

## CHANGING RELATIONS: TURKISH - ISRAELI - ARAB TRIANGLE OFRA BENGIO & GENCER ÖZCAN

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been bent on carving out a new role in the Middle East. The 1996 strategic alignment<sup>1</sup> with Israel has been the main embodiment of this aim. The alignment itself—a unique development in the modern history of the region in that it brought together a Muslim and a Jewish state—caused great concern and even alarm among many Arab countries. Some viewed it as Turkey's second betrayal of the Arabs in fifty years: the first being Turkey's recognition of the State of Israel in 1949. The 1996 alignment looked especially alarming because it caught the Arab world in one of its weakest moments, in the aftermath of the fragmentation caused by the Gulf War and because it was interpreted as being anti-Arab to the core.

The fear, in fact, was triple:

- That the alignment would increase the strategic threat to the Arab countries in general and the more vulnerable ones in particular, namely Syria and Iraq,
- That it would further fragment the Arab world by bringing to the alignment an Arab country, namely Jordan, and
- That it would jeopardise the Arab-Israeli peace process or at least weaken the Arab partners' bargaining power by providing Israel with new strategic depth, as it were, and thus strengthen its hand, and its intransigence at the negotiating table.

Our arguments will be the following:

1. When exploring the origins of the present alignment one should look more to Turkey than to Israel, which has always been eager to develop strong relationships with the countries of the 'periphery', such as Turkey and Iran. In fact, the alignment had its roots, in a combination of internal and external developments dating back to the end of the 1980s that concerned Turkey and that it attempted to address by way of this alignment.
2. Though the alignment seems to have significantly increased Turkey's and Israel's manoeuvrability vis-à-vis certain Arab countries, it did not go so far as to cause a total rupture

with any of these countries. Nor was it intended to. The 'aggressive' nature the Arab world related to the alignment was more in the realm of rhetoric than of politics.

3. It has been customary among Arab scholars and journalists to portray the relationship between Turkey, Israel and the Arab countries as a kind of a pendulum: when relations between the Arabs and Turks flourished, they declined with Israel and vice versa. Although there is some truth to this depiction, we must qualify it by saying that the Israeli factor was only one of many that influenced the Turkish-Arab relationship. Thus, relations between Turkey and the Arab countries in the 1950s were more the result of Turkey's overall Western orientation as well as the rivalry within the Arab world itself, than the outcome of Turkey's recognition of Israel. In fact, not a single Arab country broke relations with Turkey after it recognised Israel, but on the other hand Egypt did so after Turkey recognised Syria in 1961 following Syria's secession from the UAR. Similarly, the Arab world's anxiety vis-à-vis Turkey in the 1990s predated the alignment with Israel and was the result of Turkey's changing role in the region.

#### APPREHENSIONS OF THE NEW TURKISH ROLE

The Arab apprehensions of Turkey's new role were related to the three major developments of the era: the end of the cold war, the second Gulf War and the new world order.

Commenting on the impact of these three developments on Turkey, an Arab observer said, "Turkey was like someone who woke up in the morning and found a big treasure beside his bed."<sup>2</sup> The treasure he referred to included:

- a) The removal of the traditional threat from the Soviet Union
- b) The opening up of new vistas to Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans
- c) New opportunities for renewed activism in the Middle East.

In Arab political discourse, Turkey's perceived new policy was described in such terms as 'new Ottomanism', 'new Turkish imperialism' or 'Pan-Turanism', aimed at spreading Turkey's influence from China to the Balkans. As such, these Turkish ambitions were bound to clash with Arab interests and threaten Arab national security.

For, according to this view, with the opening up of Turkey to the Turkish states of Central Asia there formed two major groups or blocs of approximately the same size: the Arab world as against the Turkish world. This development was likely to increase the rivalry between the two and upset the balance of power in the region.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Arab suspicions of Turkey's new role were already aroused around three different issues: Turkey's 1987 'peace pipeline' project, Turkey's role in the second Gulf War and its policy in northern Iraq.

For all of Turkey's assertions of the benign intentions of the pipeline, namely solving the severe water problems of the Gulf countries, Jordan (and Israel), while also benefiting the Turkish economy, the potential Arab partners rejected projected water pipeline out of hand. They maintained that it would endanger Arab national security because it would put the Arab countries at the mercy of Turkey in case of emergency. Turkish policy with regard to the Euphrates water was given as only one such example of Turkey's use of the water card against the Arabs and the lack of any effective Arab answer to it.<sup>4</sup>

In the opinion of some Arab writers, Turkey kept this strategic commodity as a weapon against the Arabs for the next century-as a 'bargaining chip on Alexandretta'-and as a tool for promoting its role in the peace process. Little wonder then that the 'peace pipeline' became the 'dream pipeline' in this discourse and was never realised.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the Gulf War, notwithstanding the fact that several Arab countries participated in the anti-Iraqi alliance, it was Turkey that some Arab writers (not just Iraqis) selected for special mention for, they maintained, its anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stance, for becoming a pliant tool in the hands of the US and Zionism and for fulfilling the old role assigned to it by the West, as its Trojan horse in the region.

Apprehensions of Turkey's ambitions vis-à-vis the Arab world increased significantly because of its policy in northern Iraq. Turkey was seen or portrayed as having revived long-standing ambitions on Mosul Vilayet, which, if not checked, could end up with its annexation-as was the case with Alexandretta in 1939.<sup>6</sup> All in all, Arab writers portrayed Turkey's role in the aftermath of the Gulf War as having become the US's new policeman in the Middle East, replacing Israel, which had lost much of its deterrent power as a result of that war.

Coming against this background, the Turkish-Israeli alignment of 1996 exacerbated Arab fears and suspicions, interpreting it as they did as a partnership between the old oppressor and the modern usurper. There were those, like the Syrian Vice President, 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who described it as "the greatest threat to the Arabs since 1948",<sup>7</sup> while others termed it "the 1996 Baghdad Pact".<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the threat was perceived on many levels-ideological, political and strategic. Ideologically, it was the first time in modern history when a Muslim country openly allied itself with the Jewish state. This was even more disturbing since Islam was the major common denominator between the Arabs and Turks and thus should have served as a major obstacle to such an alignment. Syria's Foreign Minister, Faruq al-Shar'a, probably expressed the frustration of many Arabs when he said, "An alliance between Israel and Turkey, the Muslim neighbouring country, is both illogical and unacceptable." Accordingly, there was a need to de-legitimise it, and one way to do that was to blame it on the 'rich Jews of Turkey-the dönme'.<sup>9</sup> No less disturbing was the fact that it was an alignment between two non-Arab countries, hence its perceived aggressive nature against the Arabs as a whole. Most disturbing of all was the fact that it was an alignment between the two militarily strongest states in the region, with the resulting grave strategic implications both on individual Arab countries and the Arab world as a whole.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE ALIGNMENT

Despite the great publicity of the Turkish-Israeli alignment, very little is known about its genesis. Nevertheless, circumstantial evidence indicates that the Turkish military have played a pivotal role in forging it. Considering the strategic agreements as the epicentre of the alignment, they proved willing to fight relentlessly for its success. One can discern four major phases in the rapprochement between the two countries, all of which point to Turkish domestic-security-military considerations. The first was between the mid-1980s and the 1991 Gulf War, when there was covert co-operation between the Turkish military and Israel against the background of the fight against the PKK and the need for Israeli intelligence for this purpose.<sup>10</sup> The second was the aftermath of the Gulf War, which pushed the military to look for a reliable but not a very 'scrupulous' partner for its ambitious modernisation programme

and its changing strategic plans in the region. The third was the Israeli-PLO Oslo Agreement, which coincided with the growing domestic threat of the PKK, both of which granted the military the legitimacy for pushing forward the rapprochement. The last one was in late 1995, when there was a juxtaposition of the twin threats of Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism, which convinced the military of the need not only of signing the agreements with Israel but also, in a clear departure from past practices, of according them great publicity.

Throughout, the Turkish military and politicians kept declaring that there was nothing unique about the Turkish-Israeli agreements, that they did not amount to a strategic alignment but were simple military co-operation and that they were not directed against a third party.<sup>11</sup> Let us examine these assertions point by point. On the face of it there was really nothing unique or exceptional about the agreement with Israel, since Turkey had signed agreements with more than 30 countries, the majority of which were Islamic countries. However, closer analysis would show that it was unique on many accounts. On the level of bilateral relations, the agreements did revolutionise these relations in a short period as has never happened in the last previous fifty years. Nor was there any comparison between the agreements with Israel and those of other countries in terms of depth, variety and intensity. While the other agreements were with less developed countries than Turkey, those with Israel were more or less on an equal footing.

A quick glance on the unfolding of relations between Turkey and Israel, especially on the military level may shed light on their particularities. In 1993, an Israeli delegation headed by the Defence Ministry Director, General David Ivry, arrived in Ankara to pave the way for the military co-operation. This was followed by visits of high-ranking Turkish politicians to Israel (Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin in November 1993, Prime Minister Tansu Çiller in November 1994 and President Süleyman Demirel in March 1996), which prepared the necessary political atmosphere for the open rapprochement. Overall, military co-operation included among others the following agreements:

- 'Agreement on Security and Secrecy', May 1994, which stipulated that security information should not be transferred to third parties
- 'Memorandum on Mutual Understanding and Co-operation', November 1994, for fighting terrorism
- 'Military Training Co-operation Agreement', February 1996, which included among others an exchange of military information, experience and personnel
- Access to each other's airspace for the training of military warplanes and joint training activities
- 'Defence Industry Co-operation Agreement', August 1996, which provided the framework for the two 'upgrading deals', signed in 1997 and 1998, for the modernisation of Turkish F-4s and F-5s. Under discussion were also large-scale military sales and co-production of variety of military equipment including Merkava III tanks and Popeye missiles.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to joint projects and training in each other's facilities on a rotation basis, the agreements involved a wide range of activities including the exchange of intelligence, semi-annual strategic dialogue meetings between high ranking officers to discuss and co-ordinate positions on regional threats and finally joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup>

This partial list itself points to the great variety of co-operation between the military establishments. More than that, if 'defensive strategic co-operation' requires co-ordination in

military plans and movements, then the strategic dialogue between the two military establishments does qualify for this description.<sup>14</sup> Turkish military sources also alluded at times to strategic implications of the agreement: "We are surrounded on all sides by trouble. We are in the hot seat. It is critical for us to jump outside this circle of chaos and find friends in the region. Israel was the perfect choice."<sup>15</sup> No less important were perceptions by third parties, especially Syria, Iraq and Iran, who regarded the agreements as a strategic alliance directed against themselves.<sup>16</sup> An Arab analyst commented that after the Cold War era, countries rarely declared that their strategic co-operation was directed against a third party. Rather, flexible mechanisms were being developed between the two armies so that they could be put to use immediately in time of contingency.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, such perceptions might have played an important role in convincing Syria to give up on Öcalan in the October crisis of 1998 with Turkey, something which it had not felt obliged to do since 1984.

## AMBIGUOUS ARAB REACTIONS

In analysing the Arab reactions to the alignment, the following points stand out:

- The three Arab countries which led the anti-alignment campaign were Egypt, Syria and Iraq
- Egypt opposed the alignment because it viewed itself as the guardian of Arab national security and a mediator between Turkey and the Arab countries; Syria because it stood to be hurt most by it, having to bear its impact both on its northern and southern fronts; and Iraq perceived the alignment as having direct bearing on the situation in Northern Iraq.
- From the outset, Syria loudly sounded the alarm bells; Egypt was sympathetic with Damascus but low-key, preferring to engage Turkey in dialogue; Iraq was initially low-key as well, but stridently even hysterically opposed following Turkey's May 1997 incursion into northern Iraq against PKK bases.

Iraq vehemently attacked Turkey for its centuries-old hostility to the Arabs and Arabism. More tangibly, it warned of the strategic depth Israel had gained in Turkey, thus enabling it to attack Iraq and complete the strategic encirclement of Syria. Reading into Arab attitudes more closely, however, will show (and we say it with great caution) that the greater concern was of the meaning of the alignment for Turkey and the leverage it had granted it vis-à-vis the Arab world, and less so of its meaning for Israel. For while the alignment might have strengthened Israel's bargaining power, mainly in its negotiations with Syria, it had certainly strengthened Turkey's strategic standing vis-à-vis Syria and especially Iraq, particularly in light of the vacuum that had formed in northern Iraq.

Identifying Turkey as the greater and immediate threat, then, called for steps to address it, among other things, by convincing Ankara to abandon the alignment. For some years now, and especially since the beginning of the 1990s, there developed two main trends or schools of thought regarding the proper way to address Turkey. The first preached conciliation and alliance, the other containment and isolation.

Conciliation meant strengthening the bridges with Turkey and bringing it, as it were, into the Arab fold. Thus, when after the Gulf War, discussions began on regional security, this school of thought suggested including Turkey in a new Arab security system while excluding Israel. Other suggestions included strengthening political, economic and cultural relations, while stressing the common historical, religious and cultural heritage. The need to change negative

historical images of each other was placed high on the agenda.<sup>18</sup> The other school of thought continued to stress the negative heritage of Kemalism and its three pillars of Westernism, secularism and democracy. Turkey, it was maintained, could not pose as a model for the Arabs since her "democracy is more of a joke now than it has ever been".<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Turkey's attempts to tie itself to the West were ridiculed because of their meagre results. Turkey's simultaneous attempts to distance itself from the East appeared outrageous. As one writer complained, "If it were possible for Ankara, it would have dug a canal to cut itself from the East, the Arabs and Islam." Indeed, Turkey's alliance with Israel was portrayed as part of its futile attempts to overcome its mental disease of schizophrenia.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, this school of thought insisted on the need to exclude Turkey from the regional security system and to put collective Arab pressure to bear on it, including through the Arab League, to change what it perceived as its hostile stance towards the Arabs.

While differentiating between the Pro-Arab Muslim Turkish masses and the regime, especially the army, this school of thought called on these masses to come out against their government policy. In short, it advocated a policy of driving a wedge between the Turkish people and the government, while depicting Islam as the most important bridge between the Arab and the Turkish peoples. For, according to this view, the more Islamicised the people become, the greater the possibility for strengthening the bonds between Turkey and the Arabs.<sup>21</sup>

Having said that, we must differentiate between rhetoric and politics and emphasise the duality that has characterised Turkish-Arab relations, especially since the alignment with Israel. No other state than Iraq better epitomises this love-hate relationship. For at the very time that Turkish forces launched an operation in northern Iraq (in May 1997, for example), triggering harsh attacks by Iraqi officials and the media on Turkey, economic, diplomatic and political relations were flourishing on an unprecedented level since the Gulf crisis.<sup>22</sup>

It is possible to explain this duality by the need to reconcile different or even contradictory interests and goals. On the one hand, the Arab countries, foremost of which Iraq, genuinely feared the repercussions of the alignment, hence the concerted attack on Turkey. But, on the other hand, there was fear of antagonising Turkey unduly and burning bridges with a country that had become so vital to Iraq and Syria. Holding the key to the flow of water to both these countries (and to the partial flow of oil from Iraq) gave Turkey a paramount strategic importance, regardless of its alignment with Israel. Hence the need to appease or reconcile it.

Furthermore, unlike the 1970s when the Arab countries could use different political and economic weapons to pressurise Turkey to downgrade its relations with Israel, in the 1990s they no longer held such weapons. Indeed, it was ironic that the one seemingly effective weapon that Syria held against Ankara—the Kurdish PKK's separatism that it increasingly encouraged during the 1990s—turned out to be a double-edged sword. Not only did the PKK's threat become a *casus belli* for Turkey against Syria, as the events of October 1998 proved, but it had also been an important factor in cementing the alignment between Turkey and Israel.

Once the alignment became a *fait accompli*, however, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others sought to manipulate it for their own purposes: Egypt, for promoting its role as a mediator between Turkey and the Arab countries; Syria, for reducing the Turkish threat and strengthening Arab backing for its tough stand vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli peace process, and Iraq for mobilising all-Arab support to its cause and breaking out of its isolation. Stressing the Turkish-Israeli

challenge, it was hoped, could become an important means for reconciliation between long-standing enemies or rivals such as Syria and Iraq, or Iraq and Iran or even Iran and Egypt. Those who stressed the danger of the Turkish-Israeli alignment have purported to speak in the name of all the Arabs and to portray the development as a challenge to all of them, including Jordan, the Arab Gulf countries and others.

## CONCLUSION

Theoretically speaking the Arabs had three different ways of fighting what they called the alliance: forming a counter-alliance, bringing Turkey into an alliance with them to the exclusion of Israel or bringing pressures to bear on Turkey to break off its alliance with Israel. None of these has succeeded or even seriously followed. Therefore, the Arab countries had to come to terms with the notion that these two 'outsiders' had become, willy-nilly, part of the region. Also, the alignment and what followed proved even more than before the multipolarity of the region. As to the stability of the region, there was no doubt that the alignment did increase significantly the deterrence of Israel and Turkey and their manoeuvrability vis-à-vis certain Arab countries, yet the question was whether this factor was going to impact negatively on the stability and security of the region or not? Our contention is that the stability of the region might be affected by internal developments in any individual country or by some already existing conflicts (Iran-Iraq, Iraq-Kuwait) more than by this specific alignment. Nor can one exclude the possibility that the alignment will have a positive impact on stability and peace in the region, as some signs have already indicated.

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1 The term 'alignment' is preferred to 'alliance', which Arabic sources use, since the first corresponds more truly to the nature of the relations.

2 Jamal 'Abdallah Mu'awwad, "Turkiyya wal-Amn al-Qawmi al-'Arabi: al-Siyasa al-Ma'iyya wal-Aqalliyat," *Al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi*, No. 160, June 1992, p. 117.

3 E.g., see Husayn Ma'lum, 'Al-Sira' al-Turki al-Irani wa Tada'uyatuhu 'ala al-Mintaqa al-'Arabiyya, *Al-Siyasa al-Duwaliyya*, No. 114, October 1993, pp. 217-220. For a discussion of Pan Turkic groupings and trends within the Turkish Ministry of Culture, see Gareth M. Winrow, 'Turkey and the Newly Independent States of Central Asia and Transcaucasus,' *MERIA Journal*, 2 May 1997. Winrow notes, however, that the Pan-Turkist lobby in Turkey should not be exaggerated. For a discussion of 'Neo Ottomanism' by a Turkish scholar, see, Hakan Yavuz, 'Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: the Rise of Neo-Ottomanism', *Critique*, No. 12, Spring 1998, pp. 19-43.

4 For details of Turgut Özal's defunct proposals (1986, 1988, 1991) see, Joyce R. Starr, 'Water Wars', *Foreign Policy*, No. 82, Spring 1991, p.31 and Ramazan Gözen, 'Turgut Özal and Turkish Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy*, Ankara, Vol. XX, No. 3-4, 1996, pp. 80-81; Kemal Kirişçi, Ali Çarkoğlu and Mine Eder, *Türkiye ve Ortadoğu'da Bölgesel İşbirliği*, Istanbul: TESEV, 1998, pp. 180-181. Another defunct proposal, the Peace Canal on the Golan Heights, was put forward by a New York based consulting company, Wachtel and Associates, to Damascus in 1993. See, Muhammad Muslih, 'Uneasy Relations, Syria and Turkey', in Henry J. Barkey (ed.), *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, Washington DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996, p. 125.

5 Mu'awwad, 'Turkiyya wal-Amn al-Qawmi ...', pp. 108-109.

6 Muhammad Muslih argues that the two events that have left a lasting imprint on Assad and his Ba'thist comrades were the loss of Palestine to the Zionists and Alexandretta to Turkey, though the latter was of secondary importance. He also notes that the Syrian intellectual Zaki Arsuzi, an Alawite from the Sanjak of Alexandretta and a cofounder of the Ba'th Party, was the moving force behind the protest movement against the Turkish annexation. Muslih, 'Uneasy Relations...', p. 114 and p. 116.

7 Ha'aretz, 3 June 1997.

8 'Abdallah Salih, 'Al-Ittifaq al-Turki al-Isra'ili wa-'Amaliyyat al-Salam', *Al-Siyasa al-Duwaliyya*, July 1996, p. 78; Jabal 'Abdallah Mu'awwad, 'Awamil wa-jawanib tatawwur al-'Alaqaq al-Turkiyya-al-Isra'iliyya fi al-Tis'iniyyat', *Shu'un 'Arabiyya*, March 1997, No. 89, p. 136; Kazim Hashim Ni'ma, 'Al-Tatawwur al-Turki al-Isra'ili, qira'a fi al-dawafi' al-Kharijiyya', *Al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi*, June 1997, No. 220, p. 4.

- 9 Al-'Iraq, 13 January 1998.
- 10 Tolga ?ardan, 'MOSSAD'a Örtülüden Para', Milliyet, 22 January 1998, Vahap Yazarođlu, 'Suriye Elimizin Altında', Milliyet, 9 October 1998.
- 11 Ragheda Dergham's interview with Foreign Minister  $\langle$ smail Cem, 'Turkey Insists its Ties are Kosher', Al-Hayat, 25 September 1998, Mideast Mirror, 26 September 1998. Cf. ?ule Kut, 'Gecikmi? Bir  $\langle$ ?birliđi', Milliyet, 20 May 1997.
- 12 Steve Rodan, 'Turkey Wants More Arms from Israel', Jerusalem Post, 27 January 1997.
- 13 "Israel, Turkey, US to Conduct Second Naval Exercise," Israel Line, 3 February 1999. See also " $\langle$ srail ile Ortak Kara Tatbikat $\rangle$ ," Hürriyet, 6 January 1998. It was reported that the second naval exercises dubbed The Reliant Mermaid II, scheduled for late October 1998, were postponed as a gesture to Syria for its expulsion of Abdullah Öcalan. See, Hulusi Turgut, "Apo Kenya'ya, M $\langle$ T Ajan $\rangle$  ile Gitmi?," Sabah, 7 June 1999.
- 14 Mu'awwad, Sina'at al-Qarar fi Turkiyya..., pp. 229-230.
- 15 An unnamed Turkish military official quoted in 'Army Chiefs Try to Play Down Military Accords with Israel', Turkish Daily News, 5 June 1996.
- 16 Mu'awwad, Sina'at al-Qarar..., pp. 221-230.
- 17 Mu'awwad, Sina'at al-Qarar..., p. 230. The Israeli Defence Minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, alluded to such a possibility. Aslı Aydınba?'s interview with Yitzhak Mordechai, 'Amaç, Caydırıcı Güç Olmak', Yeni Yüzyıl, 26 April 1997.
- 18 The most outspoken of this school of thought was the Saudi Prince, Khalid bin Sultan. See Al-Hayat, 24 May 1997.
- 18 The most outspoken of this school of thought was the Saudi Prince, Khalid bin Sultan. See Al-Hayat, 24 May 1997.
- 19 Al-Nahar, Mideast Mirror, 28 September 1998.
- 20 Muhammad Mustafa 'Ata, Turkiyya wa al-Siyasa al-'Arabiyya (dar al-ma'arif bi-misr), p. 157. The version consulted had no publication date.
- 21 'Ata, Turkiyya wa al-Siyasa al-'Arabiyya..., p. 157.
- 22 'Ata, 'Turkiyya wal-Siyasa...', p. 157.