



[www.iepn.org](http://www.iepn.org)

## **Europe confronting the degradation of Turkish-Israeli relations: Is there room for arbitration?**

**Dorothee SCHMID, Ifri<sup>1</sup>**

The author is the sole responsible for the content of this article which do not reflect the opinion of the coordinators of the IEPN project or the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

***Final Draft: May 2011***

Since the beginning of 2009, the quality of the Turkish-Israeli relation has rapidly deteriorated to reach a point that could be described as a state of cold peace. The duo of former allies, who had built a set of comprehensive political, economic and strategic links over time, presently portray almost overtly each other as enemies<sup>2</sup>. Both government, although they periodically engage in behind the curtain informal dialogue to limit the damage, seem at the same time to exploit the bilateral tension on their domestic scene for electoral purposes.

The European Union has been witnessing as an impotent spectator the widening of this rift between Turkey and Israel. The series of diplomatic skirmishes preceding in 2009 and 2010 the Mavi Marmara flotilla episode were of little relevance in European eyes, as the structuring of the Turkish-Israeli relation grossly escaped the EU's strategic scope in the past. In other words, the Europeans were not equipped to comprehend the deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship *per se*, while its consequences for the external management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared rather clear. The emotional shock caused by the Mavi Marmara sequence was extremely strong among the European public, re-launching the political debate

---

<sup>1</sup> Dorothee Schmid, Research Fellow, Institut Français des Relations Internationales

<sup>2</sup> Turkey is not Israel's enemy », *Hürriyet Daily News*, Wednesday, November 3, 2010, translated from Haaretz.

at the level of Member states on how to handle the situation in the Middle East and how to cope with the growing implication of civil society organisations, who by now seem to compensate for the government's political paralysis.

Thus, the EU was rapidly confronted with a dilemma. As a new conflict was in the making, the EU had no choice than to work separately on its bilateral relations with both protagonists of the clash, if it wanted to engage a damage control process with no guarantee of success. Yet the willingness of the Europeans to commit themselves deeper with either side was precisely weak at this moment in history.

Lately the emergence of a set of new parameters has nuanced the picture even further. The repercussions of the Turkish-Israeli quarrel on EU's policy-planning should be considered as inevitable, inasmuch as anything like policy-planning can still take place in a profoundly disturbed regional context. The escalation of violence between Turkey and Israel undoubtedly arises new concerns for security envisaged in regional terms, a level of intervention where the Europeans tried to make a difference in the past; yet the Arab revolts impact in a drastic manner the way regional security can be envisaged at the moment. The pacific vision that the EU strove to promote in its Mediterranean neighbourhood is at least temporarily inactivated until stabilization is restored in Arab partner countries, with a hope that the new regimes will engage in a political dialogue finally based on shared democratic values. Israel and Turkey's strategic moves are equally suspended to the result of the ongoing uprisings, even if Turkey has gained a reputation in influencing current events.

What room is there for the Europeans to manoeuvre against this conflict-ridden and increasingly confused backdrop? Their capacity to help preventing escalation, or to broker an arrangement essentially depends on the players need for external help and the level of trust maintained through existing bilateral relationships.

### **1. The EU, Israel and Turkey: Elements of an informal triangle**

The relationship between the EU, Israel and Turkey has never been formalized into a structured political triangle. Yet an informal, loose triangle factually exists, as all three protagonists did establish strong bilateral ties, even if these ties were of a different essence.

### ***Turkey-Israel: from convergence to clash of national interests***

Turkey and Israel had organized over time a rather exclusive type of partnership, the contours and scope of which were never entirely defined: although it comprised a set of military agreements, it was never admitted to be an “alliance” as such.” The Turkey-Israel system of relations in fact brought together two Nation-states, who based their dialogue and exchanges on an intersection of national interests of an essentially strategic nature. Their alliance was generally perceived as expressing a convergence of strategic preoccupations and a common identity posture, shared by two states feeling they were potential or explicit aliens in their regional context, politically aligned with the West and expressing distance with the Arab and Persian way of handling the mix between politics and religion. Their rapprochement was often presented as a model of a partial strategic construction contributing to the stabilization of the Middle East<sup>3</sup>. The relationship also relied on increasing economic exchanges and a sense of relative mutual understanding by civil societies.

Recently, the degrading ties have been labelled as being against nature from the beginning, yet the messages conveyed by official on both sides in fact reveal that the partner’s attitude is just not considered to fit with national priorities anymore. Friendship with Israel doesn’t match the new Turkish foreign policy outlook, which favours economic and political rapprochement with Arab neighbours and Iran. Seen from Israel, what is perceived as the slow internal re-islamization of Turkey, its open support to the Palestinian cause and its moving closer to Israel’s main enemy: Iran, dramatically undermines the solidity and credibility of the alliance.

### ***The EU-Turkey Vs EU-Israel system of cooperation: technicalities framing unequal commitment***

As is often observed in the EU’s handling of its external cooperation, the European relationship with Israel and Turkey did not initially stem from a strategic reflection. Ties with the two countries are solid and structured along specific bilateral designs, both opening the

---

<sup>3</sup> Cevik BIR and Martin SHERMAN, « Formula for Stability: Turkey plus Israel », *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2002, vol.9: n°4, p. 23-32.

way for sophisticated types of cooperation, with a nonetheless fundamentally differing political perspective.

Since 1963 (Treaty of Ankara), the EU-Turkey relationship has evolved from Association agreement to customs unions (1996) and the perspective of joining the European Union as a full member (2005). While public polls show that economic parameters and freedom of circulation are the major motivations behind the – presently fading - Turkish public enthusiasm concerning EU membership, there are many a clue indicating that the Turkish government’s vision of the accession process is largely political. Since 2006, the slowing down of the negotiation process has finally shed light on a widening strategic asymmetry of perception between Europeans and Turkey<sup>4</sup>. If the European commission is still committed to the rapprochement at least in its bureaucratic developments – opening of chapters, rarely closing them, there is by now a growing divide among EU member states concerning the political relevance of Turkish membership. France has publicly affirmed its opposition to Turkish membership and this position is approved *sotto voce* by a few followers (Austria, the Netherlands). French President Nicolas Sarkozy is thus held responsible for the stalling of the EU-Turkey negotiation, and Turkish officials now regularly interpret the blockade as an explicit rejection of the Turks on cultural grounds, to preserve the EU as an exclusive “Christian club”.

Despite its shortcomings, the negotiation process has paved the way for a significant intensification of the contacts between the EU institutions and members states at one end of the spectrum, and Turkey at the other. Greater familiarity was achieved, if not necessarily better understanding.

The EU-Israel relation is of a more loose nature, as it falls under the frame of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, evolving under the umbrella of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), finally re-vamped through the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) initiative. From the very beginning, Israel’s status was relatively derogatory in comparison with other Mediterranean partners: the bilateral liberalization of commerce and financial flows remain the final objective, whereas Israel, which is categorized as an industrialized country, does not benefit from European aid. Israel faces three major challenges to deepen and consolidate its

---

<sup>4</sup> Dorothee Schmid, « De l’élargissement à l’éloignement: la Turquie veut-elle toujours adhérer à l’Union européenne ? », *Politique étrangère* 1/2010, pp. 13-24.

relationship with the EU: 1. De-linking the bilateral relation from the political management of the Peace Process, in which the EU is thought to be a rather active supporter of the Palestinian cause; 2. Maintaining its capital of political legitimacy in the eyes of the European public and governments, in order to allow for (3); 3. Upgrading its ties with the EU within the ENP cooperation frame, so as to distance itself from the Mediterranean circle it has systematically been confined in, and emerge as a major economic and scientific, if not political, partner for Europeans.

***Beyond compartmentalization: Is it possible to structure the informal Turkey-Israel-EU triangle?***

The three bilateral channels that we described did not interfere in the past; they developed in parallel, each actor consciously following a principle of compartmentalization in dealing with each of its interlocutors. The simple deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship should not have caused any dramatic change in this state of affairs, had it not led to an escalation of hostility nearly up to and armed conflict.

This process of degradation might bring an end to the state of compartmentalization hitherto observed between the various protagonists. Previously counting on each other, both Turkey and Israel will now have to turn to new partners or re-assess already existing external partnerships, in order to diversify external support. After the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkey became the spokesman of the “Arab street” and struggled to have the file treated in the multilateral frame of the United Nations. Israel for its part tried to break its state of isolation by attempting at a rapprochement with Greece and Cyprus, two member states of the EU whose relations with Turkey traditionally endure difficulties. Under such circumstances, the EU could become a political resource for both Turkey and Israel. Its reluctance to take sides obviously stands as a limit to such a process of political re-socialization, but the EU could still possibly seize the opportunity to impose itself as a conciliating force at regional level.

**2. Witnessing the widening Israel/Turkey rift: Changing perceptions and consequences for EU policies**

After a consistent series of bilateral incidents between Turkey and Israel, the Gaza flotilla episode definitely marked a turn in the European comprehension of the quarrel. It transformed the implicit tensions within the triangle into an open crisis, with heavy consequences on European perceptions of regional stakes.

### ***Episodes of escalation: Rising embarrassment in Europe***

The Mavi Marmara clash caused a major emotional and political shock in Europe, triggering reactions beyond the usual limit observed with regard to Arab-Israeli incidents. The interpretation of events and reactions observed in Europe also contrasted with the classical narrative prevailing until then. The EU globally condemned the Israeli operation, although the bouquet of expression emanating from institutions was not extremely consistent<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the weak engagement of EU institutions contrasted grandly with the emotional climate in the European public.

The debate was especially strong in some European countries. In this regard, it is rather revealing to follow the reactions of the public and government in France, a country who has historically been always active in shaping the EU's common position vis-à-vis the Middle East conflict and/or Peace process. French awareness of the Arab-Israeli issue is exceptionally high due to the existence of a strong French Jewish community of approximately 500 000 members, coupled with the presence on French territory of a population of six million Muslims who tend to feel more committed to the Palestinian cause over time<sup>6</sup>. In the particular case of the Mavi Marmara incident, the implication of Turkey was an entirely new parameter to cope with. Due to the French officially negative position on the EU accession process, the Franco-Turkish bilateral relationship has recently gone through many difficulties. As a result, Turkey's new diplomacy has been scrutinised with great interest in France for the last two years. Analysts have been in search of evidence that Turkey was distancing itself from the West. Developments in the Turkish relations both with Iran and with Israel are the two main elements generally advanced by French commentators to sustain that Turkey might be turning its back to Europe. The Flotilla episode thus revived the discussion at the same

---

<sup>5</sup> See the « Declaration by HR Catherine Ashton on behalf of the EU on the Israeli military operation against the Flotilla », [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/114730.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/114730.pdf); and the « Letter to the President of the European Council », by European Former Leaders Group (EFLG), <http://www.usmep.us/usmep/wp-content/uploads/2010-12-10-EFLG-letter-to-EU.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Denis SIEFFERT, *Israël-Palestine, une passion française*, Paris, Editions de la Découverte, 2004.

time on the need to find a solution to the Palestinian issue, and concerning Turkey's new diplomatic choices<sup>7</sup>.

### *New perceptions of the players*

In Europe, the tragic turn taken with the Mavi Marmara episode indeed entailed a re-assessment of the traditional perception of Israel and Turkey. To sum up the new direction taken by the public debate in most EU countries, the following questions emerged as the dominant and most urgent issues to ponder upon.

- *Can Israel rely on external, notably European, support under any circumstance, counting on the historical continuity granted by the remembrance of the Holocaust?*

The EU's uneasiness to react to operation Cast Lead, and to the Mavi Marmara incident as a consequence of the Gaza blockade, left the way opened for the Turks to assume political leadership on the defence of the Palestinian cause. The EU's tendency to withdraw politically from the Middle East theatre of operation is coupled with a rising moral *malaise*. Communication seems to become more and more impossible with the Israeli governing team, and the Israeli isolation complex is no more systematically witnessed with the same degree of indulgence. Some critical assessments of the Israeli's handling of the flotilla incident could also be found in the German press, which is still rather unusual<sup>8</sup>.

- *Has Turkey changed camp?*

The Turkey-Israel quarrel unexpectedly raised questions on the state of the Turkey/EU relationship. Turkish motivations to act were indeed interpreted beyond the strict commitment to the Palestinian cause. The Europeans fear a realignment of Turkish foreign policy, which would finally cast doubts on the compatibility of Turkish policy options with European ones.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jean-François KAHN, « Israël : questions sur un drame qui nous déchire tous », Blog *Tourner la page*, 1/06/2010, <http://www.jeanfrancoiskahn.com> ; « Israël est-il au-dessus des lois internationales et nationales ? », collectively published op-ed, *Rue89*, 21/06/2010

<sup>8</sup> As in this column from Die Tageszeitung, criticizing Israel's disregard for international law, <http://www.taz.de/1/debatte/kommentar/artikel/1/schuesse-aus-dem-bunker/>

As suggested by some American officials, Turkey may have “changed camp”, in response to humiliations endured within the stalling accession process<sup>9</sup>.

Concerning the image of Turkey as an international player, the active management of the crisis by the Turkish government revealed both some amateurism and a strong willingness to feature on centre stage. The new assertiveness of Turkish diplomacy strongly contrasts with the EU’s incapacity to react and also points to a looming competition with some member states’ political ambitions in the region – France again being the main rival in this regard<sup>10</sup>. All these evolutions entail a strategic quandary for the EU: Turkey remains a major strategic ally in the region, while being prone to undermining common visions and responses to crises, also within the NATO frame.

***Consequence for EU policies in the region: New constraints for an old objective***

Recent history has regularly proven that the EU as a collective player is not equipped to react to the intensification of conflict level in the Middle East, and that any escalation in tensions immediately jeopardize the whole set of EU’s regional policies. The functioning of the UfM was thus entirely blocked after operation Cast Lead, due to the impossibility to make its multilateral institutions operational.

In the present case, the Turkish-Israeli quarrel contributes firsthand to the deterioration of the political climate in the region, and increases the potentiality for new conflicts. For now, the quarrel has its own dynamics and the protagonists do not seem to be open for external interference or mediation. Seen in the regional context angle, the Turkish-Israeli rift seems to have become a subpart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the same time, broader geopolitical complications may emerge if one takes into consideration the Turkey-Iran partnership. All of these interpretations anyway agree on a dramatic change in regional strategic equilibriums.

The ongoing Arab revolts inevitably add to the difficulty. Any deeper EU engagement in the region is effectively constrained by this new and unpredictable variable. As far as EU policies are concerned, ongoing events legitimize the pro-reform options of the ENP, yet further

---

<sup>9</sup> Carol MIGDALOVITZ, « Israel’s Blockade of Gaza, the Mavi Marmara Incident, and Its Aftermath », *CRS Report for Congress*, June 23, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Heather GRABBE and Sinan ÜLGÜN, « The High Price of Strategic Rivalry », *European Voice*, April 20, 2011.

complicate the concrete conditions under which cooperation is implemented: no emergency mechanism was designed to accompany such a sudden democratization process, or to deal with the eruption of simultaneous crises in almost all partner countries. Political unrest in the Arab Mediterranean perimeter has for the time being asymmetrical effects on the other actors of our triangle: It increases the isolation of Israel, while empowering Turkey as a “model” or “source of inspiration” for Arab transitions, and confirming its status as a regional leader<sup>11</sup>.

These new perturbations finally cannot divert our attention from the ongoing difficulty maybe constituting the only one common parameter of reflection between the non-converging visions of our three actors: the need to find a fair and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue.

### **3. The European Union facing the rift: Defence, arbitration or simply watching?**

#### ***Weak leverage to directly address the issue***

The EU capacity to collectively react to the deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship is predictably weak, as its common strategic vision is getting more and more fragmented, while its external instruments of action are generally described as being still notably inefficient in responding to political crises<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, in this specific case, the crisis does not concern primarily the EU, who will be indirectly affected by the collateral damages of the quarrel. Consequently, the motivation to act is rather low and could only be found among the member states who have stronger links with either protagonists of the quarrel.

The potential leverage for intervention of the EU thus depends upon two variables. First variable, the intensity and the plasticity of its cooperation links both with Israel and Turkey, possibly allowing for some negotiation upon incentives and /or a loose form of conditionality. Second variable, the willingness emanating from some member states to politically commit to the finding of a solution, especially those who have traditionally played a strong political role in addressing strategic crises in the Mediterranean/Middle Eastern context: namely France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

---

<sup>11</sup> Dorothee SCHMID and Marc SEMO, « Un ‘modèle turc’ pour les révolutions arabes ? », to be published in *Politique Internationale* n°131, Spring 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Franck PETITEVILLE, « Les mirages de la politique étrangère européenne après Lisbonne », *Critique internationale* n°51, 04/06 2011, pp. 95-112.

As we stated earlier, the type, level and intensity of existing links with both main players offer little room for more European engagement at a bilateral level. In examining these bilateral relations, one should take into account not only the sophistication of the cooperation frame – the accession process theoretically offering large potentialities to intensify political dialogue with Turkey. In fact, any stronger European engagement would have to answer a call from the stakeholders themselves, who have shown so far little interest for an external help to settle the quarrel. On the contrary, it is very likely that such European engagement would be interpreted as interference into the internal affairs of both states.

Similarly, no EU member state has suggested the need for mediation between the parties and offered to engineer it. On the contrary, the policy priorities of some member states do argue against the neutrality of the EU. The EU was never held to be an honest broker by the Israelis in the context of the Peace process. More recently, the setting up of NATO operations in Libya in April 2011 served as a indicator of new potential clashes of interests between Turkey and some EU member states, in this case essentially France.

***Waiting for a new regional political and security regime to emerge***

It is generally admitted that the European contribution to appeasement in the Mediterranean can be operated at a regional level, using soft power instruments, acting on environmental parameters through legal regulation and financial aid. In the present context, promoting any of these options is not intellectually irrelevant, but is concretely vain.

The Turkey-Israel quarrel has not reached the point of desescalation yet. Right the opposite, the perspective of a new flotilla soon to be sailed towards Gaza creates the conditions for new strain ahead. The deterioration of the security climate in the region is admittedly a shared concern, yet the views of our three actors (EU, Israel, Turkey) presently differ on what type of security equilibrium is needed, and how to achieve it. In such times of crisis, the Realist approach to inter-state relations, relying on an actively managed balance of power, tends to prevail upon a more cooperative, liberal vision of regional security – the one precisely defended by the EU through the ENP. Turkey's pursuing the autonomization of its foreign policy and struggling to expand its regional influence, at the expense of its EU accession perspective, does perfectly illustrate the absence of a common rationale to envisage regional stability for the time being.

On the other hand, while problematically blurring further the lines of reasoning, the current Arab uprisings may offer in the future a crucial new resource for the Europeans to regain credibility in the region, by introducing a new deal for a more equal cooperation based on common political values. Only can a change of the regional political and security regime give the EU an opportunity to feature in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as an active player with its own moral and practical legitimacy. The Europeans should thus not be blamed to wait for such a systemic change to happen.