

TURKEY RETHINKS MILITARY COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

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✘ By Ercan Yavuz, [Today's Zaman](#), 06 December 2009, Sunday

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The first strain in relations occurred when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan requested "one minute" from a moderator in Davos during a World Economic Forum (WEF) summit in January to finish his speech, followed by a dramatic walkout in protest of Israel's Gaza policies. In October, Turkey excluded Israel from a multinational air defense exercise at the last minute.

Although the primary factor in the deterioration of the relations is the situation in Gaza, Israel's constant failure to fulfill the conditions it guaranteed to carry out in military contracts has also contributed to a loss of confidence, particularly regarding the modernization contracts for Heron and F-4 warplanes and M-60 tanks. Israel has defended itself, saying that Turkey's demands concerning these contracts are simply not realistic.

If the two countries fail to overcome the gap in confidence, it might be impossible for Israel or Israeli companies in the future to win military contracts in Turkey.

The most striking example of the recent development was the cancellation of the \$38 million Lorop Project, bought from the Israeli Elop Electro-Optic Company by the Air Forces Command. In addition to this, a \$40 million tender for the Harpy II system was canceled by the order of Air Forces Commander Gen. Faruk Cömert.

Yet another factor that has damaged the relationship of the two countries is the relationship between Israel and northern Iraq. Interior Minister Beşir Atalay has stated that he was deeply offended when the Israeli army trained troops in northern Iraq.

A history of relations

Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel. Traditionally the contents of military contracts with Israel have been kept highly confidential, as well as the method of their signing. The first agreement between the two countries was signed on July 4, 1950. It was a trade agreement. Later, an air transportation contract was signed between the two countries in February 1951. However, Turkey started seeing Israel as the biggest threat in the Middle East at the time of meetings for the Baghdad Pact, straining relations between the two countries. In 1956, Turkey recalled its ambassador in Israel when England, France and Israel attacked Egypt over this country's nationalization of the Suez Canal.

After this point, the two countries chose to conduct their relationship in a more low-profile manner. In 1958, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and Foreign Minister Golda Meir came to Turkey, where they held secret talks with then-Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. The two countries signed a top-secret agreement against the Soviet threat, known as the Environment Alliance. Only the top 10 politicians and generals knew about the agreement. In fact, this agreement has been kept from the public eye until very recently. Today, Turkey officially rejects the existence of such an agreement, but Israeli archives suggest otherwise. Most surprisingly, Iran, Israel's archenemy, appears as a third signatory to this agreement.

In 1966, Turkey failed to secure Israel's support for the vote on Cyprus in the United Nations, further straining relations between the two countries. In 1966, Turkey notified the Israeli military attaché that military cooperation between the two countries was officially over. In 1967, at the time of the Arab-Israeli war, Turkey refused to give clearance to US planes bringing logistical supplies to Israel, while it let USSR planes helping Arab countries through its airspace.

Relations normalized after US interference

Israeli-Turkish relations deteriorated further until the military coup in 1980 in Turkey. Upon the escalation of tensions, 61 US senators sent a letter to the US ambassador in 1981, asking him to make special efforts toward the improvement of Turkish-Israeli relations.

Following this letter, Turkey, with an order from then-President and coup leader Kenan Evren, abstained from a vote on the UN resolution which condemned the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. In return for this, Israel provided intelligence to Turkey about the Armenian terror organization ASALA. A new era began in Turkish-Israeli relations when intelligence units from both countries carried out a joint operation in Zahle, east of Beirut, dealing a heavy blow to Lebanon's ASALA faction and JCGA militants.

This warm rapprochement between the two countries gained a new dimension with then-Prime Minister Turgut Özal's visit to the United States in 1985, when he met secretly with the Jewish lobby. From that date on, it became a tradition for Turkish prime ministers to visit with the Jewish lobby during their visits to the US.

Being the first Muslim country that recognized Israel in 1948, Turkey was also among the first

countries to recognize the establishment of the state of Palestine, on Nov. 15, 1988. Since 1950, Turkey had tried to keep its relations with Israel secret; however, after a deal between Israel and Palestine in 1993, Turkey made its relations with Israel public.

From this date on, full cooperation began between Israel and Turkey. In 1992, a tourism cooperation agreement between Turkey and Israel became the first of a series of agreements to be signed. A visit paid by Israeli President Ezer Weizman on Jan. 25, 1994, was meaningful in that it was the first Israeli presidential visit to Turkey.

Çiller's term

A visit from Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Turkey in April 1994 was the start of a new era. Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller made a proposal to cooperate in intelligence sharing and anti-terrorism, a watershed event in the history of the two countries' relations. Çiller also signed a treaty with Israel on March 31, 1994, assuring full confidentiality on all agreements signed with Israel. Between 1994 and 1997, Turkey signed 19 agreements with Israel, 12 of these ironically signed by the anti-Israeli government of Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party (RP).

Constitution and agreements with Israel

For the 12 agreements signed under the Erbakan government, some have speculated that they are unconstitutional as the signature under these was that of then-Chief of Staff Gen. İsmail Hakkı Karadayı and not the Turkish defense minister, as should be per the law. None of the agreements were ratified by Parliament, another violation of the Turkish Constitution.

Nurettin Aktaş, a former deputy from the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), submitted a question to Parliament in 2002 querying the number of military treaties with Israel and their content. Then-Defense Minister Sabahattin Çakmakoğlu said there were 13 defense agreements with Israel, the content of which had not been ratified by Parliament due to confidentiality clauses.

Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Aktaş said: "All treaties with Israel are against the Constitution. If the government wants to, it can annul all of these."

A similar question motion was submitted by Republican People's Party's (CHP) Kemal Anadol. The response, from Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, also confirmed confidentiality. Of these secret agreements, Prime Minister Erdoğan had spoken of several during a party congress in Kütahya.

Problems in treaties

In the long term, most of these agreements have worked to damage relations between the two countries. Israeli companies won \$500 million in tenders to modernize 54 F-4 warplanes and 48 Phantom planes. Another project was the joint manufacturing of Leopard tanks, which were developed, incidentally, by a team of engineers including former Prime Minister Erbakan.

Some observers have also stated that the Feb. 28 unarmed military intervention of 1997, which took place exactly three days after then-Chief of General Staff Gen. Karadayı's visit to Israel, is also meaningful, claiming that the military's close rapport with Israel played a role in the intervention.

After Erbakan's RP was ousted by the 1997 intervention, a Motherland Party (ANAVATAN)-Democratic Left Party (DSP) coalition government came to power. In this period, the two countries' relations truly blossomed. Turkey and Israel started participating in military drills together. There still was slight tension in this period due to Israel's attack on Aksa, Palestine, that year. However, the coalition government led by Bülent Ecevit never fully severed ties with Israel. To the contrary, the most important military projects began to be awarded to Israel.

In 2002, Turkey awarded a contract for the modernization of 170 American-made M-60 A1 tanks to Israel. Those who were against this were accused of anti-Semitism by Chief of General Staff Gen. Hüseyin Kivrikiöglü. In the face of controversy around this \$1.035 billion tender, the Israeli IMI company reduced the tender price. However, the modernization project did not succeed in the way Turkey wanted. Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) deputy Erdal Sipahi said his party and many others in Parliament at the time objected to this tender being awarded to Israel, but "an order from above" handed it to Israel.

Sipahi says: "According to the contract, these tanks were supposed to be modernized by the end of 2003. Later, they reset the date and moved this to 2007. We are now in 2009, and the project has not yet been completed. The cost of a single tank for Turkey has reached \$4.5 million. Leopard-2 tanks that we buy from Germany on the other hand cost \$1 million per tank. I don't think those tanks would be of any use after all this time even if Israel completed the delivery."

A major controversy about this tender was the technical capability of Turkish military defense company ASELSAN, which was able to complete the modernization of 162 Leopard tanks for just over \$160 million.

Projects under way

Currently, the cost of military tenders awarded to Israel and Israeli companies stands at \$1.8 billion. The annual trade volume between the two countries is \$2.6 million. When the AK Party came to power in 2002, Israel sought to maintain warm relations with the government. However, the first crisis broke with Israel in January during the bombings of the Gaza Strip.

In May 2007, Erdoğan visited Israel, which was returned with a visit by Israeli President Shimon Peres in November that year. After the two visits, Turkey awarded \$700 million in projects involving tank modernization and the modernization of 48 warplanes and 300 helicopters. In the latest agreement with Israel, Turkey bought 10 unmanned Heron air vehicles; however, there has been a major delay in Israel's delivery of the Herons, only adding to the problems of the M-60 tender. The Herons, which were initially promised for May 2008, were finally delivered last month. The Air Forces are currently testing these aircraft, but it is hard to say that Israel's next job will be as easy in the next military

tender.

