



The Unexpected Vitality of Turkish-Israeli Trade

By Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans

May 31 marked the two-year anniversary of the Israeli raid on a flotilla including the Turkish vessel *Mavi Marmara* that triggered a tailspin in Turkish-Israeli relations. In the aftermath of the flotilla incident, Turkey recalled its ambassador and demanded an apology from Israel as well as reparations for the nine slain activists. Ankara even announced that its warships would escort future missions to Gaza. Turkey has since officially downgraded its diplomatic ties with Israel, and attempts to mend fences have stalled over the issue of an Israeli apology.

Trade Relations Prove Resilient

Yet below the surface, not all is grim in Turkish-Israeli relations. Remarkably, trade ties have been flourishing between the two countries.

Economic relations between Turkey and Israel took off in the late 1990s as part of a growing strategic convergence. More expansive trade was underpinned by a series of bilateral agreements opening Turkish and Israeli markets to one another. Notable deals included a free trade agreement (1996), a double-taxation prevention treaty (1997), and a bilateral investment treaty (1998).¹ These agreements ushered in an era of improving political and economic ties. Trade jumped from \$449 million in 1996 to more than \$1.2 billion in 2002.² This remarkable acceleration continued, with bilateral trade increasing 14.6 percent per year on average from 2002 to 2008.³

Even though political relations soured further following the flotilla incident, trade continued to thrive. From 2010 to 2011, trade increased by 30.7 percent,

far surpassing even the growth during the heyday of Turkish-Israeli ties. In 2011, bilateral trade totaled a record \$4.44 billion. Trade in 2012 has declined somewhat, this seems to be primarily a product of the cooling Turkish economy. In any case, trade in early 2012 continued at well above preflotilla levels: trade volumes during the first three months of 2012 were 23 percent greater than those in the first three months of 2010.⁴

Both sides have sought to isolate economic ties from the political problems. All the trade and investment treaties mentioned previously remain solidly in effect. Neither side seems eager to disrupt the trend of booming bilateral trade. In the aftermath of the flotilla incident, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his intention to cut all relations with Israel, including trade.⁵ But Ankara rapidly corrected the statement, noting that commercial ties would not be downgraded.⁶ Similarly, when an Israeli investment firm announced its plans to divest from Turkey, the head of the Tel Aviv and Central Israel Chamber of Commerce urged firms to refrain from any actions that might hurt Turkish-Israeli business ties.⁷

Anecdotal evidence also confirms the conclusion that the diplomatic crisis has not translated into a crisis in trade ties. For instance, a boycott of Turkish products was announced by several Israeli grocery chains following the flotilla incident.⁸ Despite the boycott attempts by these retailers, Turkish exports of vegetable products to Israel have remained steady since 2007 and exports of prepared foodstuffs, beverages, and tobacco doubled between 2007 and 2011.⁹

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A closer examination shows that this growth, rather than being a statistical fluke, is the result of increasing trade in a wide range of products. Israel's two main export categories to Turkey, chemical products and plastics, have risen since the political downturn, with chemicals and similar products doubling since 2007 and plastics and rubber exports increasing by 54 percent between 2007 and 2011.¹⁰ More broadly, in 2011 Turkey became Israel's sixth largest export market overall.

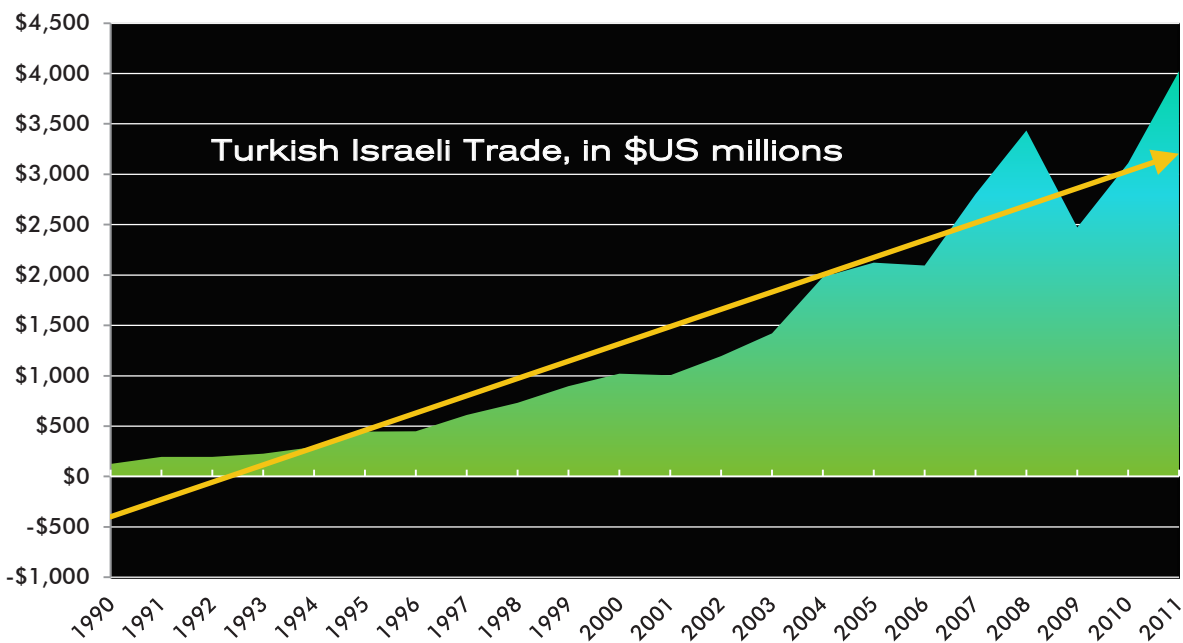
Turkish exports to Israel also show a generally positive trend. Turkey's largest export category to Israel, base metal, has continued to grow. Interestingly, exports of vehicles, aircraft, vessels, and transport equipment grew 53 percent between 2007 and 2011, probably the result of Turkey's entrance as a major player in the Israeli car market. Textiles have also grown slightly, a telling fact given that the visibility of such products for consumers would make them prime targets for boycott.¹¹

It is also worth noting that although the majority of Israeli oil transits Turkey enroute from Azerbaijan through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Ankara has made no effort to endanger Israeli supplies. An Israeli oil executive explained that Turkey's links with the global economy make any such move highly

unlikely. Even if Ankara wanted to shut off supplies, it could not do so "without being sued and suffering a serious blow to [its] credibility in the eyes of the business community."¹² The mutual reluctance of Israel and Turkey to break trade ties is understandable, especially in light of the global economic climate. After all, both countries owe much of their growth in recent years to buoyant exports, a large portion of which have been sold in European markets. This means that both countries are vulnerable to a sluggish European recovery.

Business Communities Remain Committed to Good Ties

It appears that many major companies in both countries are determined to maintain a business-as-usual posture. A notable example is the Yilmazlar Construction Group, a Turkish company that has been operating in Israel since 1993. The company is a major player in the Israeli construction sector, currently employing more than seven hundred Israelis.¹³ After the flotilla incident, the company's CEO, Ahmet Reyiz, claimed that several million dollars of his assets were frozen by an Israeli court, which cited Erdogan's political rhetoric as a source of political



risk. But Reyiz's reaction was not to divest from Israel. Instead, Reyiz pinned most of the blame on Ankara, even threatening to sue the prime minister for damages.¹⁴ Reyiz has subsequently emphasized that he has no intention of abandoning his business activities in Israel.

Another notable example is the Zorlu Group, a major Turkish business and a player in the Israeli energy market. After the *Mavi Marmara* incident, the Zorlu Group downgraded some of its operations in Israel, citing sensitivity to "civil society."¹⁵ Yet by September 2011, the company had adopted a business-as-usual attitude. Ahmet Nazif Zorlu, the company's CEO, remarked that he had no plans to abandon his \$1.3 billion investments in Israel. "We don't have the luxury to just pack up and leave," he added.¹⁶

Yet probably the most visible success story has been Turkey's participation in the production of the Renault-Nissan Fluence Z.E. electric car as part of an international venture headed by the Israeli firm Better Place. Production facilities in Bursa are currently manufacturing the vehicle for markets in Turkey, Europe, and Israel, with Better Place planning to order 50,000 cars from the Turkish manufacturer.¹⁷ In 2010, the U.S. Department of Commerce listed Better Place as one of two primary companies active in the Israeli electric car market, meaning that Turkey is positioned to become a key participant in Israel's groundbreaking experiment with electric cars.¹⁸

Declining Tourism

In contrast to the resilience in trade ties between the Turkish and Israeli business communities, tourism between the two countries has trended downward since the flotilla incident.

Beginning in the 1990s, Turkey emerged as a favorite destination for Israelis, attracting some 321,000 visitors in 2003 and 558,183 in 2008, the peak year of Israeli tourism to Turkey. On the day of the flotilla incident, the Israeli Foreign Ministry released a travel warning urging Israelis to avoid travel to Turkey out of fear of "outbreaks of violence against Israelis."¹⁹ In March 2012, the Israeli prime minister's counterterrorism office issued a further warning, citing fears of possible terror attacks against

Israelis in Istanbul.²⁰ The government downgraded the advisory on May 2 but continues to recommend "avoiding non-essential travel to Turkey or, at least, to be especially alert and cautious."²¹

Accordingly, in 2011 the number of Israeli tourists visiting Turkey dropped sharply to 79,140, down from 311,582 in 2009, the last full year before the flotilla incident. The tourism sector between the two countries has yet to recover.

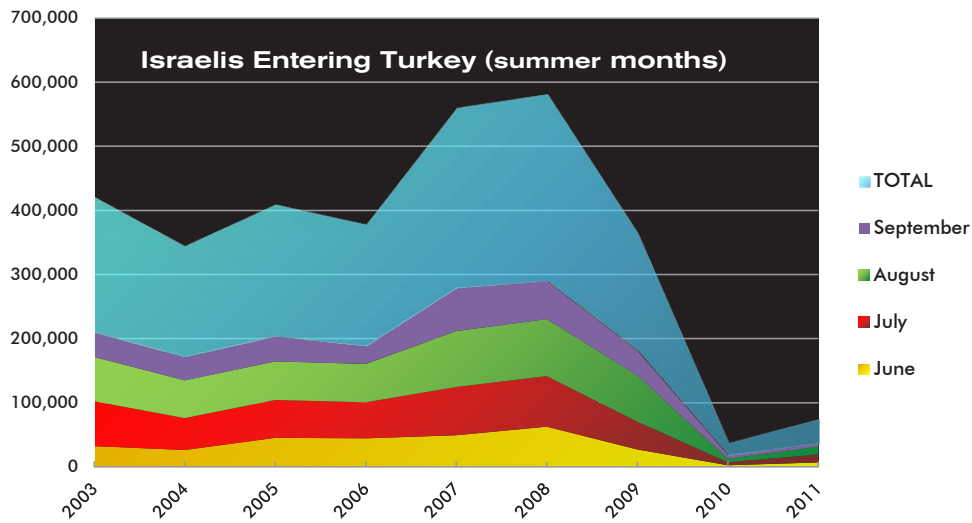
Deteriorating Defense Cooperation

The defense trade shared by the two countries has also been hit hard since the flotilla incident. In September 2011, Ankara announced the suspension of defense ties with Israel. In addition, Turkey has frozen more than a dozen defense projects with Israel, including a \$5 billion deal for hundreds of Merkava Mark III main battle tanks and the \$800 million sale of two Israeli patrol aircraft and an early-warning radar plane.²²

Another problem for the defense trade has been declining Israeli willingness to license exports. The Israeli Ministry of Defense declined to approve a \$90 million contract for Israel's largest nongovernment defense company, Elbit Systems, to export long-range aerial photography systems to Turkey.²³ This agreement was part of a larger deal reached in 2005 to export ten Heron unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) outfitted with advanced surveillance equipment. Unable to obtain the Herons, Ankara found an alternative in the United States, acquiring the use of five manned reconnaissance aircraft in April 2012.²⁴ As of March 2012, Elbit did not foresee any future contracts with Turkey.²⁵ Another major deal fell through earlier this year when the Israeli Ministry of Defense did not approve delivery of airborne early warning and control (AWAC) systems to Turkey by Elta Systems as part of a coordinated project with Boeing.²⁶ Boeing is now contemplating cutting Elta out of the project, which includes contracts with a number of other countries.²⁷

The Wider Context

The importance of the Turkish-Israeli commercial relationship is not lost on the two states' business communities. Representatives of commercial inter-



Source data: Turkish Ministry of Tourism, <http://sgb.kulturturizm.gov.tr/TR,15229/turizm-istatistikleri.html>

ests on both sides have come out in favor of restoring ties. In March 2012, the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD) investment team met with journalists to discuss Turkey's strategic investment outlook. During the meeting, executives remarked that TUSIAD identifies Israel as a priority investment partner.²⁸ Stanley Fischer, the Bank of Israel's governor, agrees. He has described Turkey as Israel's primary market in the region. "In terms of the sophisticated economies in the region, which is where we export most successfully," he said, "it is the most important."²⁹

Economics has not been the only area of Turkish-Israeli cooperation. The two countries have also cooperated on disaster relief, with Turkey helping fight fires near Haifa in December 2010³⁰ and Israel sending housing and relief materials after the 2011 Van earthquake.³¹ On the public diplomacy front, in January 2012, Turkey's state-run television network aired Claude Lanzmann's famous documentary on the Holocaust,³² marking the first time this eight-hour production has been shown on public television in a Muslim-majority country.

Amid many continuing political problems, such as the May 2012 indictment by Turkey of Israeli officials for their role in the flotilla incident and the continued exclusion of Israel from the multinational Anatolian Eagle military exercise in Turkey, some friendly political gestures have been made. To facilitate the October 2011 deal that resulted in the release of Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit from Hamas captivity, Ankara took in a portion of the Palestinian prisoners who were part of the swap.

Yet political tensions continue to run high and it would be inaccurate to describe Turkish-Israeli relations as good, or even on the mend. Still, in light of the booming trade ties, it would also be inaccurate to say that the relations are frozen. The current state of economic and trade relations suggests that Turkey and Israel have the potential for a fresh start. Even if the pair continues to diverge on certain core political issues, perhaps they can rebuild on the foundations of their robust economic links. In these times of great economic uncertainty in Europe—as noted, the largest market for both Turkey and Israel—the two countries would benefit from great trade.

TIME LINE: Turkish-Israeli Relations (2008–2012)

December 2008: Israel begins Operation Cast Lead in response to rocket fire from Gaza.

January 2009: Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan storms offstage during a panel with Israeli president Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum.

October 2009: Turkey abruptly cancels Israel's participation in the multinational Anatolian Eagle air exercise.

May 31, 2010: An Israeli naval raid on a flotilla that included the *Mavi Marmara* claims the lives of nine activists and sparks a bilateral crisis. Turkey's Foreign Ministry publically condemns the attack, announcing that Israel will "bear the consequences of this action, which was illegal under international law." The ministry summons Israeli ambassador Gaby Levy.³³ On the same day, following a travel advisory from the Israeli government, a hold is placed on 45,000 Israeli reservations for travel to Turkey.³⁴

June 16, 2010: Turkey holds search-and-rescue exercises in northern Cyprus. Fifty-six countries are invited, but Israel is not.³⁵

June 17, 2010: The Israeli government labels the Humanitarian Relief Fund (IHH), which took part in the flotilla incident, a terrorist group.³⁶

June 19, 2010: A delegation headed by Turkish parliamentarian Omer Celik visits Washington, D.C. Celik remarks that if Israel does not apologize for the flotilla incident, the crisis will only worsen.³⁷

June 25, 2010: Israel announces that it has no plans to impose a military embargo on Turkey.³⁸

June 28, 2010: Erdogan, appearing on *Charlie Rose*,³⁹ mentions that if Israel apologizes for the flotilla incident, Turkey is prepared to mediate in peace discussions between Israel and Syria.

August 2, 2010: Israel agrees to cooperate in an international investigation into the flotilla incident.⁴⁰

August 5, 2010: Israel returns the *Mavi Marmara* vessel to Turkey, in response to Ankara's request.⁴¹

October 25, 2010: In testimony before the Knesset, Israeli opposition leader Tzipi Livni accuses Turkey of deliberately provoking Israel by supporting the *Mavi Marmara* activists.⁴²

December 3, 2010: Turkey sends helicopters to help fight fires near Haifa. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu personally thanks Prime Minister Erdogan.⁴³

June–July 2011: Behind-the-scenes negotiations are conducted by Israel and Turkey to reach an accord before the UN Palmer Report is released. Israel is represented by Joseph Ciechanover, the former director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Turkey is represented by Ozdem Sanberk, the former undersecretary of the Turkish Foreign Ministry.⁴⁴ According to Turkish journalist Kadri Gursel, a June draft agreement included an Israeli apology, but the draft was scuttled due to opposition from Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman.⁴⁵

August 4, 2011: In a repeat of its 2010 decision, Turkey announces it will not participate in joint U.S.-Israel naval exercises.⁴⁶

September 1, 2011: The Palmer Report is leaked to the *New York Times*. The report recommends that Israel make "an appropriate statement of regret" and pay compensation.⁴⁷

September 2, 2011: Turkey expels the Israeli ambassador and suspends military agreements. Trade between the two governments is frozen.⁴⁸

September 9, 2011: Foreign Minister Lieberman insists that Israel will not apologize. He holds a meeting with fellow officials to formulate steps to retaliate against Turkey.⁴⁹

September 20, 2011: Prime Minister Erdogan and President Obama speak privately at the UN General Assembly summit in New York. Obama urges Erdogan to mend fences with Israel.⁵⁰

September 26, 2011: Erdogan appears on CNN's *Global Public Square*, where he emphasizes that relations with Israel will not normalize without an apology.

October 2011: An earthquake strikes the Turkish city of Van. Israel transports mobile homes to aid in the rescue effort.⁵¹

October 18, 2011: Turkey participates in the historic deal to free Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from his Hamas captors, agreeing to accept a portion of the Palestinian prisoners freed in return.⁵²

November 6, 2011: Turkey's flagship carrier, Turkish Airlines, resumes flights to Israel, after having suspended them over the summer due to lack of demand.⁵³

April 5, 2012: Unable to maintain or purchase new Heron UAVs from Israel, Turkey leases surveillance aircraft from the United States.⁵⁴

May 7, 2012: Bulent Tanik, mayor of the Turkish capital's downtown borough of Cankaya, visits Israel and announces his desire to partner in a sister-cities project with an Israeli city.⁵⁵

May 23, 2012: Ankara's chief prosecutor, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, submits an indictment to prosecute Israeli officials involved in the *Mavi Marmara* incident.⁵⁶

May 28, 2012: Turkish courts accept the indictment against top Israeli leaders for involvement in the incident.⁵⁷

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