

**Tamar Kupreishvili**, Associate Professor  
Georgian Technical University.  
Email: [t.kupreishvili@gtu.ge](mailto:t.kupreishvili@gtu.ge)

**Nodar Kobaidze**, PhD student  
Faculty of Law and International Relations  
Email: [kobaidze.nodari24@gtu.ge](mailto:kobaidze.nodari24@gtu.ge)

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## ISRAEL-TURKISH RELATIONS: CHALLENGES AND ENSURING PEACE IN GAZA STRIP

**Abstract:** *In 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly announced the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel, it became an important issue in the relations between the neighboring and local states. The entire political-historical context was redefined by the period before and after Israel. Israel and Turkey created a new bond, designed by quite different ideas from the other Arab states, and the analyst Alan Makowski called it “a sense of Difference”. (Makovsky, 2019) It is important to note that the relationship between Israel and Turkey is complex and influenced by various factors, including regional dynamics, domestic politics, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While efforts have been made to mend ties, the relationship remains characterized by periods of cooperation and tension. The relationship's future trajectory will depend on the evolving political landscape and the willingness of both countries to engage in dialogue and find common ground.*

**Keywords:** *Turkey-Israel relations, Gaza Strip, Security.*

## **Introduction**

Turkey aims to become a leader-state in the Middle East, after political modernization, which began after coming to power Turkey's Justice and Development Party (Kupreishvili, 2019).

Before discussing Israel-Turkey relations, let's explain in a few words about Israel's most painful problem – the conflict with Palestine, which has been going on for years. The conflict between them is one of the most famous conflicts in the world, the main reason for which was the expansion of the borders and the management of Jerusalem. Many people have died in this conflict to date.

The difficult situation began with the formation of Israel. Initially, there were different opinions regarding the formation of the state. One side thought of forming an independent state of Palestine, and the other thought of forming an independent state of Israel, there was also an opinion that two independent states should be formed separately. The controversy began in the second half of the 20th century and continues today (Herzog, 2008).

## **Historical Overview**

The relations between Turkey and Israel started in the second half of the twentieth century. For Israel strategic relations with Turkey were important, as it has a conflicting attitude with most of the Arab states. Indeed, relations with Turkey were a solution for Israel to escape from regional isolation and to reduce conflicts with the Arabs more or less. However, the end of the Cold War painted a new picture in the international arena.

After the end of the Cold War, Turkey, on its initiative, started a fairly rapid rapprochement with Israel, the strongest state in the region from a military point of view, which was met with undisguised displeasure by many Arab countries (Abashidze, 2009).

Since 1994, systematic, joint military exercises have been carried out, with Israeli enterprises providing modernization of the army of the Republic of Turkey, aircraft, helicopters, and tanks.

Since the 1990s, Kemal's Turkey has been looking for partners in the Middle East to help meet the security challenges posed by Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Turkey's close strategic relationship with Israel was a choice given that Israel is a strong pro-Western state with significant influence in the US as well. The USA was the new hegemonic power after the end of the Cold War.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Turkey was Israel's second closest neighbor after the United States. The relationship between Israel and Turkey in the US has changed periodically but has mostly supported Turkey's active influence in the region. In the political relations between Turkey and Israel, there are no such serious tensions as Israel has with most of the Muslim countries of the world.

Israel and the United States have a strong and multifaceted relationship. The U.S. has been a key ally and supporter of Israel since its establishment in 1948. The two countries share close security cooperation, economic ties, and cultural exchanges. The United States has provided significant military aid to Israel over the years and has been a staunch diplomatic defender of Israel in international forums.

The relationship between Israel and Turkey has been more complex and has experienced significant fluctuations. Historically, Israel and Turkey had relatively strong relations, including military cooperation and economic ties. However, the relationship deteriorated in the late 2000s, particularly after an Israeli military operation against a Turkish-led flotilla attempting to breach the Israeli blockade of Gaza in 2010. The incident resulted in the deaths of several Turkish activists and strained the bilateral relationship.

The United States has maintained a longstanding alliance with Turkey as a NATO member and strategic partner. However, U.S.-Turkey relations have also faced challenges in recent years due to various issues, including disagreements over regional policies, human rights concerns, and Turkey's purchase of a Russian missile defense system. These tensions have occasionally impacted the dynamics between Israel, Turkey, and the United States (Kupreishvili & Okropilashvili, 2023).

The West has always refrained from providing military technology to NATO ally Turkey, due to Kurdish disputes, which Israel did not hinder. Finally, Israel and Turkey established diplomatic relations with each other in 1992, signed a bilateral agreement, and became strategic partners.

Since the beginning of the strategic partnership, relations between Israel and Turkey have been developing successfully. Defense trade reached several million dollars. The agreement

between Turkey and Israel was mainly related to the modernization and renewal of Turkey's outdated equipment. Also, the states have started cooperation on terrorism and intelligence issues.

This resuscitated peripheral alliance was facilitated by the fact that both sides were eager to prove their geostrategic value to the United States in a post-Cold War Middle East. Washington, for its part, shared with Ankara and Tel Aviv a desire to curb the regional influence of hostile regimes in Damascus, Baghdad, and Tehran (Randal,2023).

Such a strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel has caused the concern of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and other Central Asian states.

The relationship between these two states has been an important feature of the international arena in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War.

The victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 did not change the strategic partnership with Israel for some time.

First, Israel's support of Iraqi Kurds for the creation of a state turned out to be an obstacle to bilateral relations. Israel's support for Iraqi Kurds was accompanied by pre-historical processes, which did not pass without consequences (Wahab, 2017).

This was followed by a slowdown in the peace process and 2006 the reception of a Hamas delegation in Ankara.

All of these made the relations between Israel and Turkey more or less difficult. High-level visits decreased and Turkey's criticism of Israel increased, eventually becoming quite severe. Israel, under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, looks to have been dissatisfied with the AKP government for not informing Turkey about its threatening attack on Gaza and for not making enough understanding to Syria in the Turkish mediation effort. Moreover, in September 2009, Jerusalem turned down a request from Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to enter the Gaza Strip from Israel, where he planned to meet Hamas officials before crossing back into the Jewish state(Keinon, 2009).

Israel has adopted a policy of not meeting with any state leader who has met with Hamas officials. Turkey has been angered by Israel's refusal to cancel an international air force exercise in 2009 in which Israel participated (Hürriyet Daily News, 2009.).

Political processes have not only reduced defense trade between the two states, but Israel has considered suspending the sale of defense capabilities. The coming to power of the AK party

raised the issue of Palestine and caused tension with Israel. President R.T. Erdoğan saw the solution to the Palestinian issue peacefully to establish stability in the region (Inbar, 2011).

Relations between Turkey and Israel have cooled times and times. Tel Aviv claimed that Ankara was strengthening cooperation with Iran. However, the tension between the two countries was not necessarily caused by Iran. The 2008-2009 Gaza War occurred while Turkey was acting as a mediator between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights, much to the concern and dismay of the Turkish government. President Erdogan criticized former Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum over Gaza, publicly calling him a liar and a murderer in the presence of other delegates.

A 2010 Israeli referendum revealed that 78% of the population perceived Turkey as an "enemy".

In late 2010, the "Mavi Marmara" incident, when Israeli landing forces attacked a Turkish fleet near Gaza and killed 8 Turkish citizens, further strained relations. The tension lasted for more than a year. In response to the attack, Turkey recalled its ambassador and suspended diplomatic relations at the consular level at the Turkish embassy in Tel Aviv. The diplomats tried to repair the relations between Turkey and Israel, but it lasted a long, till 2016. When the prime ministers of both states agreed to normalize diplomatic relations (BBC, Mavi Marmara, 2016).

In 2011, Turkey reiterated its demand for an apology from Israel, noting that such actions would only worsen relations. Erdogan's 3 conditions to end the crisis are an apology, compensation for the victims, and the lifting of the siege on Gaza, which Tel Aviv says are only soft demands that will increase to include the return of Arab lands, including the Golan Heights.

Such deteriorating relations with Israel are reflected in America's domestic policy and relations with Turkey. In 2010, President Obama warned Turkey that congressional suspicions about Turkey's motives and doubts about Turkey's credibility as a partner could affect US-Turkey relations. It also warned of its potential consequences for bilateral relations, particularly military aid, implying a disagreement over the sale of piloted aircraft used against Kurdish separatists, the planned purchase of 100 F-35 light multirole fighters was suspended due to the US withdrawal (2011). Turkey, on the other hand, has refused to deploy US ballistic missiles on its soil, fearing the deterioration of relations with Russia. Despite these tensions, the commodification of other military assets continues. In June 2011, Turkey established a partnership with the US company

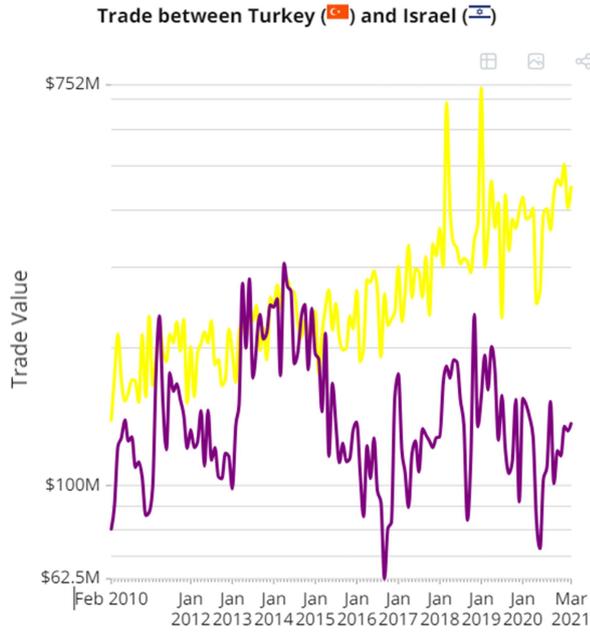
Sikorsky in a \$3.5 billion deal to supply Turkey with a new generation of multi-purpose helicopters.

At the expense of confrontation with Israel, Turkey tried to increase its influence on the Middle East region. Turkey's actions were aimed at ending the Iranian monopoly at the expense of Israel's opponents. Relations with Israel during the Cold War were beneficial for Turkey. In today's situation, it is no longer, so Turkey is trying to liquidate this allied relationship. This process is ongoing, an example of this was the sending of the "Freedom Fleet" to the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military operations in Gaza, such as Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014, caused significant casualties and drew condemnation from Turkey. The Turkish government strongly criticized Israel's actions, leading to further strain in bilateral relations.

Following the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador and downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel to a lower level. The two countries have not had ambassadors posted in each other's capitals since then.

It's worth noting that despite the strained relationship at the government level, there have been instances of behind-the-scenes cooperation and economic ties between Israel and Turkey. However, overall, the relationship remains fragile and marked by mistrust and divergent policies.

Although Israel and Turkey had a long gap in diplomatic relations, based on various facts and as a result of scientific observations, their rapprochement should be of interest to them. According to scientific analysts, the two countries share an interest in the exploitation of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean; and have mutual concerns about continued instability in Syria beyond their borders. Also, by 2020, they gathered for Azerbaijan, where logistical, technical, and operational support should be provided. The second group of analysts also mentions their connections in the transport, tourism, and economy sectors. The level of trade, which has been declining since the complication of Israel-Turkey relations, appears to be on the rise by 2021 based on the UN global trade data. Where Israel is marked in purple and Turkey in yellow (see diagram 1).



**Diagram1.** Trade between Turkey and Israel (OEC, 2021).

By 2022, the trade partnership picture of Israel and Turkey looks like this (see pics 1 and 2).



**Picture 1.** Israel-Turkey trade relations for 2022 (OEC, 2022)



Picture 2. Turkey-Israel trade relations for 2022 (OEC, 2022)

Besides the trade and economic relations, the fact that Turkey and Israel have invisible cultural ties should also be taken into account. Israel's more than 75,000 citizens boast Turkish-Jewish ancestry and maintain a deep attachment to the Anatolian lands they once called home. There are over 15,000 Jews across the Mediterranean who still call Turkey their home (Randall, 2022).

Cultural diplomacy is often used by politicians to improve relations. As one example, we can cite the meeting of Turkish President Erdogan in 2021 with the Sephardic clergy, where he uttered the following phrase: "Turkey's greatest desire is a Middle East where societies from different religions, languages, and ethnicities live together in peace." Here he added that relations between Turkey and Israel are vital for the stability, security, and peace of the region (Erdoğan, 2021).

### Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza

According to the United Nations, the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip is growing day by day. The situation has become especially serious since Hamas committed a barbaric, terrorist act on October 7.

According to the 2023 figures, most of the deaths in the Gaza Strip are children and women. The actual number of deaths is unknown, but 1.6 million of the 2.2 million population have been displaced. Their residential areas have been razed to the ground.

"Hamas' actions have caused so much senseless suffering," said Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. "This moment calls on all of us to

empathize with the plight of Israelis and Palestinians. To put ourselves in their shoes and see the world through their eyes."

"The United States supports many of the critical provisions adopted by the Council, including the immediate and unconditional release of hostages by Hamas and other groups, and humanitarian pauses to allow full, rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to civilians."

UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner presented to member states the dire situation that just six weeks of war have created in the Gaza Strip. Along with the humanitarian catastrophe, a massive crisis could develop, affecting generations. The growing impact of the crisis on the Palestinian economy has exceeded 12 percent, with GDP declining by more than 4.3 percent. The unemployment rate is expected to fall to 26 percent.

By the end of 2024, development as measured by the Human Development Index (HDI) could drop to levels not seen since HDI calculations for the State of Palestine began in 2004.

All the indicators have significantly worsened in the Gaza Strip.

Experts estimate that the Gaza Strip will have a development lag of 17 to 19 years due to this difficult situation. And every additional day or month in the Gaza Strip means a huge regression, for which it is necessary to stop the war.

## **Security Issues**

Also, after the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Israel's relationship with Gaza, where the Palestinian militant group governs Hamas, became increasingly tense. In 2007, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip after violent clashes with the rival Palestinian faction Fatah. Following Hamas' takeover, Israel, along with Egypt, imposed a blockade on Gaza, restricting the movement of goods and people in and out of the territory.

The blockade led to deteriorating living conditions in Gaza, with limited access to essential supplies, high unemployment rates, and inadequate healthcare and infrastructure. The situation in Gaza has been marked by periodic escalations of violence between Hamas and Israel, including conflicts in 2008-2009 (Operation Cast Lead), 2012 (Operation Pillar of Defense), and 2014 (Operation Protective Edge).

These conflicts resulted in significant casualties and destruction on both sides, with a higher toll on the Palestinian population in Gaza. Israel has argued that its military operations were necessary to protect its citizens from rocket attacks and other security threats emanating

from Gaza. Critics, however, have raised concerns about the proportionality of Israel's response and the impact on civilian lives.

Efforts to achieve a long-term resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and address the situation in Gaza have been challenging. Various ceasefire agreements and reconciliation attempts have been made, and mediated by regional and international actors, but a comprehensive and lasting resolution remains elusive. The situation in Gaza continues to be a subject of international concern and efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and promote stability and peace in the region are ongoing.

The opposition between them is expressed in different ways. In the more than 70 years since Israel's founding, the threats to its independence have changed radically. However, there are still two areas of risk. The first danger comes from Arab states further away from Israel, which lies in the possibility of an attack with weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, or even nuclear) rather than conventional war.

The second area of risk is the threat of Palestinian and Islamic terrorism in general. Israel handles this problem well for the most part. An effective combination of intelligence and operational forces leads to impressive prevention of terrorist attacks; But this will not solve the problem completely, because we have a clear case of how the cities of Israel were suddenly attacked on October 7, 2023 (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Thus, Israel is only driven by its interests as it understands and defines them. The main challenge for Israeli security is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the threats posed by various Palestinian militant groups. Israel faces security threats from several Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas in Gaza and various factions in the West Bank. These groups have engaged in acts of terrorism, such as suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and incursions into Israeli territory. Israel has been a target of terrorism for decades. Palestinian militant groups have employed tactics such as suicide bombings, stabbings, vehicle ramming attacks, and the launching of rockets and mortars. Combating these asymmetric threats requires a multi-layered approach that combines intelligence gathering, counterterrorism operations, and border security measures.

Israel shares borders with several neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. The volatile situations in some of these neighboring countries, such as

ongoing conflicts and the presence of non-state actors, pose security challenges. Israel must ensure the security of its borders to prevent infiltration, smuggling, and potential attacks.

Israel faces security concerns related to the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region. Iran's nuclear program and its support for proxy groups pose a significant security challenge. Israel also faces threats from Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is backed by Iran and possesses a substantial missile arsenal.

The escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict of the previous year (2023) the more or less orderly complicated relations between Israel and Turkey made it difficult again. Turkey has decided to recall its ambassador to Tel Aviv, Shakir Ozkan Torunlar, for consultations in Ankara regarding the developments in the Gaza Strip. This was announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey. This decision was made against the background of "Israeli attacks" causing a humanitarian tragedy in Gaza (Zaks, 2023).

The specific challenges Israel faces can change over time due to geopolitical developments, regional dynamics, and the actions of various actors. Different from Israel, Turkey's geopolitical location, historical legacy, and economic and military capabilities have contributed to its aspirations for regional influence. But Turkey's pursuit of regional leadership faces challenges and complexities. Its foreign policy choices have often been subject to criticism and controversy, leading to strained relations with some countries in the region and beyond.

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