

Israel and Turkey:

From Realpolitik to Rhetoric?

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Abstract *This article analyses the media discourse about Israel in Turkey during the crisis period that followed Israel's Operation Cast Lead (2008) and culminated in May 2010 when Israeli armed forces attacked the Mavi Marmara, a ship operated by a Turkish Islamic NGO, leaving nine Turkish activists dead. For the purpose of this inquiry, two leading Turkish newspapers are considered: Zaman, the best-selling national daily known for its Islamic conservative leanings and its general support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, and Hürriyet, the third largest Turkish newspaper, which has a secular-Kemalist orientation and a critical eye on AKP policy choices. By examining opinion pieces and columns in both these dailies over a three-year period (2009-2011), this work makes the case that the full dimensions of the Israeli-Turkish showdown cannot be grasped solely through a foreign policy analysis. It is necessary to address the Turkish public's receptiveness to historic and religious stereotypes of Israel/the Jews, which are to a large degree reproduced and sustained by the Turkish media. The media's handling of Israel-related issues, moreover, sheds light on the fault lines in Turkey's polarised society. Israel functions in the media as the vehicle for a more abstract discussion of the nature of Turkish identity (religious/secular, Western/Eastern), domestic politics, the Kurdish question and the ongoing Europeanisation process.*

Keywords: Turkey, Israel, media discourse, Mavi Marmara, Hürriyet, Zaman

Introduction

In November 2002, a few days after a landslide victory brought the con-

servative Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in Turkey, its deputy chairman Murat Mercan assured journalists amid fears that the party's Islamic orientation might radically transform Turkish foreign policy, that there would be no change in Turkish-Israeli relationships. The party, he declared, did not act based on its religious orientation: Turkish foreign policy would be a politics rooted 'in practical rather than ideological considerations,' that is, one of "realpolitik."¹ Despite occasional criticisms of Israel's Palestine policy by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other government members, the close Turkish-Israeli bond, dating back to the 1990s, survived and again seemed to be safe and sound after AKP's second electoral victory in 2007. Israel and Turkey even conducted joint military exercises together with the US in the Eastern Mediterranean in early 2005. Then, hardly four years passed, and the Turko-Israeli alliance was in tatters. Ambassadors were recalled, military cooperation frozen and Erdoğan became a hero on the streets of the Arab world for his increasingly harsh words about Israel.

Petr
Kučera

How can we explain this reversal of this 'remarkable tie,'² as one analyst once called it? Was it solely due to the unfortunate series of events that came hard on the heels of one another shortly after AKP's second electoral victory, starting with Israel's attack on Gaza in 2008 – which deeply offended Turkish sensitivities and thwarted Ankara's efforts at brokering a peace between Syria and Israel – then continuing in diplomatic tussles and culminating in the killing by Israeli armed forces of nine Turkish activists on board the ship *Mavi Marmara* carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza in May 2010? By examining the media discourse on Israel in Turkey, this article argues that the full scope of the Israeli-Turkish confrontation cannot be understood solely through a foreign policy analysis; we must take into account both the public's receptiveness to certain heavily covered foreign policy issues and the fault lines in Turkey's polarised society, which arguably result from democratisation and desecuritisation processes under way since 2002. The issue of Turkey's relationship to Israel has turned into a rhetorical battlefield where not only matters of foreign policy and national security are discussed, but also issues of identity (religious/secular, Western/Eastern) and domestic politics, along with the Kurdish question and the ongoing Europeanisation process.

To provide some context for my discussion, I will start with a brief assessment of the shifts in Turkey's policy towards Israel since 2002

and then move from the age of “realpolitik” to the more obscure and amorphous field of “rhetoric.”³

From Strategic Partnership to Strategic Rivalry

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When we talk about the unprecedented deepening of Israeli-Turkish ties in the 1990s – including robust military cooperation, a steep increase in bilateral trade (from \$91 million in 1989 to \$800 million [USD] in 1998)⁴ and in the number of Israeli tourists taking holidays in Turkey, the development of joint business projects and a flurry of reciprocal visits by state dignitaries and agreements on student exchanges⁵ – one fact should not be overlooked: the rapprochement between Israel and Turkey was quite a deliberate choice made by the Kemalist secular elite and the military,⁶ and did not reflect popular sentiments or the ‘social limits’ to the alliance, as one Turkish scholar has described them.⁷ Zvi Elpeleg, the Israeli ambassador to Turkey between 1995 and 1997, warned quite prophetically that a crisis in Israeli-Arab relations would not damage the Israeli-Turkish entente, but the deterioration of the situation of Palestinians undoubtedly would:

‘Their sensitivity on that point is almost as great as on the Armenian issue. Many millions in Turkey are interested in nothing outside their own borders more than the Palestinian issue; no government in Turkey can withstand the pressure of those millions.’⁸

The Turkish-Israeli alliance was from its very beginning ‘a zone of contestation over Turkey’s national orientation and yet another source of polarization between contending segments of society.’⁹ One anti-Israeli rally held on 02 February 1997 – the so-called Jerusalem Day organised by the Welfare Party’s mayor of Sincan, an Ankara suburb to protest Israel’s occupation of East Jerusalem – in which the Iranian ambassador to Turkey participated, even served as a symbolic pretext for a “postmodern coup” toppling the Islamist Welfare Party government led by Necmettin Erbakan. Public opinion, however, had little impact on the course of foreign policy. The latter was structured by elite military and secularist civil bureaucracy whose decisions and recommendations were more often than not passively adopted by the elected government. Thus, the military cooperation agreements of 1996 were signed by Deputy Chief of General Staff Çevik Bir although government officials apparently had only a vague idea about their content. The same was true of the Turkish public, which could hardly

form a picture of the extent of Turkish-Israeli ties from the snippets of information leaked to the press, let alone express an opinion.¹⁰ It stood to reason that the situation might easily be overturned by a strong, popular government boasting a comfortable parliamentary majority, nationwide support and the ability to resist pressures from the non-elected military-secular establishment and respond to voters.

What many observers found surprising was therefore not that Israeli-Turkish relations reached a freezing point a couple of years after the populist Justice and Development Party, an offshoot of Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party, assumed power in 2002. Rather, it was the fact it took so long. This was, however, a serious misreading of AKP's policy both domestically and abroad. The first term of AKP rule was actually characterised by a tidal wave of pro-European democratisation reforms that astonished everyone, including party supporters. This dynamism soon reverberated across foreign policy. Ahmet Davutoğlu, first chief foreign policy advisor to Erdoğan and from 2009 the minister of foreign affairs, developed the fresh concept of "strategic depth", which was propped on two pillars: "geographical depth" and "historical depth." The former denoted the fact that Turkey, an heir to the vast, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Ottoman Empire, was a nation of multiple identities and spheres of influence (being at once a Mediterranean, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, European and Black Sea country), while the latter spotlighted Turkey's far-reaching historical and cultural roots across the entire region. By building on these strategic depths, Turkey was said to be able to establish multiple cross-regional alliances and reach out to every country willing to cooperate. Davutoğlu's contention that Turkey had 'zero problems with its neighbours' soon manifested itself not only in an unparalleled dynamism in Turkish foreign policy, but also in a serious and quite successful attempt to mend its ties with most countries in the region.¹¹

Under these conditions, there was no place for anything like Erbakan's provocative rhetoric about Israel. On the other hand, there was also no 'objective necessity' to maintain close military ties at all costs:¹² the Israeli-Turkish bond was premised on perceived common threats to national security, stemming particularly from Syria and Iran (which supported Kurdish separatism in Turkey and threatened the existence of the State of Israel) and a rising wave of Islamic fundamentalism, as well as on the prospect of mutually beneficial military cooperation (driven by the need for modern weaponry in Turkey's case). There may

also have been the added psychological pull of a ‘common sense of otherness’¹³ – both countries considered themselves to be secular, democratic and pro-Western in a hostile Arab environment – but the bond was essentially a security pact that had little to do with sympathies. Moreover, the Turkish military used the rapprochement with Israel for domestic political gains: in its crusade against *irtica*, or religious reactionism, it tried to embarrass and intimidate the pro-Islamic Welfare Party and counteract the government’s stillborn attempts to fasten Turkey to the Islamic world.¹⁴

When, in the context of Turkey’s new multi-directional foreign policy and search for new markets for its booming economy, relations improved substantially with countries like Syria and Iran – previously seen as posing a high risk – and both domestic and foreign policy entered a process of desecuritisation, the special relationship with Israel shed a good deal of its attraction. Turkish foreign policy began to be formulated by elected politicians and foreign policy experts rather than dictated by the security establishment. The military itself was not immune to this changing environment or a total stranger to the reorientation of Turkey’s foreign policy, as the public statements of high-ranking officers make clear. At any rate, it accepted the new status quo silently if only because on the one hand, it saw the advantages of a powerful Turkey in the international arena, and, on the other, the army could hardly oppose a strong, highly popular and successful government if it wanted to hang on to any legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Warning and Kardaş are, however, right, when they say that ‘[t]aking Ahmet Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth doctrine as a blue-print for the JDP [AKP]’s foreign policy, there is much reason to assume that Turkey’s recent engagement in the Middle East has not been an inevitable result of the post-Cold war ‘anarchy,’ but to a large extent the outcome of its identity politics.’¹⁵ Ending the unconditional, and often unreciprocated orientation to the West and taking advantage of Turkey’s unique identity (both Western and Eastern, open to the coexistence of Islam, modernity and secularism, and thus, able to speak both to the West and the Islamic world), was seen as both an alternative to the clash of civilisations and a model to be emulated by other countries in the Middle East.¹⁶ This turn was also perceived as more a sign of Turkey’s “European nature” than an indicator of its “Middle Easternisation.” One scholar put it, “Turkey is acting as a European country in the Middle

East, just as Greece is seen as a European country in the Balkans, rather than a Balkan country in Europe.¹⁷

In this context, it becomes less surprising that Ankara entertained friendly relations with Israel even under the “Islamic democrats” and despite its expanding relations with Arab countries and public antipathies. Israel’s Operation Cast Lead (OCL) against Hamas, ordered by Ehud Olmert on 27 December 2008, which left hundreds of Gazans dead, was the first sign of a looming rift. Syria immediately withdrew from the peace negotiations with Israel which were being brokered by Turkey. Erdoğan was not only appalled by what he saw as a brutal war against civilians, but also deeply offended that this operation, prepared totally unbeknownst to the Turkish government, thwarted all his efforts at mediating between Syria and Israel. This was followed by Erdoğan’s lashing out at Shimon Peres in a panel discussion on Palestine at the Davos Annual Meeting in January 2009, and later, in October 2010, by a diplomatic scandal (dubbed the “low seat crisis” in Turkey) when Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon humiliated the Turkish ambassador Oğuz Çelikkol before TV cameras in response to the broadcasting of an anti-Israeli soap opera on Turkish state TV.¹⁸ After this, Turkish-Israeli relations soured, but were far from being irreparably damaged. The breaking point came only after 31 May 2010, when Israeli armed forces launched an attack in international waters on *Mavi Marmara*, a ship operated by a Turkish Islamic NGO (İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation) and supposedly carrying humanitarian aid with the aim of breaking through the blockade of Gaza. This attack killed nine Turkish activists on board.

This incident had an immense impact on public opinion (as is discussed below) and on the political establishment which Israel had crudely underestimated. Turkey withdrew from the Reliant Mermaid naval exercise, which was planned for 05 July 2010 and had been carried out regularly by Turkey, Israel and the US over the previous 10 years, and demanded a formal apology, compensation for the families of those killed and an end to the naval blockade of Gaza. Despite the tension, both sides apparently still believed in the possibility of salvaging the Israeli-Turkish partnership. The Turkish media reported that in secret negotiations held between 18 and 19 July 2011, both sides had almost reached an agreement (including on an apology and compensation), but due to the opposition of Israel’s Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, this was never finalised.¹⁹ After Israel failed to comply with

Petr
Kučera

Turkish demands, Ankara decided, in September 2011, to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary and suspend all military cooperation, and the Turkish parliament dissolved its Israel Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group.

The situation was aggravated when Israel embarked on a process of forging closer ties with Greece and (Greek) Cyprus. While June and August 2011 saw the historic visits of the Greek prime minister to Israel and Israeli prime minister to Greece – a country traditionally supportive of the Palestinians and cooperation with Arab states – Israel and (south) Cyprus agreed on cooperation to exploit oil and natural gas deposits in the Mediterranean within a so-called economic exclusive zone – a move Ankara perceived as directed against the interests of Turkish Northern Cyprus. The possibility of a triple alliance among Greece, Turkey's traditional rival, and (South) Cyprus and Israel only added fuel to the fire and intensified the Israeli-Turkish stand-off. This all generated an explosive situation in which realpolitik easily gave way to rhetoric. It is hardly surprising that the tension was both accompanied and fomented by displays of anti-Israeli sentiment in Turkey. And it is this aspect of the tension between Turkey and Israel that the second part of this study will explore..

Israel in the Turkish Public and Media Discourse

There is little doubt about the preoccupation of the Turkish public with Palestine, which has both religious and historical roots. From the beginning of OCL, anti-Israel imagery and rhetoric mushroomed. A 13-episode television series called *Separation: Palestine in Love and War* about the suffering of Palestinians under the Israeli occupation and abounding in scenes depicting Israeli soldiers committing all imaginable atrocities against women and children especially, was broadcast by the Turkish public channel TRT 1 in the second half of 2009 and drew angry responses from Israel. More than 2 million people in Turkey saw the movie *The Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* (2011), which featured the Turkish James Bond-cum-Rambo Polat Alemdar on a mission to capture Commander Moshe Ben Eliezer, an alleged mastermind of attacks on humanitarian flotillas to besieged Gaza and a ruthless killer of innocent Palestinians. The film, whose opening scenes were shot aboard the real *Mavi Marmara*, bears more resemblance to a computer game, with the main hero and his friends shooting every Israeli soldier in range. One episode of the extremely popular TV series *Valley of the*

Wolves, on which the movie was based, had already spurred accusations of anti-Semitism for its depiction of its Turkish superhero shooting a Mossad agent dead in a building owned by the Israeli embassy as blood splayed over the Star of David. These TV series and the film had certain elements in common: their depiction of Israel as a racist, land-hungry empire of evil akin to Nazi Germany, and their dehumanising of Israeli society and legitimising (and even glorifying) of violence against Israeli targets. The legendary Turkish “soft power” – its soap operas which have mass followings across the Arab world and the Balkans – can be very harsh when it comes to Israel.

Examples of anti-Israeli sentiments were not restricted to the silver screen. Tens of thousands of protesters poured onto the streets during OCL and after the *Mavi Marmara* incident to denounce Israel (‘Israel is a killer!’ and ‘Down with Israel!’ were the most repeated slogans), and during sport events, players and fans alike expressed affection for Gaza and disdain for Israel.²⁰ Campaigns, some organised by municipalities and the state-run Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı*), took place all over the country to raise money for Gaza (while also, quite naturally, indulging in harsh “anti-Israelism”). Posters addressing Israelis and proclaiming ‘You cannot be a child of Moses!’ were prepared by the Islamic-oriented Dayanışma Vakfı (Solidarity Foundation) and seen on billboards belonging to the Istanbul municipality. At the height of OCL in January 2009, Hüseyin Çelik, the Turkish Minister of Education, issued a circular urging primary and secondary schools to hold moments of silence in commemoration of the young Palestinians who had lost their lives at the hands of the Israeli army. It also announced a drawing and essay competition on the theme of ‘the human drama in Palestine.’

It would be easy to continue listing these examples that reveal the “Palestine obsession” of the Turkish public and state officials and their stereotyping of Israel. The line between criticism of Israel’s policies and anti-Semitism in these instances is very thin. While there is constant denial of the harbouring of anti-Jewish feelings – politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens alike often shrug off the spectre of anti-Semitism as a Western invention, non-existent in Turkish culture or Islam – public surveys show quite the opposite. A poll conducted in mid-2009 highlighted that most respondents (57%) would not want to have atheist families for their neighbours, with Jewish (42%) and Christian (35%) families following next behind. Jews were also the

least trusted group when it comes to their attachment to the Turkish Republic (based on the word of 48% of those polled).²¹ A survey carried out by SETA in mid-2010 revealed Turks' general distrust of other nationalities, with Armenians and Jews leading the chart of the most suspect ethnic groups (for 73.9 % and 71.5%, respectively).²² And, finally, in an opinion poll from 2011, Israel was pronounced the second biggest threat to Turkey (24%) preceded only by the US (43%).²³

Negative perceptions of Israel and Jews are sustained by a widespread sociological phenomenon in Turkey: conspiracy theories. Freemasons, Jews and *dönmes* ("converts") or crypto-Jews²⁴ and Mossad are seen as the secret evil powers pulling the strings in Turkey, as even random browsing through any Turkish bookshop will attest. This belief can reach astonishingly absurd proportions: the media, for instance, reported that peasants from Edirne held an injured, low-flying vulture for an Israeli agent who had been spying on them.²⁵

Reflecting the general sensitivity about Palestine and importance assigned to Israel in domestic affairs, newspapers give considerable space to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Turco-Israeli relations. To map how they viewed the deteriorating situation between Turkey and Israel, I examined opinion pieces and columns from two leading Turkish newspapers from January 2009 to December 2011.²⁶ This period coincided with the events that put Turkey and Israel on a collision course, starting with OCL and culminating in the freezing of diplomatic and military ties after *Mavi Marmara*. Although I did look at other types of articles for comparison, regular columns and opinion pieces were my deliberate focus. Op-eds lie at the heart of Turkish newspapers, unlike the set-up of most Western dailies, and to a large extent these columns determine the paper's editorial line and its overall policy. Many columnists are well-known public figures and influential intellectuals and enjoy something of a cult status with a mass following. Moreover, in today's polarised Turkey, certain groups of intellectuals and political movements tend to convene around specific newspapers (leftist, secular- Kemalist, Islamist, nationalist), making the debate on a wide range of issues acutely personal and politicised.

Zaman (Time), the largest Turkish newspaper with an average daily circulation of almost 1 million, can be described as a conservative, pro-government daily. It is known for its closeness to the Fethullah Gülen movement, and appeals to roughly the same people who support the ruling AKP: religious, but progressive-minded readers of all

backgrounds, especially the educated conservative middle classes. *Hürriyet* (Freedom) has a circulation of around 450 000 copies daily²⁷ and is the third best-selling Turkish newspaper after the tabloid *Posta*. It maintains a critical stance towards the government and has a pro-Western, secular-Kemalist orientation. Both dailies belong to the mainstream media and employ well-known names from the Turkish intellectual scene. They represent opposing poles in Turkish society – the religious-conservative camp on one side and the secular-Kemalist on the other – but are far away from the hardliners at either end of the spectrum, and so more representative of the population as a whole.

Petr
Kučera

OCL and Erdoğan's subsequent appearance at Davos were both spotlighted across all media, which supplied the public with daily news and images of the plight of Gazans and the brutality of Israel's incursion. Writers sympathetic to the ruling party quickly coined a nickname for Erdoğan, who received a hero's welcome on his return to Turkey: "Davos fatihi" (the Conqueror from Davos). It would be quite natural to expect some of the public sentiment to be reflected in the newspapers. *Zaman*, indeed, echoed – and in turn fed – the popular mood. Its columnists univocally condemned Israel's attack on Gaza, declaring it a genocide, a crime against humanity and state terrorism. All of them hailed Erdoğan's reproval of Shimon Peres in Davos as a morally and politically justified act and 'historic speech;' staying silent, one author claimed, would have been tantamount to 'participating in war crimes.'²⁸ Ali Bulaç and Ali Ünal, both prominent Muslim intellectuals who are very prolific on Israel,²⁹ and others sometimes shrouded their criticism in religious rhetoric, focusing on different aspects of Judaism (like the meaning of "chosen people" in the Quranic context³⁰) while at the same time dismissing allegations of anti-Semitism as alien to Islam and Turkish culture and a product of the West; such charges, they said, were readily taken up by local secular circles feeding on Western philosophies and ideologies.³¹ On the other hand, "liberal" writers like Alpay Şahin and Herkül Milas, while denouncing Israel's government, warned of the danger of identifying the policy of a state with its inhabitants; they strictly refrained from searching for religious connections and condemned any manifestation of anti-Jewish tendencies in Turkey.

Zaman regularly publishes translated articles from a wide range of Arabic newspapers, which are, as one might expect, not very sympathetic to Israel. In January 2009, it even ran an article on Israel's in-

tervention in Gaza written by Khalid Mashal, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau and published originally in a Jordanian newspaper. *Zaman* also features op-eds on Israel and the Middle East from American and British dailies and surprisingly even *Ha'aretz*. This definitely broadens the spectrum of views on Israel. Yet if we look at the kinds of articles the Turkish daily chooses, we see that most, including the *Ha'aretz* pieces, are highly critical of Israel's policies. There is a genuine feeling in the public, also shared by *Zaman*, that Turkish-Israeli relations are now being "normalised." The argument goes that the Israeli-Turkish alliance in the 1990s was forced upon the nation and its representatives by unelected senior military officials and then sustained by a tiny elite of Kemalist bureaucrats and politicians. Current foreign policy, in contrast, is said to be democratising and more responsive to voters.

Like *Zaman*, *Hürriyet* devoted a lot of space to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but with a strikingly different interpretation. *Hürriyet's* opinion articles did criticise OCL as brutal and disproportionate, and at times they even labelled it a 'massacre.' They were, however, united in condemning Hamas as also blameworthy for the situation in Gaza. *Hürriyet's* columnists pointed to the fact – totally missing from *Zaman's* commentaries – that Hamas was firing missiles at Israel and Israel's intervention was therefore at least partially justified. Moreover, in *Hürriyet's* pages Hamas was almost always described as a terrorist organisation which had rejected the universal values of 'civilisation and modernity,'³² established a cruel sharia regime and turned Gaza into a 'hell for women,' as one columnist put it.³³

In practically all *Hürriyet* columns explicitly dealing with Israel in 2009, Erdoğan was lambasted on counts including his 'rude' and 'uncivilised' behaviour and his clumsiness and unnecessarily harsh and undiplomatic words. He was also described as a thug from an Istanbul suburb, accused of crude populism and compared to Hugo Chávez and Nikita Khrushchev although many also saw Peres's emotional speech at Davos as provocative and unbalanced. There seemed to be a shared conviction among *Hürriyet's* writers that through its uncompromising attitude against Israel, Turkey had become a mouthpiece for Hamas, drifting dangerously away from the West and losing its role as an impartial mediator in the Middle Eastern peace process. AKP's policy was viewed as unprincipled for combining a benevolent response to Hamas with exaggerated critique of Israel (while remaining silent about

Darfur and the Uygurs). Alongside this, Hadi Uluengin published a series of articles on the dangers of rising anti-Semitism in Turkey (in February 2009) and painfully deconstructed the myth that anti-Jewish attitudes had always been foreign to Turkish culture. Together with *Hürriyet*'s other writers, he rejected the introduction of moments of silence for Palestinian victims as only inciting local anti-Semitism. As the Israeli-Turkish crisis unfolded, *Hürriyet*'s columnists maintained their conciliatory tone. This was clearly visible in their negative commentary on the TV series *Separation*. Some columnists seemed to comprehend Israel's irritated reaction (which they compared to Turkey's response to *Midnight Express*) and asked why the government did not take any steps against these types of soap operas.

It is barely possible to exaggerate the impact that the *Mavi Marmara* incident had on the perception of Israel in Turkey. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu repeatedly said that it was – in terms of the psychological shock it created in the state – the Turkish 9/11. In a rare gesture, the Turkish press united against Israel, regardless of political orientation, producing a strongly worded denunciation of what it took to be an act of 'state terrorism' and 'barbarism'.³⁴

Zaman's writers intensified their denunciations of Israel, calling it a rogue state, a pirate state, a country that willingly set itself apart from civilised nations, a bully in the region and a monster that could only keep a nation together through fear. Ahmet Turan Alkan described Israel as a political project that was 'the worst invention in history',³⁵ while Naci Bostancı – borrowing from Karl Jaspers's classification of (German) guilt and Zygmund Baumann's thesis that under suitable conditions anyone can become a Nazi – found parallels between Israel and the Nazi regime.³⁶ Similarly, Ali Bulaç viewed the emergence of Israel as a 'great tragedy' because the state was founded in blood – by purging the promised land of Palestinians – and later led by the 'mass murderers' who took part in these massacres; the state, he insisted, was created to appease Western imperialistic ambitions in the region.³⁷ Providing a 'dialectic reading' of Turkish-Israeli relations, Süleyman Seyfi Özgün claimed the Jews, seeking to purify themselves of the horrors of the holocaust, had forced the same bitter experience on the Palestinians, using methods that they had learned from the Nazis. Some authors asked for strong measures to be imposed on Israel, with one guest contributor declaring the attack 'a clear casus belli' and calling on the Turkish army to show its power by flying Turkish fighter jets over

the south-east Mediterranean to 'harass Israel.'³⁸ Most commentators demanded diplomatic pressure and an apology. A series of university lecturers presented different legal analyses of the incident, all coming to the conclusion that Israel had breached international law and was guilty of war crimes.

Quite widespread among *Zaman*'s columnists was the view that the storming of the *Mavi Marmara* was a deliberate attack aiming to destroy Turkey's position as an impartial broker in the Middle East and quell its growing influence in the region. This was a bid, they said, to undo Turkey's efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian crisis (which had brought Iran into collision with the US), overturn Erdoğan's rising popularity among Arabs and sow seeds of discord in Turkish society. A common thread running through a number of commentaries, especially those by Ali Ünal, hinted at or even openly alleged a connection between the *Mavi Marmara* raid and a PKK attack on a military base in İskenderun (which occurred on the same day). Israel was blamed for collaborating with Kurdish separatists to create Great Kurdistan to Israel's benefit in the region.³⁹

Despite the castigating tone of most of its articles, *Zaman* rarely slipped into the vicious anti-Israelism with anti-Semitic overtones that was prevalent in the Islamist media. *Zaman*'s success as a newspaper probably lies in the fact that it provides a space for a wide variety of opinion writers and columnists of very diverse backgrounds. Alongside op-eds denouncing the state of Israel after *Mavi Marmara*, *Zaman*, for example, published extended pieces by Lütü Özşahin, an expert on the history of religion, in which he excoriated those who called for the destruction of Israel, nurtured anti-Jewish views and encouraged the tendency to see Israeli society/Jews as a monolith by ignoring the various currents and world views that exist among today's Jewry.⁴⁰ Herkül Millas, a Greek-Turkish writer, lamented the 'martyrdom discourse' and usage of religious references in connection with *Mavi Marmara* because this only deepened the divide between 'us' and those 'others,'⁴¹ while Mümtaz'er Türköne deconstructed popular conspiracy theories. Surprisingly, Fethullah Gülen, Turkey's most influential religious leader – *Zaman* is considered his movement's flagship paper – refused to censure Israel and insisted that the activists of the "Freedom Flotilla" should have sought permission from Israel – their failure to do so was a 'sign of defying authority.'⁴²

After the *Mavi Marmara* incident, the tone changed even in *Hürriyet*,

whose writers hastened to condemn what they called ‘state terrorism’ against Turkish citizens. Many used expressions like ‘folly’ and ‘atrocities’ and described Israel’s government as ‘racist and fascist’ and ‘spoiled and aggressive’; they too spoke of a rogue state guilty of piracy in international waters. There was, however, also a feeling of palpable fear in many of these *Hürriyet* pieces about the consequences an Israel-Turkey showdown might hold for Turkey’s future. As Zeynep Güranlı rightly noted, this time it was not about rhetoric: this time blood had entered Turkish-Israeli relations.⁴³ Some authors saw this as a trap to divert Turkey away from the West and send it into the orbit of radical Islam. Journalist Ertuğrul Özkök, whose articles on Israel had always been admiring of the Jewish state and deeply critical of any hint of intolerance towards the Turkish-Jewish community, published a tellingly emotional column on 01 June 2010, one day after the *Mavi Marmara* attack. Titled ‘I call out to you, my Israeli friends,’⁴⁴ it expressed anxiety about Turkey’s shift towards the Arab world and asked the Israeli people to raise their voices against their government, which had harmed not just Turkey’s interests, but Israel’s standing in the world; its policy of brute force, he was quick to add, was ‘gradually increasing the number of fanatics among us.’ Interestingly, on the very same day that most newspapers printed articles blasting Israel in the strongest terms, Yılmaz Özdil described in great detail the constant fear that Jewish schoolchildren must live with in Turkey due to all the security measures; their ‘shivers of fear,’ he wrote, were not worth less than those of Palestinian children.⁴⁵ Other voices, notably Özdemir İnçe, offered a more nuanced view of the incident than most newspaper contributors. Questioning the real aims of the organisers of the “Freedom Flotilla,” he hinted at İHH’s ‘paramilitary structure’ and yearning for martyrdom. While condemning the attack itself, most op-eds in *Hürriyet* called for calmness and an investigation of the incident; there was a prevailing sense that it would be a mistake to end all dialogue with Israel. What all these writers agreed on was that it would be extremely difficult to erase this tragic event from the collective memory of the Turkish people and the Turkey-Israeli alliance was too precious to sacrifice now – a formal apology by Israel was seen as the first step to resuming normal relations.⁴⁶

The extent to which “Israel” penetrated the media and everyday political discourse was also apparent from the fact that accusing one’s opponent of being “Israel’s lawyer” became a very popular game in Tur-

Petr
Kučera

key after OCL. It was not just media outlets who accused each other of supporting Israel or even being on its payroll,⁴⁷ but also politicians. The leaders of the two strongest parties in Turkey, the ruling AKP and opposing leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), each devoted a lot of energy to rebuking one another for being proxies of Israel. The debate heated up in September 2011 with news of plans to station a NATO anti-missile radar in Turkey, a move seen as designed to protect Israel.

Conclusion

By following the tensions between Israel and Turkey over the three-year "crisis period" between 2009 and 2011, we can easily see that the topic of Israel has a semiotic power for the public which only a few other policy issues possess in Turkey. *Mavi Marmara* was undoubtedly the breaking point since it was widely understood as an affront to Turkey's national pride and an attack on the country's growing influence in the region. But the policy on Israel appears to have been driven at least as much by emotion as strategy since OCL. The loosening of Turkish-Israeli ties was the result of both external geopolitical shifts and domestic changes. The gradually fading clout of the old Kemalist guard in public affairs and the waning political power of the military since AKP's victory in 2002 enabled a "marginalised majority" from the conservative Muslim middle classes to make its images, symbols, values, world views and attitudes prominent, acceptable and even preferable to the public. This can at least partially explain the visibility of "Muslim solidarity" with Palestine and a hostility to Israel very rarely seen to such an extent in the previous decade in mainstream media or public demonstrations. We may infer that even in the absence of OCL and *Mavi Marmara*, the Turkish-Israeli alliance would inevitably have lost its vigour. With the pendulum swinging back in favour of the religiously-oriented classes in Turkey, secular-Kemalist circles quite naturally expressed anxiety about the direction the country was moving in. As this study has tried to demonstrate, this was very much manifest in the discussion on Israel in newspaper commentaries. *Zaman*, the voice of the emerging Muslim bourgeoisie, pigeonholed Israel as a state filled with violence and engaged in the violation of universal human norms, but gave very few glimpses of the actual workings of Israeli politics or society. While *Hürriyet* stood out from the general discussion on Israel by offering alternative views, even this seemed to be done mostly for domestic purposes: secular-Kemalist writers saw

the growing divide between Turkey and Israel and the rapprochement with the Arab world and Iran as another sign of the creeping Islamisation of the country and a threat to its secular order and pro-Western orientation. As Anat Levin, who analysed Turkish and Israeli media in the late 1990s, observed (about both countries), there was a lack of 'genuine understanding of the other side's frame of reference' and only 'rarely insight into the context within which the other country is operating'.⁴⁸

Connecting tensions with Israel with Turkey's most burning issue, the Kurdish problem, as many newspapers and politicians were quick to do, was further proof of how fast the public perception of a country might change in a setting overloaded with emotions, rumours, conspiracy theories and stereotypes: while in the 1990s the Turkish-Israeli alliance had been considered a great asset in the fight against the PKK, and the ability of Mossad and Israeli armed forces to monitor PKK's activities exaggerated, after OCL and *Mavi Marmara*, the media, politicians and the public immediately began to "discover" clandestine connections between Israel and Kurdish separatists, and again shift the issue of Israel to the national identity debate.

The current debate on Israel in the media and across the political spectrum confirms the unfortunate prospect that it will take a long time to mend Turkish-Israeli relations politically and probably even longer to change public opinion. Outside observers sometimes wrongly associate the possibility of a renewed Israeli-Turkish alliance with a future change of government in Turkey (and/or in Israel). This seems fairly spurious, however, as almost no party (unless backed by the military or plotting secretly as in the 1990s) would be able to maintain its legitimacy while taking a unilaterally reconciliatory approach to Israel. One positive sign that Israeli-Turkish relations are not doomed to break down altogether is the steady growth of business relations between the two countries regardless of political tensions: trade between Turkey and Israel was up by 24.5% between 2009 and 2010, and by 22.7% to \$4.449 billion in 2011 from \$3.440 billion in 2010 (with imports from Israel climbing by more than 50%).⁴⁹

On the other hand, it can be assumed that unless there is a major breakthrough on the Palestinian question, a serious settlement between Israel and Turkey on *Mavi Marmara* and general acceptance of Turkey's new role in the region, the public debate and formulations of foreign policy are unlikely to change.

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Notes

- 1 Anonymous (2002), 'AK Party Sees No Change in Israel Ties,' *Hürriyet Daily News*, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?page-id=438&n=ak-party-sees-no-change-in-israel-ties-2002-11-08>.
- 2 Amikam Nachmani (1998), 'The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie,' *Middle East Quarterly*, pp. 19-29.
- 3 This article reflects the state of affairs at the time when it was first written (spring 2012). Some slight changes have been made to include information about the current situation in the spring of 2014. The focus of the essay is, however, the crisis period from 2009 to 2011, and no attempt has been made to analyse the media discourse after that time.
- 4 Çağrı Erhan and Ömer Kürkçüoğlu (2010), 'Relations with Non-Arab States,' in Baskın Oran (ed.) (2010), *Turkish Foreign Policy 1919-2006. Fact and Analysis with Documents*. University of Utah Press, p. 871.
- 5 For a detailed analysis, see the relevant chapters in Oran (2010). See also Joseph Codispoti (2000), *Star and Crescent. Turco-Israeli Partnership in a Tough Neighborhood*. Maxwell Papers 22, Air War College: Maxwell; Suha Bolukbasi (2009), 'Behind the Turkish-Israeli Alliance: A Turkish View,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29/1, pp. 21-35; Nachmani (1998); Daniel Pipes (1997/98), 'A New Axis: The Emerging Turkish-Israeli Entente,' *National Interest*, available at: www.danielpipes.org/article/293.
- 6 For the views of one of the architects of the alliance, Turkey's then deputy chief of general staff Çevik Bir, see Çevik Bir and Martin Sherman (2002), 'Formula for Stability: Turkey Plus Israel,' *Middle East Quarterly*, IX/4, pp. 23-32.
- 7 Gökhan Bacık (2001), 'The Limits of an Alliance: Turkish-Israeli Relations Revisited,' *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23/3, pp. 49-63.
- 8 Elpeleg was quoted in *Ha'aretz* on September 30, 1997, cited in Amikam Nachmani (2003). *Turkey: Facing a New Millennium: Coping with Intertwined Conflicts*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 209.
- 9 M. Hakan Yavuz (1997), 'Turkish-Israeli Relations through the Lens of the Turkish Identity Debate,' *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 27/1, p.23.
- 10 Kılıç Buğra Kanat (2011), 'Türk-İsrail ilişkilerinde 96'dan bugüne değişenler,' *Zaman*, available at: <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haber-no=1186602&title=yorum-dr-kilic-bugra-kanat-turkisrail-iliskiler>

- inde-96dan-bugune-degisenler.
- 11 See Ahmet Sözen (2010), 'A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges,' in Barry Rubin (ed.) (2010) *Islamization of Turkey under the AKP Rule*. Routledge, pp.101-121.
 - 12 Birol Akgün (2009), 'Ortadoğu'da bozulan ezberler veya Türkiye-İsrail ilişkilerine balans ayarı,' *Zaman*, available at: <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=819296&title=yorum-birol-akgun-ortadoguda-bozulan-ezberler-veya-turkiyeisrail-iliskilerine-balans-ayari>.
 - 13 Alan Makovsky (1996), 'Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Turkish 'Periphery Strategy'?' in Henri J. Barkey (ed.) (1996), *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 169.
 - 14 Other reasons given to explain Turkey's willingness to cooperate with Israel, such as the need for an ally on the Cyprus issue, efforts to increase Turkey's strategic importance in the eyes of the West after the end of the Cold War and the benefit of having the powerful American Jewish lobby on side to offset the anti-Turkish Armenian and Greek lobbies, were rather a secondary calculation. Undoubtedly, the Madrid conference (December 1991) and Oslo Peace Process (1993) helped to legitimise the alliance.
 - 15 Martina Warning and Tuncay Kardaş (2011), 'The Impact of Changing Islamic Identity on Turkey's New Foreign Policy Alternatives,' *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 10/2-3, p. 150.
 - 16 Ibid, p.154.
 - 17 Tarık Oğuzlu (2008), 'Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy: Does Turkey Dissociate from the West?' *Turkish Studies* 9/1, p.16.
 - 18 Çelikkol has presented his views of the crises and Turkish-Israeli relations in a recently published book *One Minute'ten Mavi Marmara'ya. Türkiye - İsrail Çatışması* [From 'One Minute' to Mavi Marmara. The Conflict between Turkey and Israel] (2014). Istanbul: Doğan Kitap.
 - 19 Kadri Gürsel of *Milliyet* claimed to have personally seen and studied the document. Gürsel (2011), 'Türkiye-İsrail: Yeniden düşünmek-2,' *Milliyet*, available at: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/turkiye-israil-yeniden-dusunmek-2/kadri-gursel/tvrehberi/yazardetay/21.11.2011/1465363/default.htm>.
 - 20 In fairness, it should be acknowledged that some instances of hate-inciting behaviour towards Israel were prosecuted. A lawsuit was brought against sports fans who shouted anti-Israel slogans during a Eurocup volleyball match between Turkey and Israel in July 2011. Erdoğan also spoke openly of anti-Semitism as 'a crime against humanity' at the Davos conference in 2009.
 - 21 The poll was conducted by Frekans with the support of the European Commission delegation to Turkey between May 18 and June 18, 2009. It can be accessed at: www.turkyahudileri.com/images/stories/dokumanlar/farkli_kimliklere_yahudilige_bakis_algi_arastirmasi_090930.pdf.
 - 22 Ahmet İnsel (2011), 'Biz 'biz'i sever miyiz?', *Radikal*, available online at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1048071&Yazar=AHMET-INSEL&CategoryID=97>.
 - 23 The poll was conducted by Metropoll across different Turkish provinces

Petr
Kučera

- between December 25 and 29, 2010. Available at: www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkiye-siyasal-durum-arastirmasi-aralik-2010.
- 24 Historically, *dönmes* are descendants of the Jewish followers of the self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zevi, who converted to Islam in Istanbul in the 17th century. See, for example, Jacob Landau (2007), 'The Dönmes: Crypto-Jews under Turkish Rule,' *Jewish Political Studies Review*. 19:1-2, pp. 109-118.
 - 25 *Hürriyet*, January 1, 2011.
 - 26 I looked at the online versions of both periodicals (www.hurriyet.com.tr and www.zaman.com.tr), which to my knowledge include the same opinion articles and columns as the printed versions plus additional commentaries only available online.
 - 27 The average daily sales of *Zaman* fluctuated between 825 000 (in the first week of January 2009) and 980,000 (in the last week of March 2012); the equivalent figures for *Hürriyet* were 524 000 and 421 000, respectively. For precise numbers, see <http://medyatava.com/tiraj.asp>. These statistics do not take into account the (presumably large) pass-along and online readership. According to some figures, *Hürriyet* is the most widely read online newspaper, while *Zaman* is only the fifth most popular: see <http://www.xgazete.com/net-tiraj.php>.
 - 28 Ekrem Dumanlı (2009), 'Lütfen biraz samimiyet! Ya Erdoğan tepki vermeseydi?', *Zaman*, available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekrem-dumanli/lutfen-biraz-samimiyet-ya-erdogan-tepki-vermeseydi_810699.html.
 - 29 Ali Bulaç (b. 1951) has written several books on Islam and politics and regularly appears in TV discussions. Ali Ünal (b. 1955) writes extensively on Islam and has translated many works by Fethullah Gülen as well as the Quran into English.
 - 30 See, for example, Turan Alkan (2009) "İsrailoğulları, gerçekten günah keçisi mi?", available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ahmet-turan-alkan/israilogullari-gercekten-gunah-kecisi-mi_819727.html.
 - 31 See, for example, Ali Bulaç (2009) 'Yahudi Düşmanlığı,' available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ali-bulac/yahudi-dusmanligi_805289.html, and (2010) 'Antisemitizm ve İslam,' available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ali-bulac/antisemitizm-ve-islam_993291.html, or M. Naci Bostancı (2009), 'Türkiye ile İsrail arasındaki 'Ayrılık'', available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-m-naci-bostanci-turkiye-ile-israil-arasindaki-ayrilik_905846.html.
 - 32 Bekir Coşkun (2009), 'Koyun ve bacağı...', available at: http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/10862314_p.asp.
 - 33 Mehmet Yılmaz (2009), "Hamas'a duydukları sevginin nedeni," available at: http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/10837302_p.asp.
 - 34 Most newspapers from June 1, 2010, spoke about 'state terrorism' (which was the headline in *Milliyet*, *Türkiye*, *Haber Türk*), 'barbarism' and a 'massacre'. *Zaman* and *Hürriyet* ran similar headlines: 'The Whole World in Up-roar' and 'World in Uproar'. The tabloid *Posta*, the second most popular newspaper in Turkey, said simply 'Israel Has Gone Mad'. The headline in the leftist *Cumhuriyet* read 'Israel Has Attacked Humanity' and was echoed

- by *Radikal*'s 'Bullets against Humanity'. *Sabah* proclaimed a 'Global Intifada against Israel's Massacre', while *Vatan* wrote of 'A Shameful Act'. Islamist newspapers heaped slurs on Israel, with headlines like 'Hitler's Children: They Only Know How to Kill' (*Yeni Şafak*) and 'Zionist Dogs' (*Vakit*).
- 35 A. Turan Alkan (2010), 'İsrail: Tarihin en kötü icadı', available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ahmet-turan-alkan/israil-tarihin-en-kotu-ica-di_990693.html.
 - 36 M. Naci Bostancı (2010), "Cezai, siyasi, ahlaki ve metafizik suçluluk," available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-m-naci-bostanci-cezai-siyasi-ahlaki-ve-metafizik-sucluluk_993348.html.
 - 37 Ali Bulaç (2011), 'Nekbe!', May 19, available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/ali-bulac/nekbe_1136041.html.
 - 38 Vedat Gürbüz (2010), "Mavi Marmara İsrail'i derinden vurdu", available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-doc-dr-m-vedat-gurbuz-mavi-marmara-israili-derinden-vurdu_990691.html.
 - 39 This view seems to be rather pervasive in the Turkish media and even among politicians. AKP's general vice president Hüseyin Çelik and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the chairman of the main opposition party (CHP), seriously doubted that the two attacks were unrelated (see *Radikal*, May 31, 2010).
 - 40 Lütfü Özşahin (2010), 'İsrail niçin bu kadar gergin?', available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-lutfu-ozsahin-israil-nicin-bu-kadar-gergin_941179.html; (2009), 'Bütün Yahudiler aynı mıdır?', available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-lutfu-ozsahin-butun-yahudiler-ayni-midir_816830.html.
 - 41 Herkül Milas (2010), 'Onlar-biz veya biz insanlar', available at: http://www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_yorum-herkul-millas-onlar-biz-veya-biz-insanlar_993003.html.
 - 42 Joe Lauria (2010), 'Reclusive Turkish Imam Criticizes Gaza Flotilla,' *Wall Street Journal*, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704025304575284721280274694>.
 - 43 Zeynep Güranlı (2010), 'İsrail'le ilişkilerde şimdi ne olacak', available at: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/14889261.asp?gid=373>.
 - 44 Ertuğrul Özkök (2010), 'Size sesleniyorum İsraili dostlarım', available at: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/14896168.asp>.
 - 45 Yusuf Özdil (2010), 'Mavi Marmara', available at: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/14895528.asp>.
 - 46 Through its prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's government did indeed apologise to Turkey in March 2013 for the *Mavi Marmara* incident almost three years earlier, and expressed its willingness to compensate the victims of the raid. Nevertheless, matters have become more complicated since May 2014 when the Istanbul 7th Court of Serious Crimes ordered the arrest of four Israeli commanders who were allegedly involved in the raid on the *Mavi Marmara*. Thus, normal relations between Turkey and Israel have not been resumed to date.
 - 47 The most famous case is *Vakit*'s public allegation that Doğan Media Group, owner of *Hürriyet*, was part of an Israeli media consortium. In a fierce campaign, the paper also accused Özdemir İnce of being a traitor and lawyer

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for Israel (*Vakit*, June 10, 2010). Other newspapers (including *Zaman*) frequently spit fire at (unnamed) 'pro-Israeli' Turkish media.

48 Anat Levin (2010), "Turkey and Israel: Reciprocal and Mutual Imagery in the Media, 1994-1999," *Journal of International Affairs* 54/1 (2000), p. 240.

49 This data has been compiled from statistics published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (www.turkstat.gov.tr).