

# The Changing Dynamics of Turkey's Relations with Israel: An Analysis of 'Securitization'

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## ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to answer the following questions: How was it possible that a state such as Turkey, which had until then pursued a low-profile policy in the Middle East, has able to forge a bold strategic alliance with the state of Israel in the 1990s? Conversely then, why was the unparalleled and positive nature of relations in the 1990s replaced by a hostile and toxic nature in the first decade of the 2000s? How can this difference in the relations between the 1990s and 2000s be explained? To answer such questions, this article uses the Copenhagen School's theory of securitization. This approach not only helps to illustrate the characteristics of different periods in Turkish-Israeli relations, it also helps to highlight the specificity of the politics of civil-military relations in foreign policy making.

Turkish-Israeli relations have seriously soured to an all-time low. In 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stormed off the stage at the World Economic Forum in Davos after a spectacular exchange with the Israeli president over Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" in Gaza. More tragically the infamous Flotilla Attack followed: an Israeli military raid on an international aid convoy to Gaza left nine Turkish peace activists dead. After the leak of the UN's Palmer Commission report, which accused Israel of using "excessive force" against the flotilla but legitimized the Israeli blockade of Gaza, Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador and scaled back diplomatic relations. Added to this, Israel was quick to suggest that the AKP government was aligning Turkey with the likes of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran instead of its strategic ally, Israel.

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This current picture of relations is remarkable when one considers that Israel was one of Turkey's strongest allies in the region just a decade ago. Thus, this present study seeks to answer the following questions: Why has the unparalleled and positive nature of relations in the 1990s been replaced with a hostile and toxic environment in the 2000s? How can this difference in the relations between the 1990s and 2000s be explained? To answer such questions, this article uses the Copenhagen School's theory of 'securitization'.<sup>1</sup> This approach not only helps to illustrate the characteristics of different periods in Turkish-Israeli relations, it also helps to highlight the specificity of the politics of civil-military relations in foreign policy making. More specifically, the securitization framework provides many insights into how the military top brass could have a privileged role in the formation of foreign policy. Similarly, it also helps to explain how it becomes possible for governments and civil society organizations to reverse this privileged role in their favor. As such, the securitization theory proves helpful in understanding the nature of the military's role in Turkish-Israeli relations and unearthing many hitherto missing links necessary to reveal how the changes between the two periods occurred.

The first section of this article seeks to briefly explain the main contours and workings of securitization. The second section then examines the role of securitization in the burgeoning Turkish-Israeli relationship of the 1990s. The final section focuses on the gradual reversal of securitization (namely 'desecuritization') in the Turkish political landscape and the consequent manifestations of this desecuritizing (and re-politicizing) on relations with Israel in the first decade of the 2000s.

### **Securitization: How Does It Work?**

According to the Copenhagen School (the CS), a public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from non-politicized (when the state does not deal with the issue) through to politicized (when the issue is part of public policy requiring government decision), securitized (when the issue is presented as an existential threat justifying going "beyond normal politics") and desecuritized (meaning the issue is not defined as a threat and moved into the public sphere of deliberation).<sup>2</sup> For the CS, "politicization means to make an issue appear to be open, a matter of choice, something that is decided upon and that therefore entails responsibility."<sup>3</sup>

Securitization is a move from the politicized to the realm of (state) security and it "takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or above politics."<sup>4</sup> For the CS, securitization involves three types of units: referent objects, securitizing actors, and functional

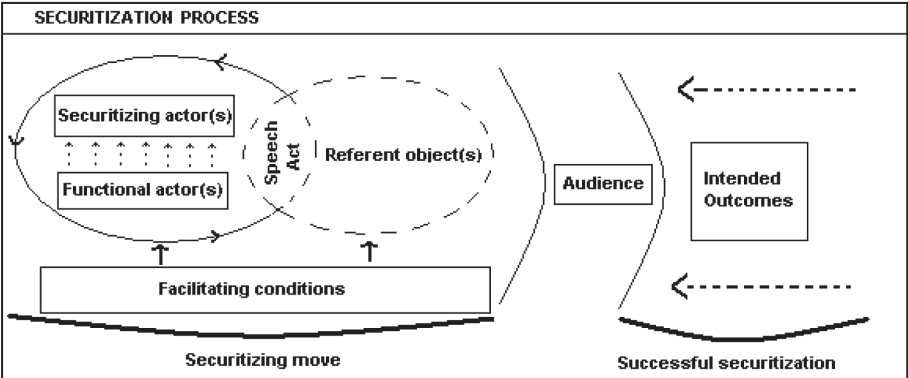
actors. The referent object is something which is thought “to be existentially threatened.”<sup>5</sup> Although the referent object for security has traditionally been the state, securitizing actors can in principle attempt to construct almost anything (e.g., national identity, social groups, individuals and so on) as a referent object. Securitizing actors (e.g., the political elite, government, pressure groups and the military) are those who “perform the security speech act” with a view to securitize an issue. They perform the act by calling a disputed-politicized issue an “existential threat” to a referent object (e.g., the state, ideology and national sovereignty). By speaking on broader communities, polities or general principles as referent objects of security, they can disguise their vested interests and have a chance to win over the target audience. However, facilitating conditions help to determine which issues are suitable for what referent objects and which actor is best to perform the speech act.

**Turkish-Israeli relationship  
cannot be separated from  
domestic politics and  
civil-military relations in Turkey**

A functional actor “is an actor who significantly influences decisions in the field of security” and never become a securitizing actor which chooses the referent object and calls for the security action on behalf of it.<sup>6</sup> When a securitizing actor defines an already politicized issue as an “existential threat” to a referent object, functional actors also take part in the process. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the functional actor is an “external influencing factor” in the process of securitization or an actor contributing to the speech act of security. When securitizing actors are not able to securitize an issue directly, they can draw on the social capital of the functional actors to successfully do so.

Securitization is a three-stage process. The first stage is about the portrayal of a certain issue as an “existential threat” to a referent object. While the securitizing actor is dominant in this stage, functional actors and facilitating conditions play important roles in making the referent object seem “existentially threatened.” This stage “does not by itself create securitization”, instead it constitutes “a securitizing move” or a securitization attempt.<sup>7</sup> An issue is securitized only if and when the target audience accepts taking the issue out of the boundaries of “normal politics.” If there is no such acceptance by the target audience we can only talk of a securitization attempt. The second stage of securitization is only completed when the securitizing actor convinces the audience that the referent object is “existentially threatened.” The target audience is not necessarily the public: it can vary from political decision-makers to bureaucratic elites to military officers. Hence a securitization move becomes successful when it conceives “a more restrictive audience” on the presence of an “existential threat” to a revered referent object. This would be the case even if the wider population re-

jects the speech act of security and considers the proposed emergency measures as illegitimate.<sup>8</sup>



Unlike the CS, we argue that an additional or a final stage is needed. Consider the following: what if a target audience (for example, the public) is convinced that the referent object is existentially threatened, but the securitization does not yield any concrete outcomes to address the threats? How can we account for the success of a securitization in such cases? Therefore, the third stage of securitization here is taken to constitute the expected outcomes of a securitization process, which is the implementing of *particular* measures to overcome the alleged threat.<sup>9</sup> Responses (e.g., agreements, sanctions, wars and so on) taken by securitizing actors are the outcomes of the securitization process and it is such outcomes that make the securitization meaningful as well as successful.

Finally, desecuritization is the reverse process and means “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is a process in which particular issues are removed from the extra-political-security realm and enter into (or return to) the realm of normal day-to-day politics. In desecuritizing attempts or moves, securitized referent objects are re-politicized by actors with the help of functional actors under facilitating conditions as in the securitization process. To establish a successful desecuritization, actors need to convince the target audience that the referent object is not existentially threatened and that the measures are counterproductive and that they need to reverse the outcomes of the successful securitization.

Securitization in Turkish-Israeli Relations in the 1990s

The late 1990s witnessed “the zenith” of Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>11</sup> It was indeed in this period that the two countries signed a number of landmark agree-

ments that paved the way for an exceptional rapprochement. How did a state which had pursued a low-profile and “neutral” policy in the region until then forge a bold strategic alliance with Israel? How was this made possible? Despite some positive developments<sup>12</sup> in the beginning of the 1990s, it was impossible to talk of a strong alliance developing between the two countries. As this study argues, it was “a securitization process” that elevated relations between Turkey and Israel to a *potent* strategic partnership in the 1990s. The following section will reconstruct the process leading to the successful securitization of relations with Israel in the 1990s, which culminated in a novel strategic alliance. We begin with the two referent objects of the securitization process that proved all too effective in the hands of Turkey’s securitizing agents in convincing the relevant audiences (bureaucrats, politicians and civil-society organizations) of the necessity of the strategic partnership.

*Referent Objects: The Survival of State and Secularism*

For the Turkish state elites, external threat perceptions have often been the main ingredients in the foreign policy-making process. In the 1990s, the Turkish military-bureaucratic elite saw internal and external affairs “through the lens of the ‘Sèvres syndrome’”, a conviction that there is an international conspiracy to weaken and divide Turkey.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the image of an unfriendly and threatening world around Turkey necessitated having a privileged role for the military in both domestic and foreign policy making. This external threat perception peaked in the 1990s partly due to the end of the strategic certainties enjoyed by the state elites during the Cold War and the war-like conflict between the PKK and security forces in the south-eastern provinces.

In the 1990s, however, the referent objects of securitization were not constructed only in terms of territo-

rial integrity but also for the ideological preservation of the Turkish state, embodied in its most valued republican principle, namely secularism. What was often felt and shown to be *in danger* and thus in need of protection was secularism. The ‘security threats’ to the secular nature of the state were to come from everything related to the ‘remnants’ of Islamic identity. Within the confines of this mentality, the Islamic-traditional social forces could not only be dismissed but also easily constructed as the ‘potential enemies’ of the state.

For the secular elite, Israel came to be represented as an ideological mirror-image of the secular Turkish state. The feeling among secular circles in Turkey was that the Israelis were in many ways just like them: “modern; westward-

It was predominantly Turkey’s domestic political power struggle that impacted upon both the start and the collapse of the relations with Israel

looking; having a shared Arab ‘other’; fellow victims of terror”.<sup>14</sup> Through a strategic relationship with Israel they could firstly halt the Kurdish separatists, secondly, counter regional support for local Islamic groups, and lastly, but not least, prove their secular credentials in the eyes of their supporters and dissidents.<sup>15</sup> The relationship with Israel was then perceived as an antidote for the threats to the referent objects. Israel was construed as an ideal partner for the restoration and strengthening of secularism in Turkey that will contribute to the survival of the state against external threats.

### *The Securitizing Actor: The Military and Israel*

The military has been the main securitizing actor in Turkey. A close examination of the speech acts by the military in the 1990s reveals that the above discussed referent objects were presented as existentially threatened. The main referent objects for the generals were territorial integrity and secularism. In 1989, the General Staff pointed out that the main source of external threats to Turkey shifted from the north (the Soviet Union) to the south (Iran, Syria, and Iraq).<sup>16</sup> Later, Chief of the General Staff İsmail Hakkı Karadayı pointed to Russia, Iran, Syria, Greece and Southern Cyprus as external threats to the territorial integrity and survival of the Turkish state.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the General Staff, the top institution of the military, gave a comprehensive briefing on “external threats” after the publication of Karadayı’s article.<sup>18</sup>

Although the perception of threats coming from Islamic social forces within the country dates back to the late 1980s,<sup>19</sup> the speech act on the issue of *irtica*, religious reactionism, among the military gained a distinct emphasis after the Islamist Welfare Party’s (WP) two consecutive election victories in 1994 and 1995. In a demarche issued on February 28, 1997 (the so-called post-modern coup of 1997), the military declared *irtica* the number-one threat to state security, replacing the role of Kurdish separatism in the famous “red book”, the National Security Strategy Document. “The extermination of *irtica*” acquired a “vital importance” in the agenda of the top brass and other high-ranking members of the General Staff.<sup>20</sup> Public opinion was further alarmed when the military attached *irtica*, the number-one internal threat, to external threats: Iran was incessantly accused of exporting “an anti-secular regime” to Turkey. Çevik Bir, then the deputy chief of the General Staff, named Iran a “terrorist state” and said it was exporting its anti-secular ideology to Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1990s, the Turkish military used *irtica* and external threats as the main reasons for the agreements with Israel. When Çevik Bir said “the circumstances in the region dictate an inevitable cooperation of two countries”<sup>22</sup> during the signing ceremony of the agreement foreseeing the exchange of military information and joint military training on February 23, 1996, he overtly referred to external

threats to the survival and territorial integrity of the state. Similarly, a military officer defended the agreement by arguing that “we are surrounded on all sides by trouble. We are in the hot seat. It is critical for us to jump outside this circle of chaos and find friends in the region. Israel was the perfect choice.”<sup>23</sup> Chief of the General Staff Karadayı also reiterated the confinement position of Turkey in a securitizing language when he said that Turkey had “fire on its three sides” during his visit to Israel in February 1997.<sup>24</sup>

Turkey's relations with Israel in the 1990s were exploited by the military and Kemalist elites to fight against the rise of the social forces of political Islam and Kurdish nationalism

The generals firmly believed that the alliance with Israel would help them to cope with the threats to the referent objects. Thus, Çevik Bir would both argue that “the military agreement signed between Turkey and Israel paved the way for resolution of the Turkish-Syrian crisis,”<sup>25</sup> and would openly link “the danger of *irtica*” (coming from the WP) to the agreements signed with Israel: “the army made it clear that it would not sit idly by and watch Turkey turn toward Islam or allow Israeli-Turkish military relations to be jeopardized.”<sup>26</sup>

#### *Functional Actors: The Media, Politicians and Others*

In addition to the generals, the media proved to be a remarkably influential source as well. The mainstream media was resourcefully and efficiently employed as a springboard to move issues “beyond politics.” In the first half of the 1990s, almost all the leading newspapers were full of reports shoring up the General Staff's redefinition of the source of threats. A popular phrase often endorsed in media reports emerged from the writings of a former veteran diplomat, Şükrü Elekdağ. According to Elekdağ, Turkey should follow the “two and a half wars strategy” that required the country to be able to fight on “two and a half fronts” at the same time, which referred to the prospect that Turkey would have to fight both Syria and Greece plus the internal Kurdish separatists, which would have been supported by Greece and Syria to weaken the country from within.<sup>27</sup>

Although the mainstream Turkish media had portrayed *irtica* as a threat since the mid-1980s,<sup>28</sup> the reports on the danger of *irtica* gained frequency in the 1990s. With the WP's coming to power, the mainstream visual and print media were full with securitizing comments. They published and broadcast reports prepared by the notorious Western Working Group, a semi-secret formation in the military, set to alarm the public about “the danger of *irtica*”.<sup>29</sup> In short, “the media acted as ‘functional securitizing actor’ in representing the WP government as an ‘Islamist domestic threat’ to ‘the secular nature of the state.’”<sup>30</sup> Certain



academics, secularist women's groups and Turkey's leading trade union confederations joined the securitizing chorus by holding many public demonstrations and making statements in tune with the media reports prepared by the Western Working Group. Similarly, prominent politicians also regularly spoke out about the rise of "the movements against secularism" and contributed to the depiction of *irtica* as "an existential threat" for the secular regime.<sup>31</sup>

Like the military, the Turkish media and other civil actors linked the military agreements between Israel and Turkey to external threats and *irtica*. For example, a columnist from the *Milliyet* daily wrote that "both countries meet in a

common policy against Syria. Also, Israel promises that it is determined to defend Turkey against fundamentalist Islamic movements in the Middle East. As a Muslim and secular country Turkey, in return, alleviates the solitude of Israel in the region."<sup>32</sup>

**It was "a securitization process" that elevated relations between Turkey and Israel to a potent strategic partnership in the 1990s**

A leading daily also announced the

military agreement in February 1996 by commenting that "Ankara gained a huge advantage against Athens and Damascus by getting the support of the strongest state of the Middle East."<sup>33</sup>

In a similar manner, Democratic Left Party leader Bülent Ecevit presented the Turkish-Israeli military accord as a result of "shared concerns and aims" between the two countries.<sup>34</sup> Turan Tayan, then defense minister, advocated cooperation between Israel and Turkey by pointing to Syria as "a major problem for both Israel and Turkey." For him, "the source of the terror against Israel is Syria. Syria also hosts the head of the PKK."<sup>35</sup> Doğu Ergil, a well-known academic, called the agreement as "an alliance among the only democratic and secular countries in the Middle East" both of which "face the same dangers".<sup>36</sup>

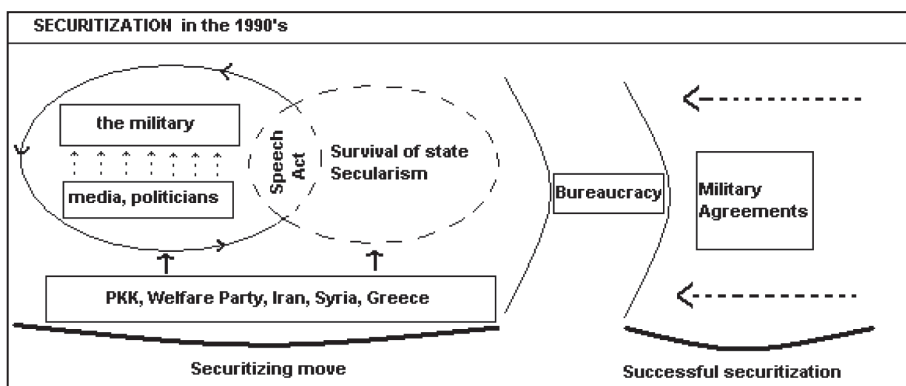
### *The Facilitating Conditions: The PKK and the Welfare Party*

All factors facilitating the successful securitizations in the 1990s were not simply discursive. The social environment and brute "facts on the ground" contributed significantly to the processes of securitization. For instance, three times more security forces were killed by the PKK between 1992 and 1995 than between 1984 and 1991.<sup>37</sup> Between May 1993 and October 1993, the PKK killed 1,600 people, which was unusually high.<sup>38</sup> A war-like situation in the south-eastern part of Turkey ensued, which in turn generated a fertile ground for the military for speaking on and defining threats to the territorial survival of the state.

On the domestic political front, Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the WP, occasionally provided fuel for the allegations leveled against his government.



Before coming to power, he had made a provocative and inflammatory speech claiming that the regime of Turkey “would be certainly changed.”<sup>39</sup> Although sporadic, such *faux pas* by the members of the WP nevertheless did provide a fertile context which facilitated the military’s speaking about and defining *irtica* as an “existential threat” to the secular regime. The military used “the twin challenges posed to the state’s security and political orientation by Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism” to increase its influence in Turkish foreign and domestic politics.<sup>40</sup>



### *The Audience: Bureaucracy, Politicians and the Public*

In the 1990s, debates over the future of Turkey’s secular regime engendered a divided society as public opinion was polarized between secularist and Islamist identities. Despite deep divisions, a unifying thread was also evident in that both groups agreed on the threat posed by the PKK and its external supporters to the territorial survival of the state. It was this “politics of fear” that dominated the political scene and helped the military increase its political influence. However, it is vital to stress that the military did not do this by brute force or covert political interventions, but rather by techniques of argumentation and persuasion that often hit the headlines and got primetime coverage on the national TV. The mainstream visual and print media often reflected the storyline in sync with the narrative preferred by the military: the coverage of the “threats posed” by the Islamist and Kurdish identity holders. As a scholar on Turkish politics puts it, the 1990s witnessed a civilian-looking military that “used the mass media, press briefings, conferences, and regular public announcements to inform public opinion about the threat to the existence of the state and homeland stemming from political Islam and Kurdish ethno-nationalism.”<sup>41</sup> This public information campaign found remarkable support among many civil society organizations, bureaucratic institutions such as the foreign ministry, and leading political parties.



Photo: AA, Metin Pala

The declaration of the UN report on the Flotilla Attack and Israel's refusal to apologize for its flotilla raid changed the case and Turkey "suspended all military agreements" with Israel.

### *Successful Securitization: Military Agreements*

The main outcome of the successful securitization was the set of agreements signed with Israel. Bypassing the civilian government in February 1996, a Turkish-Israeli military accord was signed by General Çevik Bir and his Israeli counterpart. Oltan Sungurlu, then defense minister, said just after the signing of the accord that "I do not know the degree of secrecy of the agreement. Besides, I have no idea about the contents of the agreement."<sup>42</sup> The accord was concluded at a time "when Turkey effectively had no civilian government" and was negotiated in secret.<sup>43</sup> Because the accord was in part thought to be, and represented as, a solution to the "existential threats" to the ideological and territorial survival of the Turkish state, the military was able to easily bypass the civilian government in signing the agreement.

However, the absence of an effective government was not the rationale for signing the agreement since a second agreement with Israel on cooperation in the defense industry was signed in August 1996 when the WP was in power. WP leader Necmettin Erbakan had in fact declared that after coming to power they would abolish the Turkish-Israeli military training agreement.<sup>44</sup> However,

as one analyst put it, “faced with the possibility of a major confrontation with the Turkish military, the principal supporter of the agreement, Erbakan government ratified the accord despite considerable opposition from the Islamist groups and media.”<sup>45</sup> By doing so, the military not only changed government policy but it also defied the Islamic sensitivities of the public.

Arguably one of the most important repercussions of this securitization was that of normalizing the military's circumventing of the civilian WP government as far as relations with Israel were considered. Süleyman Demirel, the then president, said that “the military agreement will continue without interruption and Welfare Party will not change this agreement.”<sup>46</sup> This became the case when the members of the WP overtly said that “the government was bypassed by the military during” the military exercise with Israel, Turkey, and the US in May 1997.<sup>47</sup> As a result, it was the securitization process that excluded the civilian government from Turkish-Israeli relations, which would be expected to be an arena of civilian politics in a democratic system.

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### **The Desecuritization of Turkish-Israel Relations in the 2000s**

In the first part of the 2000s, the military agreements were still intact and well functioning and military personnel continued their regular visits to Israel. Politicians, however, started disagreeing with the military about the priority of relations with Israel over Turkey's other regional relations. This section of the study will examine how Turkish politicians came to criticize the military agreements with Israel in the beginning of the 2000s; following this, they gained their voice on Turkish-Israeli relations, in particular after 2009.

#### *The Fall of Referent Objects and Israel*

The late 1990s witnessed a decrease in the perceived level of threats against the referent objects as the territorial survival of the state became less of an issue. The capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, on February 15, 1999, followed by a decrease in the number of terrorist acts by the PKK, saw the gradual recovery of relations with Greece and Syria. In other words, the possibility of “two and a half wars” evaporated from the policymaking mindset and media discussions. On the domestic ideological front, threats to the secular nature of the state were also less visible. The WP was closed down by the Constitutional

Court in January 1998. Its successor, the Virtue Party, secured only 15.4 per cent of votes in the 1999 general elections. The entire Islamist political cadre underwent a profound change after which they “de-Islamized” their discourse and political agenda.<sup>48</sup>

The military, however, continued with its securitization moves in the beginning of the 2000s and they still perceived and represented the referent objects as

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existentially threatened. For instance, in 2001, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Yaşar Büyükanıt attempted to securitize the political space by declaring that a “secular and democratic Turkey” is a common value to

all and that “all movements that do not meet on this common value” were “the enemies of the nation and country.”<sup>49</sup> Unlike in the 1990s, however, the military had to face two major obstacles in its drive to assert secularism as something “existentially threatened.” The first was “political resistance” to its securitization moves put up largely by the centre-right parties, and the second were the conditions put forward by the European Union in the membership accession process.<sup>50</sup>

As a result, the referent objects of the 1990s lost their effectiveness in legitimizing the military’s moves in Turkish-Israeli relations. When a contract worth \$668 million for the modernization of 170 M-60 tanks was awarded to an Israeli company on March 29, 2002, Sabahattin Çakmakoglu, then defense minister, argued that the contract with Israel was necessary to close the gap with Greece which had signed an agreement with Germany to purchase 170 new Leopard tanks.<sup>51</sup> Although the mainstream media columnists repeated Çakmakoglu’s justification for the deal,<sup>52</sup> the Greek connection was not useful to silence the opposition. Faced with opposition, the military had to resort to additional excuses for the deal: Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu, then chief of the General Staff, justified the deal saying that Germany and the US did not want to share their technologies for the tank modernization.<sup>53</sup> A retired colonel also justified the deal by pointing out that some countries are unwilling and restrictive in their technology transfer to Turkey, not referencing the Greek situation.<sup>54</sup>

### *Desecuritizing Actors and Israel*

In the late 1990s, political actors began criticizing the military’s dominant role in defining national threats. For example, Mesut Yılmaz, the then prime minister, posed a spectacular challenge to the military’s definition of “*irtica* as an existential threat” to the secular character of the country. He argued that *irtica* was a pretext to maintain the military’s power, position and large budget share.<sup>55</sup>

Yılmaz's arguments were noteworthy since it "represented a departure from the previously near-total absence of any empirical and theory-based problematization of the topic."<sup>56</sup> These were early desecuritization attempts to cut the 'constructed' link between perceived threats and the referent objects. Indeed in the 2000s, the Turkish political scene was to witness more of such desecuritizing attempts under the government of the Justice and Development Party (the AKP).<sup>57</sup>

Turkish political authorities could not help venting their disapproval and condemnation when faced with the internationally deplored acts committed by the state of Israel. An early example was when Israeli soldiers besieged Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's headquarters in May 2002. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit overtly accused Israel of "applying genocide on Palestinians."<sup>58</sup> Ecevit's accusation was in sync with the critical tone against Israel prevailing among Turkish politicians, particularly after the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Mesut Yılmaz, publicly questioned the signing of the tank modernization contract and stated that "it is better to suspend the signing of the project until a solution" on the occupation of Palestine was in sight.<sup>59</sup> The main opposition parties, the AKP and the True Path Party, also called for the "suspension" or "cancellation" of the deal.<sup>60</sup> It is vital for our discussion, however, to note that Ecevit did not cancel the tank modernization deal with Israel despite his apparent misgivings about it in a period when the tensions between Israel and Palestinians were running high.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the military's misgivings, the EU's legal proviso for membership significantly limited the military's role in domestic politics

Therefore, the criticism of politicians directed against the deal should be seen as *failed* desecuritization attempts. This is because the audience of their desecuritization attempts, namely the military, which held the veto power to cancel the deal, was *not* convinced that it must be cancelled. In a response to the politicians who criticized the deal, Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu, then chief of the General Staff, described "those who are against" the deal as "those who were born anti-Semites."<sup>62</sup> Unsurprisingly then, the deal remained intact and continued to function uninterrupted. While the deal and Kıvrıkoğlu's response to the criticisms showed that the military held the upper hand, new desecuritizing attempts followed during the 2000s. Although Turkish politicians occasionally rallied against Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, desecuritization attempts (going back to "normal politics" about the necessity of relations) did not bear any fruits until 2009 and relations with Israel continued to be controlled, in large measure, by the Turkish military.

### *The Facilitating Conditions for Desecuritization*

A number of facilitating conditions helped the desecuritization of relations. The year 1999 was a turning point for the securitization process in Turkey. The 1999 earthquake reduced tensions with Greece and resulted in the collapse of the image of the 'Father State', a tradition justifying the supremacy of the state over

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civil initiatives.<sup>63</sup> Another important development in 1999 was the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK. Most importantly, the 1999 Helsinki Summit, which confirmed Turkey's European candidacy, gave an unprecedented impetus towards domestic political change. Despite the military's misgivings, the EU's

legal proviso for membership significantly limited the military's role in domestic politics.<sup>64</sup> Also, 1999 was followed by an economic crisis between 2000 and 2001. The prevailing supremacy of the economy over security issues provided a free space for governments (not the military) to act on domestic and international issues.

In addition to the above developments, the failure of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians at Camp David, followed by the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, created fertile ground for civil actors in Turkey to speak out against Israel and criticize its policies, especially those towards Palestine. Similarly, the Israeli-Lebanese War in 2006 and the occupation of Gaza at the end of 2008 changed the domestic political climate. Israel's blatant violation of international law and the international public outrage that followed its acts showed that Turkey's role as a partner of Israel was an untenable venture and provided an impetus for the civilian government to speak out against the Turkish-Israeli alignment and the military agreements.

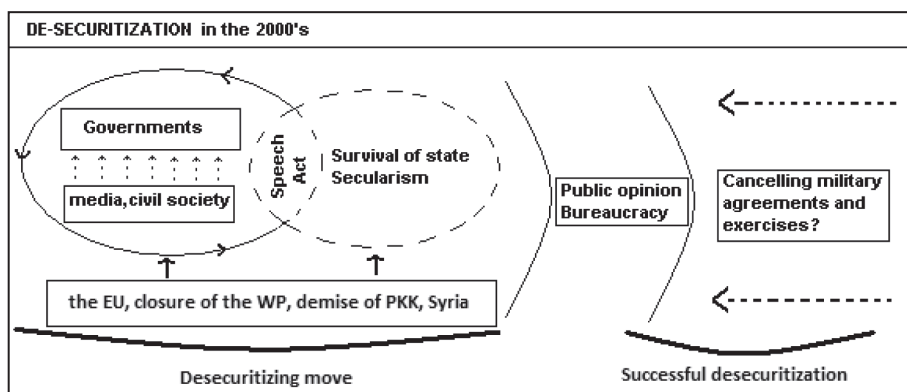
### *Functional Desecuritizing Actors: The Media, Civil Society Organizations and Israel*

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Turkish media had gradually come to act as an intermediary functional desecuritizing actor. For example, Cengiz Çandar, an influential columnist, echoed what many had in mind when he claimed that "Turkey cannot afford the shame to be the number one 'military partner' of the aggressor 'military machine' raising the anger of the region's people" in the first days of the Al-Aqsa Intifada.<sup>65</sup> Another well-known commentator in the Turkish media, Mehmet Ali Birand, presented the signing of the tank modernization deal in 2002 as "an example of hypocrisy" against the Palestinians. He



further disrupted the military's securitizing move by mocking its claims that the deal was a counter-balance for Greece's purchase of 170 Leopard tanks from Germany.<sup>66</sup>

Another functional desecuritizing factor was the intensive and dramatic media coverage of Israeli atrocities against Palestinians. The Turkish media extensively covered Israel's assassination of Hamas's spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin in 2004, the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006, and the three-week invasion of the Gaza Strip by Israeli armed forces from the end of December 2008 until January 18 the following year.<sup>67</sup> These developments also generated massive public protests against Israel and made some civil society organizations more sensitive about the Palestinian question.<sup>68</sup> The mobilization of the Turkish public reached its peak with massive popular demonstrations across the country against the state of Israel after the Flotilla Attack. Remarkably, many civil society organizations called on the Turkish government to take action against Israel. For example, Eğitim-Bir Sen (Education Personnel Labor Union) spokesperson Ali Kıtır summarized the widespread feeling: "we ask the authorities to remove all agreements with Israel. No agreement with a terrorist state is more valuable than humanity or one drop of our Muslim siblings' blood."<sup>69</sup> Not surprisingly, the Turkish parliament swiftly passed a resolution calling for ties with Israel to be severed, demanding a formal apology and compensation to victims. Turkey also recalled its ambassador from Israel.<sup>70</sup>



### *After 2009: A Successful Desecuritization?*

The year 2009 was the tipping point in the influence of the military over Turkish-Israeli relations; after this year, the AKP government took control of all initiatives into its own hands.<sup>71</sup> After Erdoğan publicly criticized Israel over its operation against Gaza at the World Economic Forum in January 2009, Turkish-Israeli relations began to rapidly deteriorate. This was followed by the visibly



symbolic humiliation of Turkey's Ambassador to Israel Oğuz Çelikkol, who was seated on a lower chair in a routine meeting with Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon. When Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister, visited Turkey in January 2010 to reduce tension between the two countries, Turkish Chief of the General Staff İlker Başbuğ declined to meet with him, as did President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

In addition, the Anatolian Eagle, an Israeli-Turkish-American joint military exercise that had been held regularly since 2001, was cancelled on October 7, 2009. Davutoğlu hinted that Turkey deliberately excluded Israel from the exercise "partly because of Ankara's criticism of Israel's Gaza offensive almost a year ago."<sup>72</sup> Erdoğan also stated that "I could not deny the request of my people, it was in this direction," namely the exclusion of Israel from the exercise.<sup>73</sup> Unlike its stance in the 1990s, the military was unable to counteract the government's decision to exclude Israel's air force from the Anatolian Eagle. As a military official claimed, there was government pressure on the military to postpone the exercise.<sup>74</sup>

Although some analysts read the exclusion of Israel from the Anatolian Eagle "as a clear sign of consensus between" the government and the military,<sup>75</sup> in essence it represented the military's loss of initiative in relations with Israel, as well as the transformation of the civilian-military balance in favor of civilian po-

**In the first part of the 2000s politicians started disagreeing with the military about the priority of relations with Israel over Turkey's other regional relations**

litical authority.<sup>76</sup> For example, when Israel asked to join the next exercise at the end of April 2010, the Turkish military remained silent.<sup>77</sup> This being the case, the government gained its voice in Turkish-Israeli relations as illustrated by Davutoğlu: "Yes, we cancelled last year's military exercises, and we will not do these kinds

of exercises if potential military tension exists in our region."<sup>78</sup> The government also barred Israeli military flights from Turkish airspace in June 2010. Accordingly, a government authority said that "in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara [the Flotilla Attack] incident, the tendency is to not give permission to Israeli military flights as was done in the past."<sup>79</sup>

While the government put the existing military agreements between the two countries up for discussion, most agreements with Israel remained in effect for a while. Rather than due to the Turkish military's veto, this continuation was arguably because Turkey has long depended on Israel. For instance, the purchase of unmanned aerial vehicles necessitates training of Turkish officers by Israeli counterparts. Therefore, it was necessary that a Turkish military and govern-

ment delegation went to Israel at the beginning of July 2010 to learn how to operate these unmanned aircraft.<sup>80</sup> However, the declaration of the UN report on the Flotilla Attack, which stated that Israel's naval blockade of the Gaza Strip was legal, and Israel's refusal to apologize for its flotilla raid in September 2011 changed the case and Turkey "suspended all military agreements" with Israel.<sup>81</sup> Remarkably, Necdet Özel, the current chief of the General Staff, had this to say: "All military activities have been suspended. There is no any channel of communication between the Turkish and Israeli army to solve the crisis. *This is not the matter of the military but that of politics.*"<sup>82</sup>

Following 2009, joint military exercises and the military agreements from the 1990s with Israel were cancelled or suspended by the Turkish government. Unlike in the 1990s, the military has been silent when asked its opinion about Turkish-Israeli relations and points to the government as the only interlocutor in these affairs. Although the Turkish military's silence can be explained because of Israel's failure "to honor its offset and technology-transfer commitments,"<sup>83</sup> the military's relinquishing of foreign relations with Israel to the government cannot fully be explained without examining the desecuritization process which has been under way since the beginning of the 2000s.

At this point it must be remembered that desecuritization is "the fading away of one particular issue or actor"<sup>84</sup> (in this case, the Turkish military) and it can be replaced with another securitization process because the production of a national identity is strongly related with representations of threats. In other words, it is security that functions as a "determining principle, beginning or ground" upon which national identities can stand.<sup>85</sup> However, this study can only be a bold and provocative step in further researching Turkish-Israeli relations after 2009 because space does not allow for more. Suffice it to say, at this moment the government would be able to re-securitize the issue by taking it out of the boundaries of normal politics.

## Conclusion

This article has identified a number of factors and actors that made for the change in relations between Turkey and Israel from the early 1990s to the late 2000s. It has argued that the Turkish-Israeli relationship cannot be separated from domestic politics and civil-military relations in Turkey.<sup>86</sup> Analyzing the

The year 2009 was the tipping point in the influence of the military over Turkish-Israeli relations; after this year the AKP government took control of all initiatives into its own hands

process of successful securitization, it has shown that Turkey's relations with Israel in the 1990s were exploited by the military and Kemalist elites to fight against the rise of the social forces of political Islam and Kurdish nationalism. In the 2000s, however, the governments and the civil society have effectively desecuritized relations with Israel, which paved the way for a gradual reversal of the cordial relations and saw the end of the strategic alliance.

This article has shown that the Turkish military embarked upon a strategic alliance with Israel for discursive reasons in addition to the necessities of *Realpolitik* such as military modernization. It was predominantly Turkey's domestic political power struggle that impacted upon both the start and the collapse of the relations with Israel. There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this present case. Firstly, Turkey's alliance and burgeoning relationship with Israel, to a considerable extent, were an initiative exclusively conducted by the military; that is, it was an undertaking that literally bypassed the civilian government, which at times was not even aware of the contents of the agreements signed between the two countries. Secondly, the military did so with a view to showcase its grip on the domestic and foreign policy-making process. More specifically, it aimed to demonstrate that when faced with a domestic challenger with a different political agenda it will not stand in the barracks.

In theoretical terms, the study of Turkish-Israeli relations is an interesting avenue of research and provides at least two important research outcomes. First, neither the alliance forged in the 1990s nor its demise in the 2000s can be purely understood in rationalist-realist terms. That is, both the birth of the "strategic alliance" and its downfall are far from being purely a strategic necessity and shaped by the structural dictates of international politics. Instead, the changing dynamics in the relationship have been subject to wider changes in the socio-political context. As this paper has suggested, the impact of the latter is substantial to the extent that the ebb and flow of relations can be connected to the political attitudes and behaviors of social forces in Turkey's domestic political space.

Secondly, as this article has sought to demonstrate, the theory of securitization developed by the CS provides an innovative and productive framework for grasping the changing dynamics in Turkish-Israeli relations between the 1990s and 2000s. Not only does securitization neatly provide a useful analytical map of the important factors in the process, it is also able to identify the specificity of the political in relations, that is, how the relationship concealed the real struggle over the ideological representation of the Turkish state and the subsequent closure of the public space in the face of domestic political opposition.

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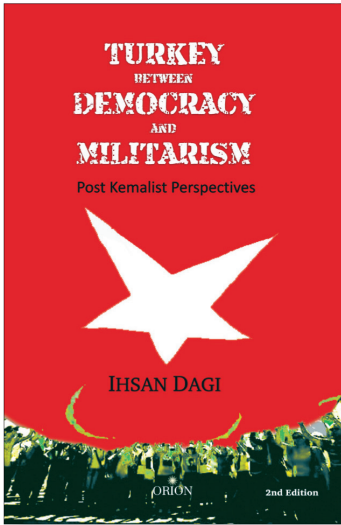
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