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TURKEY AND ISRAEL: AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP*

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Turkey's Rapprochement with Israel

The end of the Cold War led to a breakdown of the equilibrium in world politics and a new equilibrium has yet to emerge. The bipolar characteristic of power distribution has disappeared and a transition to multipolar politics has begun but has not yet been completed. The post-Cold War era is marked by a great degree of uncertainty which has precipitated cooperation among those states affected by this uncertainty. The Middle East is one region impacted by the precarious security environment. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has responded to global and regional changes by reformulating its foreign policy. Faced with uncertainty regarding its borders and its identity, Turkey has forged new alliances, one of which includes Turkey's emerging "strategic alliance" with Israel as part and parcel of this reformulation.

We will analyze the Turkish-Israeli axis by posing the following questions. What Turkish security interests would a pro-Israeli foreign policy serve in the post-Cold War world? What kind of strategic realignment is emerging between Turkey and Israel, and what impact will that alliance have on Middle Eastern security, if any? A related question is the impact of the politics of water on cooperation between Turkey and Israel.

Water is becoming an essential component of political power in the Middle East, a region where water is scarce. Turkey is one of the few states in the Middle East which enjoys abundant ground-water resources. Since natural resources are an important element of a country's power when dealing with other states, Turkey's water resources give it power vis-a-vis other Middle Eastern countries. Indeed, water can play a number of different roles. It can be utilized to generate common interests between parties in conflict, or it can be used to threaten one's opponents. In this respect it can be a tool for building consensus or become a source of conflict. For example, in December 1993 the Tansu Ciller government threatened to limit the flow of water into Syria in retaliation for Syrian support of the Kurdish separatist movements opposed to Turkey.

As a tool for cooperation, the role of water is recognized as the subject of one of the five working groups in the multilateral negotiations that are part of the Middle East "peace process". In their joint invitation to the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, President Bush of the United States and President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union listed the settlement of "water" issues as crucial for peace and stability in the region.¹ Since water is a major input into agriculture and industry, the determination of equitable water rights and the

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setting of "economic" water charges will be essential for optimal development of both Palestinian and Israeli agriculture. Since it has become fashionable to say that the next war in the Middle East could be fought over water,² Turkey, by providing cheap water on a reliable basis, may be able to decrease tension in the region surrounding the allocation of this scarce resource.

In October 1991, the late Turkish president Turgut Özal had scheduled a water summit for the Middle East but was forced to postpone the meeting due to Syrian opposition to Israeli participation. The Turkish government has suggested a number of projects for the sale of water to the Middle East, specifically to Israel. There is also a proposed peace water pipeline project for the transportation of water from Turkey to Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, to reap the true benefits of such a pipeline, peace between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon is a must.

Since the early 1980s, water has become one of the major foreign In discussing the growing pattern of cooperation between Turkey and Israel, we will look at Turkish motivations for rapprochement with Israel, focus on the various conflicts of interest, and analyze the emergent alliance between Turkey and Israel.

Turkey's Motivations

Süleyman Demirel, president of Turkey since June 1993, has summarized the motives behind the Turkish-Israeli axis as follows: "Turkey and Israel have decided on regional cooperation for increasing the economic welfare of the region and curbing terrorism".³

The Turkish rapprochement with Israel is a result of the interplay of a number of factors: the end of the Cold War, the 1990-91 Gulf War, Turkey's Kurdish problem, and the Israeli-Arab peace process. Turkey has always toyed with the idea of closer ties with Israel and there was always a political will to associate with Israel, yet the favorable environment for this endeavor emerged only in the 1990s.

From 1945 to 1989, Turkey held an integral position within the Western security system because of its role as a buffer state against the Soviet Union. This position enabled acceptance of Turkey as part of the European state system. On the other hand, Turkey is isolated in the Arab Middle East because of its imperial past, i.e., the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, and because of its perceived break with Islam, i.e., the secular form of government in Turkey since 1924. It moved further away from its Muslim Arab neighbors during the Cold War era and allied itself with the West, the United States in particular. Since 1989, Turkey's reluctantly acknowledged incorporation into the West has been challenged. The dismantling of the Soviet Union has raised questions with regard to Turkey's continuing importance as a security partner of the West.⁴ The emerging security order in Europe has not fully embraced Turkey as did the post-World War II European organizations.⁵ With the turn of events at the end of the Cold War, Turkey has become acutely aware that it is not welcome in the Arab Middle East, but neither is it comfortably accepted in the Western camp. In the post-Cold War era, Turkey finds itself in a turbulent security environment marked by volatility and instability. Such regional destabilizers as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Iran have alerted Turkey to the dangers of isolation and marginality within the global and regional security order leading it to find new allies, with Israel the most likely candidate. Thus, the first factor that triggered Turkey's rapprochement with Israel was this awareness of its increased seclusion in the post-Cold War era.

The second factor leading to rapprochement was the 1990-91 Gulf War which erupted in the precarious environment of this post-Cold War Middle East. The Gulf War confirmed that the Middle East region continues to be a major source of instability with the potential to threaten global security. In addition, the Gulf War demonstrated that Turkey is still important for Western security despite the fact that its role as a buffer against the Soviet Union has ended. Finally, the Gulf War accentuated the similarities between Turkey and Israel, two states which are not Arab yet exist in a predominantly Arab region in which neither is welcome and both are susceptible to common dangers. For example, Saddam Hussein's insistence on likening the invasion of Kuwait to Turkey's 1974 intervention in Cyprus and to the Palestinian problem highlighted the fact that Turkey and Israel have a common foe in Iraq.

The second factor that enables Turkey to pursue a pro-Israeli foreign policy more freely is the evolving Arab-Israeli peace process. Turkey recognized Israel in 1949, the first Muslim state to do so, but until the 1990s the Turkish government was reluctant to move towards closer cooperation with Israel because of Arab sensitivities. Even so, Turkey's policy towards Israel accentuated its differences with the Arab world. Nasser, for example, explicitly stated that "Turkey is disliked in the Arab world because of its Israeli policy."⁶ Turkish foreign policy traditionally has been based on a policy of non-intervention in Arab affairs. Therefore, broad cooperation with Israel was not possible as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained unsolved. Thus, until the 1990s, Turkey's ties and relations with Israel were curbed by Turkey's appeasement of its Arab neighbors. The moves toward finding a viable, lasting solution to that conflict in the post-Cold War era have altered Turkey's foreign policy towards Israel and paved the way for Turkish cooperation with Israel by reducing Turkey's anxiety at being isolated by the Arabs.

Lastly, the emerging alliance can be viewed within a broader framework with the USA as the power behind its formation. Observers of Middle Eastern politics point to the American decision to participate in joint Turkish-Israeli naval maneuvers which were scheduled for November 1997 as an indicator of such involvement. The emerging Turkish-Israeli alliance has the capacity to serve American interests in the Middle East for a number of reasons. First, the Middle East ranks very high on the American foreign policy agenda due to its economic and strategic importance. Second, the demise of the Soviet Union has increased the strategic importance of the Middle East by shifting American attention to the well-armed rogue states that represent the new threats to Western security. These rogue states defy internationally accepted rules of conduct, support terrorism, possess substantial military capabilities, are engaged in massive arms build-ups, and carry the potential to destabilize regional and global security. The American administration has labeled Iran, Iraq, and Libya as rogue regimes and Syria as having the potential to be one. Thus, a Turkish-Israeli alliance might act to counterbalance these rogue states as part of the American "dual containment policy" towards Iran and Iraq. Third, since the end of the Cold War, the US has been developing strategies to revise its role as the "global policeman" of the New World order. One such strategy is the devolution of authority and responsibility to regional powers. The United States needs regional allies to take upon themselves such tasks as regional crisis management and peace-keeping, which would then leave the US free to focus on problems of larger magnitude.⁷ Therefore, it is no coincidence that America would favor a Turkish-Israeli axis as a new power base in the Middle East, one which would decrease the level of direct American involvement in the region but still keep the American presence intact.

To sum up, Turkey's warming to Israel is directly related to the end of the Cold War and its aftershocks. The political will for closer ties with Israel always existed in Turkey, but the Cold War atmosphere prevented its realization. It was only as a result of the above-mentioned systemic changes in the 1990s that this will was able to be realized. Let us now identify the Turkish security interests that the Turkish-Israeli alliance would serve and analyze the emerging partnership. We will then review the implications of the alliance on regional balances and take a look at what the future may hold.

Turkey's Security Interests

To probe the question of what Turkish security interests would be served by an alliance with Israel requires a look at the threats to Turkey's security. Turkey is surrounded by hostile, "rogue" states against which it is caught in a struggle for power and influence for regional mastery. It has serious conflicts of interest with these states, the most visible ones involving Kurdish separatist terrorism, the distribution of water, and Islamic fundamentalism (see below).

Turkey's major domestic policy headache is its struggle with the PKK, a Kurdish separatist terrorist organization which the Turkish government has been fighting since 1984.⁸ Syrian support for Kurdish separatist terrorism constitutes the core issue in Turkish-Syrian relations. Turkey accuses Syria of supporting the PKK and of engaging in clandestine activities aimed at undermining Turkish national unity. Various Turkish officials directly point to Syrian support as an important factor contributing to the violence in

southeastern Anatolia. Although the Syrian government denies such involvement, the fact that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan resides happily in a suburb in Damascus and that PKK terrorists are trained in Syrian-controlled camps in Lebanon tells another story. In February 1996, Turkish-Syrian relations reached a low point over Syrian support for the PKK. First, the Turkish government officially demanded the surrender of Abdullah Öcalan by Syria, to no avail. Second, the so-called “truck affair” erupted when five trucks carrying weapons and explosives which the Turkish government believed were on their way to the PKK were stopped at the Syrian border.

The Kurdish problem lies at the core of Turkish-Iraqi relations as well. The political vacuum in northern Iraq and the competition for power between various Kurdish factions in the area together benefit the PKK. In an attempt to eradicate the PKK, Turkey has infiltrated into northern Iraq a number of times, the most recent Turkish moves being the “Dawn Operation” of June 1997 and September 1997. The Iraqi government and its Arab allies do not look positively on this policy of “hot pursuit” and they have condemned the Turkish government for these infiltrations on various occasions.

There are, of course, other sources of dispute between Turkey, on the one hand, and Syria and Iraq, on the other. Further causes of dispute between Turkey and Syria include the question of Hatay province,⁹ the distribution of waters from the Euphrates, Tigris, and Asi rivers, and the 1995 Syria-Greece agreement granting Greece the use of Syrian airbases. Disputes with Iraq include the question of northern Iraq, the protection of the Turkoman minority in Iraq, and the politics of water. The most controversial of these clashes of interests is the one concerning water. The politics of water is a major source of conflict in the Middle East and one which has direct implications for the Kurdish problem. Turkey is faced with a conflict of interest with Syria and Iraq over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which originate in Turkish territory and then flow into Syria and Iraq, the downstream countries. About 90% of the water from these rivers is drained from Turkish soil. Since the early 1980s, the water problem has become a major Turkish foreign policy issue because of the GAP (Güney Doğu Anadolu projesi) project — the building of dams in southeast Anatolia — using the water resources of these two rivers. The Syrian government perceives a tradeoff between its support for the PKK and the politics of water. Support for the PKK is Syria's bargaining chip, while control of the water is Turkey's; neither wants to give up its most important card. The Turkish position is that negotiations with Syria and Iraq over water will be determined by their support for the PKK. While Turkey denounces Syria and Iraq for their support for the PKK and for their alleged wish to destabilize Turkey, Syria and Iraq accuse Turkey of obstructing the flow of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into their territories.

Turkey is also suspicious of Iran's designs over Turkish internal affairs and its support for Islamic movements in Turkey. In addition, Turkey and Iran compete for influence in the former Soviet Union's Central Asian republics and in the transport of oil and natural gas. Turkish-Iranian relations went through a brief honeymoon period on the occasion of then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's visit to Iran in August 1996, during which a \$23 billion deal was signed on the transport of natural gas from Iran to Turkey. In 1997, Turco-Iranian relations soured as a result of increasing interference by various Iranian diplomats in Turkey's domestic affairs. In February 1997, the Turkish foreign ministry asked the Iranian ambassador, Muhammed Reza Bagheri, and the consul-general in Istanbul, Muhammed Reza Reshid, to leave Turkey for “violating international legal norms of diplomatic conduct”¹⁰ after Bagheri made a public speech during a “Jerusalem night” meeting organized by Bekir Yıldız, the mayor of Sincan, a municipality near Ankara. In his speech, Bagheri criticized the Turkish government's pro-Israeli foreign policy and stated Iran's support for the establishment of an Islamic state in Turkey. This event triggered a chain reaction: the Turkish army sent its tanks into Sincan, Bekir Yıldız was arrested, and Bagheri was asked to leave. Such incidents strengthen Turkish perceptions about the Iranian government's support of Islamic movements in Turkey. The crisis deepened when the Iranian consul to Erzurum, Said Zare, accused the Turkish commander, General Cevik Bir, of being irresponsible in his response denouncing Iran as a rogue state that supports terrorism. The Turkish government declared Zare “persona non grata”. In retaliation, the Iranian government asked the

Turkish ambassador and the Turkish consul in Orumieh to leave Iran. These events brought Turkish-Iranian relations to a breaking point in 1997.

In short, Turkey has serious conflicts of interests with its neighbors Syria, Iraq, and Iran over the Kurdish problem, the politics of water, the role of Islam, and their respective political influence in the region. Turkey's perception of the threats to its security is also influenced by the fact that these countries are heavily armed and are labeled as regional destabilizers. For example, there seems to be a trend in Iran towards a heavy military build-up of both nuclear and conventional weapons. In October 1997, Israeli intelligence sources pointed out the Iranian acquisition of missile technology and know-how from the Russians which extends Iran's reach well beyond 700 miles. Coupled with reports on Iranian nuclear, biological, and chemical capabilities, it takes only a little calculation to estimate the purposes for which these missiles can be used. Also, some reports indicate that Iran has increased its defense budget by 40% to \$4.7 billion in 1996-1997 for conventional arms. This massive military build-up increases Iranian capabilities and power in the region, while at the same time confirming Turkish, Israeli, and American suspicions over Iran's intentions.

Israel faces threats to its security from the same countries in the region which threaten Turkey's national security. Iran finds in Israel its arch-enemy and has now acquired missile technology and nuclear capabilities with Russian help. Iraq, during the Gulf War, opened a second front by sending its Scud missiles into Israeli territory. To top it all, Syria threatens Israel's territorial integrity and the peace process. The Israeli-Syrian conflict revolves around such issues as Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon, and Syrian support of Hamas and Hizbullah terrorists opposed to Israel. Former Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy on a number of occasions "strongly criticized the Syrians for supporting terrorist organizations and for actively aiding Hizbullah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine".¹¹ For example, from the Bekaa valley in Syrian-occupied Lebanon, Hizbullah terrorists launch rocket attacks into northern Israel. In the uncertain, volatile post-Cold War environment of the Middle East, faced with hostility from Iran and Arab states sworn to its destruction, Israel requires a reliable partner and the most likely candidate is Turkey. This idea has not been foreign to Israelis, since "Israeli traditional foreign policy had been characterized by efforts to link up with the non-Arab states, such as Turkey, in the extended Middle East".¹² There is, then, a convergence of interests between Turkey and Israel for deterring Syria, Iran, and Iraq for similar security reasons.

It was very likely, therefore, that Turkey would approach Israel in the highly volatile environment of the post-Cold War Middle East. Turkey and Israel not only share security concerns, but there are other similarities between them that make cooperation likely. Turkey and Israel are the only secular democracies in the region, both have market economies, and both are integrated into the European economic order. Their major export and import partners indicate an integration with the states of the West. The European Union is Turkey's main trading partner; the EU receives 52% of all Turkish exports, and 43.8% of Turkey's imports come from the EU. Israel's major trading partners are the US and the EU. Turkey and Israel also have similar aspirations regarding their relations with the European state system, i.e., both want to be recognized as European. Turkey has been included in the European state system since 1945. In the formulation of its identity as European, Turkey stresses the role of history, geography, and military alliance. Israel also perceives itself to be a part of "Europe" through its emphasis on Judaeo-Christian culture.

Turkey shares a vested interest with Israel in promoting stability in the highly volatile region in which it is located; they are also the only two countries in the region with the capacity to do so. Furthermore, they are similar in the problems they face: religious fundamentalist movements, economic difficulties, hostile behavior from their neighbors, and separatist movements that threaten their territorial integrity. Turkey and Israel are among the strongest military powers in the region in terms of capabilities, military expenditures, standing army, and weapons technology. Turkey had the second largest army in NATO (prior to German reunification) and Israel has superior military technology from which Turkey would undoubtedly benefit. In addition, Israel has strong American backing and the Jewish lobby in Washington has the freedom to try to

influence American foreign policy. The indirect benefits of a pro-Israel policy for Turkey may be a change in the attitudes of the American Congress, which has not been very friendly towards Turkey.

An alliance with Israel has the capacity to counterbalance the threats to Turkey's national security and to shift the power equation to Turkey's advantage. For Turkish strategic interests, "friendship" with Israel would help strengthen Turkey's position in the Middle East, curb terrorism, and deter hostile states from destabilizing Turkey. A long-term benefit would be to increase Turkey's perceived power in the region by expanding its military capabilities through the transfer of Israeli military technology and sale of weapons. Thus, pushed out and threatened by the Arab states, and not fully accepted in the Western camp, Turkey's rapprochement with Israel, the only country in the region perceived to be "like Turkey", is understandable.

There is, however, one obstacle to cooperation between Turkey and Israel: Turkey's internal politics. Turkey's position towards Israel reflects the internal dynamics and divisions in Turkish society. The fundamentalist religious groups oppose Turkey's ties with Israel, condemning Israel as a hostile enemy power which has occupied the Holy Places. In contrast, the secular military and bureaucratic elite favor ties with Israel in the post-Cold War era as a rational and realistic foreign policy decision. Relations with Israel, therefore, are a good barometer in measuring both Turkey's new stance in the Middle East as well as the relative power of Turkish domestic groups. For example, while in opposition, Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party, denounced the Turkish-Israeli axis and claimed that once in power, he would reverse the tide. After Erbakan became prime minister in June 1996, not only did his government ratify the previous agreements signed with Israel, but throughout his term until July 1997 the alliance deepened even more, and he was ineffective both in blocking further cooperation and in reversing the tide. The fact that Erbakan could not initiate a radical foreign policy change towards Israel seems to indicate that the real force behind the formation of the Turkish-Israeli axis is the Turkish military and bureaucratic elite.

The Formation of the Turkish-Israeli Axis

An analysis of developments that have unfolded since 1991 sheds some light on the nature of the strategic alliance that is emerging between Turkey and Israel. The formation of a Turkish-Israeli axis depends upon progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process which began in Madrid in September 1991. The increasing frequency of official state visits and the spiraling expansion of cooperative projects indicate the forming of a partnership. Even though the military aspects of the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement are most often discussed, its economic dimensions are also of importance. Joint agreements began with a 12-article memorandum of cooperation signed in Israel during then Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin's visit to Israel in November 1993. The memorandum addressed cultural cooperation as well as cooperation between the Turkish MIT intelligence agency and its Israeli counterpart, the Mossad. In January 1994, Israeli President Ezer Weizman met with Turkish President Süleyman Demirel in Ankara, where they agreed to extend the dialogue and ties between the two countries. In November 1994, two agreements were signed for cooperation against terrorism, drug smuggling, and with regard to communications. Also in November 1994, then Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller visited Israel and Gaza during which she declared Turkey's interest in the peace process. In 1996, Demirel visited Weizman in Israel and signed a free trade agreement on March 14.¹³ In December 1996, the Turkish-Israeli Business Council met in Istanbul to discuss the implications and implementation of the agreement, which was finally put into operation on May 28, 1997, upon ratification by the two countries' parliaments. Also in March 1996, agreements were signed regarding mutual investments and the prevention of double taxation, and negotiations began about the sale of water. On June 16, 1996, another trade agreement was signed for cooperation on industrial and agricultural technology. On December 26, 1996, Turkey and Israel signed a customs agreement for lowering tariffs. The expansion of such ties between Turkey and Israel is illustrated by the increase in volume of their bilateral trade from \$100 million in 1991 to \$500 million in 1996, with the projected goal of \$2 billion for 2000. Turkey also became one of the most popular destinations for Israeli tourists. The economic aspects of the Turkish-Israeli alliance seem

to prosper quietly as a result of the vested economic interests of both sides. These agreements and the official state visits point to the evolution of a Turkish-Israeli axis in the Middle East.

The Turkish-Israeli strategic axis, however, was formed along the lines of military cooperation. On February 23, 1996, Turkey and Israel signed a military education and cooperation agreement which foresaw the exchange of military personnel and aircraft, and granted the right to visit and to use ports and air bases in each other's countries.¹⁴ This agreement involves Israeli assistance in training Turkish military personnel and intelligence units. On August 26, 1996, the two countries expanded the February agreement to include joint military training and increased military exchanges, and agreed to a deal in which Israel Aircraft Industries would upgrade the Turkish Air Force's F-4 Phantom jets. This pact included a five-year deal to upgrade fighter bombers and to install avionics and navigation systems, and radar and electronic warfare capabilities. The August agreement constituted the second military pact for the Turkish-Israeli axis. In December 1996, the two countries agreed on joint air and naval maneuvers. These pacts opened each country's airspace to the other's air force. During Turkish Chief of Staff Ismail Hakki Karadayi's visit to Israel in February 1997, the first Turkish Chief of Staff to make such a visit, joint air and naval military maneuvers were planned for 1997-1998 and the sides agreed to intensify their exchange of intelligence information. The Turkish military has agreed to adopt Israeli military technology and strategy, especially in air force operations. In April 1997, Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy visited Ankara. This visit was followed immediately by Turkish Minister of Defense Turhan's and then General Cevik Bir's visits to Israel. Lastly, in October 1997, Israeli Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak visited Turkey to return Karadayi's visit. During Shahak's visit, the sides agreed on the sale of certain weapons from Israel to Turkey and on the modernization of Turkish armed forces' tanks by Israel. In addition, Shahak and Karadayi reached an agreement on joint weapons production, starting with the Israeli Merkava III tank. The agenda of these meetings was not made totally public, but it probably also included intelligence sharing, joint naval operations, regional balance of power concerns, and mutual threats to security.

The above-mentioned military pacts were put into operation in 1997. For example, Turkish naval vessels visited the Israeli port of Haifa in June 1997 within the framework of Turkey's SeaWolf-97 exercises. A joint naval exercise between Turkey, Israel, and the American Sixth Fleet was planned for November 30-December 4, 1997. The declared purpose of the joint naval exercise — Reliant Mermaid — was preparation for natural disasters. The Turkish navy's visit to Haifa in June 1997 and the joint naval exercise planned for late 1997 were demonstrations of Turkish-Israeli military cooperation and power. Such exercises can be perceived as signals for the shared defense and security interests of both countries. In addition, there are reports indicating that Israeli military personnel provided planning and technical assistance to the Turkish army in its incursions into northern Iraq in June and September 1997. One indirect but highly relevant development involves the sale of weapons to Turkey. In 1996, the American Congress placed a "quasi-embargo" on the sale of arms to Turkey. Under that embargo, even those items for which Turkey has paid in full were not delivered and certain items such as Popeye missiles were excluded from the list of weapons that Turkey may acquire. The alliance with Israel helps Turkey circumvent the American embargo. For example, during his visit to Israel, Karadayi asked Israel's help to purchase SeaHawk helicopters from the US. Turkey has become a buyer of weapons from Israel, as demonstrated by the sale of anti-ballistic US-made Patriot missiles in March 1997 and by the planned sale of \$50 million worth of US-made Popeye missiles agreed upon in October 1997. There is also the problem of the delivery of three Perry destroyers from the USA to Turkey, one of which was to be rented and the other two were to be donated to the Turkish navy. Even though the deal for the destroyers was made in 1996, they were not delivered due to the American embargo. Turkey sought Israel's backing for the delivery of these destroyers and they were to be delivered to Turkey in February 1998. The role of Israel in the sale of weapons seems to indicate that the American administration does not object to an influx of such weapons to Turkey, and that this may be a device developed to circumvent the Congress.

Thus, the expansion of ties between Turkey and Israel on a number of levels seems to affirm that Turkey and Israel are moving towards strategic cooperation. Its evolution has been gradual and cautious, and in certain

aspects secretive. It is no coincidence that both of the military agreements in February and August 1996 were signed by General Cevik Bir, second to the Turkish Chief of Staff. The 1996 military education and cooperation agreement makes use of the secret security agreement signed between Israel and Turkey on March 31, 1994, which designates that all information gained would be treated as secret information by both sides. This secrecy clause raises questions as to what exactly the two governments have agreed to cooperate on and to what extent these agreements are made public. The parts of the Turkish-Israeli military agreements that remain secret have caused uneasiness among the countries in the region that perceive the Turkish-Israeli axis as a threat.

Turkey, Israel, and the Regional Destabilizers

The Turkish-Israeli alliance is condemned by all the Arab states which see the alliance as a direct threat to their own national security. Their discomfort is reflected in the Arab summit resolution of June 23, 1996, in which Turkey was called upon to reconsider its military agreement with Israel. The Turkish-Israeli military alliance is directed mainly against terrorism, as illustrated by President Demirel in his speech at the Knesset in March 1996 that "Turkey and Israel should stand together to fight terrorism". Turkish and Israeli officials emphasize that the alliance is not directed against any particular state. In the words of David Ivri, adviser to the Israeli Defense Minister, "the security pact signed is not aimed at any state, but it seeks to build confidence in the Middle East and to contribute to peace and stability in the region".¹⁵ Demirel echoed the same argument in his visits to Egypt in September 1997 and to Kuwait in October 1997 with the aim of softening Arab reactions to the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

However, certain incidents give some clues as to whom the Turkish-Israeli axis would be directed against, if it is a common defense strategy against a potential aggressor. In his February 1997 visit to Israel, Karadayi pointed out that there had been a transfer of Russian-made Scud missiles from Iran to Syria, which might be used against Israeli settlements by Hamas and against Turkey by the PKK. In an implicit manner, Karadayi stressed the common interests of Turkey and Israel against Syria and Iran. During Shahak's visit to Turkey, their mutual interests and the current threats that Iran's missile technology poses were the topics addressed.

One expected development is that the alliance provides Turkey with more effective military capabilities to deal with the PKK. The Turkish interventions in northern Iraq are achieving their aim of flushing out the PKK, and there is some evidence pointing out to Israeli support in these undertakings. Some PKK officials charge that "the PKK is one of the main targets of the Turkish-Israeli alliance"¹⁶ and that the Israeli military helps the Turkish army in its incursions in northern Iraq.

Despite all the statements from the Turkish government that the military pact is not directed against any state, the Turkish-Israeli alliance seems to be a clever move against Syria. The alliance "gives Israel's air force its first staging area in Asia, from which it could outflank Syria and intimidate Iran. It gives the Turks a perfect way to squeeze Syrian President Hafez al-Assad."¹⁷ Turkey is looking for ways to pressure the Syrian government to extradite PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and it is concerned about Syrian demands regarding the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris and its campaign at Arab League summits to gain support for its position. In December 1995, during the Arab summit held in Damascus, Turkey was collectively criticized by the Arab states for its policies on water. Only two months later, Turkey signed the military education agreement with Israel. Israel has similar concerns: to curb Syrian support for Hamas and Hizbullah, and to block Syrian demands for the Golan Heights. The suicide attacks in Israel throughout 1997 increased the urgency to deal effectively with terrorism, which the Israeli government claims has its headquarters in Damascus.

Seen in these terms, the alliance is an encirclement of Syria and a challenge to Damascus which Syria is quick to realize. Syrian government officials have declared that the alliance is "an act of aggression against the Arabs and an act of hostility to pan-Arab existence".¹⁸ On a number of occasions, Syrian President Hafez Assad has declared that the alliance is directed against the Arabs in general and Syria in particular. Syria claims that the Turkish-Israeli alliance made both these countries more aggressive, with the Turkish

intervention in northern Iraq in June 1997 and Israel's shelling of southern Lebanon in August 1997 seen as confirmation.

Assad claims that the Turkish-Israeli axis aims at the destruction of the Arab world and what is happening to Iraq is an example. He even claims that the axis aims at evacuating northern Iraq and settling the Palestinians there.¹⁹ Assad may be wary of the consequences of the Turkish-Israeli axis for two reasons: first, increased Turkish power in the region will prevent the resolution of the water conflict to Syria's advantage, and second, increased Israeli power may erode Syria's power to effectively block the peace process. Faced with the combined power of Turkey and Israel, Syria may have a harder time promoting its own interests in the region. Such possibilities push Syria to devise strategies to counter the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

In response to the Turkish-Israeli axis, there seems to be a rapprochement between Syria and Iran. During Syrian Vice-President Abd al-Halim Khaddam's visit to Iran in June 1997, the two governments jointly condemned the Turkish incursion in northern Iraq and the alleged Israeli role in causing unrest in the region.²⁰ The Syrian-Iranian alliance began to take more substantial shape during Assad's visit to Teheran in summer 1997. Though the Iranian government denies that a Syrian-Iranian axis is forming in response to the Turkish-Israeli military pacts, it may very well have been triggered by the Turkish-Israeli axis. On the other hand, Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology from Russia shows the timeliness of the Turkish-Israeli alliance. Iran, it seems, with Russian know-how and technology, will soon be able to produce long-range missiles with ranges of 700 to 1,200 miles.²¹ Such a capability will place Israel and Turkey within the range of Iranian weapons. For Israel this is particularly threatening since the Iranian regime has sworn to pursue Israel's destruction; for Turkey this means falling behind in the race for regional leadership, as well as a change in the balance of power in Iran's favor. Russian involvement in Iran's quest for missile technology, if true, violates the "Missile Technology Control Regime". Russian motives for such involvement may include an attempt to regain a foothold in the Middle East through Iran. In response to the rumors of Russian involvement, the Israeli government has suspended a natural gas deal with the Russians. Even though there were always some reports that the Iranians were developing nuclear weapons and missile technology, it is only recently that the issue has received attention from the USA. Furthermore, the missile issue indicates that the Middle East is still a battleground in the struggle for power between the USA and Russia.

In terms of American interests in the region, the Turkish-Israeli strategic realignment should rank high on the American foreign policy agenda. Both of these countries are pro-American and their alliance would promote America's dual containment policy against rogue regimes such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria, all of which are engaged in military build-ups, especially with weapons of mass destruction, and which pose a major threat to American interests. The military build-up in these regimes partly explains the American push for the alliance as a strong barrier against these rogue states. Given the strategic importance of the Middle East and the desire for an uninterrupted flow of oil, the Turkish-Israeli alliance with its stabilizing and balancing capabilities might be the blessing the United States has been looking for in its post-Cold War Middle Eastern foreign policy.

To sum up, Turkish-Israeli security cooperation seems to be the dominant event of post-Cold War Middle Eastern politics. Turkish concerns over the threats that Syria, Iran, and Iraq pose to Turkish national unity and territorial integrity are the factors that led to Turkish rapprochement with Israel. The end of the Cold War, the Gulf War and its impact on Turkey's Kurdish problem, and the Israel-Arab peace process prepared the fertile ground for Turkey to openly follow a pro-Israeli foreign policy. The alliance serves a number of Turkish security interests: helping to suppress the Kurdish terrorism of the PKK, shifting the power equation to Turkey's advantage in the politics of water, and generally increasing Turkey's perceived power and its actual capabilities. For example, one reason for Turkey's increased acquisition of weapons and missiles from Israel is the Greek Cypriots' 1996 purchase of S-300 missiles from the Russians. In an attempt to balance the destabilizing effect of such a missile acquisition by the Greeks, the Turkish army ordered 70 Popeye missiles from Israel. It is interesting to note that both Iran and Greek Cyprus are buying missiles from the Russians.

Water acts as another policy tool for Turkish-Israeli rapprochement by creating a common interest between the two parties. Since Israel has a pending water problem, one of both economic and political magnitude, cooperation with Turkey could serve as a solution. For example, in April 1998 Turkey began the sale of fresh water to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus via balloons, and Israel could be a potential customer for water transported in the same manner. The feasibility of the experiment with Northern Cyprus could serve as a test for such a sale of water to Israel.

As of today, there is still no collective defense pact between Turkey and Israel, yet the military cooperation agreements may lead one to conclude that Turkey and Israel are emerging as security partners in the Middle East. In the post-Cold War era, Turkey needs reliable partners in the Middle East to help strengthen its hand and counterbalance those who have designs on Turkey. In the turbulent environment of the 1990s, for Turkey the most reliable partner in sight seems to be Israel.

On the other hand, the Turkish-Israeli axis indicates an evolving polarization in the Middle East. One pole consists of the Turkish-Israeli alliance backed by American power, and the other pole is the Iranian-Syrian axis which seems to be supported by the Russians. Such regional polarization coupled with high levels of militarization is not a good sign. What may have begun on Turkey's behalf as an initiative to find a reliable ally may degenerate into an ugly conflict. Thus, whether the alliance will ultimately help to preserve stability in the region remains to be seen ■

Endnotes

* A paper presented at the **Bi-National Conference on Cooperation and Conflict in the Middle East** with Special Reference to Water, April 20-21, 1998 Bilkent University, Turkey.

¹ George Gruen, "International Regional Cooperation", **Water as an Element of Cooperation and Development in the Middle East**, Ali Ihsan Bagis (ed.), (Ankara: Hacettepe University Press, 1994), p.263.

² **The Economist**, "The Survey of the Arab World", May 12, 1990, p. 10.

³ Turkish Daily, **Milliyet**, January 27, 1994.

⁴ See Meltem Müftüleri -Bac, **Turkey's Relations with a Changing Europe** (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997).

⁵ Since 1989, European security has been reformulated around the notions of common European values, norms, and a European identity. Turkey's problem is that its European identity has always been questioned. Thus, in this new European order, the extent to which Turkey has integrated into the European identity becomes a crucial factor in determining Turkey's position as a security partner as well.

⁶ Ismail Soysal, "Turkish-Arab Diplomatic Relations after the Second World War", **Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations**, (Istanbul: Foundation for Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations, 1986), p. 253.

⁷ John Hillen, "America's Alliance Anxieties; Superpowers Don't do Windows", **ORBIS**, vol. 41, no. 2, Spring 1997, pp. 241-257.

⁸ See Nimet Beriker-Atiyas, "The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Issues, Parties and Prospects", **Security Dialogue**, forthcoming; and Henri Barkey, "Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma", **Survival**, vol. 35, no. 4, 1993, pp. 51-70.

⁹ At the end of World War I, the province of Hatay was placed under French mandate and in 1939, Hatay province was given back to Turkey. Syria claims that Hatay is a part of its territory, and does not recognize the 1939 decision. In 1997, the Syrian government still wanted to place the question of Hatay on the agenda for negotiations with Turkey.

¹⁰ Turkish daily, **Turkish Daily News**, March 1, 1997.

¹¹ Information Division of the Israel Foreign Ministry, January 12, 1997, <http://www/israel.org>.

¹² Henri Barkey, "Reluctant Neighbors: Reflections on Turkish-Arab Relations", **The Beirut Review**, no. 7, Spring 1994, p. 13.

- ¹³ The Free Trade Agreement foresees zero customs by the year 2000 for industrial products and a total elimination of customs regulations by January 1, 2000. The agreement applies first to industrial products, then a next stage is foreseen for agricultural products and a final stage for textiles.
- ¹⁴ The February Agreement was signed by General Cevik Bir, second in command of the Turkish Armed Forces, also known as the "Foreign Minister" of the Armed Forces, and by General David Ivri, adviser to the Israeli Defense Minister. When the Agreement was signed, there was no effective civilian government in Turkey because it occurred just after the December 24, 1995, general elections and, as of that date, a new government had not yet been formed. Another point of interest is that the Agreement was not publicized prior to April 1996 and even after it leaked out, the text of the Agreement was not made public.
- ¹⁵ SW Broadcasts, Middle East, ME 2939, MED 15, 7 June 1997.
- ¹⁶ See Robert Olson, "Israel and the Kurds", *Middle East International*, 21 February 1997 and "Turkey-Syria Relations since the Gulf War: Kurds and Water", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2, May 1997.
- ¹⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, "Israelis and Turks Form Military Alliance against the Arabs", *New York Times*, Op Ed Page, 16 June 1996.
- ¹⁸ SW Broadcasts, Middle East, ME 2952, MED 8, 23 June 1997.
- ¹⁹ SW Broadcasts, Middle East, ME 2964, MED 9, 7 July 1997.
- ²⁰ SW Broadcasts, Middle East, ME 2951, MED 2, 21 June 1997.
- ²¹ Israel claims that Iran is building two types of missiles, Shibab-3 and Shibab-4, which have ranges of 930 and 1,240 miles respectively.