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Turkish-Israeli Relations from Israel's Perspective

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After the Justice and Development Party's most recent victory, Turkish-Israeli relations are expected to improve and develop in the upcoming period. Israel will change its policy of “diplomatic self-restraint” - which it has exercised since its relations with Ankara were strained as a result of the Freedom Flotilla incidents of last year (2010) - to one in which it will make initiative and take more efficient steps to mend relations. This shift in relations of course has its reasons and determinants and is dictated by strategic changes in the region. The following article will focus on the future of Turkish-Israeli relations from Israel's perspective.

Israeli Interpretation of the Turkish Elections

Israel's media and academia did not show as much interest in the Turkish elections as they did regarding the effects of the election results on the future of the two countries' relations, which stems from the fact that the results had already been determined in favor of the Justice and Development Party.

Israeli estimates on the effects of the elections on the future and outlook of Turkish-Israeli relations vary, so much so that they have become an important topic of Israeli discussion. Israelis have also gained interest in Turkey's post-election cultural course, which has become the focus of Israeli media, politics, and research, in terms of whether the Justice and Development Party will succeed in pulling Turkey towards the east culturally and politically through more political and constitutional action or whether it will fail to do so. This in itself reveals that the question of constitutional amendments or the Islamization of the constitution is Israel's principal object of obsession rather than a natural part of the electoral process or its recent outcome.

Gallia Lindenstrauss, a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, believes that the elections represented the confidence of the Turkish people in the party and in Erdogan himself as well as the latter's ability to maintain Turkey's economic development. Nonetheless, she believes that the party was disappointed with the results because, although it won fifty percent of the votes, it went from 331 seats in the previous elections to 326 in the current elections, which compels it to cooperate with one of the opposing parties; this may very well cause Erdogan's plans for constitutional amendment to fail. This failure, Lindenstrauss imagines, will prove to be the beginning of the party's recession in Turkish politics and the end of Erdogan as a political leader. (1)

On the other hand, Alon Liel, Israeli researcher, politician, author of several books about Turkey, and former Israeli ambassador to Turkey, stated in a lecture he gave at Tel Aviv University during a conference held for the analysis of the Turkish electoral results that Israeli -Turkish relations have been affected and will continue to be affected by the occurrences in the region rather than by Turkish ideological and political considerations for it is not the results of the Turkish elections that will shape Turkish-Israeli relations whether negatively or positively but the current conditions in the region, including the Arab revolutions and the Israeli-Palestinian trajectory. (2)

Nonetheless, there are some who believe Turkish orientation toward the East is purely strategic and will continue to play an influential role in Turkey's relations with Israel regardless of how much Israel tries to improve the relations and ultimately, this will prove to be a great loss for both Israel and the West. (3)

Turkish-Israeli Relations

Israelis believe that the deterioration of relations with Turkey remains both transitional and temporary because it occurs within an outdated political, constitutional, and cultural structure

(being both Western and secular). However, this deterioration, from their point of view, can shift from transitional to strategic, if it occurs within a contemporary Turkish political, constitutional, and cultural structure (being Islamic and oriental), which was what Israel feared would take place if the Justice and Development Party won enough votes to qualify it to make these changes. However, when it became clear that this was not going to happen, Israel was relieved.

Despite deteriorations in Turkish-Israeli relations in the aftermath of the war on Gaza in 2008 and the arrival of these deteriorations at their peak in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla in 2010 as well as the murder of Turkish nationals(4), Israel is optimistic about resolving its relations with Turkey in the upcoming period, especially after the elections which Israelis believe are what will shift relations from decline and corrosion to rapprochement and cooperation as Israeli assessments indicate that part of the Turkish anti-Israel rhetoric was triggered by electoral reasons as some of the social bases of the Justice and Development Party oppose Israel. Hence, it is far from coincidental that Israel took the initiative to unite with Turkey after the elections in addition to the structural factors mentioned above.

After the elections, Israel has begun to try to improve relations with Turkey and Netanyahu took the first step when he sent to Erdogan a letter of congratulations for winning the election and called for the settlement of the disagreements of the two countries. The second step taken after the elections was the placing of the Turkish-Israeli relations file under the responsibility of Vice Prime Minister and the Minister of Strategic Affairs, retired General Moshe Bogie Ya'alon, which is a significant indication especially as the Turks delegated the Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Feridun Sinirlioglu, who is merely an employee rather than a high-rank official like Ya'alon; even so, Israel did not object. This implies the following:

- **First:** resolving the Turkish profile entails strategic dimensions and is part and parcel of Israel's general strategic vision in the upcoming stage which is exhausted by crucial events throughout the Arab world (i.e. Arab revolutions, instability on the Syrian front, and so on) and within Palestine.
- **Second:** moving the profile from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its minister, Avigdor Lieberman (who austerely objects to any form of apology for the deaths of the Turks in the Freedom Flotilla incidents) and the role his deputy, Danny Ayalon (who is also a member of Lieberman's party), played in straining relations between the two countries when he had the Turkish ambassador seated in a chair lower than his, thus symbolizing Israel's humiliation and degradation of Turkey.

In this regard, Israel seeks to send two messages to Turkey, namely:

1. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs takes partial responsibility for undermining relations as a result of its minister's demeanor and thus, Israel has revoked the profile from the ministry as a symbolic gesture.
2. It affirms that, on an official level, Israel deals with Turkey according to mutual interests as opposed to the notion of "national dignity" which Lieberman has applied in his foreign policies. This may indicate that Israel is willing to apologize to Turkey in some form or another (clandestinely or temperately, apologizing for example for the flotilla incident but not the deaths of the activists involved).

Meetings held in Geneva between Ya'alon and the Turkish Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on the first stage of discussion of the United Nation's report on the Freedom Flotilla and according to Israeli sources, the report favors the Israeli position. Thus, Turkey has requested that Israel ease the intensity of its language in the report before its issuance and the latter is inclined to grant its request as the first stepping stone to easing tensions between them (which Turkish representative Ozdem Sanberk and his Israeli counterpart, Yosef Ciechanover, seek to achieve to render the report to the beginning of reconciliation between the two countries).

Nonetheless, Turkey's demand for an apology for the deaths of its nationals will remain a point of conflict and, according to Israeli diplomatic sources; Erdogan gave the Turkish delegation orders to refrain from lenience regarding this matter. Still, the same sources confirm that reconciliation has in fact begun albeit cautiously and slowly (Ha'aretz, June 26, 2011). Israel realizes that resolving its disputes with Turkey starts from this very report and in turn it seeks to benefit from it till the very end to improve relations.

According to the Israeli political vision, Israel needs to mend its relations with Turkey in this period of time particularly as it will not be able to endure four more years of tension with the rule of the Justice and Development Party and Erdogan's primacy. Consequently, it is willing to relinquish certain aspects of the report in favor of these relations. The factors it believes will contribute to improving relations with Turkey are as follows:

1. The Justice and Development Party's victory in the election will not enable it to make structural and constitutional changes, in Turkey, that totally threatens these relations; Israel's concern was focused on this particular point during the election.
2. The immense and profound changes in the Arab world requires Israel to maintain ties with an important strategic ally like Turkey as this new reality necessitates mutual cooperation, from Israel's point of view, in order to absorb the unpredictable changes of the future.(5)
3. The dissociation or the beginning of the dissociation of what Israel labels the Turkish-Syrian-Iranian axis. Events in Syria have contributed greatly to tension in Turkish-Syrian relations and the different positions taken by Turkey and Iran regarding both the events and the future of the region have disturbed the mood.(6) From the Israeli perspective, Turkish-Iranian relations are not ideological as Turkey supports political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians while Iran wishes to annihilate the state of Israel and this of course destroys any ideological relations between the two parties. This then renders Israel an important player in the system of Turkish relations in the region. Also, conditions in Syria will only lead to the weakening of the Iranian-Turkish alliance which will then strengthen relations between Israel and Turkey, which have common interests in Syria. (7)
4. Israeli observations find that Erdogan faces a disconcerting reality for his foreign policies. Countries he attempted to start an alliance with for the establishment of a new Middle East are no longer a source of power from Turkey's point of view. An Israeli diplomat expressed his contentment with this outcome declaring, "Erdogan triumphed in the election but collapsed in the world." (Ha'aretz, June 2011)
5. Syrian borders, which are shared by both Israel and Turkey, require the two countries to coordinate strategically to avoid regional ramifications.

6. Israeli observations find that Erdogan will try to remain an active political player in the region through the Palestinian file. He recently received Khalid Mish'al and later Mahmoud Abbas and because Israel is the main party in this conflict, Turkey has no choice but to mend relations with Israel in order to have any influence, which is what many Israeli researchers and diplomats suggested, adding that Israel should allow it to do so. (8)

In addition to the political indicators above, there are economic indicators that show the dawn of rapprochement of economic relations between Turkey and Israel, which deteriorated in 2009. According to the data published by the Israel Export & International Cooperation Institute, in 2010 commercial exchange between the two countries (both exportation and importation) increased by 29 percent from 2009.(9)

The indicators of 2011 also show the start of economic rapprochement in their relations as Turkey ranks third in the world in total Israeli exports: in the first quarter of 2011, it received \$500 million worth of Israeli exports (a 72 percent increase from the first quarter of 2010) and there are 650 Israeli companies and factories operating within the scope of these economic relations.(10)

In conclusion, improving these relations is not limited to the success of the initiative or Israeli desperate desire to end the tension on its own, despite Israeli optimism about reconciliation [with Turkey]. Israel considered the pressure put on the IHH, Humanitarian Relief Foundation, by the Turkish government for not participating in the organization of a second Freedom Flotilla as a positive indicator of Turkey's acceptance of the Israeli initiative. Other factors, however, determine the future of this initiative, including: development of conditions in Syria, the position on the recognition of the long-awaited Palestinian state, the United Nations' report on the Freedom Flotilla, and Israeli reactions to Turkish demands and so on. Still, Israel is adamant, after the Turkish election, about ending the anxiety as a prelude to the upcoming period on both the Arab and Palestinian arenas.

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Sources

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