

# The Turkish Prime Minister Visits Israel:

## Whither Turkish-Israeli Relations?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Apr 27, 2005

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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



Brief Analysis

On May 1–2, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will visit Israel. Erdogan’s trip is important since it follows harsh criticism of Israel’s policies in the Palestinian territories (see “Where Goes the Turkish-Israeli Relationship?” by this author in *Middle East Quarterly*, fall 2004). Turkish-Israeli relations, which flourished in the 1990s, have been strained since November 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in Turkey. Where does the bilateral relationship stand now, and will it last over time?

### Why Turkey and Israel Get Along

**History.** The Ottoman state served as a safe haven for Jews escaping European persecution. In fact, in the seventeenth century more Jews lived in the Ottoman Empire than in the rest of the world collectively. This created a positive legacy in Turkish-Jewish relations, enhanced by the Jewish community’s loyalty to the late Ottoman state. Turks tend to distrust former Ottoman subjects who rebelled against the empire, especially those who did so with violence. But the Jews never rebelled against the Ottomans, instead defending the state alongside the Muslim Turks until the end of the empire (Jews fought in the Ottoman army during the 1912–1913 Balkan wars, for example). After the Ottoman period, Turkish confidence in the Jewish community translated into fine relations between Turkey and Israel. Ankara recognized Israel in 1949 and developed healthy ties with it early on. For example, in 1957–1958, the two countries entered a secret alliance, also known as the Peripheral Pact, to cooperate on defense matters.

**Defense cooperation.** In the 1990s, Turkish-Israeli relations developed significantly, as Syria’s “war by proxy” toward Ankara aligned Turkish and Israeli threat perceptions of Damascus (Kurdistan Workers Party [PKK] leader Abdullah Ocalan lived in Damascus during this period, while PKK terrorists received training in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley). The ensuing intelligence-focused cooperation solidified as Turkey acquired weapons from Israel to use against the PKK and to modernize the Turkish military. European insistence that Turkey’s actions against PKK terrorists constituted human rights violations resulted in European embargos on arms sales to Turkey during this period. Combined with the occasional U.S. reluctance to transfer sensitive weapons systems to Ankara, Israel became a significant source of hi-tech weapons for Turkey, which enhanced bilateral military ties. Joint Israeli-Turkish-U.S. Reliant Mermaid exercises in the Mediterranean, as well as Israeli use of Turkish airspace for flight training, serve as evidence of

those strengthened ties.

Economic links. Galloping economic relations in the 1990s gave Turkish-Israeli relations an independent life. Bilateral trade, which hovered around \$54 million in 1987, expanded to \$2 billion in 2004, excluding weapons sales. This boom created business lobbies in both countries pushing for stronger ties. Tourism also bolstered the growth dynamic, with Israel's nascent middle class visiting Turkish destinations in droves during the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2004, a total of 3,298,000 Israeli tourists—an impressive number, given Israel's population of less than 7 million—traveled to Turkey, spending an estimated \$2.4 billion.

#### Post-2002 Strains and the AKP

Turkish-Israeli relations came under political pressure, however, when the AKP came to power in 2002. The ruling party took an especially critical stance toward Israeli acts against the Palestinians during the second intifada. For example, in May 2004, Prime Minister Erdogan called Israel's killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin a "terrorist act." The AKP's traditional Islamist constituency advocated "cold shoulder" treatment toward Israel, and by 2003 negative commentary—previously limited to the fringe Islamist press—began appearing in the mainstream Turkish media.

#### The Future of Turkish-Israeli Relations

The latest negative developments have led some analysts to question whether the pillars on which this longstanding relationship has rested—a solid historical legacy, defense cooperation, and healthy trade—can continue to support bilateral ties.

Erosion in positive historic perceptions. While Turkey's rigorous free press reflects a range of views on the Turkish-Israeli relationship, a sudden surge in the publication of anti-Semitic literature in the country is troublesome. The proliferation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is especially puzzling. Turkish publishers print solely in paperback format, and books typically sell for \$10–15 per copy. *Mein Kampf*, on the other hand, sells for as little as \$2.50. Anti-Semitism, formerly a peripheral phenomenon in Turkey, now seems to be reaching out to the wider public through apparently subsidized literature.

Solid defense ties vs. foreign policy fluxes. The defense aspect of the Turkish-Israeli relationship remains as strong as ever. The two countries continue to pursue close military cooperation, including the Reliant Mermaid exercises. Meanwhile, Israel remains a prominent supplier of high-tech and sensitive weapons systems to Turkey. For example, on April 19, Ankara announced that it would purchase \$200 million worth of unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel. This drone technology represents the "next step" in air warfare, which Turkey currently lacks.

Turkish foreign policy, however, seems to be in flux. First, Turkey and Israel no longer share a threat perception of Syria. Ankara has engaged Damascus in a friendly dialogue since the Syrians drove Ocalan out of the country in October 1998 (after Turkey massed troops on the Syrian border). But the best evidence that Ankara's attitude toward Syria has changed is the nearly 450-mile long, 1,500-foot wide minefield between the two countries (planted in 1952 at the height of the Cold War) that Turkey is now clearing.

At first glance, Turkey and Israel also seem to have different perspectives on Iraq. While Turkey would like to see a strong central government in Baghdad to check possible Kurdish independence, most in Ankara believe that Israel prefers a weak, decentralized Arab state. Yet, the two countries do share an ultimate objective for Iraq: a unified country with institutions of representative government that would thwart the formation of both a Kurdish state and a fundamentalist Shiite majority state.

Healthy economic ties. The economic basis of the Turkish-Israeli relationship also remains strong. Currently, the two countries are cooperating on the most sensitive regional economic sectors: water and energy. In 2004, for

example, the two countries signed the Manavgat water agreement, committing Israel to buy 50 million cubic meters of water annually from Turkey over the next twenty years. That same year, a Turkish company also signed an \$800 million contract to build and manage three energy plants in Israel.

### The Next Step

During his trip to Israel, Erdogan will affirm the Turkish-Israeli relationship. The two countries will continue close defense cooperation and bolster bilateral political ties, for example, with Israel supporting Turkey's bid for a UN Security Council seat in 2009–2010. The two will also likely boost trade with more energy deals, and a Turkish-Israeli-Palestinian business forum is scheduled to take place in Istanbul on May 27. On the Palestinian front, Erdogan is scheduled to meet Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah on this trip. Ankara is expected to engage in Palestinian capacity-building measures in the field of secular judiciary, for example, where it has plenty of expertise. The question is whether Turkish public attitudes toward Israel—at a time when public attitudes are an increasingly important factor in Turkish foreign policymaking—will improve or deteriorate. The public perception of Israel in Turkey could be significantly affected by a decision on the part of the AKP government to take a more public leadership role in the conduct of Turkish-Israeli relations, as it has in Turkey's relations with other Middle Eastern countries. After all, the relationship has benefited Turkey in the defense, economic, and political spheres, and facilitated American Jewish support for Turkey. Another important factor will be whether anti-Semitic literature is pushed back to the margins of society, with Turkish politicians—particularly those in the AKP—highlighting the un-Turkish character of anti-Semitism, condemning publications such as *Mein Kampf*, and emphasizing historically strong Turkish-Jewish ties.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #987

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)