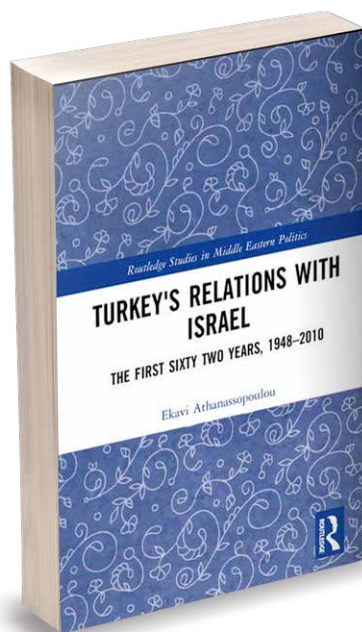




The First Six Decades of Turkey-Israel Relations: Even When Fruitful, Never Simple

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***Turkey's Relations with Israel:
The First Sixty Two Years, 1948-2010***

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In her book *Turkey's Relations with Israel: The First Sixty-Two Years, 1948-2010*, Prof. Ekavi Athanassopoulou of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Athens presents a comprehensive and thorough analysis, highlighting long term aspects of the relationship that provide context for the peaks and troughs in the period of analysis. This book is compulsory reading for anyone interested in bilateral relations between the countries. It also touches on other central

issues, such as Israel's relations with Arab countries, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Kurdish underground, the conflict in Cyprus, as well as United States' policy towards the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

One of the insights emerging from the book is that not only was the “honeymoon” period in Israel-Turkey relations in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century unique when compared to previous and subsequent periods, but also that these years were full of challenges and mutual disappointments.

The book is structured chronologically in three sections: the Cold War period, the first decade after the Cold War, and the start of the new millennium. This highlights the unique nature of the book, since most studies of Israel-Turkey relations have not considered the links between these three periods. Among other things, the book makes use of 58 in-depth interviews conducted by Athanassopoulou with leading figures from Turkey, Israel, the United States and Arab countries, who were directly involved in relations between Ankara and Jerusalem, or who have specialized knowledge of the subject. One of the insights emerging from the book is that not only was the “honeymoon” period in Israel-Turkey relations in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century unique when compared to previous and subsequent periods, but also that these years were full of challenges and mutual disappointments. For example, in May 1996 there was a failed assassination attempt of Turkish President Suleyman Demirel, in which the would-be assassin was apparently protesting against the strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey (p. 259). Moreover, until Benjamin Netanyahu came to power in 1996, Israel was reluctant to indicate any specific public opposition to the Kurdish underground, and restricted itself to a general condemnation of all types of terror (pp. 226, 231).

The book examines the relationship mainly from the Turkish perspective, and according to the author, Turkey has never had a consistent or coherent foreign policy towards Israel (p. 324). Athanassopoulou explains the changes and contradictions in Turkish foreign policy with respect to Israel through the range of Turkey's "Role Conceptions," with shifting orders of priority throughout the period, including as a faithful ally of the United States and the west, an independent actor, a friend of the Arabs and "brother of the Muslims" at the regional level (p. 5). In the 1990s Turkey also assumed the role of regional "example" and "leader" (p. 325). According to Athanassopoulou, relations with Israel were good in periods when Turkey's role conception as a faithful ally of the United States was dominant, and when this suited American interests with respect to Israel, in the face of Arab countries and the Muslim world (p. 325).

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The explanation at the level of role conceptions links to the theoretical literature in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and contributes to this book, but when Athanassopoulou references the parallel existence of contradictory conceptions, it appears that this explanation could apply to almost any outcome. Sometimes the author uses similar words (with slightly different meanings) to describe particular roles but the terminology is not consistent, which can be somewhat confusing. For example, when discussing the role of "friend of the Arabs" or "brother to the Muslims," she sometimes adds the words "regional collaborator" or "regional protector," which are similar but do not contain the element of shared religious identity, and could therefore also include Israel.

One aspect that is particularly relevant to the discussion of Israel-Turkey relations since the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power in Turkey in 2002, is the role played by the leader, and particularly by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the deterioration of relations. Athanassopoulou stresses the theoretical concept of national role conceptions, that is, the definition of the country's proper role in the international and regional systems within which it operates (p. 2), particularly over the long-term. In this way she effectively reduces the importance of the explanation at the individual level of Turkish decision-making, with respect to events affecting bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. She maintains that the role conceptions that she describes in her book have been shared by most of the political parties in the Turkish government and opposition (p. 326).

The period covered in the book ends in 2010, in the middle of Erdogan's second term as prime minister. In the early years of Erdogan's rule, not only were relations with Israel not terminated, they in fact became closer (p. 278). Athanassopoulou is skeptical about the widely-held belief that Erdogan refrained from harming relations with Israel due to his fear of the army (which pushed for relations with Israel) and its influence in the domestic political sphere (p. 284). Although she does not entirely reject this explanation, she argues that Erdogan understood the advantage of relations with Israel—it was a way of demonstrating to those both inside and outside the country that Turkey had not abandoned its identity as a faithful ally of the United States and the West (p. 285), in spite of the conservative nature of the Justice and Development Party—whose founders emerged from the reformist faction of the Welfare Party after it was outlawed in 1998 by the Turkish Constitutional Court, on the pretext that it was operating against the country's secular character.

Turkey's identity as a regional leader was also important in guiding its relations with Israel. Pinchas Avivi, Israel's ambassador to

Turkey during the years 2003-2007, managed to persuade Ahmet Davutoglu, who was a senior advisor to Erdogan on foreign policy from 2002 to 2009 (and later Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Turkey), that Turkey could not be a significant regional player without good relations with Israel, and that Turkey could even play an intermediary role between Israel and other actors in the region (p. 290). This suited Turkey's role conception as a regional leader and example. Subsequently, after Operation Cast Lead that started at the end of 2008, Turkey effectively decided to promote its identity as a leader of the Muslim world at the expense of relations with Israel (p. 306).

One of the issues that is particularly interesting when examined from a contemporary perspective is the subject of Israel-Syria-Turkey relations in the 1990s. At that time Turkey was opposed to the peace process between Israel and Syria, believing that it would enable Syria to move forces from the border with Israel to the border with Turkey. There was also concern that Syria, which had already allowed the Kurdish underground to operate from its territory, would find it easier to continue doing so. Moreover, the discussions at that time between Israel and Syria on the issue of water cannot be disentwined from water disputes between Turkey and Syria. Western diplomats interviewed by the author stated that in its opposition to the peace process, Turkey tried to argue that after Hafez al-Assad's demise, Syria would split into communities—an outcome which at that time Ankara saw as positive (p. 228). This is the complete opposite of

the current Turkish view since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, which stresses the importance of Syria's territorial integrity. In May 1997 the Turkish Defense Minister even visited the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights—an event which is hard to imagine being repeated today (pp. 231-232).

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Athanassopoulou has done impressive work for a study covering six decades, which is both thorough and yet short enough to be contained in one volume. What is needed in order to "complete" her work is a discussion of the 15 years that have passed since 2010, plus a deeper examination of the Israeli side. The author states her intention from the outset to focus on the Turkish side, but of course any discussion of bilateral relations cannot be complete without studying the policies of both sides, all the more so in the case of a country as complex as Israel.

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