

# MERIA

## TURKEY AND THE SYRIAN-ISRAELI PEACE TALKS IN THE 1990s

By Aysegul Sever\*

*Turkey supported the Arab-Israeli peace process for many reasons. But as Syria's northern neighbor, engaged in more than one dispute with that country, Turkish leaders worried that a Syria-Israel peace agreement might shift the power balance against Turkey. There was concern that the removal of a Syria-Israel conflict might make Damascus more confident in its demands toward Turkey, while there were also questions as to whether some provisions of a peace deal might be at Turkey's expense. The failure of these negotiations, then, provided some satisfaction to Turkish leaders. Ironically, though, Turkey's own successes against Syria and the easing of Turkish-Syrian relations could make Ankara more receptive to any progress on Syria-Israel relations in future.*

In the early 1990s Ankara welcomed the opening of the Arab-Israeli peace talks, especially the Israeli-Palestinian track, because of their anticipated contribution to the political stability and economic prosperity of the Middle East. The Madrid process was perceived as an opportunity to strengthen Turkey's ties with both the Israelis and the Arabs on two parallel tracks and thereby improve Turkey's posture in the area.

Consequently, Ankara took part in various initiatives to keep the process on track. It actively became involved in all five multilateral peace process working groups, undertook to provide economic assistance to the Palestinians, joined the Sharm al-Sheikh summit in 1996 to condemn anti-peace terrorist campaigns, participated in the Temporary International Presence in Hebron in 1997, acted as a "facilitator" in the Palestinian-Israeli talks, and eventually took part in the international fact finding commission in the wake of the 2000 intifada.

At the same time, though, Ankara singled out the Syrian-Israeli talks as a special case in the overall Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, due to its own long-standing problems with Damascus. By the early 1980s, Turkish-Syrian relations begun to experience severe setbacks due to Syria's harboring of the PKK (the Kurdish Workers' Party)(1) and two countries' conflicting views over the use of Euphrates waters. Even before, the two states

had hardly been on good terms. The territorial dispute over Turkey's Hatay province, claimed by Syria, and the two countries' different ideological orientations throughout the Cold War had long strained relations.(2) Consequently, the Syrian-Israeli peace talks often caused a serious degree of concern in Ankara, especially during the December 1995-March 1996 period when the parties seemed most close to a deal. Still, Ankara's stand on the talks gradually improved and evolved from being seriously apprehensive in the mid-1990s toward a calmer positioning in the late 1990s.

All parties involved in the Madrid process seemed to have endorsed Syria's influential role in the peace process because of its dominant position in Lebanon, its leverage with anti-peace radical groups and its long-time claim to championing of Pan-Arab interests.(3) Given the fact that Ankara's relations with this country had then been under severe strain for years, the political importance attributed to Damascus within the Madrid framework became a serious concern for Turkey. However, Ankara refrained from becoming a harsh critic of the talks. Instead, it preferred to give a reluctant approval to the Israeli-Syrian dialogue. At the same time, it was wary of possible undesired repercussions of the talks on the issues of Turkey's concern like water and security.

## FIRST ROUND OF SYRIAN-ISRAELI TALKS AND TURKEY

Even though the Syrian-Israeli talks opened on the issues of border demarcation, security arrangements, water and normalization of relations as early as 1991 at the Madrid conference and talks held in Washington, Turkey had no immediate misgiving until Yitzhak Rabin became Israel's prime minister in June 1992. Unlike his predecessor, Yitzhak Shamir, he indicated his readiness to withdraw from the Golan Heights, a major shift in Israeli policy.(4)

In the months following the Madrid conference "the peace for peace" formula of the Likud party government without any territorial concessions did not pay off. Likud's commitment to retaining the Golan Heights that Israel had taken in the 1967 war made any peace agreement with Syria impossible given Damascus's demand for the return of all that territory. As long as Shamir remained in power, no serious step would be taken in the Syrian-Israeli talks.(5) When the Labor government replaced the Likud administration in June 1992, however, newly elected Prime Minister Rabin indicated his willingness to test the "land for peace formula," which would accelerate the Arab-Israel peace process.

However, unlike the Palestinian-Israeli track, the Israeli-Syrian one did not revive at once. Only after the announcement of the 1993 Declaration of Principles (DOP) between the Palestinians and Israel did Syria-Israel talks record some progress, being reactivated by the end of that year.(6) Under the new Clinton administration, Washington began to push on this front. At the end of 1993, President Bill Clinton held a "face-to-face" meeting with Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, followed by ambassadorial-level talks. Moreover, the Israeli and the Syrian chiefs-of-staff discussed security matters in December 1994. Despite all these sporadic talks, no concrete result came out but, at least, the prospects for peace were kept alive. While the on-and-off Israeli-Syrian negotiations continued during the period of 1991-1995, Turkey's relations with the negotiating parties were rather different in nature. Turkish-Israeli relations were moving toward improvements

while the Syrian-Turkish ties were as troublesome as ever. This situation was to be even more evident in the period of 1996-1998.

In the early 1990s the proclamation of the DOP and the Labor-led Israeli government's commitment to the peace process created a fertile ground for closer relations between Israel and Turkey. Ankara had already raised Turkish diplomatic representation to the ambassadorship level in Israel in 1991, but the real breakthrough in the ties came when Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin visited Tel Aviv in November 1993.

Turkey had been the first ever-Muslim country to recognize the state of Israel in 1949. However, Turkish-Israeli relations were very much subordinated by Ankara to the state of Arab-Israeli relations in the following years. For instance, in the 1960s and the 1970s, in order to gain the goodwill and the support of the Arab world in the Cyprus dispute, Turkey generally sympathized with the Arabs in their consecutive wars with Israel.(7)

In the early 1980s, the Turkish-Arab relationship was still seen as a zero-sum game in regard to any links between Turkey and Israel. During this period Ankara's policy toward the Arab Middle East was increasingly dictated by economic considerations, especially in view of Prime Minister Turgut Ozal's export-based liberal economy and of the rise in oil prices. Especially owing to the setback in Turkish-European Community relations following the September 1980 military takeover in Turkey, Arab countries became most valuable in terms of economic relations.

At the same time, Turkish-Israeli relations remained stagnant. In reaction to Israel's declaration of Jerusalem as its "eternal" capital in 1980, Turkey lowered its diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary.(8) This was the lowest-ranking representation since diplomatic ties had been established between the two countries. The decision, by and large, was attributed to Turkey's desperate need to improve its economic ties with Arab countries, especially with Saudi Arabia, which was then offering attractive economic deals to Turkey.(9)

Nonetheless, by late 1980s, Turkish-Israeli relations began to improve. Ankara upgraded its diplomatic representation in Israel to the rank of chargé d'affaires in 1986. In this decision, Israel's increasing contribution to Turkish intelligence-gathering on the armed Armenian and Kurdish groups attacking Turkey--ASALA and the PKK, respectively--the potential role of the Jewish lobby in preventing anti-Turkish legislation in the U.S. Congress, Egypt's reintegration into the Arab world despite its peace deal with Israel, and the fall in oil prices can be considered as influential incentives of varying degrees. This betterment in the relations was, however, interrupted by the eruption of the intifada in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1987. Turkish public opinion turned decisively against Israel and Ankara followed suit.

It was the opening of the peace talks in Madrid that finally seemed to have given a free hand to Ankara to foster better ties with Israel. Foreign Minister Cetin's visit to Israel in 1993 was of historical importance in this regard. During the visit, he signed a Memorandum on Mutual Understanding and Guidelines on Cooperation with his counterpart.(10) Cetin was to be followed by the visits of Prime Minister Tansu Ciller and of President Suleyman Demirel, in 1994 and 1996, respectively. These were reciprocated by the Israeli foreign minister and president. However, until early 1996, Ankara had appeared to assign priority to improving economic, technical and cultural ties over military cooperation with Israel.(11) Therefore, Turkish-Israeli liaison was not a critical factor to be taken into account in the ongoing Syrian-Israeli talks until the Turkish-Israeli military training agreement was signed on February 23, 1996.

At the time when the early Syrian-Israeli talks were under way, Turkey's frustration with Syria's support of the PKK was on the rise due to the intensifying armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army, a conflict which had resulted in resulting in the loss of thousands of lives in southeast Turkey. Nonetheless, in the early 1990s Turkish attempts to resolve its problems with Damascus through negotiations were not ruled out altogether. Evidently, Prime

Minister Demirel visited Damascus and met Asad in January 1993 to iron out the long-standing problems of Syrian sheltering of the PKK and the water dispute over the Euphrates. At the end of the talks on January 20, 1993, a joint communiqué was issued in which both sides expressed their determination not to permit any activity on their respective territories which would be detrimental to each other's security. On his return Demirel declared that his visit had "started a new era" in the relations with Syria.(12)

Despite this, however, no real improvement in the relations was in sight, as had been the case in 1987 and 1992 when similar attempts were made.(13) At most, all these attempts of resolving the problems prevented the total collapse of the dialogue. Being aware of this dialogue, even Israeli President Ezer Weizmann asked Ankara to play "the role of an intermediary" between Damascus and his country during his visit to Turkey in January 1994.(14)

#### **THE DECEMBER 1995-MARCH 1996 TALKS AND TURKEY**

Turkey had its most serious apprehension regarding the Syrian-Israeli peace process in the wake of Rabin's assassination in November 1995. This was due to the growing international and especially U.S. efforts to foster the Syrian-Israeli peace talks. Since Rabin's death was a real blow to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, activism was judged especially urgent so as not to give the upper hand to the anti-peace forces in the region. When Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced on December 16, 1995, in Jerusalem that Syrian-Israeli negotiations would resume in Maryland on December 27, both the Syrians and the Israelis seemed more prepared than ever before to pursue peace talks.(15)

Ankara therefore seriously suspected that U.S.-sponsored peace talks between Israel and Syria might be detrimental to Turkish interests.(16) Unlike earlier sessions, this time all the Syrian-Israeli problems of security, terrorism and water were simultaneously on the negotiating table.(17) Consequently, Turkey's interest in the talks grew in scope.

More than that, numerous reports suggesting Turkish waters might becoming a bargaining chip in the talks irritated Ankara. So did references to possible American attempts to exclude Syria from the list of states sponsoring terrorism for the sake of achieving an Israeli-Syrian deal.(18)

As the December 1995-January 1996 peace talks began, Turkish-Syrian relations were at the breaking point. In early 1996, Turkey decided to suspend all official contacts with Syria after Damascus had declined to expel PKK chief Abdullah Ocalan, despite Ankara's official request. Moreover, Syria was rallying to gather Arab support against the latest Turkish dam project, the Birecik dam on the Euphrates river. Together with Iraq, Syria wants an agreement under which Euphrates and Tigris river waters would be allocated among the riparian states through a mathematical formula. Turkey rejects this proposal claiming that it is disadvantageous to the Turkish sovereign rights over the use of its own national resources and favors the concept of "equitable utilization" of waters.

The Turkish-Syrian conflict over water grew dramatically in the 1990s as numerous dam projects and hydroelectric plants of Turkey on the Euphrates River became operational under the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi or GAP) which commenced in the late 1970s. Syrian concerns considerably increased in January 1990, when Turkey began to fill the Ataturk Dam reservoir. Since then Syrians have increasingly accused Ankara of releasing water that is insufficient in amount and poor in quality. Turkey has rejected this claim on the grounds that it has been releasing enough water for Syrian needs and Damascus has not been using it well or properly. Back in the 1980s, Ankara had proposed a three-stage plan for the equitable use of water.(19) But neither this nor any other proposal has served as a solution.(20)

Reports about the formation of a Syrian-Greece security partnership also escalated the tension between Ankara and Damascus.(21) Consequently, once the Syrian-Israeli talks resumed with great expectations in December 1995, Turkish political circles suspected that some regional problems could be settled at

their expense.(22) Ankara therefore followed the negotiations with great interest while considering possible responses. Given the timing of a secret military cooperation agreement with Tel Aviv on February 23, 1996, this decision might be seen as connected with the Syrian-Israeli talks then in progress. It appears as if the agreement had been a precaution or a tactical move taken by Ankara to improve its status vis-à-vis a possible Syrian-Israeli deal.(23) Of course, this was not the sole incentive. One must also consider such complementary factors as Ankara's growing frustration with the decade-long PKK terror, its immediate need for alternative sources to Western countries for advanced weaponry without any strings attached, and its desire to boost Turkey's standing with the United States with the help of the influential Jewish lobby there. The Israeli-Turkish military cooperation agreement projected a wide cooperation in joint military training, exchange of visits between military academies, use of respective air spaces, and port visits.(24)

As to the issue of terrorism, in the December 1995-March 1996 Syrian-Israeli talks, the main Turkish concern was to get the PKK listed in the group of terrorist organizations and to have Syria pressured to stop harboring the PKK. Although the United States classified the PKK as a terrorist organization, reportedly Turkey worried at times that Washington might overlook Syria's liaison with the PKK and even go as far as removing that country from the list of states supporting terrorism for the sake of securing Syria's participation in the peace talks.(25) It was thought that any concession to Damascus over the issue might make it more confident and therefore, more assertive in challenging Ankara. At the time when the Syrian-Israeli talks were resumed,(26) Syria was still on the list of terrorist states, but was far from being isolated for its sheltering of various groups involved in terrorism.

Prior to the re-opening of the talks, numerous visits to Damascus by the U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher were enough to prove how much importance Washington attributed to Syria's participation in the process. Moreover, some statements

made by Christopher created the impression that the “Turkish-Syrian conflict involving Syria’s support of the PKK should be postponed until after a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement was at hand.”(27) Consequently, Turkey wished to make sure that during the talks Syria should be warned against its cooperation with the PKK.(28) Turkey’s apprehension was to be eased in part by the assurances given by American officials. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns pointed out that his government “regularly reminds the Syrian government of its obligation to stop its activities of support, indirect or otherwise, of the PKK.”(29)

Like the United States, Israel, too, comforted Turkey by saying that contrary to claims in the world media, Israel would not overlook Syria’s continuing use of terrorism against Turkey. During his visit to Israel, Undersecretary of the Turkish Foreign Ministry Onur Oymen said that if an agreement was to be signed with Syria before that country stopped harboring terrorist groups, this would encourage Syria to further its support of terrorism.(30) His counterpart Eli Dayan assured Oymen by stating that this was certainly not to be the case since Israel would not sign a peace accord with Damascus unless Syria gave up all support for terrorism.(31) Similarly, Israeli Ambassador to Ankara Zvi Elpeleg said, “I believe that when Israel comes to terms with a final agreement with Syria, it might insist that Syria must refrain from encouraging or hosting terror against Turkey, which is a very good friend of Israel. And I can hardly believe that if such an agreement is achieved, Syria would move to enhance terror against Turkey, which is not going to be accepted by Israel.”(32)

On the other hand, Ambassador Elpeleg pointed out that “we only cooperate in the area of information and so on. But every country should cope with its own domestic problems. Terrorism is defined as a domestic problem.”(33) As seen in the statement by the ambassador, despite all the assurances given, Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who took office after the death of Rabin, sometimes “played down Syrian-sponsored terrorism” in order to make progress with Damascus.(34)

On this issue, the Peres government signaled, “while Turkey and Israel have common interests, the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization PKK is Turkey’s internal matter and Israel does not want to be drawn into this.”(35) The prime minister confirmed that Israel’s primary concern was the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hizballah, not the PKK. Nonetheless, this attitude of the Peres administration did not seriously alarm Turkey since the very same government initiated the most far-reaching military cooperation agreement ever with Turkey and therefore significantly improved Turkey’s security posture vis-à-vis Syria and the Syrian-backed PKK military campaign. Although both Israel and Turkey declared that the military agreement of February 1996 was not concluded against a third party, the treaty put Syria under a heavy strain and eventually resulted in reduced Syrian support of PKK and PKK chief Abdullah Ocalan’s expulsion from the Syrian territory.

In addition to the PKK issue, Ankara wondered whether a Syrian deal with Israel might pose a further military challenge in case Syria were to deploy more armed units to the north. Therefore, reports claiming that the bulk of Syrian army would be stationed far away from the Israeli border but near the Syrian-Turkish border concerned Ankara.(36) Ankara was also quick to convey its uneasiness to Israel on this matter. Like the PKK issue, Turkey was soon comforted on this point as well. Moreover, the signature of the Turkish-Israeli military agreement in February and then the sudden break up of the Syrian-Israeli talks in March 1996 because of Hamas bombing campaigns relieved Ankara to a greater extent.

As far as the water problem was concerned, the 1995-1996 Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations at first seemed to pose serious risks for Turkey. When the water issue was tabled in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in early 1996, articles were published claiming that Turkey could provide Syria with additional water to compensate it for the loss of Golan’s water resources.(37) This, of course, was very badly received in Ankara. When the Syrians and Israelis first met in Washington in 1996, Damascus

reportedly asked both Israel and the United States to exert pressure on Ankara to supply it with more water.(38) In response to all this, a Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that “the water issue and the peace process are two separate matters and to be dealt with accordingly. The waters of the Euphrates are not an issue of bargaining [in the peace process]. No contribution to the Mideast peace can be made at the expense of Turkey.”(39)

Ankara sought guarantees from both the Americans and the Israelis about the issue. Israeli officials denied press reports claiming that it was planning to pressure Turkey to supply Syria with more water from the Euphrates so that it would in turn obtain more water from the Golan. On his visit to Israel in January 1996, Onur Oymen was reassured at the highest level on this matter by Prime Minister Peres in person.(40) Similarly, State Department Spokesperson Burns said, “In terms of Syria-Turkey issues and specifically that of water, we’ve taken the position that these issues ought to be settled by negotiations between Syria and Turkey.”(41) It is not clear how much all this persuaded the Turkish authorities but the sudden end of the peace talks between Syria and Israel in March 1996 was to relieve Turkish misgivings.(42)

Still, even reports that Turkish waters were becoming an issue at the negotiations was enough to alarm Ankara. In this context, it was reported that while the Syrian-Israeli talks were in progress, Dennis Ross, the State Department’s special Middle East coordinator, planned to visit Ankara to ask for Turkish contribution to the talks by displaying more understanding of the Syrian demands on the Euphrates.(43) The visit never took place. However, these rumors raised concerns that if the talks lasted longer, Turkey could have faced some pressure pertaining to the water problem sooner or later.

In the wake of the 1995-1996 negotiations, Turkey had an alternative way to improve its strategic position by strengthening its links with Israel, thus also making it feel more secure vis-à-vis any Syrian-Israeli peace process. Numerous Turkish-Israeli agreements were signed in virtually all fields. Ironically, this approach was reinforced--not

deterred--by the fact that, just after the February 1996 Turkish-Israeli military agreement, consecutive setbacks in the Arab-Israeli peace process were to increasingly disrupt Turkish-Arab dialogue due to growing Arab criticism of the Israeli-Turkish alignment.(44)

Soon after the Turkish-Israeli military agreement it became clear that the Turkish-Israeli alignment and the Israel-Syrian peace process would not be working on two parallel tracks. Instead they were perceived as alternative processes. Indeed the treaty was leverage for Israel to use in the negotiations with Damascus if necessary. When Ankara signed the treaty in February, Israel was firmly engaged in the peace negotiations with the Syrians as well as the Palestinians. Only days after the conclusion of the treaty, the suspension of all the Arab-Israeli talks owing to Hamas attacks in Israeli cities in February-March 1996 placed Turkey on a defensive position.

Furthermore, the timing of the treaty’s disclosure was most unfortunate, coinciding with the Hizballah-Israel confrontation in Lebanon in early April, which put Ankara in a very delicate position in the region.(45) The Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed its concern regarding the Israeli military operation in southern Lebanon, launched on April 11, and described it as a potential threat to the Middle East peace process. Nevertheless, this was nothing more than an attempt to save face since the military deal between Israel and Turkey had already been completed and was in place prior to the Israeli operation in Lebanon. Israeli training flights over Turkey by F-16 planes commenced on April 15, 1996.(46) Although both Israel and Turkey constantly said that their military cooperation did not target any third party, most of the Arab world (except Jordan) and Iran were in uproar.

As was expected, Syria took the lead in condemning the Israeli-Turkish agreement. Given its long-standing problems with the signatories, Syrian protest at the treaty was not a surprise to Ankara. However, the Syrian suspicions regarding the agreement were shared by most Arab countries, and by Egypt in particular. In the Damascus summit, held

on June 8-9, 1996, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia urged Turkey to reconsider the Turkish-Israeli military deal and to avoid taking any action that would harm neighborly relations with the Arab countries.(47) This call was again repeated in the Arab summit in Cairo on June 21-23, 1996, but this time in a milder tune. In spite of all the Syrian efforts for a stern condemnation of Turkey, the summit confined itself to ask Ankara to review its arrangements with Israel.(48) It was Egypt's attitude that particularly surprised Turkey, as this country had become the first ever-Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Yet Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Mousa said that the Israeli-Turkish alignment was nothing less than an act of aggression against Arab states and a danger to regional security. Arabs argued that the Turkish-Israeli military axis put Israel in an advantageous position by easing pressure on Israel to come to the negotiating table.(49)

Thus, all Turkish assurances regarding the Turkish-Israeli alignment fell on deaf ears. Notwithstanding all Arab criticism of the cooperation, U.S. backing of the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement was forthcoming.(50) State Department spokesperson Burns stated in early May 1997 that "it makes sense to us that Israel and Turkey were to be friends, if certain other Arab countries don't like that, that's just tough."(51) The United States went further than verbal support by taking part in an Israeli-Turkish rescue operation codenamed Reliant Mermaid in the Mediterranean in January 1998.(52)

In addition to the Lebanese campaign of Israel in April, Benjamin Netanyahu's accession to power in May 1996, just months after the Israeli-Turkish military cooperation agreement, was to exert extra stress on Turkish-Arab relations. By the beginning of the Netanyahu period, the Israeli-Turkish alignment's anti-Syrian nature became more obvious.(53) For example, Turkish Defense Minister Turhan Tayan's visit to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in May 1997 was generally perceived as a clear indication of the anti-Syrian stance of the alignment. Soon after Tayan's trip to the Golan, Netanyahu issued a statement on a Turkish television

channel by saying that "Turkey has suffered from terrorist attacks from the PKK and we see no difference between the terrorism of the PKK and that which Israel suffers".(54) With this statement Israel also formally rejected the idea of a Kurdish state.(55) In his books on terrorism, Netanyahu referred to the PKK as one of the leading terrorist groups in the area.(56) This was what the Turkish authorities wished to hear most. Netanyahu's commitment to wage war against terrorism echoed in Turkish military circles.

During a visit to Israel in February 1997, Turkey's Chief of Staff General Ismail Karadayi stated that cooperation against international terrorism was vital.(57) A consensus prevailed in the importance attached to the fight against terrorism on both sides whereas the Syrian-Israeli talks were at a standstill. In the meantime, Israeli-Turkish ties continued to grow in intensity.(58) In addition to the military cooperation agreement the Turkish-Israeli alignment reached to its peak in 1996 with the signing of a trade agreement in March and a defense cooperation agreement in August. All the agreements were to make Turkish interests far less a potential bargaining chip in any future Syrian-Israeli talks.

## **TURKEY AND THE 1999-2000 SYRIAN-ISRAELI PEACE TALKS**

When the Syria-Israel talks reopened in 1999 after a period of three years, Ankara's perception of the negotiations was quite different than in the earlier period. This was due to the fact that its relations with both negotiating parties had changed for the better since the collapse of the 1995-96 Syrian-Israeli talks. Turkish-Israeli relations deepened and extended in almost every field. On the other hand, a new era opened in the Syrian-Turkish relations after Syria expelled Ocalan from Damascus, his long-time headquarters, under Turkish pressure in October 1998.

Prior to issuing an ultimatum to Syria to stop harboring the PKK and its leader in October 1998, Ankara had taken some conciliatory steps towards this country in early 1998. Director of the Middle East Department of the Turkish Foreign Ministry

Ambassador Aykut Cetirge's visit to Damascus in February 1998 was of historical importance as it was the first effort to resume dialogue with this country after three years.(59) Foreign Minister Ismail Cem also explored the opportunities to improve the stagnant relations with the Arab world in general and with Syria in particular in this context. The foreign minister met with his Syrian counterpart at the Doha meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization in March 1998, but without any results.(60) Meanwhile Arab criticism of the Turkish-Israeli alignment was as lively as ever. At a ministerial meeting in Cairo in March 1998, the Arab League again expressed its concern over Turkish-Israeli military cooperation and asked Turkey to review its policy. The league also criticized Ankara for its water policy concerning the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, which was regarded as damaging Syrian and Iraqi interests.(61)

Bearing all this in mind, Ankara's long overdue frustration with the unbearable human and economic costs of the Syrian-supported PKK campaign, rising European trends to recognize the PKK as a political force, the conclusion of the September 1998 Washington deal between the leading Kurdish factions of northern Iraq and, last but not least, Ankara's growing self-confidence as a result of the alignment with Israel eventually culminated in a full-blown crisis between Syria and Turkey.

At the opening session of the Turkish Grand National Assembly on October 1, 1998, President Demirel warned Damascus by stating, "I declare once more to the world that we reserve the right to retaliate against Syria, which has not abandoned its hostile attitude despite all our warnings and peaceful initiatives, and that our patience is nearing an end."(62) Similarly, Turkish Chief of Staff General Huseyin Kivrikoglu said that his country was in a state of undeclared war with Syria.(63) All this signaled that a serious crisis was in the making. Not only did the firmness prevail in the statements of the highest-ranking officials but also the words were backed by actions. Ankara massed troops on the Syrian-Turkish border and put its southern forces on alert.(64)

Fortunately, the crisis did not turn into a full-blown military confrontation since Syria decided to extradite Ocalan on October 9, 1998. Soon after the crisis was over, Damascus agreed to suspend all support to the PKK and assured Turkey that the PKK leader would not use its territory as base any longer. Mediation efforts by Egypt's President Husni Mubarak and Iran's Foreign Minister Kharazzi contributed to the resolution of the problem by diplomatic means. Meanwhile the Israelis preferred to remain on the sidelines during the crisis--reportedly coordinating this step with Turkey. Prime Minister Netanyahu stated, "We have no part in this tension. We've taken steps to reassure Syria that we are not going to use any of this to our advantage or to change the status quo on the border between Syria and Israel."(65) On the other hand, Washington openly took the side of Ankara throughout the crisis.

In the aftermath of the October crisis, a new era prevailed in the Syrian-Turkish relations. Soon after the Syrian-Turkish confrontation was over, a new round of the Syrian-Israeli talks got underway in December 1999. This time Ankara was much more comfortable compared to the first periods of the talks in the mid-1990s. It was believed that Syria would not risk its just-restored ties with Ankara by making Turkey-related issues a bargaining chip right away.

When then newly elected Prime Minister Ehud Barak signaled his intention to restart peace talks with Damascus following his accession to power in July 1999, the Turkish president stated that his country welcomed any Israeli peace deal with Syria and hoped that the peace process would resume very soon. Similarly the Turkish Ambassador to Israel, Barlas Ozener said that Ankara would welcome any progress. "Syria is a potential partner for peace, and without it there will be no genuine peace in the region. We have no problem with you solving your problems with Syria, and the better our relations with Syria, the more flexibility we will have in our ties with Israel."(66) Nonetheless, out of caution President Demirel went to Israel in order to make sure once again that the forthcoming Syrian-Israeli talks would not be detrimental to Turkish interests.(67) Barak took the

opportunity to reassure Demirel that any peace settlement with Syria would not come at the expense of Israeli-Turkish close cooperation. Barak however added that he hoped "The warm links with Turkey will neither threaten nor hinder Israel's relations with other countries in the region."(68)

Consequently, as the Syrian-Israeli talks were reopened at a summit meeting in the presence of President Clinton, Premier Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara, Turkey's wariness over the talks was significantly less than in earlier times and focused on the water issue rather than the security or terrorism aspects. At any rate, Syria clearly put the question of Israeli withdrawal before any other issue that might have affected Turkey more directly. Meanwhile, Turkish-Israeli alignment was so well established that there was no serious reservation in mind about Israel's becoming responsive to any Syrian demand at the expense of its relations with Ankara. Israel also assured Ankara once again that it would not be any haggling over Turkish waters. The water problem would be dealt with on bilateral basis between the Syrians and the Turks.(69) In spite of its highly improved reception of the talks, Ankara consistently repeated that it would not accept any Middle East peace deal that would be reached because of its making concessions over Turkish waters.

The Foreign Ministry repeatedly stated that Turkey could only contribute to the water aspect of the peace process by selling water to the region.(70) On his last visit to Israel in July 1999, President Demirel stated that "we can definitely supply Israel with 180 million cubic meters of water right now, and more in the future".(71) Selling water to the Middle East was hardly a new project. It has been on the agenda for years. In 1987 Prime Minister Ozal offered to start up the Peace Water Project, which would carry water from the Seyhan and Ceyhan rivers to the Middle East through pipelines as far as to the Gulf countries and Israel. Another project that Ozal initiated was about the Manavgat River. Both projects aimed at economic benefits of Ankara as well as contributing to the political stability of the region by increasing economic

interdependence among the regional countries.

However, the idea of becoming dependent on Turkish water did not appeal to most Arabs especially in view of the long-running dispute over the Euphrates water between Turkey and two Arab countries and of the historical distrust that had been hardly missing in Turkish-Arab relations.(72) At present Turkey wants to sell Manavgat waters. Negotiations with Israel over the sale of this water are quite advanced but no binding agreement has been concluded yet.(73)

Turkey's reduced concerns over the January 2000 Syrian-Israeli talks came to a sudden halt altogether with the suspension of talks on January 17, 2000. The Clinton-Asad March summit in Geneva too turned out to be fruitless. The death of Hafez Asad in June 2000 complicated the situation even further. At the same time, Turkey's representation at Asad's funeral by President Ahmet Necdet Sezer proved how significantly the bilateral ties took a new turn.(74) Sezer became the first president to pay a state visit to Syria since Ozal's visit to that country in 1990.(75) The president was warmly received in Damascus. Bashar Asad signaled clearly that he would go along with his father's recent decision to improve relations with Ankara.(76) Meanwhile economic ties moved to the fore in Turk-Syrian relations.(77)

After the failure and disagreements of the year 2000, Syrian-Israeli talks did not appear likely to revive soon. At the opening of the Arab summit in Cairo, Bashar Asad called upon Arab countries "to halt all forms of cooperation with Israel".(78) Since the unfruitful Syrian-Israeli talks of January 2000 and the Clinton-Asad summit of March 2000 in Geneva, Turkey has continued to improve its ties with Syria while its cordial relations with Israel has been maintained and even deepened. In parallel to the improvement in the Syrian-Turkish relations, Turkey faces any prospective Syrian-Israeli peace negotiation with greater confidence--even though the chances for such a breakthrough are now rather slim.

The progress recorded in the relations with Damascus after the October crisis not only

improved Turkey's posture on the Syrian-Israeli talks but also bettered Turkish relations with other regional states. Arab condemnation of Turkish-Israeli military cooperation lessened in the wake of the October confrontation.(79) For example, following Egypt's mediation efforts in the Turkish-Syrian crisis of 1998, Egypt-Turkish relations took a new path. In an interview, Foreign Minister Amr Musa said "We moved from a perception of confrontation to one of dialogue, and from a perception of Turkey as a violator of Arab interests to one that sees Turkey as an integral part of those interests."(80) Mubarak's visit to Turkey in December 1998 was regarded as the beginning of "a new phase of closer relations between Egypt and Turkey."(81)

By the late 1990s, Turkey was able to enjoy good relations with both Israel and much of the Arab world. At the same time, Israel's good relations with Turkey had no negative effect in its dealings with the Arab world. New joint Israeli-Turkish-U.S. military exercises were held January 15-18, 2001.(82) Each party continues to attach great importance to their ongoing alignment. The points of consensus--including close alignment with the United States, cooperative approaches to the Turkic republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and concern over Iran and Iraq's policy of acquiring nuclear weapons--surpass any divergences in both countries' respective foreign policy orientations. Nevertheless, both parties want to keep their own maneuvering space regarding their respective national policies and interests.

## CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace process, the Syrian-Israeli track was a special case from the Turkish point of view, largely thanks to its long-standing troublesome relations with that country. While Ankara was in favor of a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian settlement, it was not particularly eager for advancing Israeli-Syrian talks, especially when the problems with Syria were at their peak in the mid-1990s. Turkish concerns as to the possible Syrian-Israeli settlement were a

major incentive behind the growing military cooperation between Turkey and Israel.

Yet Turkish misgivings regarding the prospective Syrian-Israeli settlement decreased dramatically by the late 1990s due to two major developments. First, multifaceted Israeli-Turkish relations made it less likely that Turkish interests would become a bargaining chip in any Israeli-Syrian settlement. Second, Syria's decision to expel Ocalan and to close down the PKK camps significantly lessened Turkish reservations regarding a possible Syrian-Israeli deal. Thereafter, Ankara's apprehension regarding any prospective Syrian-Israeli settlement seems to be confined to the water issue. As long as Syrian-Turkish relations are inclined to improve, it is less likely to see the water as the cause of a serious confrontation between the two in the short run. At present, given the cordiality in the relations with both parties, Ankara might favor an Israel-Syrian settlement in anticipation of its contribution to the overall stability in the Middle East. More importantly, it would serve the interests of Turkey in military and economic fields, alongside with those of other countries in the region.

*\*Aysegul Sever is assistant professor at the department of political science and International Relations, Marmara University, Istanbul. He is author of Turkey, the West and the Middle East in the Cold War Era, 1945-1958 (in Turkish) Boyut Kitaplari, Istanbul, 1997. His articles include "Turkey's Stance on Dual Containment," Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Volume 24, #2 Winter Issue, 2001 and "The Compliant Ally? Turkey and the West in the Middle East 1954-58" Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.34, No. 2, April 1998, pp. 73-90.*

## NOTES

1. The PKK launched a military campaign against the Turkish state in southeast Turkey where Kurds live in large numbers. Since then more than 30,000 people were killed in this long-lasting fight. By the late 1990s, especially after the capture of Abdullah Ocalan and his sentence to death in Turkey, the PKK lost its

war against the Turkish army. However, this was not the end of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. As long as Turkey fails to be a country where all the citizens of different origins feel comfortable with the existing order, the issue would remain as a trouble spot in Turkey's internal as well as external relations.

2. The province of Hatay (former sanjak of Alexandretta) became part of the Turkish territory in 1939 as a result of the understanding reached between Ankara and France, which was then the mandatory power in Syria. The Syrians never accepted this takeover, which was endorsed by the French on their behalf. For further information on the Hatay dispute and the Turkish-Syrian relations during the Cold War see Abdurrahman Melek, *Hatay Nasil Kurtuldu?* (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1991); Avedis K. Sanjian, "The Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay): Its impact on Turkish-Syrian Relations (1939-56)," *Middle East Journal*, Vol.10, 1956, pp.379-84; Tayfur Sokmen, *Hatay'in Kurtulusu Icin Harcanan Cabalar* (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Gazetesi Yayini, 1999); Aysegul Sever, "The Complaint Ally? Turkey and the West in the Middle East 1954-58," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.34, No.2, April 1998, pp.73-90; Omer Kurkcuoglu, *Turkiye'nin Arap Ortadogusu'na Karsi Politikasi 1945-1970* (Ankara: AU SBF Yayinlari, 1972).

3. Alon Ben-Meir, "The Israeli-Syrian Battle for Equitable Peace," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.3, No.1, 1994, pp.74-76; 83.

4. Syria says Rabin and then Peres committed themselves to withdraw from the Golan to the 4 June 1967 lines. Therefore, Asad asked Barak to endorse that commitment before negotiations resume. Israel rejected any earlier such undertaking by the earlier governments. On this matter for further information see Patrick Seale, "Special document The Syria-Israel Negotiations: Who is telling the truth?" *Journal of Palatine Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Winter 2000; Yossi Ben-Aharon, "Negotiating with Syria: A First Hand Account," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June 2000.

5. Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks 1991-96 and Beyond* (Washington DC: US Institute for Peace Press, 1999), p.40.

6. *Ibid.*, p.57.

7. Kemal Karpat, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Transition* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1974), pp.124-134.

8. Suha Bolukbasi, *Turkiye ve Yakinindaki Orta Dogu* (Ankara: Dis Politika Enstitusu, undated), p.6.

9. George E. Gruen, "Turkey's Relations with Israel: from ambivalence to Open cooperation," David F. Altabe, Erhan Atay and Israel J. Katz (Eds.), *Studies on Turkish - Jewish History: Political and Social Relations, Literature and linguistics—the Quincentennial Papers* (NY: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1996), p.121.

10. Ihsan Gurkan, "Turkish-Israeli Relations and the Middle East Peace Process," *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, Annual 1993, Vol.7, p.133.

11. Meliha Altunisik, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the Post-Cold War Era," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.36, No.2, April 2000, p.172.

12. Quoted in George Gruen, "Turkey's Potential Contribution to Arab-Israeli Peace," *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, Annual 1998/99, Vol.10, pp.200-201.

13. Alan Makovsky, "The New Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy," *SAIS Review*, Winter-Spring 1999, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/alanais.htm>>.

14. Altunisik, "The Turkish -Israeli Rapprochement..," p.177.

15. Cobbana, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace*, p.10; Ben - Meir, "Israel-Syrian Battle...," p.76.

16. *Turkish Daily News* (TDN), January 15, 1996

17. *Milliyet* (Turkish Daily), February 18, 1996, *Hurriyet* (Turkish Daily), January 10, 1996.

18. Reports quoted in TDN, February 15, 1996; *Milliyet*, January 12, 1996; *Hurriyet*, January 10, 1996.

19. For the details of the three-staged plan see "Water Issues Between Turkey, Syria and Iraq," Republic of Turkey, Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Department of Regional and Transboundary Waters, January 1995.

20. In 1987 a bilateral accord was concluded between Turkey and Syria. Under this arrangement Turkey undertook to provide Syria with a minimum of 500 cub m /second.

21. *Cumhuriyet*, 16 April 1996.

22. Reportedly the Undersecretary of Turkish Foreign ministry told an Israeli diplomat how apprehensive his government about the talks by saying that "How can you negotiate with Syria? Have you gone mad"...You must stop at once. That's my government's position." See Alain Grash, "Winds of war ruffle the Middle East," *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 1997, <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1997/12/mideast>>.

23. Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian*, p.158; Altunisik, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement," p.179.

24. The treaty was made public two months later but its whole content was not disclosed.

25. *Hurriyet*, January 10, 1996.

26. TDN, January 25, 1996.

27. Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkey-US-Israel Triangle: Continuity, Change and Implications for Turkey's Post-Cold War Middle East Policy," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.22, No. 4, Summer 1999, p.12.

28. *Hurriyet*, January 10, 1996.

29. Ibid.

30. *Yeni Yuzyil* (Turkish Daily), January 15, 1996.

31. TDN, January 15, 1996.

32. TDN, March 1, 1996

33. Ibid.

34. *The Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 1997.

35. *Turkish Probe*, June 7, 1996.

36. Altunisik, "The Turkish -Israeli Rapprochement," p.180.

37. Alain Grash, "Turkish-Israel-Syrian Relations and Their Impact on the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, Vol.52, No.2, spring 1998, p.198.

38. *Turkish Probe*, February 13, 2000, Issue 370 Online edition.

In an interview given to *Zaman* (Turkish Daily) on April 15, 1996, Syrian Ambassador to Ankara Abdulaziz El-Rifai claimed that the water issue never became an issue in the

negotiations. So there was no point of concern from the Turkish standpoint.

39. TDN, February 15, 1996.

40. *Hurriyet*, January 10, 1996; TDN, January 15, 1996.

41. Quoted in TDN, January 18, 1996.

42. *Yeni Yuzyil* May 19, 1996; *Hurriyet*, February 26, 1996.

43. *Milliyet*, May 19, 1996.

44. MEI, April 12, 1996.

45. Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace*, p.11.

46. MEI, April 26, 1996.

47. TDN, June 10, 1996.

48. *The Economist*, June 29, 1996.

49. Zeine Khodr, 'Lebanon threatened, too', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 15-21 October 1998; Ahmet Abdel-Halim, 'Mobilization, here and there', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 26 November-2 December 1998.

50. *Sabah* (Turkish Daily), May 21, 1997.

51. Quoted in Gresh, "Turkish-Israeli-Syrian Relations," p.190.

52. *Sabah*, January 6, 1998

53. MEI, October 24, 1997.

54. Quoted in Gresh, 'Turkish-Israeli Relations', p.194

55. Ibid, p.194

56. TDN, June 3, 1996; *Sabah*, February 25, 1997.

57. *Sabah*, February 25, 2000.

58. Even when the Islamists-led Refahyol coalition government was in power during the period of July 1996-June 1997 Israeli-Turkish cooperation continued in full swing.

59. Baykan, "The Turkey-US-Israel Triangle," p.28; *Milliyet*, February 28, 1998.

60. TDN, March 23, 1998; *Yeni Yuzyil*, March 17, 1998; *Hurriyet*, March 17, 1998.

61. Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey - The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington D.C: Brooking Institute, 2000), pp.133-134.

62. *Sabah*, October 2, 1998.

63. *Sabah*, October 8, 1998.

64. *Cumhuriyet*, October 3, 1998; *Sabah*, October 4, 1998.

65. 'Turkey gives Syria 'final warning over Kurdish rebels', <http://cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9810/06/turkey.syria.02/>. Israel did not take the forefront during the Syrian crisis of 1998 but reportedly played a critical role in the abduction of PKK

leader Ocalan in Kenya by the Turkish authorities in February.

66. *Ha'aretz*, July 1, 1999.

67. *Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 1999.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Milliyet*, December 23, 1999

70. *Turkish Probe*, February 13, 2000.

71. *Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 1999.

72. Turks generally regard the Arab revolt during the First World War as a stab in the back. On the other hand, Arabs in general have had difficulty in coming terms with Kemalist reforms in Turkey.

73. *Turkish Probe*, February 13, 2000.

74. *Hurriyet*, June 13, 2000.

75. *Milliyet*, June 13, 2000.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Milliyet*, August 13, 2000.

78. <<http://www.sana-syria.com/english/reports>>

79. *Hurriyet*, January 16, 2000.

80. *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22-28 October 1998.

81. *Al-Ahram* 3-9 December 1998

82. *Milliyet*, January 15, 2001.