

# Turkish-Israeli Relations

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

On April 9, 2009, Institute senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program Soner Cagaptay addressed the Middle East Forum. The following is a summary of his remarks.

Read (<http://www.meforum.org/2117/turkish-israeli-relations>) more about this briefing at [the Middle East Forum's website \(http://www.meforum.org/2117/turkish-israeli-relations\)](#).

To illustrate how Turkey has changed under AK Party rule (the "Justice and Development" party), Soner Cagaptay highlighted the fact that, before the AKP came to power in 2002 elections, Turkey "worked as a normal country."

For example, pre-AKP Turkey fostered a positive public relationship with Israel, exemplified by strong economic, intellectual, and even military ties. Moreover, Turkey was an important contributor to NATO, having participated in every NATO operation since joining the alliance in 1952. Finally, it exhibited a markedly pro-Western outlook and was being seriously considered for EU membership.

All three qualities have eroded under AKP leadership. EU accession talks have stalled as liberal democratic values are being undermined in Turkey. Media freedom and gender equality have suffered; there are now fewer women in administrative positions in government. Turkey refused to allow U.S. troops to enter Iraq from the north in 2003 and is now cultivating links with Iran.

Nowhere has this transformation been more pronounced than in Turkey's relationship with Israel. Prime Minister Erdogan and his party have promoted anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel at home, suggesting that "God would punish Israel" and accusing it of having turned Gaza into a "concentration camp." Turkey's antagonism came to a head at the Davos meeting earlier this year when Erdogan told Israeli president Shimon Peres, "You know very well how to kill people."

Yet not all killing upsets Turkey. The day after returning from Davos, Erdogan hosted the vice president of Sudan, who is currently wanted by the International Criminal Court for waging a genocide against Sudan's non-Arab Muslim population. Cagaptay believes this is the "best proof" that Erdogan's thinking and foreign policy is Islamist. The AKP views the world through a religious lens, caring only for non-Muslim on Muslim violence. This viewpoint is inevitably anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Israeli. Turkey's opposition to Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's nomination to head NATO due to his defense of the publication of cartoons of Muhammad is also telling. The AKP demands one-way respect for Islam: recently, the AKP objected to Rasmussen on ground that his actions were offensive to Muslims, but ran anti-Semitic cartoon exhibits in Istanbul during the Gaza conflict.

Cagaptay suggests that continued AKP influence will turn Turkish citizens against Israel and the West. This is a problem because Turkey is a democracy and "you cannot sustain a relationship that is not supported by the public." Furthermore, as the AKP views world conflicts in terms of Muslims versus non-Muslims, its place within NATO could deteriorate further as the alliance launches new offensives in Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

However, Cagaptay sees reasons for optimism. The AKP fared poorly in recent local elections and the economic downturn is bound to have a negative impact on its prospects. As middle-class Turks and professionals abandon the AKP, it will be left with an Islamist core, allowing outsiders more easily to identify it for what it is. In this regard, Erdogan's Davos outburst was seen as a "blessing in disguise" by some analysts.

Cagaptay counsels the Obama administration to define Turkey as a Western country that happens to be Muslim, thereby setting clear benchmarks for Turkish behavior both internally and on the world stage. Furthermore, America must not alienate ordinary Turks by passing resolutions condemning the Armenian genocide, a wildly unpopular topic in Turkey.

According to Cagaptay, the most important lesson from the Turkish experience over the past decade is: "If Islamists rule, they corrupt even the most liberal of Muslim societies."

This is a lesson that many Palestinians may have come to learn the hard way.

This summary was prepared by David Rusin and Raymond Ibrahim of the Middle East Forum. ❖

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