



Academic Paper

The Arab Perspective on the Dialectics of Turkish–Israeli Relations

2002–2020



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Introduction

Arab political literature in the past decade (2010–2020) has been marred by a lot of confusion when it comes to understanding and analysing Turkish-Israeli relations. Trends like wishful thinking, ideological bias, and the accelerating changes in the geostrategic environment of the Arab region, have also acted as obstacles impeding a balanced interpretation of these relations. Thus, Arab interpretations in this regard have been divided into two main trends:

First Trend

This thought trend believes that Turkish policy since the ascent of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP) to power has not changed its outlook vis-à-vis Israel, despite some fleeting tensions between the two sides. It perceives that Turkey did not change its traditional orientations, from membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to its eagerness to accede to the European Union (EU). This Arab thought trend believes it has been vindicated as a result of the tensions that hit Arab-Turkish relations, especially after Turkey stepped up its intervention in Syria, northern Iraq, and Libya, and inserted itself in the Gulf crisis alongside Qatar in its row with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. This pushed some to go as far as to link Turkish policy post-2003 with the Ottoman legacy in the region and alleged attempts to revive it. This thought trend believes that Turkish-Israeli relations have remained invariably stable, while trade relations grew even further, making Turkey into Israel’s top trade and tourism partner in the Middle East. It invokes the gap that expands and contracts between Turkey and the Refusal Front groups such as Hizbullah, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as well as states like Iran, which this thought trend sees as a central backer of the Refusal Front that is averse to continued diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel. Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize



Justice and Development
Party Logo



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Israel after its establishment. While this was under a Turkish administration completely different in attitudes from the AKP administration currently governing Turkey, recognition of Israel remained a constant of Turkish policy despite tensions with Tel Aviv. The statements of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 25/12/2020, in which he said he hoped for better relations with Israel, affirmed that his country had not fully severed ties with Israel, confirmed that there is ongoing intelligence cooperation between the two sides, and argued that the main problem was Israel's unmerciful policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians,¹ may bolster the argument of this thought trend.

Second Trend

On the other hand, there is another Arab political thought trend dominated by Islamic orientations, which observers that Turkey is a Muslim state that supports Palestinian rights, aids Palestinians, and rejects Israeli policies in the occupied territories. It also observes that Turkey has supported the Democratic wave that has swept through the Arab countries since 2010, and consistently voted in international fora to defend Palestinian rights. In addition, the Turkish role in curbing Kurdish separatism in West Asia (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria) has helped maintain the territorial integrity of Arab countries, and has frustrated Western and Israeli tendencies to help establish a Kurdish state that would be an auxiliary to Israel in the region, given the long history of collaboration between Kurdish forces and Israel, sometimes secretly and sometimes quasi-publicly.

The intellectual clash between these two Arab thought trends poses the following questions: Is Turkish policy in the Middle East built on a pragmatic basis (meaning that interests are the main driver of Turkish policy)? Or is the ideological factor the main determinant thereof (specifically the Islamic tendencies of the AKP)? Or is the determinant a reasonable combination of the two dimensions, especially given the extreme complications of the political landscape of the Middle East? Answering these questions requires analysing the incentives of Turkish policy vis-à-vis Israel, and vice versa.

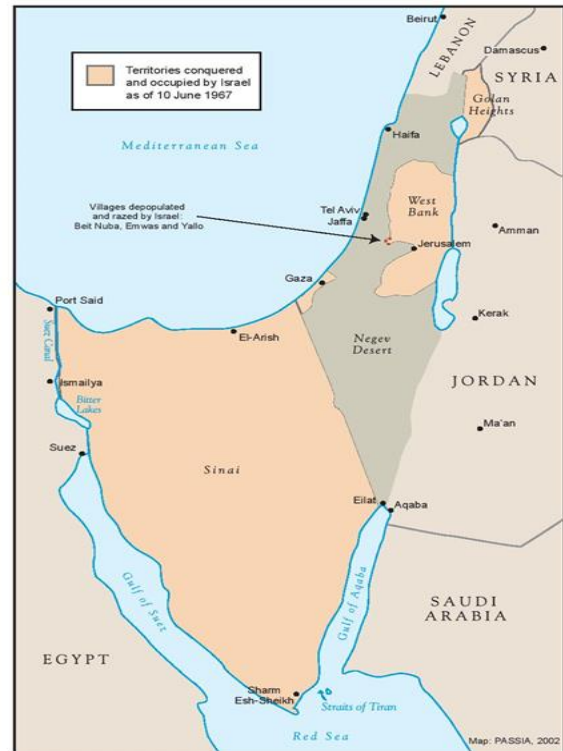
It is important to note that Turkish-Israeli relations, since Turkey's recognition of Israel in 1949, have seen many ups and downs, regardless of the identity of the ruling party in Turkey. In addition to many political, security, military, and trade agreements signed between the two sides between 1949 and 2002 i.e., prior to the ascent of the AKP to power, this period saw many tensions between the two sides. In 1956, Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel following the latter's involvement in the tripartite aggression against Egypt. Turkey also denounced the Israeli assault on the Arab



states in the war of 1967, and demanded its withdrawal from the territories it seized. However, in 1969, Turkey refused to join the Islamic state in their call to sever ties with Israel following the burning of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and later upgraded diplomatic ties with Israel to the level of exchanging embassies. Turkish-Israeli relations soured again in 1980 when Israel declared its annexation of Jerusalem. However, these relations were restored in 1992 with the return of the Turkish ambassador to Israel,² suggesting the ups and downs in relations with Israel were a feature of Turkish policy prior to AKP's tenure.



The Arson of *al-Aqsa* Mosque



The 1967 War

Turkish Positions Between Media Rows and Ideological Clashes, and Strategic Interests

First: Turkey and the Strategic Landscape in the Middle East

Since the ascent of the AKP to power in Turkey in 2002, Turkish-Israeli relations proceeded in the shadow of some radical shifts in the Middle Eastern landscape that had taken place between 1973 and 2002, and to which the AKP had to adapt after it took power, namely:

1. The end of several Arab-Israeli states of wars, and the diplomatic recognition of Israel by Arab countries (Egypt, the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty (Wadi 'Araba)). In addition, Arab states and Israel were holding increasing numbers of meetings, with commercial offices established and some Arab media outlets collaborating with Israelis, etc. leading up to the wave of normalization agreements in 2020 between Israel and some Gulf Arab countries, Sudan, and Morocco.

2. The repercussions of the Iranian revolution and the Gulf wars between 1980 and 2003, and the emergent Sunni-Shia schism, which made the Middle Eastern landscape radically different from its state in the previous half century preceding the arrival of the AKP.
3. The repercussions of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and implications for Turkey's role within NATO. Furthermore, the reduced attractiveness of Communism gave a boost to the trust of Islamists in Turkey and elsewhere.
4. The growth of Islamic movements in the Arab countries, which the AKP has seen as a natural ally
5. The general unrest that hit the Arab region since 2010, which toppled several regimes and led to multilateral military interventions across the region. This has been accompanied by economic collapse in most Arab countries as a result of the unrest, followed by oil price collapse since 2014, then the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above all means that the geostrategic environment encountered by the AKP was radically different from the conditions that had prevailed in the previous 50 years prior to its ascent to power, prompting a central question about the foreign policy of the AKP-led administration: Is it to be dominated by pragmatism and national interests? Or by ideological considerations? Or should it be a combination of the two?

Second: Political, Media, and Ideological Clashes

In the context of this geostrategic environment, the AKP adopted a policy of adaptation and reconciliation between the radical shifts in the region and its implications for Turkish interests, and its Islamic rhetoric.

Attempts to mediate between Arab states and Israel constituted the first Turkish attempt to adapt to the complex environment in the Middle East. International relations history suggests that states that mediate in international conflicts must be acceptable to all sides, which cannot be possible without the mediator enjoying positive relations with the parties to the conflict in question.

Turkey's refusal to cooperate with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a turning point in Syrian-Turkish relations, encouraging rapprochement between the two countries. This had a direct impact in January in 2004, when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey, launching a process of rapprochement between the two states. Two months later, Turkey sharply criticized Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, described by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a terrorist act.³ Turkish-Syrian relations developed further with Erdoğan visiting Damascus in late 2004, where he signed a



US-led Invasion of Iraq 2003



Ahmad Yasin Assassination 2004



free trade agreement with Syria. Erdoğan returned in 2007 and attended with the Syrian president the opening ceremony of the Aleppo International Stadium. Relations evolved further, with another summit in 2008 and even joint military drills.⁴

However, the wave of unrest in the Arab world or the so-called Arab Spring after 2011 led these relations to move in the opposite direction, a subject that requires separate study.

On the other hand, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Israel in May 2005, offering to mediate with Syria. In the same year, Turkey purchased arms from Israel worth \$183 million.⁵ In 2007, the late Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Turkey, and met with Turkish President Abdullah Gül. Peres delivered a speech in the Turkish parliament in which he called for improving relations between the two sides.⁶



Shimon Peres meeting Abdullah Gül 2007

Turkey realized that its relations with the Palestinian resistance, whose Islamic wing was growing, requires improvement, to allow Turkey to expand its diplomacy in the Middle East, including through providing aid to Palestinians especially in the besieged Gaza Strip (GS). However, the complexities of the situation in the Middle East undermined Turkey's position; the Turkish-Israeli relations soured following the Israeli



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

assault on GS in 2008, and Turkey's sharp criticism of Israel's behavior expressed by Erdoğan at the Davos Forum in 2009. Tensions increases after Turkey prevented Israel from participating in the Anatolian Eagle exercises in October 2009, which took place in the framework of NATO. Both the United States and Italy objected to the Turkish decision, which led to the cancellation of the drills,⁷ prompting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to declare that Turkey could not be

an "honest broker" between Israel and Syria. Tensions between Turkey and Israel increased in 2010, when Israel attacked the Turkish aid ship headed to GS, killing nine Turkish nationals (one a dual US-Turkish national). Erdoğan described the raid as an act of state terror. The bilateral relationship then deteriorated further on numerous serious occasions, including:⁸

1. The recognition of US President Donald Trump of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, an issue that caused sharp tensions between Turkey and Israel, manifested through a war of words.

2. The Israeli assault on GS in 2018, which led to an escalation in Turkish criticisms of Israeli policies.
3. Turkish concern over Israeli support for a Kurdish entity especially in northern Syria, expressed explicitly by Netanyahu days before the referendum declared by Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017.
4. The convergence in the positions of some Arab countries and Israel on Hamas and the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement, declaring them ‘terror’ organizations, bearing in mind the close similarities between the political attitudes of the MB movement and those of the ruling AKP party in Turkey.
5. The contradictory policy priorities of Israel and Turkey in Syria. While Israeli policy priorities in Syria are led by curbing or ending Iranian and Hizbullah presence in Syria, Turkey’s priority is to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity at any cost, fearing it would become a springboard for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) insurgency in Turkey, which designates it as a terror group.
6. The growth of religious and nationalist right-wing movements in Turkey (after 2002) and Israel (since 1977), has expanded the gap between Israel and Turkey based on the ideological shifts in both countries.⁹

Differences between the two sides worsened when Israel, in March 2017, arrested the GS branch manager of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*—TİKA), accusing him of transferring funds to Hamas’s military wing. However, Turkish investigations indicated that the transfers took place without the involvement or knowledge of TİKA.¹⁰ In a speech on 10/12/2017, Erdoğan described Israel as a “terrorist state” and a “killer of children.” Israel responded through Netanyahu by claiming Turkey was a supporter of terrorism and a killer of Kurdish civilians. This was followed by Turkey’s expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. Israel responded by expelling the Turkish consul to the Palestinian Authority (PA) from Jerusalem in 2018.¹¹



Amid these tensions between the two sides, despite Israel’s distrust of Erdoğan and even accusations of anti-Semitism against him, Israel opposed the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016. A statement by the Israeli Foreign Ministry and by the office of Prime Minister Netanyahu affirmed this and Israel’s determination to improve relations between the two sides.¹²

Conclusions From This Political-Media Landscape

1. The Islamic religious identity of the ruling AKP’s popular base in Turkey makes it difficult for the party to turn a blind eye to Israeli policies in the occupied territories, especially religious symbols such as Jerusalem, or human rights violations and economic blockade on a Muslim majority people, as is the case in GS. According to some reports as well, there may be a Turkish desire to oversee Islamic holy sites



in Jerusalem alongside Jordan, which reinforces the assessment above.¹³ Further indications of the influence of religious tendencies on Turkish political conduct include Erdoğan's accusations against Israel of aiding the military coup in Egypt against elected President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. Erdoğan cited a video of a conversation between French thinker Bernard-Henri Lévy and Israeli ex-Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in which it was said that Israel would never allow the MB movement to rule Egypt no matter the cost.¹⁴



Bernard-Henri Lévy



Tzipi Livni

2. The growing influence of the religious movements in Israeli policy through extremist right-wing and religious parties, escalating the war of words between the two sides.
3. The AKP desires to show a contemporary Islamic political model that can expand the regional scope of Turkish diplomacy and present an alternative model to the religious regime in Iran.
4. The religious perspective in Turkish policy has led to sustained tensions with Israel on the one hand, and similar tensions with Syria on the other.
5. The Ottoman legacy is still cemented in the historic memory of some Turkish elites, which influences the strategic vision of the state between the imperial history and the nation-state present.¹⁵

Third: Turkish Interests Shared with Israel

Turkey's shared interests with Israel are represented in the following:

1. Trade

According to publicized figures, trade between Turkey and Israel was worth \$5.8 billion in 2019, which marked an increase of \$233 million compared to 2018. Turkey exported goods worth \$4.1 billion to Israel and imported \$1.7 billion. In 2020, trade in the first 8 months added to projections for the remaining 4 months put the value of bilateral trade at \$5.95 billion, an increase of \$150 million. If we calculate the rate of growth of Turkish-Israeli trade between 2008 and 2018, we will find it to be around 238%, compared to an increase of only 17% in trade with the Arab world. But trade with the Palestinians over the same period grew by 489%. The above means that political differences between Turkey and Israel did not go beyond rhetoric that has had no influence on the evolution of trade relations, while trade slowed down markedly with Arab states (especially Arab Gulf states, for example trade with the UAE decreased by about 58%).¹⁶

Israel is Turkey's second largest trading partners in the Middle East, after Iraq, while Turkey is Israel's top trading partner in the region and fifth worldwide.¹⁷ Turkey has sought to capitalize on its trade relations with Israel to benefit from tech partnerships

between Israeli companies and US and European counterparts, in return for acting as an intermediary between Israel and Arab markets that remain closed or semi closed to Israeli goods.

However, there is another development in the trade relations between the two sides; over the same period 2010–2018, the number of Israeli companies operating in Turkey decreased by 33%.¹⁸ This could be linked to security developments, especially after the protests in Istanbul and Ankara against Israel, and some other incidents that affected Israeli nationals.¹⁹



Measuring what economists term “trade intensity” can help understand the depth of Turkish-Israeli trade relations. This metric measures the proportion of bilateral trade to their overall global trade. In this context, it appears that Turkish-Israeli trade intensity is high and generally increasing. Indeed, Turkey’s external trade with Israel increased further compared to the growth of its global trade, which is the most important marker that goes into measuring trade density. In the period between 1995 and 2015 then 2018, Turkey’s exports to Israel increased 10.41-fold, while its imports increased by 9.31-fold. Both countries foreign trade increased by 9.93-fold. When the values of the bilateral trade density metric are examined for 1995–2015, it becomes evident that both countries increased their bilateral trade more than they increased their global trade. In the same period, Turkey’s average exports to Israel were 4.26 bigger compared to its share in global exports.²⁰

2. Alternative Ports

As a result of unrest in Syria post-2011, Turkish trade diverted to Haifa port using it as a transit point to Jordan instead. Between 30 to 40 Turkish trucks arrive to Haifa port via sea, before continuing on to Jordan.²¹ Studies show that up to 25% of Turkish exports bound for the Gulf pass through Haifa for the same reason (the Syrian conflict).²² On the other hand, oil from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been routed to Turkey’s Ceyhan port, to be shipped to Ashdod in occupied Palestine using ‘camouflaged’ ships bearing third party flags.²³



Turkey’s Ceyhan port



Haifa Port

3. Alternative Markets

After Israel discovered large gas fields in the Mediterranean with surplus quantities, it sought foreign customers in the region. It signed deals with Jordan, but with the latter's market being too small, it sought deals with Egypt, unsuccessfully. Israel then sought an importer outside the immediate neighborhood, eying Turkey, which Israeli policymakers believe that it wants to reduce its reliance on Russian gas (60% of Turkey's imports) and Iranian gas (20%). However, improved Russian-Turkish relations, the high cost of building undersea pipelines, the risk of Israeli gas facilities coming under attack from the resistance in GS or Lebanon, as well as Cypriot objections to a pipeline passing through its Cypriot waters without settling the conflict with Turkey first, made Israel's gas less attractive for Turkey, albeit not completely undesirable.²⁴



Discoveries of Natural Gas Fields in the Mediterranean Sea

4. Tourism

Israeli cargo flights returned to Turkish airports in May 2020 after nearly a full decade of suspension.²⁵ Meanwhile, tourism and travel seems to be the sector least affected by the twists and turns of Turkish-Israeli relations, with Turkey earning around \$240 million in revenues from Israeli tourism in 2016, compared to \$26 million in Israeli revenues from Turkish tourists.²⁶ However, political tensions between the two sides still had an impact. In 2008, prior to the conflict between Palestinian resistance forces and the Israeli army, up to half a million Israeli tourists visited Turkey, a figure that then declined to around 100 thousand by 2010.²⁷



Israeli studies suggest events related to Israel's actions in GS have impacted Turkey's image in Israel, turning gradually from positive to negative and deterring Israeli tourists from visiting Turkey.²⁸ However, Israeli tourism to Turkey recovered somewhat with the normalization of ties with Turkey (294 thousand Israelis visited Turkey by the end of 2016), albeit the figure remains far below pre-2008 levels.²⁹

5. Science and Technology

Despite political tensions in 2006–2010, cooperation between academics and science, technology, and research bodies in the two countries



continued, especially in fields like medical sciences and bioengineering. Collaboration increased between entities such as the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) and the Israeli Industrial Center for Research and Development (MATIMOP).³⁰



6. Military

Despite the historic relations between Turkey and Israel, and security and military agreements between them in place prior to the AKP administration, military industries in the two countries could not collaborate further following the AKP ascent to power. On the one hand, Israel's institutions did not fulfil many of their commitments under previous contracts with Turkey. Moreover, Turkey moved in the direction of developing its homegrown military industries to reduce its reliance on arms imports, and in 2011, was able to locally produce around half of its needs, reducing its need for Israel.³¹ Erdoğan confirmed this trajectory when in 2020, he stated that in 2002 his country had had only 62 defensive industry projects, rising to 700 by 2020. Erdoğan also stated that seven Turkish defence companies sit among the top 100 in the world, 5 of which arriving to this position in the period between 2015 and 2020.³²



2016 may be considered the year in which Turkish-Israeli relations regained some warmth, especially following the security collaboration after three Israelis were killed in Istanbul, on 19/3/2016. This was followed by secret contacts between the two sides that led to Israel paying compensations to the families of the victims of the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara [Gaza flotilla raid] and allowing Turkish aid into GS.³³

Fourth: Conclusions

1. The limited impact of rhetorical and political-ideological rows between Israel and Turkey on material interests between the two sides, which reaffirms the non-zero-sum outlook of their relations.
2. Turkish aid to Palestinians is of a “non-military” humanitarian nature often coordinated with Israel, which means that Turkey is aware of the Israeli strategic sensitivities regarding aid to the Palestinians. For this reason, Turkey does not



provide military or security assistance to the Palestinians, which sets it apart from its own role in Arab conflicts post-2010, and from Iran's relationship with the Palestinians.

3. The Turkish side is aware that positive relations with Israel echo positively in Washington and the Israel lobby there and in Europe. Given Turkey's membership in NATO and aspirations to join the EU, reiterated clearly by Erdoğan in November 2020—saying Turkey sees itself in no other place than



Europe and looks forward to building its future with Europe³⁴—it seems evident Turkey's desire to leverage its ties with Israel to achieve its interests in the US and European spheres. Indeed, European relations with Turkey are wobbly, going through periods of tensions that could escalate soon, especially with regards to oil and gas exploration policies in the eastern Mediterranean.

4. Intersection of interests: Among familiar aspects in international relations is objective convergence of interests without prior planning. In Turkish-Israeli relations we find some manifestations of this, such as:

- a. **Azerbaijan:** Azerbaijan is the world's second largest buyer of Israeli arms, while its proximity to Iran is of interest to Israel. Meanwhile, Turkey shares a short but important border with Azerbaijan, in addition to historic cultural bonds and shared hostility to Armenia. This linkage created



convergence between the two states in dealing with the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh last year.³⁵ The repercussions of this issue can be spotted through press reports claiming Azeri efforts to mediate between Israel and Turkey, as a sign of gratitude to both sides for their support for Azerbaijan's campaign during the crisis with Armenia.³⁶

- b. **Iran:** While the zero-sum-game may apply to Israeli-Iranian relations, Turkish-Israeli and Turkish-Iranian relations observe the rules of the non-zero-sum-game. Both Turkey and Israel desire specific outcomes in Syria, which include changing or modifying Iran's position vis-à-vis the regime in Syria (the same regarding Russia). Moreover, both Turkey and



Israel, albeit for different reasons, intervened in Syria. However, Turkish-Iranian

- relations have grown markedly, especially in trade, while officials from the two countries never stopped meeting, unlike the case with Turkey and Israel. Meanwhile, Israel has accused Turkey of giving information in 2013 to Iran on a network of Iranian spies who met with Mossad officials in Turkey, which reinforces the idea of there being security collaboration between Iran and Turkey.³⁷
5. Observing Turkish foreign policy decisions leads one to conclude that Turkey enjoys a considerable measure of “independence and sovereignty” in the decision-making and policymaking process, regardless of the nature of the strategic outcomes of these policies from the Arab perspective.

Conclusion

In the light of the complex realities of the Middle East, Turkish foreign policy under the AKP administration has sought to simultaneously maintain its domestic base, strengthen ties with Islamic-leaning Arab political forces in the region, and leverage the trade, technological, and political advantages of its relations with Israel. However, balancing these components seems to be more complicated than first expected by Turkish diplomacy. Moreover, its keenness to capitalize on international rivalry in the region (especially Russian-American competition) has sometimes negatively—as well as positively—impacted Turkish interests in West Asia.

When conducting a comparative analysis of the dimensions of Turkish policy especially vis-à-vis Israel, it emerges that Turkey’s pragmatic interests override ideological considerations, but do not cancel them out. This has created a kind of a Hegelian dialectic, while noting the profound sense of independence that gives priority to Turkish national security interests. We believe that in the coming five years, this will crystallize a new trajectory in light of several factors dominating the political, economic, and social structure in Turkey, and in light of the developments of the regional and international situation and their implications for Turkish geostrategic dynamics.



Accordingly, we conclude that:

1. The Turkish role in aid, relief, and moral support for the Palestinian side, and developing it further, is the main horizon open right now to Palestinian-Turkish relations. It seems that any ambition to go beyond that role in the near term is not backed by solid foundations.
2. Turkey’s membership of NATO, ambition to join the EU, and continued evolution of trade and even intelligence ties with Israel, represent key variables useful in determining the Turkish position vis-à-vis the **Palestine** issue, especially given that these variables were constants before and after the AKP’s rise to power.



3. Leveraging religious rhetoric on Palestine among Turkish audiences is important and its potentials must not be overlooked.
4. Arab and international pressures on Islamic movements, and the inclination of some Islamic movements to deal with Israel (e.g., AKP in Turkey and Justice and Development Party in Morocco) reinforces accusations by the opponents of political Islam. This could create repercussions that are more profound than what appears on the surface.

Recommendations

1. Key forces in the Refusal Front must spare no effort to restore Syrian-Turkish relations to their pre-2011 state (while fully realizing the huge complexities surrounding this issue). This effort must proceed based on two dimensions:
 - a. Focusing on shared interests on which Syrian and Turkish strategies converge, which prevailed between the two countries prior to 2011, and had reached advanced stages
 - b. The mediation efforts of the Refusal Front must focus on coordinating with international powers to facilitate internal dialogue in Syria, and on providing communication channels to reinforce it.
2. Many points of convergence between Syria and Turkey could be explored and developed into economically and politically broader horizons. Historic experiences in international relations suggest this would be possible if strategic interests on the one hand, and wise decision making on the other, are coupled and a gradual approach is adopted to alter positions.



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