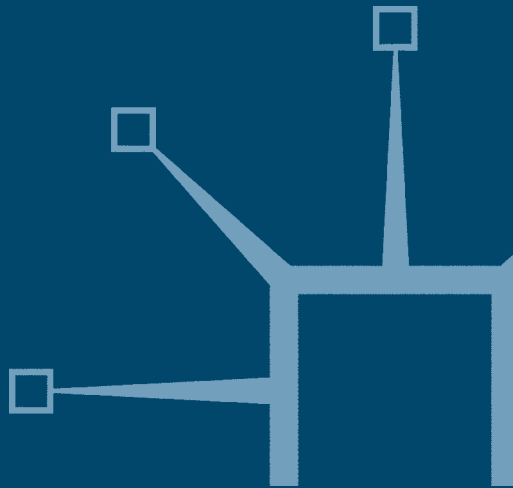


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The Turkish–Israeli Relationship

Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders

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Preface

The idea for this book was born during an international seminar held in 1996, at Ann Arbor, Michigan, attended by a large number of scholars from all over the world, including myself, from Israel, and Prof. Gencer Özcan, of Yıldız University in Istanbul. It so happened that at that very time the strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel was being forged. After considering several other ideas, we decided to undertake a joint project that would deal with the deeper roots of this partnership. Since that time, we have continuously exchanged ideas, thoughts, and research materials, resulting in a number of coauthored articles on the subject. At some point, we each decided to write our own books on the subject, while continuing to benefit from ongoing exchanges and cooperation. Apart from the intellectual enrichment derived from our brainstorming marathons, my greatest joy has been the lasting friendship that has developed between us, for which I am deeply grateful to Gencer, his wife Hatice, and daughter Idil. My long night together with the Özcan family in earthquake-stricken Istanbul only cemented the relationship that much more.

This book is about encounters in different points of time between two cultures, societies, and nations, the Muslim Ottoman/Turkish and the Jewish-Israeli ones. These encounters were, on the whole, quite positive, and as such they were unique in the conflict-ridden Middle East. In weaving the story of those relations I have used a variety of Turkish, Israeli, and Arab source materials, as well as extensive interviews with people who were actively involved in forging Turkish-Israeli ties. For the period of the 1950s and 1960s, I have also made extensive use of Israeli diplomatic archives. Unfortunately, I had no such access to parallel Turkish documentation, while the British and the American archival sources were quite disappointing. Therefore, until such time as the Turkish archives are open, the story of the unfolding of relations will remain incomplete.

Working on this book turned out to be a very special experience for me. In excavating the deeper layers of the Turkish-Israeli relationship,

I discovered how my own personal family story fits in with the larger history of Jews and Turks. My parents, Adina and Avraham Bassoul, of Blessed Memory, and to whom this book is dedicated, were born in the Ottoman Empire, near Aleppo. They thus shared the fate of the multitude of Jews who found refuge in the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. The ceremonies held in Turkey in 1992 to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Jews' arrival to the empire signified, as it were, the continuity in this special relationship. In later years, when Syria and the new State of Israel were in conflict, and the Syrian Jewish community became hostage to the whims of Syria's rulers, Turkey became the secret escape route for many Jews, including my family, through which they could pass to Israel. The strained relations between Turkey and Syria throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, and the conflict between Syria and Israel, would serve in time as an important glue for the Turkish–Israeli strategic partnership. Would it be too optimistic to hope that Turkey will one day fill the opposite role: that of a model for other Muslim states and even of a bridge to peace between Israel and Muslim Arab countries?

Writing a novel, I am told, is a solitary endeavor, but not a book of historical research, which requires the support, encouragement, and cooperation of many individuals and institutions. Indeed, I was fortunate to have plenty of all of these. The Moshe Dayan Center, my professional home, granted me all possible backing. Martin Kramer, the Center's former director, encouraged me to tread down an unknown path, and Asher Susser, the current director, helped me to reach its end. Aryeh Shmuelevitz provided constructive comments on the entire manuscript and made available to me his deep knowledge and insight concerning Turkey and the Ottoman Empire. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman accompanied the research and the writing of the book in its various phases, and his contribution to the final product was invaluable. I doubt whether it could have seen the light of day without his help. Other members of the Dayan Center who contributed in different ways to the book's completion were Roslyn Loon, Aryeh Ezra, Lydia Gareh, Elena Lesnick, Ilana Greenberg, Amira Margalith, Liat Kozma, and Ayelet Baruch. Haim Gal, head of the Center's Documentation Unit, and Marion Gliksberg and Dorit Porat, the Center's librarians, were also extremely helpful. I thank them all for their patience and their friendly assistance.

The research and writing of the book was assisted by grants from Süleyman Demirel Program at the Moshe Dayan Center, the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, and the

Leonard Davis Institute of International Affairs at The Hebrew University. Yıldız University in Istanbul hosted me during various phases of my research, and the friendship of its staff has made me feel at home there. The staff of the Israeli National Archives was also most helpful. I would like to thank my Turkish and Israeli interviewees, most of whom must remain anonymous, for their time and insights. In the final stages of the work on the book, I benefited from the important suggestions made by two anonymous readers as well as from the linguistic editing and styling of Virginia Myers. David Pervin and the Palgrave team were most helpful in bringing the manuscript to publication. Last but not least, my husband Shmuel, and my sons Lavi and Adi, took active part in the endeavor, contributing ideas, observations, and insights, joining me in the great adventure of becoming better acquainted with another country, its people, language, and culture.

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Introduction

Shortly after the coup d'état of May 1960 in Turkey, an Israeli diplomat approached General Cemal Gürsel, the head of the new government in Ankara, to inquire about the prospect of upgrading relations with Israel. The General answered frankly: "We want you to know that we wish to befriend the Arabs," adding that: "our situation resembles that of a man in love with a woman who is surrounded [being courted] by many men. If I declare that I am in love with the woman, I will only annoy the other men with no benefit [to her]." ¹ The analogy is, of course, false, since Israel was patently not being courted by the surrounding Arab countries, and was indeed a complete outcast. Nevertheless, it is helpful in illustrating the triangle of relations that shaped and reshaped itself over some four decades, from the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 up to the early 1990s, when they were fundamentally transformed.

The heart of this book is the story of the Turkish–Israeli relationship over the past half century, which began in the shadows and eventually faded to insignificance, only to reemerge during the 1990s, this time in the full light of day, constituting a tectonic shift in the Middle Eastern strategic equation. But the story is not explored narrowly, rather as a lens for viewing the Middle Eastern strategic landscape, both past and present. With this new perspective, the received wisdom about the inter-Arab and Arab–Israeli conflicts and rivalries that characterized the 1950s must now be reexamined and revised. No longer can events such as the Suez Crisis and War, and the Egyptian–Iraqi struggle for regional hegemony, be viewed without regard to Turkey's crucial strategic role. It goes without saying that this is also true for the yet-to-be written history of the tumultuous 1990s.

Unlike most accounts that place overwhelming emphasis on American and British perspectives, this study analyzes modern Middle Eastern History from within the region, based on Turkish, Israeli, and Arab sources. It demonstrates how regional parties are far from passive

“clients” of great powers, and in fact often act as the proverbial tail wagging the dog. Simultaneously, they vigorously pursue their own regional foreign policies *vis-à-vis* their immediate neighbors. It is this simultaneity that is often lost in the literature of the foreign policies of Middle East states. Turkey provides ample proof of foreign policy activism in both these directions: in contrast to accepted notions, Ankara was neither a mere follower of Washington in foreign policy matters, nor did the legacy of Kemalism result in Turkey’s refraining from active engagement with its Arab neighbors in order to pursue its interests. In fact, profound geostrategic forces compelled Turkey to adopt policies that were not always in line with the desires of its Great Power patron, and to orient its foreign policies not just westward but also toward the Middle East. Hence, the account developed here provides the proper historical context for the full-fledged Turkish–Israeli alignment that began to emerge in 1993.

The major players in the Middle East—Israel, the Arab states, and Turkey—all acted according to certain basic assumptions or beliefs that conditioned their relations throughout this period, even when some of these proved to be mistaken or irrelevant.

Turkey’s stance toward the Arab states can best be described as a duality. On the one hand, the memory of the Arabs as having “stabbed the Turks in the back” during the World War I continued to shape their image in Turkish eyes and to arouse suspicions and reservations about Arab intentions. On the other, considerations of *realpolitik* in the economic, political, and diplomatic spheres dictated close relations with Arab regimes. Although Turkey considered Israel to be a strategic asset in the region and a potential counterweight to the radical states in its immediate vicinity, it did not wish to endanger its relations with Arab countries for the sake of friendship with Jerusalem. As a consequence, four interrelated rules guided Turkey’s behavior throughout the period: the need to adopt a balanced position *vis-à-vis* Israel and the Arab states; an assumption that the quality of relations with Arab countries was almost entirely determined by the type of relations with Israel; the view that friendly relations with Israel could only be detrimental to relations with the Arabs; and that Turkey should maintain its ties with Israel, but keep them as discreet as possible.

Israel’s view of Turkey was conditioned by the fact that Ankara had for years been the only Muslim country in the region—and indeed the world—to have recognized Israel both *de facto* and *de jure*. Relations with Turkey were therefore of crucial strategic, political, and diplomatic importance. In other words, Turkey was a strategic asset,

a pivotal country for Jerusalem in the years of its total isolation in the region. This drove Israel to do everything possible to strengthen relations with Ankara. Thus, almost all the initiatives for improving or upgrading relations came from Israel's side. In a sense, the Jewish state was completely dependent on Turkey's goodwill. It had to tread cautiously on any subject that was sensitive for Turkey, or could cause annoyance, and its room for maneuver between Turkey and the Arab states was almost nonexistent.

The Arab world's view of Turkey was shaped by the Ottoman legacy and by lingering fears that Turkey might one day encroach again on their sphere of influence. Suspicions were increased significantly by Turkey's recognition of Israel, which was perceived as a stab in the back, because it undermined Arab attempts to deny Jerusalem any legitimacy. Hence the endeavors by Arab states to turn the clock back, making their point of reference Turkey, rather than Israel—a country over which they had no leverage at all. The assumption was that the Arab states could, and should, exploit their numerical superiority to pressure Turkey to sever—or at least reduce to the minimum—its relations with Israel. Different levers were used at different times, including the oil weapon, Islamic solidarity, the Palestinian cause, and the issue of Cyprus.

The effect of all these contradictory interests, inhibitions, fears, and pressures was that relations between Turkey and Israel up to the 1990s developed along two tracks: a secret strategic track, which, when it existed, was quite intense and intimate, and a public track, which for most of the period was generally low-key and unimpressive. However, the Gulf crisis of 1990 and its aftermath eroded this duality, and little by little the two tracks drew closer together, and by 1996 they had openly converged. The key to this change lay in Turkey, and not Israel, which had always been eager to develop strong and open relations with Ankara. Indeed, the shift in Turkish policy was intimately linked to the far-reaching changes that engulfed the region after the Gulf crisis. As a result of that war, the Arab states lost much of their influence over Turkey, although this had been eroding for many years; the Israeli–Arab peace process granted legitimacy to Israel; and Turkey's own basic assumptions underwent some important transformations. All this persuaded Ankara to overcome the fear barrier and approach Israel openly, both politically and strategically.

Because the 1991 Gulf War was crucial to the various processes in the Middle East, this book begins with a panoramic view, analyzing the role of the various actors in the conflict: the United States, Iraq, and the

Arab world, Turkey, and Israel. The Gulf War and its consequences thus provide a framework for the regional developments of the 1990s, one aspect of which was the close alignment between Turkey and Israel. Chapter 2 is a flashback to the secret peripheral alliance between Turkey and Israel of the 1950s, which laid the foundations for the rapprochement of the 1990s. The historical context enables a better understanding of the forces at work during that time and allows comparisons to be drawn between the two periods. The background to the new alignment of the 1990s, and its different motives and motivators, are discussed in chapter 3. Placing the alignment in a domestic context illustrates the particular developments, pressures, dilemmas, and interests that were at play in both countries and helped shape their special relationship. This chapter also discusses the dual role of the United States in the alignment. Chapter 4 analyzes the content of the alignment and its strategic, military, political, and economic ramifications. The emphasis is less on the dry details of strategic agreements than on presenting a wider picture of the type of relations that developed between the two countries and their peoples. The reactions of states in the region, which have sometimes confounded scholars and analysts, are the focus of chapter 5: to what extent did neighbouring states actively oppose the Turkish–Israeli alignment, and to what extent did they accommodate it; and what was the overall effect on the balance of relations in the region. The conclusion tries to answer the two basic questions of this study: to what extent did the alignment form a new regional order? And did Turkish–Israeli relations cross a point of no return after the Gulf War?

On the whole, the book is not written chronologically, but rather in a “Rashomon style,” in which each chapter provides a different perspective and emphasis on the relationship. They can therefore be read separately, but for the sake of clarity certain details are occasionally repeated. Although the general time frame is the 12-year period between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 American *coup de grace* against Saddam Hussein’s regime, relevant historical contexts and factors are discussed in all chapters.