

MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2021/22

Chief Editor: Prof. Shaul Chorev

Editor: Dr. Ziv Rubinovitz



Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Centre
המרכז לחקר מדיניות ואסטרטגיה ימית

Israel–Turkey Relations – An Ocean of Opportunities

Omri Eilat

Followingr Joe Biden and the Democratic Party winning the 2020 elections in the United States, 2021 has been marked by the re-evaluation of positions in the East Mediterranean basin. As part of this trend, Turkey has reassessed its relations with the countries in the region and has taken special diplomatic measures to advance its relations with Egypt, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. The phone call between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Israeli counterpart Isaac Herzog this summer aroused considerable interest but also many questions on the Israeli side.¹ On the one hand, Israel and Turkey have many shared interests and an impressive track record of cooperation, including during the Erdogan years. On the other hand, the Israeli confidence in the success of yet another move toward warming relations is very low, primarily due to Erdogan's anti-Israel stance and the formation of profound Turkish commitment toward the Palestinian issue. Although Turkey's multifaceted positions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East are not dependent on its relations with Israel, Israel's opening up to the sea in the past decade has added an extra layer to the relations between the two countries. This layer includes new dilemmas and challenges but these are accompanied by new opportunities. To understand their origins, it is critically important to understand Turkey's fundamental positions concerning the Mediterranean Sea. Only a small proportion of these are a consequence of Erdogan's reign. Most of them are much deeper-rooted, going back to the Ottoman period.

This article analyzes and presents to the readers and particularly to the decision-makers, the Turkish perspective on developments in the eastern Mediterranean basin, given the current state of affairs. This is not to say there are no profound structural problems in Turkey's relations with Israel or to argue that the criticism toward Turkey's conduct in the region is not at least partially justified. My main goal is to shed light on the many points of convergence of interests of the two countries, their complicated shared history, and this history's role as part of a regional tapestry, concerning which the Israeli comprehension is found lacking. As a rule, Israel's acquaintance with its neighbors is sparse, sometimes embarrassingly so. Moreover, the Israeli side is first to recognize a threat but the last, to sense an opportunity. I believe that, especially when Israel is reevaluating and rebuilding its web of foreign relations, these things have to be clearly stated.

¹ Rina Bassist, "Erdogan, Herzog share rare phone call," *Al-Monitor*, 13 July 2021.

The desire for a just international order

At the root of Erdogan's policy, going back to his early days as Prime Minister stands the desire to install a new world order in which Muslim countries will gain an improved positioning.² Turkey's leading role in promoting these efforts and claims, like speaking out against the status of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, is, in the minds of the Turkish policy-makers, intended to provide Turkey a leadership role in the Islamic world. The Erdogan administration's deep nostalgia for the Ottoman past and its reinstatement as a Turkish "birthright", as opposed to the Kemalist approach which regarded the establishment of the republic, is the most dominant factor in the formation of Turkey's policy.³ Moreover, suspicion and defensiveness against international arrangements and institutions have always existed in Turkey. The sense of alienation toward the international order, which is discriminatory toward Turkey, has roots going back as far as the late nineteenth century, when its western allies, Britain and France, effectively relinquished their efforts to preserve the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.⁴

At the time, the positioning of the Ottoman Empire as the protector of Muslims was a consequence of the loss of territory through wars and the displacement and massacre of Muslim communities, first and foremost by Czarist Russia, but also in the Balkans, where new nation states were asserting themselves and were gaining their independence from the Ottoman Empire with West European backing. This memory reflects substantially, directly on the Cyprus issue, which has made its way back into headlines this year. The status of the Turkish minority in Cyprus is one of a string of issues that remained festering sores in Turkish public opinion even before the foundation of the Republic. The concern of Cyprus joining forces with Greece is justified and is based on the move Crete did at the turn of the twentieth century when it won west European support despite the agreements with the Ottoman Empire, which involved the deportation of the Muslim minority from the island. The loss of the Dodecanese Islands to Italy following the latter's aggression in 1911 in Libya left the Empire and following that, the Republic was devoid of control of the

² Henri Barkey, "How Erdogan Muscled Turkey to the Center of the World Stage," *World Politics Review*, October 30, 2020.

³ Yağmur Karakaya, "The Conquest of Hearts: the Central Role of Ottoman Nostalgia within Contemporary Turkish Populism," *American Journal of Culture and Sociology* Vol. 8 (2020): 125–157.

⁴ Sean Mcmeekin, *Berlin–Baghdad Express* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 35–52.

Mediterranean islands.⁵ The vulnerability of the Turkish minority in Cyprus following its independence from Britain and the fragility of the dual-nationality agreement between the Greeks and the Turks on the island led to the Turkish invasion and underpins Turkish demands from the European Union till today.

The vulnerability of Turkish minorities outside Turkey, including the Palestinians, the loss of the Province of Mosul to the British Mandate in Iraq in the Treaty of Lausanne, which ended the Turkish war of independence in 1923, and the status of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits are scars, lingered in Turkish memory due to the Ottoman demise. 2019, the year in which Turkey embarked on some of its most aggressive moves, was the centenary of the humiliating Treaty of Sèvres, which dismantled the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish objections to this treaty brought upon it, among other things, the war of independence, out of which came the Turkish Republic. If the first decade of Erdogan's rule could be characterized with domestic neo-Ottomanism while treading cautiously in the international arena, the second decade has strengthened neo-Ottomanist tendencies in Turkey's foreign policy. The collapse of Syria and Iraq has made the Turkmen and Kurdish minority regions relevant once again to Turkish influence.⁶ Besides the involvement of Turkish military forces as peacekeeping forces or as NATO forces in places like Iraq and Kosovo, Turkey has extended its military footprint into other areas, which do not fit this description, such as in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia - which has brought Turkish military involvement to 13 countries.⁷

From Aggressiveness to Assertiveness

The Turkish expansionist tendencies peaked in 2019 with the implementation of the "Blue Homeland" doctrine by the Turkish Navy. This doctrine was first introduced in 2006 by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz in a symposium held at Navy headquarters as an academic-strategic exercise. It became Turkey's official program. According to Blue Homeland, Turkey has rights to a vast offshore expanse – 462 thousand sq. km – in the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and Black Seas. This area includes territories which according to international conventions are recognized as belonging to Greece and Cyprus. Turning the doctrine into official doctrine came with extensive naval

⁵ Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4–7.

⁶ Nick Danforth, "Turkey's New Maps Are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2016.

⁷ Selcan Hacaoglu, "Mapping the Turkish Military's Expanding Footprint," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2020.

exercises, seismic research work in the Exclusive Economic Zones of neighboring countries, and expulsion of ships, including Israel's *Bat Galim*, from Economic Waters claimed by Turkey as part of the doctrine.⁸

Although The Blue Homeland doctrine encountered substantial difficulties given the French intervention in the summer of 2020 and the change of government in the United States in January 2021, Turkey's claims in the eastern Mediterranean basin continue to challenge the international system. The Turkish aggressiveness has been substantially tempered but the claims and aspirations for dominance in the Middle East have remained valid, have not diminished and are not expected to be taken off the table. The stationing of squadrons of UAVs at the Geçitkale airport in northern Cyprus and Erdogan's demanding statements directed at the European Union regarding the status of the unrecognized Turkish republic on the island on the 47th anniversary of the Turkish invasion are indicative of the Turkish belligerent position.⁹ This position is being rewritten into various doctrines, which have been replaced several times during the second half of Erdogan's time in power. It represents the attitude of a party that feels excluded from the international system, or which in the least, is underrepresented. According to the Convention on the Law of the Sea, the inherent discrimination against Turkey in the Economic Waters of the East Mediterranean basin renders it unacceptable for Turkey, which prefers to reach a political resolution of the issue.

In the regional rivalry, aerial force building is intricately intertwined in the developments within the maritime space. The development of Turkey's aircraft carrier, the *Anadolu*, was originally intended to carry F-35 aircraft, which are capable of vertical take-off and landing. The removal of Turkey from the aircraft's development project and the cancellation of the sale by the US Congress during the Trump presidency was a consequence of the crisis over the S400 air defense system, which drove a massive Russian wedge into NATO. Despite Turkey's desire to resolve this crisis and repair its relations with the US administration, this dramatic snafu cannot be solved without severe strategic harm to NATO or through massive indemnification by the US administration in return for disabling the system. The meaning of the second course of action will be an entry into conflict with Russia,

⁸ Omri Eilat and Ayal Hayut-Mann, "The Turkish Maritime Doctrine - The 'Blue Homeland' (Mavi Vatan)," in Shaul Chorev and Ehud Gonen (eds.), *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2020/21* (Haifa: Haifa Research Center for Maritime Policy & Strategy, University of Haifa, 2021), pp. 187–195.

⁹ Günter Seufert, "Erdogan the Builder in Northern Cyprus," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Comments*, 47.

which might be detrimental to the construction of the nuclear plant Turkey has set its sights on. The way Turkish diplomacy functions in this area is a complicating factor in itself. Erdogan's statements regarding the purchase of an additional S-400 battery as a warning to the American side are severely harmful to the renewed attempts at rapprochement between Turkey and the United States.¹⁰

Besides this, Turkey's independence in terms of aircraft has seen a dramatic development in recent years, with the Bayraktar TB2 UAV becoming operational, and the success of its sale to the Ukrainian and Polish armies has turned a corner in Turkey's strategic status. Turkey's alienation from the United States and Israel in the past decade has been accompanied by the development of a more independent aircraft industry, where the development of the Bayraktar is its most outstanding achievement. This development actually offers potential for reducing Turkish aggressiveness due to its growing self-assurance of its regional status. It goes hand-in-hand with the general shift toward moderation to the extent of assertiveness and retention of its long-term demands.¹¹

Turkey and Israel: From Crises to Opportunities

As part of Turkey's attempts to improve relations with the United States, it has been trying this past year to improve its relations with its leading allies in the region: Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The Turkish-Israeli relations had begun deteriorating since Operation Cast Lead in late 2008, wherein response, Erdogan began publicly criticizing Israel. At a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos in the winter of 2009, Erdogan left the stage in anger when during a session that discussed the fighting in Gaza, the then-President Shimon Peres defended Israel's position. The flotilla which set off from Turkey in May 2010 toward the Gaza Strip and the incident onboard the Mavi Marmara in the summer of 2010 brought relations between the two countries to an all-time low, which downgraded diplomatic ties to their lowest level. Despite an attempt to resume the relations in 2016, assisted by President Barak Obama through a series of measures which included the restoration of ambassadors, the ethical differences between the countries trumped their shared interests with the advent of the Marches of Return in the Gaza Strip in summer 2018, which received Turkish backing, and which touched off violent confrontations along the border fence. Turkey began openly supporting Hamas and directly confronted

¹⁰ Henri Barkey, "Resolving the S-400 Crisis Could Revive the Turkish-American Alliance," *The National Interest*, May 25, 2021.

¹¹ Burak Bekdil, "The Rise and Rise of Turkish Drone Technology," *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, No. 1,992, April 11, 2021.

Israel on matters unrelated to the Palestinians. In a memorable incident in November 2019, Turkish Navy ships expelled the Israeli research vessel the *Bat Galim*, which belongs to the Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research (IOLR) Institute, from the Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone. This incident was yet another example of the deterioration of the relationship between Israel and Turkey, albeit the causes were a dispute between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus over control of the offshore gas deposits in the Mediterranean.¹²

In spite of all these, the countries' economic interests remained out of sight. Despite the diplomatic rift, trade between the countries kept on growing and crossed the \$6 billion per year mark. Of course, the potential for trade growth was much larger, and Israeli exports to Turkey are highly undiversified (based primarily on oil products from the Israel Oil Refineries).¹³ Besides the tensions, there was the question of gas exports from the Leviathan Deposit and the plans for a gas pipeline that was supposed to transport gas from this deposit to Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria, and Italy. Furthermore, the Israeli decision-makers are continuing with the plan to export gas to Europe, ignoring the fact that the profound maritime dispute between Turkey and its neighbors, Greece and Cyprus, will preclude the passage of the pipeline, which is already very expensive and complicated, via the planned route. Even if the Israeli, Greek, and Cypriot positions are legally iron-clad in accordance with the Convention on the Law of the Sea, the multinational energy companies are not going to take the risk that their huge investments will be destroyed due to a maritime dispute which has already produced Turkish-Israeli and Turkish-Greek conflicts in international waters.¹⁴

Although Turkey is experiencing difficulties nailing down a consistent foreign policy, it does not restrain itself from making aggressive statements and moves against its neighbors. It is a key country for the establishment of effective regional cooperation, not only because of its strength but also due to the many points at which its interests dovetail with Israel's interests. The gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the increased need to safeguard environmental security, and Iran's footprint in Syria and Lebanon serve as leverage for expanding the collaboration.

¹² Gallia Lindenstrauss and Remi Daniel, "The Ships that Scuttled Turkey-Israel Relations: A Decade since the Flotilla Incident", *INSS Insight* no. 1323, INSS (May 25, 2020), 1

¹³ "Turkey's Exports to Israel," in *Trading Economics*; "Israel's Exports to Turkey," in *Trading Economics*.

¹⁴ "Report: Turkish Navy Intervenes in EastMed Pipeline Survey," in *The Maritime Executive*, September 29, 2021; "Turkish ships said to force Israeli research vessel out of Cypriot waters," in *The Times of Israel*, December 14, 2019.

Such a move can take place in two ways: using the convergence of the economic and geopolitical interests to bypass the existing problems, assuming that these remain unresolvable for the time being; or using the convergence of interests to settle the deep-seated problems in such a way that will facilitate the creation of a long-term, sustainable partnership.

The issues of energy and the Economic Waters figure high on the Turkish agenda. The economic crisis Turkey is currently enduring in an age of vulnerable global trade makes the issue of long-term stabilization of prices and supply chains ever-more critical for it. Turkey's demands to substantially extend its Exclusive Economic Zone and the desire for more energy independence are not dependent on Erdogan's desires. They enjoy wall-to-wall support among the Turkish public. Moreover, the gas discoveries in the Black Sea basin and the desire to reach extraction agreements with energy companies Chevron and Exxon-Mobil brings Turkey even closer to Israel following Chevron's acquisition of Noble Energy's holdings in the Leviathan and Tamar fields. If in the past the tensions between Israel and Turkey due to the Israel-Palestinian relations overshadowed the maritime tensions, the needs and opportunities in the maritime-energy fields are now the root cause of Turkey's overtures toward Israel despite the situation between Israel and the Palestinians.¹⁵

The Turkish overtures toward Israel are a signal that they are serious, and they merit attention on the Israeli side. Of course, the Turks must realize that it will not be possible to bypass Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office, and no Israeli official should create the impression that this is possible. Moreover, Israel has got to make it clear that any progress made in the relations with Turkey cannot come at the expense of its ties with Greece, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. Israel made a mistake in the 1960s when it adopted an excessively pro-Turkish position. David Ben Gurion's efforts to forge the "Periphery Alliance" (with Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia) were manifested in unequivocal public support for the Turkish side to the extent that it motivated several countries to support Turkey's interests in Cyprus' affairs. These efforts led to several years of good, albeit hesitant relations on the Turkish side until the Six-Day War and to a long-standing rift with Greece and Cyprus, which lingered until the Oslo accords. Therefore, for Israel, it is advisable to support a political settlement (and not in accordance with the rules of the Convention on the Law of the Sea), concerning Turkey's dispute with Greece over the delineation of the Exclusive Economic Zone between them. However, we must not be tempted by Turkish initiatives directed at Israel to agree between them in this area at the expense

¹⁵ Murat Temizer, "East Med energy could be key to improving Turkey-Israel relations," in *Anadolu Agency*, July 13, 2021.

of Greek Cyprus, without a comprehensive settlement of the island's partitioning, a settlement which for the time being is not in the offing.

Turkey's cooperation with Israel can be built around the activities of the energy companies in the region. The distinct Turkish interest in enlarging the local energy market presents an opportunity for improving relations. One possible solution might be the liquefaction of the gas and exporting it. The cost of liquefaction is indeed very high but it will bypass the question of maritime boundaries. Besides that, the need on the part of the European and Turkish markets to diversify their energy sources due to Russia's aggressive actions might incentivize future support for various solutions which will enable exports of gas from the Israeli, Lebanese and Cypriot deposits to Europe. Another important channel for advancing the relations can be around the development by Chevron of the new gas deposits in the Black Sea. This way, Chevron would benefit by increasing its activities in the region. This way, the US administration could advance an effective economic partnership, which will increase stability in the region such that it would demand less direct US involvement and would counterbalance the Chinese activity in the region without detrimental impacts on diplomatic and security assets. Due to these added values, the US administration might be attentive to the development efforts despite its intention to limit the development of fossil fuel deposits around the world.

Besides, the increase in maritime activity in the region creates significant shared interests between the relevant countries in the security and environmental areas. Against the backdrop of these interests, there is potential for broader collaboration, which requires stability and a lengthy maturation process in regional settlement of the maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean basin. This is an extremely difficult process but the Israeli decision-makers need to realize that despite the strategic alliance with Greece and the deep understanding with Egypt, Israel will not be able to export gas to Europe without close coordination with Turkey, which forms one of the important energy corridors to Europe. Ironically, Israel and Turkey, two countries that have not signed up to the Convention on the Law of the Sea and which are known for their preference of agreed political solutions rather than involvement of international factors, could be the ones to advance it. Turkey is on the path toward renewed warming of ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in what seems to be a possible beginning of stabilization in the region. Moreover, the entrenchment of Iran on the Mediterranean shores as part of Lebanon's implosion is a wake-up call to all countries in the region, and first and foremost to Israel, and this is supposed to motivate them to cooperate.

With all of these opportunities and challenges, Israel needs to internalize the change that has occurred in its strategic position in the Middle East following the change of administrations in the United States. The commonality between Israel and Turkey is that they both were given the green light to pursue a regional policy free of outside pressures with the blessing of President Trump. Nowadays, Turkey will no longer be able to conduct itself in the Mediterranean the way it had in the two final years of the Trump presidency, and Israel will not be able to rebuild its political-strategic relations with the Democratic administration in the United States without any movement on the Palestinian issue. This reality ought to increase the cooperation between the two countries. They both have much to gain from this.