

Enjoying Ups and Downs: The Realism Approach in Turkey-Israel Bilateral Relations

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Abstract: *This research studies the dynamic of Turkey-Israel bilateral relations. The phenomenon of exchange visits between Israel and Turkish leaders in 2022 shows a new chapter in the political dynamics in the Middle East. The difficulties in Turkey-Israel bilateral relations had occurred since 2005 when Erdogan, Prime Minister of Turkey at that time, committed to being a peace mediator for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This exchange visit phenomenon is also interesting to analyze because Turkey is Israel's rival in the Middle East political map, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This research used the qualitative method. By exploiting Morgenthau's fundamental political theory and Kenneth Waltz's Balancing Strategy, this article concludes that Turkey's policy of strengthening its bilateral relations with Israel is motivated by Turkey's national interests and the realization of the Balance of Power in the Middle East.*

Keywords: *Turkey, Israel, bilateral, middle east*

1. Introduction

The President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, welcomed the arrival of the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, in Ankara on March 9, 2022. The reception was held at a banquet between the two presidents and the delegations involved. President Herzog considered this meeting especially important because he hoped that Israel and Turkey could restore their bilateral relations after experiencing difficulties since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010. President Herzog also said that the Prime Minister of Israel, Naftali Bennet, and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid had coordinated this meeting (Kreshner & Timur, 2022). Turkey also responded to this

visit by sending its Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, on May 24, 2022. Yair Lapid, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, welcomed The Turkish minister in Tel Aviv. The two ministers discussed the prospects for Turkish-Israeli cooperation in various sectors such as diplomacy, economy, and security. Both are committed to restoring bilateral relations through these various cooperation programs (Bassist, 2022).

The exchange of visits also signals developing Middle East political dynamics. Some observers say this is a step backward for Turkey concerning the defense of the Palestinian people. This activity also drew much criticism from the Turkish community. The hashtag "#OneMinuteErdogan" was widespread on Twitter after this meeting. Many people regret the steps taken by President Erdogan (Kreshner & Timur, 2022). This research leaves this background. It questions the motivation of Turkey, which finally followed in the footsteps of other Arab countries to restore its bilateral relations with Israel, and how to predict Turkey's move by considering the earlier record of Turkey's bilateral relations with Israel. This research used a qualitative approach. Sources of data were obtained through library research, namely by reading, understanding, analyzing, and interpreting data about the course of Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations, recent reports on the crisis experienced by Turkey in recent years, and reports on work projects.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research employs *realpolitik* or Morgenthau's political realism theory. He argues that political realism does not require moral justification but a sharp distinction between the expectation and what is possible to achieve anywhere and anytime (Asrudin, 2014). For him, this world could be better, so it causes conflicts based on the different interests of various communities. So, rationally, the use of morals cannot be fully applied to achieve goals. To achieve this goal, the actor should rationalize his evil means (Morgenthau, 1973). In this article, the theory is used to analyze the policy of the Turkish government, which is contrary to the expectations of Muslims domestically and worldwide. The policy is also contrary to Turkey's position in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the prolonged conflict, Turkey's position as the front-line rival to Israel in fighting Palestinian rights has softened. It is especially true of Turkey's position, which has established relations with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition, this article also used Kenneth Waltz's theory of Balancing Strategy which emphasizes the principle of Self Help. This article employs the theory to analyze the readiness of a society, corporation, or country to survive in an anarchic system while securing or trying to achieve its interests. Such an approach will influence the decisions made by the country. In simple terms, the state will protect its interests while maintaining stability and security. This security manifests in several elements: territory, population, economic strength, military capability, and intelligence security. The various efforts aim to achieve a Balance of Power. This principle promotes a balance of power between various groups in an anarchic system without harming the diversity of elements. Therefore, it will create security when the

competing powers are in balance. The article uses the theory to analyze the background underlying Turkey's decision to restore diplomatic relations with Israel, especially in the economic and security sectors. Turkey is experiencing an economic crisis and has started a cooperation project to distribute Israeli natural gas to Europe. Meanwhile, in the security sector, Turkey has competed for influence with geostrategic actors in the region, namely the United Arab Emirates, which has already normalized its relations with Israel.

3. Result and Discussions

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel started when the state of Israel proclaimed its establishment in 1948. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel's independence. Their relationship is even more positive because they have the same enemy, namely the rise of the Arab nation (Bengio, 2004). However, Turkey's alignments began to change after the Israeli attack on the Sinai region and the Suez Canal in 1956. It lowered Turkey's diplomacy to the level of *chargés d'affaires* (Efron, 2018). Turkey and Israel also restored their relationship in 1959 through a meeting of two prime ministers, Adnan Menderes of Turkey and David Ben Gurion of Israel. This meeting was carried out secretly and resulted in the draft "Peripheral Pact," which bound Turkey and Israel's cooperation in the military field. However, despite cooperating with Israel, Turkey has not changed its policy. With other Arab countries. Turkey called for warnings for the Israeli army to withdraw from Sinai after Israel won the six-day war. Nevertheless, Turkish policy was considered rhetoric because they refrained from labeling Israel as an "aggressor country" (Efron, 2018).

Turkey's alignment with Arab-Palestinian is increasingly evident. In 1979, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLO), Yasser Arafat, visited Ankara, intending to set up a PLO office there. Turkey also lowered its diplomacy level to a symbolic level after Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1980 (Ulutas, 2010). Through the Madrid conference in 1991, Turkey again restored its relations with Israel to the same level as the bilateral relations between Turkey and the Palestinian Authority, namely the exchange of ambassadors (Altunısık, 2000). Throughout the 1990s, the relations between Turkey and Israel became more intimate. They increased the status of cooperation, initially limited to the economic sector, to become a solid military bond (Aykan, 1999). The cooperation is motivated by the same security interests against the Syrian threat. Turkey began to perceive Syria as a threat since Syria refused to grant recognition for Turkey's annexation of the province (Efron, 2018). Furthermore, Syria aids the terrorist organization, the Secret Liberation Army of Armenia, in running against the Turkish military in the Lebanese territory and supplies logistical aid to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê/PKK) (Kanat, 2013).

This cooperation benefits both parties as Turkey can obtain weapons unavailable in its country while Israel gets lucrative customers for its military industry (Kanat, 2013). Simultaneously, relations between Turkey and Israel have strengthened in the

tourism and trade sectors, making Israel the closest friend of Turkey in various sectors. Israel is also the fastest country to supply aid that managed to save Turkish citizens after the earthquake that hit Turkey in 1999 (Liel, 2017). In 2000, Turkey and Israel's relationship grew closer. Turkey signed an agreement allowing Israel to buy water in Turkey in January 2000 and the signing of cooperation in the academic sector in June of the same year (Efron, 2018).

The intimate relationship began to ebb and flow at the end of 2000. The outbreak of the Intifada II movement and the violent response conducted by the Israel Defense Force (IDF) brought the influence of labor on Turkish public opinion against it (Liel, 2017). In 2002, Turkey signed a secret agreement on strengthening Turkish securities by developing the 170M-60A1 Tank. In addition, Israel signed an agreement to drain sixty million cubic meters of water from the Magat River, worth \$1 billion annually for the next 20 years (Vidal, 2004). However, Israel later withdrew from the treaty and opted for seawater desalination, which upset Turkey. Close relations worsened after the AKP party came to power in November 2002. Erdogan served as prime minister of Turkey at the time and began to voice anti-Israel sentiments as part of his political agenda. However, diplomatic relations between Turkey-Israel continued to run until 2004. Tensions began when Israel killed the leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, sparking criticism from Erdogan, who said Israel's actions were terrorism and considered Israel to be conducting "state terror" in Gaza (Efron, 2018). Although this is an early sign of estrangement in Turkish-Israeli relations, military cooperation between the two countries continues. The two countries signed the purchase of three uncrewed planes (UAV) from the Israeli aviation industry worth 185 million dollars in April 2005 (Reuters, 2009).

Considering Israel's plans to withdraw from Gaza in May 2005, Erdogan invited Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to visit Ankara. In September, Turkey began to mediate for peace between Israel and Pakistan, experiencing tensions at the time. Turkey has also begun legitimizing itself as a mediator in the region (Efron, 2018). However, Hamas' victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections sparked a rift between Turkey and Israel. Furthermore, the escalation of violence in Gaza and the war against Lebanon sparked widespread anti-Israel rhetoric and demonstrations across Turkey, although relations have persisted. Nevertheless, even Turkey still played its role as a mediator for Israel and Syria peace talks from 2007 to 2008 (Aytürk, 2011).

An essential moment in relations between Turkey and Israel occurred in December 2008. This moment changed the way Turkey views Israel. This change occurred three days after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to Ankara. Israel launched a "Cast Lead Operation" in Gaza, killing 1,400 Palestinians (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2012). Erdogan's government at that time strongly criticized Israel's attacks and considered it an insult to bilateral relations between the two. Erdogan publicly said that he had lost trust in Olmert and stopped considering him as a "partner of peace" (Aytürk, 2011)

After the incident, Turkish-Israeli relations deteriorated further. Both berate each other in international forums. One of Erdogan's sentences against Israeli

president Shimon Peres was also in the spotlight. Erdogan said, "When it comes to killing, you know how to kill. Then, the two criticized each other. Israel condemned Turkey for its attacks on the Armenians and called them genocide, as Turkey did the same for Israel's actions against the Palestinians (Liel, 2017).

The peak of the direct Turkish Israeli confrontation was in the case of Israel's attack against a Turkish volunteer ship, the Mavi Marmara, a ship of Turkish humanitarian volunteers who are members of the İnsani Yardım Vakfım (IHH) organization. The attack on the Mavi Marmara happened after the ship ignored warnings from the Israeli Navy. This incident killed nine Turkish citizens by direct fire to vital objects (Yackley, 2010). Turkey was angry and firmly condemned Israel's actions in international forums. Even so, Israel continues to argue that the ship was carrying aid equipment, including weapons and money, to the terrorist group Hamas. In response to this incident, several international investigations were conducted and raised questions about the legality of Israel in conducting the blockade (Buchan, 2012). However, the United Nations, in a press release given by Geoffrey Palmer in September 2011, said that the actions taken by Israel were legal, and the United Nations questioned the background and purpose of sending the fleet by IHH (Palmer, Uribe, Itzhar, & Sanberk, 2011).

The Marmara incident significantly affected the bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel. Turkey recalled its ambassador to Israel after the Mavi Marmara attack and asked the UN security council to follow up on this incident. A year later, Turkey expelled Israeli Ambassador Gabby Leby and senior Israeli diplomats from Turkey. Only "low-level officials" officers are allowed to stay in Turkey (CNN, 2011).

After the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkish-Israeli relations turned into rivals that brought each other down. The hatred spread to the public, making cooperation between the two almost impossible. Therefore, as a partner of cooperation between the two countries, the United States tried to rehabilitate the deteriorating relations by mediating between the two leaders of the two countries. Even so, the two countries showed no desire to reconcile. Turkey requires Israel to fulfill three conditions to restore its bilateral relations: addressing public apology, compensation of 20 million USD for the families of the victims of Mavi Marmara, and stopping the occupation of the Gaza area. The United States then managed to open talks between Turkey and Israel. Turkey started dealings with Israel after an agreement on developing the Turkish Air Force's early warning technology Israel. This agreement was successful thanks to encouragement from the United States. Through this agreement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reconnected with Erdogan (Efron, 2018).

The two began to talk about reconciliation. However, the reconciliation process could have been more active along the way. They disagree with Turkey's three demands: to stop occupation in the Gaza area and even ask Turkey to close the Hamas office in Ankara. Finally, after conducting two mediations in 2016, both agreed to restore their bilateral relationship. Israel then gave Turkey 20 million USD in compensation and apologized publicly.

Meanwhile, Turkey withdrew all criminal and civil charges against Israel. The blockade continues. It is just that Turkey has access to the Ashdod port in Israel so that Turkey can send humanitarian aid and volunteers (Liebermann & Labott, 2016). Turkey-Israel intensively conducted cooperation in the economic and security fields. Even though the tension in their relationship has fluctuated, the cooperation between the two has developed to this day. The cooperation on the natural gas pipeline project continues despite the ongoing political turmoil between the two.

3.1. Bilateral Relations as a Solution to the Economic Crisis

Turkey's economic crisis has worsened over the last few decades. Even in April 2002, Turkey experienced a spike in inflation, reaching 70 percent (Al Jazeera, 2022). As a result, prices for food and other necessities have skyrocketed. For example, the price of flour per kilogram, which at the beginning of 2022 was around 110 lire, doubled in March 2022. In addition, the cost of electricity and housing has also increased due to the current inflation that hit Turkey (Michaelson & Narlı, 2022). Three things cause the economic crisis in Turkey. The first is Erdogan's policy toward the economic system in his country. Erdogan rejected proposals from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise interest rates (Emin, 2021). The second is Erdogan's intervention in the Central Bank's policies. Erdogan's intervention in the Central Bank was a reckless act of his government. Erdogan would replace the director of the Central Bank, who made policies that were contrary to the pattern of his government. The policy leads to a decrease in the confidence of foreign investors. Erdogan's policy was poor, making investors hesitate to invest their money in Turkey because it is risky (Sonmez, 2021). Lastly is the substantial number of refugees from Syria and Palestine, which have brought instability to Turkey. The crisis-hit Turkey also resulted in discrimination against refugees (Osterlund, 2022).

To deal with the crisis, Erdogan increased the minimum wage for work by up to 50%. As a result, Turkey's minimum working wage will reach 4,250 lire, while in 2021, it will only be 2,825 lire (Arbar, 2021). In addition, Turkey also subsidized various basic needs, such as bread (Yanuar, 2021). Furthermore, Turkey also strengthens tourism for economic stability. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and most countries closed their borders, Turkey even performed a massive promotion in the tourism sector (Prakoso, 2022).

The development in the tourism sector has a reason. The tourism sector accounts for 13% of the total income in the Turkish economy. Moreover, Turkey is a country with such good popularity among tourists that it has earned the title of the six best countries for tourism. Even Roger Kelly, head of regional economics at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, said that if the profits from Turkish tourism increase, it would help Turkey to lower the country's deficit so that the value of the lire would increase (Craig, 2022). Most of the tourists visiting Turkey are from Israel. Turkey is still the best tourist destination for Israelis. At the end of 2016, 293,988 Israeli tourists came to Turkey (Eisenbud, 2017). This number increased

after the reconciliation between Turkey and Israel in 2015-2016. Turkey's efforts to attract Israel to the tourism sector come true with the visit of a delegation from the governor of Antalya to Israel to revive Israeli tourism in the city. Israeli tourists who visited Antalya in 2016 reached 170,000. Turkey wants Israeli tourists to return to visit the country as, before the Turkish-Israeli conflict, Israeli visitors to Antalya reached 330,000 (Alon, 2017).

It makes sense to strengthen relations between Turkey and Israel as it will positively affect Turkish tourism. The increased tourism will strengthen the Turkish economy and weaken the current Turkish economic crisis. Apart from tourism, strengthening Turkey-Israel relations will also be a win-win solution for cooperation in the energy sector. Turkey's dependence on imports of gas energy to Russia and Iran is enormous. Turkey imports 60% of the country's gas from Russia and another 20% from Iran. This dependence became a threat after the crisis of bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia in 2015 (Efron, 2018). Pipeline gas from Israel to Turkey would reduce Turkey's dependence on Russia and Iran, although the gas imports transported through Israel would not be comparable to Russia's.

On the other hand, Israel will get a substantial cooperation partner for the country's economy. Turkey's decision to finally keep good relations with Israel, as Morgenthau (1973) argued, sidelined moral values to promote its pragmatic as well as rational goals in terms of Turkey's domestic interests. In real politics, Turkey opted to continue good relations with Israel, even though Israel had committed violence against Palestinians and killed seven Turks in the Mavi Marmara incident. Turkey's harsh criticism of Israel over cases of violence is mere rhetoric.

3.2. Bilateral Relations as Balancing Strategy

An interest in the Balancing Strategy also drove the Turkish-Israeli reconciliation. Turkey and Israel share a common interest in resolving the conflict in Syria. Syria's instability will threaten Turkey's security, especially in the southern region, the Turkey-Syria border. Turkey has a high priority in defending its country from the Kurdish People's Defense Unit threat, also known as the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) (Daily Sabah, 2022). In addition, Syria's instability could open various terrorist movements to run on Turkey's territory.

On the other hand, Israel is very aware that its security also depends on the stability of Syria. Israel is concerned with Iran's continuous influence in Syria. The strong influence of Iran will support proxy actor Hezbollah to run in Israel's border areas which might disrupt stability in Israel. Turkey and Israel are interested in the Balance of Power in Syria so that the effects of the conflict will not disrupt the stability of the two countries. Furthermore, Turkey also has an agenda to balance its influence in the region. The strategy aims to balance the influence of Turkey's rival, the United Arab Emirates (UEA), in the region, which has decided to normalize its relations with Israel. UEA's strategy also aims to balance its relationship with Iran and Turkey. (Ghantous, 2021). Turkey and the UEA competed for influence in the region. The United Arab Emirates supported Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's uprising in 2013, normalized

with the Syrian government in 2018, and supported the Khalifa After movement in Tripoli, Libya.

On the other hand, Turkey limited its diplomatic relations with Egypt in 2013, strongly condemned the al-Assad regime in Syria, and successfully formed a Libyan interim government in response to Khalifa After's attack in Libya. Turkey also confronted the United Arab Emirates directly by condemning its normalization with Israel, which was considered a step against Palestine (Ramani, 2021). Turkey also supported the Ikhwan al-Muslimin movement by allowing them to set up a base in Turkey. Despite the condemnation, Turkey followed in the United Arab Emirates' footsteps to normalize with Israel, aiming to balance the influence of the Gulf state in the region, which is often on the other side in responding to a conflict. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates struggled to become regional pioneers, especially as mediators.

4. Conclusion

Turkey-Israel bilateral relations fluctuated. Turkey and Israel have developed bilateral relations for a long time. However, Turkey's view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has changed since the AKP took office in 2010. It has affected bilateral relations between the two countries, and difficulties since the Mavi Marmara incident disrupted their relations. The tendency of Turkey-Israel to reconcile as usual is possible. Their ties may be re-established. The reason is that the cooperation between Turkey and Israel can positively affect both countries. Turkey-Israel relations tend to be mutualistic. Turkey, which poses challenges domestically and regionally, will treat Israel as a significant partner. Israel would receive help from its bilateral relation in the economy and security sectors. Although Turkey and Israel have reconciled, Turkey may be more pragmatic in conducting this bilateral relationship. As Morgenthau (1973) argues, Turkey has adopted a 'realism' approach, taking the side of moral values to promote its interests and solve domestic economic and energy problems.

Furthermore, receiving help from Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory (1979), this article argues that Turkey-Israel bilateral relations also aim to balance the competing and the emerging power of the countries in the Middle East, especially Iran's influence over Syria and the United Emirates Arab (UEA). Nevertheless, Turkey should be cautious in its relationship with Hamas and the Ikhwan Al Muslimin, as it could be detrimental to its relations with Israel. However, the upcoming Turkish election would decide the developments of the two countries-bilateral relations.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that it has no competing interests.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The researcher obtained Ethical Approval from the University before this research (UMJ - Rector No. 028/DPP-91-2021).

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