without a Foreign Policy agenda. Such policy had to cater for internal needs as well as for external purposes. Fairly rapidly salvation arrived through the adoption of the foreign policy doctrines of Ahmet Davutoğlu.

The adoption of this new approach, which demanded international recognition of Turkey as the country capable of preventing a clash of civilizations, but which also emphasized the need to disengage from Israel as the necessary cost of reconciliation with the Muslim world, resulted in Turkey's abandonment of the strategic alliance. It is important to emphasize that this is not a singular turnabout vis a vis a single country – Israel – but a substantive change in Turkish foreign policy across the board. This change has led Turkey to identify its goals and aims in a different way than it had done during the Kemalist era.

It is important to note that the tone and character of the relations between the two countries has traditionally been set by Turkey. Turkey determined the pace of relations and their substance in accordance to the regional circumstances and Turkish domestic needs. Israel, irrespective of which party was in power, has consistently sought good ties with Turkey, for a number of reasons:

1. Israel's need to have good ties with Muslim countries in order to prove that the problem with the Arab world in general, and the Palestinians in particular, is not religious in essence, but one of clashing nationalisms and territorial claims.

2. A traditional strategic outlook that sees Israel's problems linked to the Arabs surrounding it, which in turn fuels an obsession with non-Arab states in the outer periphery of the region, including Turkey. The breakup of the soviet Union only bolstered this outlook because the process shifted attention from the centrality of the Arab world to the importance of the Turco-Persian belt in the international arena.

3. The view of Kemalism and of the Turkish army as an security anchor against the possibility of Turkish Islamization or other forms of radicalization.

4. The Israeli military establishment could, to a certain degree, identify with the ideology of the Kemalist elite, whose secular nationalism resembled that of Zionism. Both countries underwent similar changes in their attempts to socially construct "a new man," and in efforts to shake off, or otherwise, negotiate, with the religious elements of the past.

5. There are military and economic reasons for wishing to preserve the strategic partnership. Israel lacks space for training, particularly for its air force, has no border with Iran, and also sought to become involved in large economic investment projects, sell technology, military and civilian, in Turkey and in central Asia.

Naturally, ties have not always been good and they have known ups and downs. The turning point in the ties between the two came in 1996. At that point the strategic alliance, characterized by massive cooperation, was enabled from Turkey's point of view as a result of the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Accords. This is a period in which Turkey has come to terms with the post-Soviet reality, and was seeking to develop new strategic assets. In this context, ties with Israel were viewed as part of the triangular relationship that also includes the U.S.

The American declared "war on terrorism" following September 11, 2001, only emphasized the need for cooperation between Israel and Turkey, and collaboration continued on different levels of intelligence and diplomatic/military efforts.

In Israel it was hoped that Turkey's standing, and especially the continued involvement of the Generals in political decision-making in the country would ensure continued and stable cooperation and would allow for gains in other areas – including arms sales, and various contracts for the defense industry – an important goal of Israeli foreign policy since the 1970s.

However, much to the disappointment of many officials in Israel, November 2002 constituted a veritable upheaval in government, and the Justice and Development party, whose leadership held harsh positions on Israel, and often expressed the opinion, before coming to power, that the alliance with Israel should be cancelled, rose to power.

Initially it appeared that the Justice and Development Party would prove the theses that moderate and democratic Turkish Islam does exist, and that this would be an opportunity to prove that Turkish Sunni Islam is naturally quietist and moderate. Even though there were increasingly louder voices of concern in Israel as AK leaders spoke of genocide against the Palestinians and especially when the political leader of Hamas, Khaled Meshal was invited to Ankara on an official visit, the dominant view remained unchanged: that the two countries,

Turkey and Israel still had a mutual interest in the reforms that Turkey was undergoing as part of the accession process to the European Union, and that this would result in moderation and stable cooperation during a particularly stormy period in the region.

However, it became gradually clear that this is not the case. In a number of years, the Justice and Development Party led bilateral relations to a different direction than had been customary between Turkey and Israel since 1996. This change was the result of a new reality in Turkish eyes, and the formulation of a new outlook on the position of Turkey in the world in general and the region in particular.

Among the elements that contributed to creating a new Turkish reality, the war in Iraq should be mentioned as well as the establishment of autonomous Kurdish areas which control areas rich in petroleum and gas in Kirkuk and Mosul in northern Iraq; the accession of Cyprus to the European Union, contrary to Turkey's wishes; and the continued process of identifying terror and violence with Muslims, with very little distinction being made between Muslims – as many in Turkey and among the Turkish diaspora were quick to note.

The frustration that resulted from the new developments, the sense of insult and the need to formulate a new strategic concept for security and foreign affairs in order to counter the new challenges, became acute for the Turkish government under AK, especially since the government had failed to demonstrate genuine gains in domestic matters. The adoption of Davutoğlu's world view offered a total solution to Turkey's difficult situation, including the tempting illusion of empowerment.

Davutoğlu's theories on foreign policy are based on two major principles:

1. The need for Turkey to attain power - if she wish to defend itself and not to enslave itself.

2. The concept of *medeniyet* – civilization, that read: the need of Turkey to come to term with its true identity (based on Islamic and Ottoman heritage).

Davutoğlu's main argument can be identified in Islamic discourse of the 1950s. His innovation is that he translates this ideological argument into a political claim. At the center of this claim is that Turkey, as the clear representative of the Muslim world, should be granted the international recognition it deserves: a respectable place in international institutions, including a permanent seat at the Security Council.

The problem with Turkish foreign policy during the Kemalist era, Davutoğlu argues, is in its lack of understanding at the way power is created, and in its lack of experience in formulating tactical maneuvers. Power, he argue, is the combination between permanent qualities (history, geography, population, culture, etc.) and potential qualities (economic, military and technological) and the relation between them and strategic mentality, tactical planning and political will. Strategic alliances must take into account geopolitical, geocultural and geoeconomic considerations. They are meant to lead the state to greatness and to the accumulation of power. To date, Turkey's alliances ignored this significant element of power. Moreover, the great mistake of foreign policy makers in the pre-AKP era, Davutoğlu argues, is the lacked understanding of the importance of the permanent qualities of the Turks. Kemalist foreign policy was passive. However; Turkey is not a regular country. It is a key country and in the center of a civilization. Following the Cold War: Turkey must form a new foreign policy in regions like the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. The defense of Istanbul and western Turkey will be manifested not through missile batteries but through the creation of areas of Turkish influence in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East. All three are conflict zones between various hegemonic forces.

Another important claim is that under the mask of "universalism" Western powers gained full control of international institutions. Muslim countries are

under-represented in such system and therefore marginalized, and their demands remain unheard. This, it is argued, must be changed in favor of a more balanced system. For example, the inability of Turkey to change reality in Cyprus is being perceived as the result of the same process. Turkish policymakers are now stressing a parallelism in the two conflicts, of Cyprus and Palestine. In such new equation there is "false universalism" that gives western powers hegemony on one hand, and Muslim under-representation that prevent the Palestinians, the Bosnians and the Turkish Cypriots from receiving fair treatment. The only way to convince the Muslims around the world that they are not isolated from the international system is by both changing the attitude of western states toward symbolic places of conflicts (Palestine-Israel, Kosovo or Cyprus) and by admitting Turkey, the only Muslim European state into the EU and as a respected member in major international institutions. It is important to note that Turkish experts, both supporters and detractors of relations with Israel, have always pointed out that Israel was very powerful, not just because of its military strength but also because of its influence on the US and the support it receives from most western states. In the 1990s Turkish political reality and foreign policy framework, it meant cooperation and alignment with Israel. For Turkey, its failure in Cyprus, while Israel continued to enjoy support from the west for its policies vis a vis the Palestinians, highlighted the difference between the strength of the two. A dissimilarity that was difficult to accept, from a political and psychological point of view. Furthermore, Israel's strength and regional behavior, including what was seen in Turkey as Israel's inability to accept Turkey's regional supremacy, stood in contradiction to Turkish ambition, self esteem and persistent wish to be established as the sole regional power. Yet, not only did Israel refuse to acknowledge the role of Turkey as a significant "player" and failed to appreciate it, she often was an obstacle to the hypothesis that Turkey's new foreign policy theorists had been trying to build, both for internal and external consumption: that Turkey under AKP leadership can provide what the Kemalists had failed to do, namely achieving international respectability without giving up Islam or the Ottoman heritage. Furthermore, some in Turkey have suggested that not only the EU but even the US would soon realize the

need to choose between the "Turkish option" and the "Israeli option." The US should understand, explained Abdullah Gül that allowing Israel to continue its policies stands contrary to US strategic and security needs and interests. Turkish officials maintained that this is a choice between peace and political solutions over military solutions to conflicts. Ankara has been facilitating dialogue with Iran and Syria, and negotiated with Hamas. AKP's foreign policy represents the option of solving disputes with diplomacy and dialogue. Davutoğlu's aggressive realist approach to foreign policy in general and toward Israel in particular, is can be safely argued, has ruined the strategic alliance between the two states.