

Fixing Turkish-Israeli Relations

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's May 20 demarche calling Israeli acts in Rafah "state terrorism" signals that the iceberg awaiting the crash of Turkish-Israeli relations has now surfaced. Jerusalem needs to act immediately to avoid a fallout with Ankara.

Turkish-Israeli relations face a potential crisis. On the Turkish side, the readiness of the public to accept tight military, security, and political relations with Israel - the bedrock of the bilateral links - is being eroded by the ripple effects of the Iraq War.

Many Turks, including the country's secular parties, the media, and the military who were staunch supporters of Turkey's alliance with Israel in the 1990s believe that Ankara and Jerusalem have different interests vis-a-vis Iraq. The thinking is that Turkey desires a strong central government in Baghdad in order to check Kurdish nationalism, while Israel hopes that the Kurds carve a niche for themselves against Baghdad to ensure that the new Iraq is a decentralized, weak, and non-threatening Arab state.

In the past, most Turks would not have cared much for the developments in Iraq. Today things are different. The fact that the Iraqi Kurds have made major gains as a result of the recent war, from powerful political posts in Baghdad to control of one third of the country's territory - including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, home to a large Turkmen community - has not gone unnoticed in Ankara, which is always wary about Kurdish nationalism. Moreover, the presence of 5,300 Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorists in the northern Iraqi bastion of Kurdish nationalism touches on the open wound of the Kurdish question, a real trauma in Turkey rooted in the country's two-decade fight against the PKK.

Fears about Kurdish nationalism had started to dissipate in Turkey after the capture of the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999. In August 2003, Ankara granted amnesty for all PKK members, with the exception of the upper echelons of the organization. But just as the Turkish public was moving beyond the PKK's violent legacy, the Iraq War rehashed fears about Kurdish nationalism.

Most Turks cannot see anything positive in the Kurds' achievements in Iraq especially since the PKK, which renounced its cease-fire on June 1 and increased attacks against Turkey, is based in northern Iraq. It is in this context that one can understand the recent allegations that Israel is pushing the cause of Kurdish independence in

northern Iraq. The Turks now feel as worried as Israel would if it heard that Turkey was making inroads among Hezbollah toward forming a Shi'ite state in southern Lebanon.

Thus Israel's task today vis-a-vis Ankara is momentous. As a result of its concern over Kurdish nationalism, Jerusalem seems to have lost the confidence of many of its best friends in Ankara - the secular Turks, including parts of the military which remembers the fight against the PKK that cost Turkey over 30,000 casualties.

The liberal foreign policy elite in Ankara has its own reason to stay away from Israel. They believe that Turkey has a solid chance of getting into the EU, following the EU's December 2002 promise of Turkey's membership provided Ankara fulfills Brussels' expectations before December 2004. This perception has turned pro-EU orientation into their overriding policy, and this explains why Turkey's position today on a range of issues - from Iran's nuclearization to the Greater Middle East Initiative and the Arab-Israeli conflict - overlaps with that of Brussels.

While Israel's allies are mostly quiet about Turkey's relationship with Jerusalem, the governing Justice and Development Party - a conservative democratic movement rooted in Turkey's banned Islamist Welfare Party - is taking advantage of this development to adopt an increasingly critical tone toward Jerusalem. This explains why Turkey's position on Israel occasionally goes even beyond the European position.

If these developments are indicators of things to come, then the more Turkey's pro-EU secular elites curry favor with Brussels, criticize Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories, or remain lukewarm toward Jerusalem over the Kurdish issue, the more pro-AKP conservatives and Islamists will take cover under these issues to attack Israel. If not addressed properly, these developments have the potential of destroying the sympathy of the Turkish public toward Israel, and even undermining the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

How can Israel overcome this conundrum?

In the eyes of many Turks, Israel is guilty until proven innocent when it comes to its alleged involvement with the Iraqi Kurds. Hence, Jerusalem ought to implement policies to convince the Turks that it is not supporting Kurdish independence, and that its vision regarding Iraq's future is not at odds with that of Ankara. Toward this end, Israel should be transparent in sharing its plans with the Turkish public vis-a-vis the Iraqi Kurds. Jerusalem should also consider harmonizing its strategy over northern Iraq with Ankara.

Israel's goal should be convincing the Turks that it would not sacrifice its vital relationship with Turkey, a powerful nation of 70 million inhabitants, for the sake of its ties with four million Iraqi Kurds. By working together with Turkey on the Kurdish issue, Jerusalem could win back the strong nationalist constituency in Ankara.

If Israel were thus to take the first step, the AKP government would be in a position to take the next step. The alternative to allaying Turkish fears over northern Iraq is a possible deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship to unprecedented levels. Today, Jerusalem has all the reasons to turn back the wheel in that relationship.

The writer is the director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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