

# TURKEY, ISRAEL AND THE TUMULTUOUS 2011-2021 DECADE IN THE ARAB WORLD

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*Neubauer Research Associate, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)  
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GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM YOUNG ACADEMICS PROGRAM POLICY PAPER SERIES No.15

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This paper, entitled “Turkey, Israel and the Tumultuous 2011-2021 Decade in the Arab World” is authored by Rémi Daniel as part of the GRF Young Academics Program Policy Paper Series.

GRF convened the following group of distinguished members to evaluate and guide Rémi Daniel's paper:

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GRF is grateful to all members who participated in the evaluation commission for their invaluable insights and informed guidance, as well as for the time and effort they dedicated to the program.

GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM

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**Rémi Daniel** is a Researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv), a Ph.D. candidate in the International Relations Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and an Azrieli fellow. His Ph.D. dissertation deals with the relations between Turkey and Israel between 1960 and 1971. Beyond analyzing the events that shaped the bilateral ties during the period, he uses their study to assess theories linking domestic and foreign politics and especially the impact of democratization on foreign policy decision-making processes. At the INSS, he has written several articles on present Turkish foreign policy. His publications also include texts on European politics, Canadian and Quebecois politics, and nationalist ideologies. Remi Daniel holds a BA and a MA in History (with highest honors) from the Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne University and from the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris) and was an Erasmus student at Boğaziçi University.

# Turkey, Israel and the Tumultuous 2011-2021 Decade in the Arab World

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## Abstract

The Arab uprisings from 2011 launched a decade-long political cycle in the Middle East characterized by intense inter-Arab conflict. For Turkey and Israel, two non-Arab Middle Eastern states, the turmoil in the Arab countries created an environment full of risks and opportunities. This article analyzes how both countries and their leaders, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, conducted regional policy from 2011 to 2021. Despite structural similarities and a similar assessment of the situation, Turkey and Israel chose different paths. Turkey gave more weight to hard-power tools while adopting an autonomous and assertive policy. Israel tried to develop soft power tools and worked to integrate in its environment. Ankara and Jerusalem also sided with different actors and different camps in the struggles shaking the region. By analyzing the regional policies of Turkey and Israel in parallel and then Turkish-Israeli relations and their intertwining with regional dynamics, this article assesses the choices made in by both countries from 2011 to 2021, highlighting how complementary each country's assets are and arguing that cooperation would prove highly fruitful for them and for their neighbors.

## 1. Introduction

The period from 2011 to 2021 was eventful in the Middle East. Starting with the Tunisian revolution, the region and particularly the Arab world underwent a series of dramatic changes. First analyzed as an 'Arab spring', social and political movements touched various states and then took violent turns, resulting in civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, while Iraq and Syria had to deal with the rise of the Islamic State on their territories. For ten years, the Arab states were shaken by unrest, coups, diplomatic crises, and military showdowns, until greater stability took hold at the end of the decade.

These events had important consequences for Middle Eastern non-Arab countries Turkey and Israel. Facing similar challenges and having similar structural and incidental determinants, Ankara and Jerusalem adopted radically different, if not opposite, policies in the Middle East. The following article analyzes these two policies in parallel before connecting them through the lens of Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations. Such an analysis will enable me to reflect upon the dynamics that shaped the Middle East during the decade and discuss the concept of regional power and how it can be used to describe each country.

In this analysis, Iran and its activities will not receive great focus. This does not mean that Tehran did not play a key role in the region or in shaping Ankara and Jerusalem's foreign policy decisions. On the contrary, balancing Iran has remained a major determinant of Israel's policy, and Turkey and Iran have been in continuous, although changing, contact throughout the decade. However, given the perspective of this research I mostly put aside, for analytic reasons, Iranian activism, even though it appears in relevant parts of my analysis.

The article will be divided into three parts. The first part will analyze the structural similarities between the two countries as well as the similar impact that the new regional configuration had on them. Then, I will study the regional strategies adopted by Ankara and Jerusalem between 2011 and 2021. The third part will focus on Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations and connect them to each country's regional policies.

This structure will also enable me to have a three-step analysis of the policies implemented by Ankara and Jerusalem during this period. The first part will expand upon the various factors that have impacted, if not shaped, the Turkish and Israeli governments' decisions and, in doing so, will be inspired by the neo-classical realist theory of IR that attempts to study foreign policy by using a combination of factors at different levels of analysis. Allusions to the factors presented in this first part will be made in later sections. The second part will focus on the implementation of these decisions and their adaptation over time. Finally, the third part will assess the policies adopted by each by examining bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel.

## 2. Two outsiders in the Middle East and the Arab uprisings

### *Structural similarities*

Turkey and Israel demonstrate structural similarities in their interactions with their region. They are two “outsiders” in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> because they are non-Arab countries in an Arab-dominated region. Historical tensions between the Arab world on one side and Turkey or Israel on the other have produced reciprocal resentment or, at the very least, suspicion. It is true that Turkey never had to deal with a level of regional isolation as radical as the one Israel faced in the first decades of its existence. It did not have to struggle to be recognized by its neighbors and could try to develop ties with them. However, its attempts to integrate into regional dynamics were slowed down by historical memories and differences in strategic positioning. In the global balances, the two states have also developed strong links with the West and especially with the United States, which are unequalled in the Middle East.

Moreover, at a domestic level, although both political systems have been criticized from within and from abroad, Israel and Turkey both had reached a level of democracy in 2011 that did not exist in other Middle Eastern states. According to the 2011 Freedom in the World report, Israel had a 1.5 rating (free country) and Turkey 3.0 (partly free country) in 2010, the year before the Arab uprisings. The highest rated Arab country was Lebanon (4.0), while Egypt and Iraq were 5.5, Saudi Arabia and Syria 6.5, and Libya 7.0, the lowest score possible.<sup>2</sup> As such, Turkey and Israel have been, both factually and in the minds of others, unique in the Middle East.

However, as much Turkey and Israel are ‘outsiders’, they are connected to the region, are impacted by regional developments, and have actively shaped Middle Eastern dynamics. Both countries are important regional military powers with significant economies. Starting from the early 1990s, Turkey became increasingly involved in regional events, playing a crucial role in the anti-Saddam Hussein coalition and increasing its activities in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq as part of its fight against the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK. Israel’s impact on the region was also critical, even if Jerusalem had more limited political contacts compared to Ankara due to the greater animosity of its neighbors. Beyond the Arab-Israeli wars and their political repercussions on various Arab states, the centrality of the Palestinian issue in Arab public opinion means that Israel’s actions can stimulate important reactions from and within its neighbors. Conversely, the political instability in Middle Eastern states, the rise of political movements like Arab nationalism or political Islam have affected Israel.

### *A new configuration*

The events that launched the dynamics shaping the Middle East from 2011 to 2021 the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and the Syrian civil war – created a new regional configuration that affected Israel and Turkey in similar ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties*, (Maryland, United States: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 834.

These events posed challenges for both countries. In Jerusalem, the revolts were seen as potentially dangerous.<sup>3</sup> In its contacts with other countries of the region, Israel had considerably relied on ruling autocrats. For example, Hosni Mubarak was central to the good relations between Cairo and Jerusalem. Even more complicated Arab leaders like Bashar al-Assad guaranteed stability and, although in conflict with Israel, a *modus vivendi* had been established. These autocrats were thus perceived as preferable to the instability and the rise of potentially more antagonist players. The situation in Ankara was more complex and ambiguous.<sup>4</sup> The Turkish government officially supported the protesters and saw in the political changes in the Arab world an opportunity to export its model of Muslim democracy.<sup>5</sup> However, the Arab uprisings happened at a time when Turkey was trying to improve its regional position. In 2011, the Turkish government was prosecuting its so-called policy of “zero problems with neighbors,” put forward by then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, among others, in his 2001 book *Strategic Depth*. Claiming a more important role for Turkey, Davutoğlu pleaded for its stronger regional integration by improving relations with its neighbors.<sup>6</sup> This policy had borne significant fruit by the end of the 2000s: relations with Syria and Egypt, among others, had sharply improved. The fundamental reshuffle induced by the protests, however, threatened the continuation of this policy and put Ankara in a dilemma between championing its ideals or pursuing its interests.<sup>7</sup> The war in Syria also created new security threats for Turkey as a bordering country descended into chaos, terrorist movements like ISIS emerged, Kurdish groups strengthened, and a wave of refugees crossed the border.<sup>8</sup>

At the domestic level, the two countries did not experience shocks like their Arab neighbors, although there was some unrest. In 2011, the social justice protests in Israel brought hundreds of thousands of people to the streets of the country’s main cities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Byman, “Israel’s Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring,” *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (August 2011): 123–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2011.588139>; Philipp O. Amour, “Israel, the Arab Spring, and the Unfolding Regional Order in the Middle East: A Strategic Assessment,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 293–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1185696>.

<sup>4</sup> Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest,” *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (August 12, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2017639>; Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 203–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2013.868392>.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring*. (Turkey Policy Brief Series), (Ankara, Turkey: The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey’s International Policy and Leadership Institute, 2012); H. Tank Oğuzlu, *The ‘Arab Spring’ and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey’s ‘Zero Problems with Neighbors’ Policy*, (Ankara Turkey: SAM Center for Strategic Research, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Bezen Balamir Coşkun, “Neighbourhood Narratives From ‘Zero Problems With Neighbours’ to ‘Precious Loneliness’: Turkey’s Resecuritized Middle East Policy After the Arab Spring,” in *Regional Insecurity After the Arab Uprisings: Narratives of Security and Threat*, ed. Elizabeth Monier, New Security Challenges Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 191–95, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137503978\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137503978_10).

<sup>7</sup> Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring.”

<sup>8</sup> Coşkun, “Neighbourhood Narratives From ‘Zero Problems With Neighbours’ to ‘Precious Loneliness,’” 199–200.

<sup>9</sup> Anat Lapidot-Firilla, *On the Fringe of the Arab Spring: The Tent Protest in Israel*, IEMED Mediterranean Yearbook, 2012, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/on-the-fringe-of-the-arab-spring-the-tent-protest-in-israel/>; Ari Rabinovitch, “Biggest Rally in Israel’s History Presses PM,” sec. World News, *Reuters*, September 3, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-economy-protests-idUSTRE7821OS20110903>.

In 2013, the Gezi Park movement shocked Turkey's political world.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, observers connected these protests to the ones happening in Arab states.<sup>11</sup> However, there were significant differences. First, both countries are non-Arab-speaking, so there was neither a strong identification nor connection between their protests and the ones happening in Arab countries. Second, the outcome of each was different from the protests in Arab countries. The rulers in Turkey and Israel were not overthrown, which can be explained, almost paradoxically, by the countries' democratic political system, which offered a political settlement through elections and thus nuanced the radicality of the protesters. As such, even from the point of view of social unrest, Turkey and Israel remained in their position of interacting outsiders.

More than that, both countries enjoyed strong continuity of leadership in the period under examination here. Erdoğan, prime minister from 2003 to 2014 and president thereafter remained the ruler of Turkey during the whole period from 2011 to 2021. In Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu remained prime minister from 2009 to 2021. The political configuration under which both leaders ruled varied in time, but they both maintained a strong grip on foreign policy. This does not mean that they could completely overlook public opinion. Regional developments created waves of intense feelings in both countries. The Turkish population evinced a special interest in the events in Syria and in the Palestinian territories. In Israel too, issues related to the country's relations with its neighbors have been part of the political debate. This means that for Erdoğan as for Netanyahu, the two leaders that had to face the voters regularly, regional policy could be instrumentalized for domestic purposes, and indeed both were accused of doing so, even at the expense of strategic objectives. However, their strong political foundation also meant that they could ignore public opinion if they wished, as when they decided to normalize relations between their two countries despite opposition from their political base and from parts of their own parties.<sup>12</sup> This room to maneuver gave more weight to their personality in foreign policy decision making. Since they had limited counterpower opposition in this domain, and since both leaders saw in global and regional politics opportunities for personal activism, the world views of Erdoğan<sup>13</sup> and Netanyahu<sup>14</sup> were vital components of their respective countries' foreign policies.

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<sup>10</sup> Constanze Letsch, "A Year after the Protests, Gezi Park Nurtures the Seeds of a New Turkey," sec. World news, *The Guardian*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>.

<sup>11</sup> Labri Sadiki, "From Taksim to Tahrir: A Turkish 'Arab Spring'?", Al Jazeera Center for Studies, June 18, 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/06/2013618111850423294.html>; Nicolai Due-Gundersen, "Israel Escaped an Arab Spring-Style Uprising in 2011 – but Only Just," *The Conversation*, February 8, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/israel-escaped-an-arab-spring-style-uprising-in-2011-but-only-just-90641>.

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Diplomatic Deal With Turkey Upsets Israelis Wary of Conceding Too Much," sec. World, *The New York Times*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/israel-turkey-diplomatic-relations.html>;

<sup>13</sup> Soner Çağaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, (London, United Kingdom: I. B. Tauris, 2020); Murat Ülgül, "Erdoğan's Personal Diplomacy and Turkish Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (December 13, 2019): 161–82; Ç. Esra Çuhadar et al., "Turkish Leaders and Their Foreign Policy Decision-Making Style: A Comparative and Multi-Method Perspective," *Turkish Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2020.1724511>; Aylin Ş. Görener and Meltem Ş. Ucal, "The Personality and Leadership Style of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Implications for *Turkish Foreign Policy*," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 357–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2011.604216>.

<sup>14</sup> Yael S. Aronoff, "Benjamin Netanyahu: Battling the World," in *The Political Psychology of Israeli Prime Ministers: When Hard-Liners Opt for Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43–77; Robert O. Freedman, ed., *Israel Under Netanyahu: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2019); Noa Katzir, "The Decision Calculus of Benjamin Netanyahu," in *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?*, vol. 28A, Contributions to Conflict Management, Peace Economics and Development (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 67–89; Amnon Aran and Leonie Fleischmann, "Framing and Foreign Policy—Israel's Response to the Arab Uprisings," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 614–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy055>.

Finally, to fully understand the configuration that propelled Ankara's and Jerusalem's actions, one must also look at the global and systematic dynamics and their impact on the Middle East. In 2011, U.S. hegemony was being contested by rising revisionist powers, above all China. The U.S. was losing its capacity to impose its will on world events, in what has been called a move from a unilateral to a multilateral world. In the Middle East too, questions about the role of the United States in the region<sup>15</sup> increased. The Arab uprisings started when the Obama administration was redefining the U.S. policy in the Middle East, after a cycle opened by the September 11th attacks that led the US presence in the region to rise sharply, most notably with the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama wanted to reverse this trend and, among others, had ordered a withdrawal from Iraq, which was culminating in 2011.

The U.S. reaction to regional events intensified the questions about its presence in the Middle East and was perceived as a sign of growing U.S. disinterest and proof of disengagement. The failure of the U.S. administration to prevent the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, a close ally to Washington, as well as its lack of assertiveness in the Syrian civil war, especially against Assad's war crimes, raised questions among regional actors about the U.S. commitment to the region, something that would be accentuated under the Trump administration. The concrete measure of U.S. disengagement remains debated. Some underline that Washington remained deeply involved in Middle East affairs. However, global and local actors felt at the time that a void was created, which encouraged the ambitions of regional and global powers, particularly Russia and Iran.<sup>16</sup> For countries like Turkey and Israel that relied on the United States for their security, this new configuration created important worries, especially in Jerusalem, and prompted a reassessment of their regional policies.<sup>17</sup>

However, these changes also created opportunities for both countries. As their neighbors entered a period of internal turmoil, which weakened key Arab states, room opened for Ankara and Jerusalem to maneuver. The non-Arab countries of the region, Turkey, Israel, and Iran found a larger field of activities in the Middle East upon which to achieve their national objectives,<sup>18</sup> increased by the perceived withdrawal of the United States.

As such, the first Arab uprisings and their domestic and global context created for Turkey and Israel a rather similar configuration. Erdoğan and Netanyahu, both having little domestic opposition in foreign policy, a field in which they wanted to invest more, faced a regional upheaval that created risks and threats but also opportunities that were reinforced by changes in global balances and U.S. policies. Each leader adopted a very different attitude.

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<sup>15</sup> Brandon Friedman, "US Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perception," *Strategic Assessment* 24, no. 1 (January 2021), <https://strategicassessment.inss.org.il/en/articles/us-engagement-and-disengagement-in-the-middle-east-paradox-and-perception/>; Jonathan Panikoff, "Shifting Priorities: The US and the Middle East In a Multipolar World," ISPI, July 8, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/shifting-priorities-us-and-middle-east-multipolar-world-35692>; Richard N. Haass, "The Irony of American Strategy: Putting the Middle East in Proper Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2013): 57–67; Dalia Dassa Kaye et al., *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA958-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA958-1.html).

<sup>16</sup> Marina and David Ottaway, "The Changing Geopolitics of the Middle East," in *A Tale of Four Worlds*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 51–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190061715.003.0004>.

<sup>17</sup> Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessi, "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting Vis-à-Vis a Volatile External Security-Provider," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 2 (March 15, 2021): 311–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1580185>; Efraim Inbar, "Implications of US Disengagement from the Middle East" (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04725>.

<sup>18</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Israel and the Arab World – Renewal of the Alliance of the Periphery," *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 5, no. 4 (September 27, 2019): 225–40, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajms.5-4-2>.

### 3. Two different strategies

#### *Two different tactics*

##### *Different levels of intervention*

Ankara and Jerusalem each entered the space created by the Arab uprisings in different ways. For a long time, Jerusalem preferred to maintain its distance.<sup>19</sup> Enjoying their country's self-defined position of "villa in the jungle," Israeli leaders avoided making public comments on the various developments happening around them, knowing that they could backfire as any sign of support to one side could be exploited by this side's enemies.<sup>20</sup> Israel only intervened in Syria, where it sensed that it had some strategic interests, first by organizing a humanitarian operation for the rebels in the regions bordering the Golan starting in 2013, allegedly supporting some rebels for a while,<sup>21</sup> and then launching regular air raids on Syria to slow down the Iranian installation in the country.<sup>22</sup> Israel's open activism was a rather late development, at a time when the country's regional integration was strengthened through the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and the Abraham Accords (see below).

Turkey intervened much earlier and more openly in the region's political and military processes.<sup>23</sup> After being rather taciturn about the revolution in Tunisia, the Turkish government did not hide its support for the opposition to Mubarak, developing warm ties with Morsi and rashly attacking Sisi after the coup in Egypt. In Syria, Ankara led a changing policy,<sup>24</sup> supported various groups in the country, claimed an active role in the settlement of the conflict through the Astana process with Russia and Iran, and displayed strong interventionism, described by some as over-activism.<sup>25</sup> In Libya, Turkey supported actively the Government of National Accord and provided it with weapons and the support of Syrian fighters. In the Gulf, Ankara stood behind its Qatari ally<sup>26</sup> and entered a feud with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The relations with Saudi Arabia declined further after the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, an issue in which Erdoğan himself became strongly invested. In short, contrary to Israel, Turkey almost immediately entered the Arab political and military scene following the uprisings in 2011, with a multi-arena and intensifying intervention in various theaters of conflict.

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Beck, "'Watching and Waiting' and 'Much Ado about Nothing? Making Sense of the Israeli Response to the Arab Uprisings,'" *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (November 29, 2016): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.79>.

<sup>20</sup> Itamar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi, *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 139–40, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691212616>.

<sup>21</sup> Helle Malmvig, *Israel's Conflicting Interests in the Syrian War* (Denmark, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13182>.

<sup>22</sup> Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 137–41.

<sup>23</sup> Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring."

<sup>24</sup> Rabinovich and Valensi, *Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath*, 130–37.

<sup>25</sup> Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East."

<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Youssef, "Turkey-Qatar Relations: Friends through Thick and Thin," Anadolu Agency, December 6, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-qatar-relations-friends-through-thick-and-thin/2439871>.

## *Regional integration vs regional affirmation*

Turkey and Israel also differed in their level of regional independence. Part of Israel's cautiousness was linked to its fear of regional isolation, a fear with deep historical roots and part of its "outsider" position. The first phase of the Arab uprisings reinforced this fear, and Jerusalem worried about being excluded from regional dynamics by the emerging regimes in its neighborhood. However, many developments ended up playing in Israel's favor: the situation in various countries stabilized in a rather favorable way for Israeli interests, Iranian (and somehow Turkish) regional ambitions created a common threat to the Israelis and some of their Arab neighbors, and U.S. protection for various countries did not seem as assured as previously, prompting them to look for alternatives. Using the opportunities created by these changes, the Israeli government made efforts to improve its regional integration and to increase the coordination of its activities with other regional players. Jerusalem was an active player in two important regional initiatives. Established in 2019, the first was the East Mediterranean Gas Forum,<sup>27</sup> in which Israel joined with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), Jordan, Egypt, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority. The second was the Abraham Accords<sup>28</sup> signed between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in 2020 under U.S. President Trump's patronage. These developments symbolized Israeli regional integration and served as platforms for its intensification, while bilateral relations between Israel and various neighbors intensified. To summarize, Israel dealt with the threat of being isolated in the second half of the decade by using the tools at its disposal to increase its regional integration and develop ties with its neighbors through bilateral and multilateral initiatives.

Fear of isolation is also part of Turkey's regional self-perception, here too linked to its outsider status. However, in dealing with the same fear as Israel that was accentuated by the same events, Turkey adopted a radically different policy.<sup>29</sup> Ankara decided to affirm itself assertively and to impose its presence to its neighbors.<sup>30</sup> It would be exaggerated to say that Turkey was completely isolated in its actions, as it entered into alliances with local players in Syria and Libya and remained close to Qatar. However, Turkey's foreign policy during the 2011-2021 period was characterized by its autonomous decision making. Globally, Ankara loosened its ties with its traditional Western allies, even entering periods of open tension with the European Union and United States. Regionally, Turkey's policy was to use its strength as it wished and according to its own interests, minimally

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<sup>27</sup> Sergio Matalucci, "EastMed Gas Forum Fuels Energy Diplomacy in Troubled Region", Deutsche Welle, October 8 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/eastmed-gas-forum-fuels-energy-diplomacy-in-troubled-region/a-55206641>;

<sup>28</sup> Ben Lynfield, "Israel's Rewarding Road to Normalization," *Foreign Policy* (blog), January 31, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/31/israel-abraham-accords-normalization-middle-east/>; Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco and Kristian Alexander, "The Abraham Accords Two Years on: From Ambition to Reality," Real Instituto Elcano, August 17, 2022, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-abraham-accords-two-years-on-from-ambition-to-reality/>; Yoel Guzansky and Sarah Feuer, "The Abraham Accords at One Year: Achievements, Challenges, and Recommendations for Israel," INSS (blog), November 1, 2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/abraham-accords-one-year-insights/>; Dennis Ross, "The Abraham Accords and the Changing Shape of the Middle East," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abraham-accords-and-changing-shape-middle-east>.

<sup>29</sup> Michaël Tanchum, "The Logic Beyond Lausanne: A Geopolitical Perspective on the Congruence between Turkey's New Hard Power and its Strategic Reorientation," *Insight Turkey*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/the-logic-beyond-lausanne-a-geopolitical-perspective-on-the-congruence-between-turkeys-new-hard-power-and-its-strategic-reorientation>.

<sup>30</sup> Hakan Yapar, "From Strategic Depth to Blue Homeland and Beyond: Understanding Turkey's Drift towards Greater Strategic Autonomy," Opinion Paper (Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estrategicos, April 12, 2021); Meliha Benli Altunışık, *The New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities*, (Rome, Italy: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2020); Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?," *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July 1, 2021): 1085–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab094>.



considering the input of its partners and imposing itself on its rivals or enemies.<sup>31</sup> The increasing presence of Turkey in the region was undeniable it has become a key player in various regional processes. Turkey's growing presence was based on factors antithetical to those on which Israel based its regional policy. While Israel prioritized cooperation and integration, Turkey's strategy was based on affirmation and autonomy, what has often been summarized as Turkey's "precious loneliness," in the words of one of Erdoğan's advisors.<sup>32</sup>

### *Hard power vs. soft power*

Finally, there was a difference in the nature of the tools each country used in its interaction with its environment.

The tools characterizing Turkey's Middle Eastern policy during the Davutoğlu period were mostly soft power-related. Behind the idea of "zero problems with the neighbors" was a strategy in which Turkey affirmed its position and its role in the region through non-violent means.<sup>33</sup> Efforts were put into developing trade with the idea of creating a free trade region around Turkey, cultural exchanges, ad hoc agreements, and producing cultural goods, especially TV shows. This focus on soft power, and Turkey's role as a mediator between conflicting sides, even between Israel and Syria, led some analysts to conclude that there was a "Europeanization" of Turkish foreign policy.<sup>34</sup> The idea that Turkey could be a model of democracy for its changing neighbors was also, at first, part of this soft power-based foreign policy.<sup>35</sup>

However, the balance between soft power and hard power in Ankara's policy shifted as the decade progressed.<sup>36</sup> The growing intervention of Turkey in Middle Eastern battlefields was accompanied by the militarization of its activities<sup>37</sup> and "resecuritization" of its foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> On the domestic level, the move was symbolized by a series of changes that peaked with the departure of Davutoğlu from the government in 2016, and Ankara's use of military tools grew. It launched operations in Northern Syria and Iraq and militarily supported other players like jihadist militias in Syria, the Qatari government, and the Government of National Accord in Libya. The Turkish navy also increased its presence

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen J. Flanagan, F. Stephen Larrabee, and Magdalena Kirchner, "Turkey at a Crossroads," in *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Research Report, RR-2589-A (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> David Gardner, "Turkey's Foreign Policy of 'Precious Loneliness,'" *Financial Times*, November 15, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Defne Günay, "The Roles Turkey Played in the Middle East (2002–2016)," in *Turkish Foreign Policy: International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*, ed. Pınar Gözen Ercan (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 195–215, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50451-3\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50451-3_10).

<sup>34</sup> H. Tanık Oğuzlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy at the Nexus of Changing International and Regional Dynamics," *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2015.1136088>.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East Regionalism: The Arab Spring and Competition for Discursive Hegemony between Egypt, Iran and Turkey," *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 421–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2014.968474>.

<sup>36</sup> Francesco Siccardi, *How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy*, (Bruxelles, Belgium: Carnegie Europe, 2021), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/09/14/how-syria-changed-turkey-s-foreign-policy-pub-85301>; Görkem Dirik, "Hard Power, the Coming of Age of the Turkish Republic," *Daily Sabah*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/09/03/hard-power-the-coming-of-age-of-the-turkish-republic>; Barçın Yinanç, "Turkey's Projection of Hard Power," *Hürriyet Daily News*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/barcin-yinanc/turkeys-projection-of-hard-power-154933>.

<sup>37</sup> Ali Bakır, "Mapping The Rise of Turkey's Hard Power," New Lines Institute, August 24, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/turkey/mapping-the-rise-of-turkeys-hard-power/>.

<sup>38</sup> Coşkun, "Neighbourhood Narratives From 'Zero Problems With Neighbours' to 'Precious Loneliness,'" 201.

in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the end of the decade, the moderate and soft power initiatives had been replaced by a strong, assertive, and militarized deployment in various fields. This rise in the use of hard power was also linked to the development of Turkey's capabilities. While the Turkish Armed Forces remained one of the strongest armies in the region, the efforts of the Turkish government to develop a national military industry started bearing fruit, especially in the production of drones, making Turkey a leader in this field.<sup>39</sup> The conjunction of a more ambitious political line and of wider capabilities enabled Ankara to actively deploy its hard power tools.

During the same period, Israel shifted in the opposite direction. Structurally, its capacity to use soft power tools in its environment had been limited. The state of open conflict with several Arab states made it impossible and other countries had a policy of no-contact with Jerusalem. Even with Jordan and Egypt, two states with which Israel had signed peace agreements, relations had been limited to strategic and political contacts, while the rare attempts to create shared platforms through civil society had failed. Thus, Israel relied on its military and political strength in its regional policy.<sup>40</sup> This tendency also fitted Netanyahu's own vision of Israel's "place among the nations." Even before he was elected, the Israeli leader developed a geopolitical vision for his country, to which he remained true,<sup>41</sup> according to which Israel had to interact with its neighbors on a hard power basis to maintain its regional position. Resulting from the facts accentuated by its leader's political principles, Jerusalem's Middle Eastern policy thus relied heavily on hard power.

From 2011 to 2021, however, new opportunities for Israel's diplomacy emerged, and Jerusalem embraced them. The first field in which Israel employed its soft power was energy.<sup>42</sup> The discovery of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean altered the positions of countries like Egypt, the RoC, and Israel. The latter saw the political opportunity that the new discoveries could offer for its regional positioning.<sup>43</sup> Gas exploitation and exportation played a key role in the warming of relations between Israel and Egypt starting after the military coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Egyptian-Israeli energy cooperation was renewed with a memorandum of understanding in 2014 and a contract to export Israeli gas to Egypt in 2018.<sup>44</sup> In 2019, the EMGF brought together several regional players. For Jerusalem, beyond the economic gains it could obtain from such a forum, it served as an efficient platform to promote cooperation with its neighbors through the lens of energy. While Israeli-Egyptian gas cooperation continued to thrive,<sup>45</sup> energy also served to

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<sup>39</sup> David Axe, "How Turkey Became a Drone Superpower," *The National Interest* (The Center for the National Interest, January 29, 2022), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/how-turkey-became-drone-superpower-199998>.

<sup>40</sup> Amour, "Israel, the Arab Spring, and the Unfolding Regional Order in the Middle East."

<sup>41</sup> Binyamin Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations*, Warner Books ed. (New York, United States: Warner Books, 2000); Zack Beauchamp, "The Ideas That Define Benjamin Netanyahu," *Vox*, March 16, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/16/8220035/what-does-netanyahu-think>. Raphael Ahren, "Netanyahu: There Was Never a 'Real Reconciliation' between Israel and Jordan," *The Times of Israel*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-there-was-never-a-real-reconciliation-between-israel-and-jordan/>.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Mitchell, *Israel, Energy and the Eastern Mediterranean: Shaping a New Regional Foreign Policy* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Hugh Lovatt, "Israel's Geopolitical Windfall - Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines," in *Deep See Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines*, European Council on Foreign Relations MENA Program, 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern\\_med/israel](https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/israel).

<sup>44</sup> Oden Eran, Elai Rettig, and Ofir Winter, "The Gas Deal with Egypt: Israel Deepens Its Anchor in the Eastern Mediterranean," *INSS Insight* (blog), March 12, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Ahmed Gomaa, "How Egypt Benefits from Gas Agreement with Israel," *Al Monitor*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/egypt-israel-gas-agreement-leviathan-eastmed.html>; Danny Zaken, "Latest Gas Deal Reflects Warmer Israel-Egypt Ties," sec. Opinion & features, *Globes*, February 18, 2022, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-latest-gas-deal-reflects>.

strengthen Israel's relations with Jordan.<sup>46</sup> An agreement signed in 2016 and implemented in 2020 enabled Israeli exports of gas to Jordan. In 2021, a new agreement was signed to exchange Jordanian green electricity for Israeli desalinated water.

In parallel to these developments, the Abraham Accords completed with the agreements with Morocco widened the range of opportunity for Jerusalem in its interactions with the Arab world. Beyond the economic cooperation that these agreements foresaw, as well as exchanges in various technical fields, relations between Israel and its new Arab partners have included important cultural contacts, with bilateral events, the opening of flights, and even religious Jewish-Muslim ceremonies.<sup>47</sup> The two processes, the energy cooperation with Egypt and Jordan and the Abraham Accords, strengthened each other: energy is part of the economic cooperation expected from the Abraham Accords, while the latter also gave a stronger legitimacy for Jordan and Egypt to develop their links with Israel.<sup>48</sup> This led to an unprecedented situation for Israel to use a wide range of tools, with a growing importance placed on soft power to strengthen relations with its neighbors and its regional positioning.

The impact of the processes I described should not be overemphasized. Hard power remained at the core of Israel's regional policy, and Turkey could still make limited use of soft power. However, both countries moved the center of gravity of their regional policy in contrary ways that underlined the growing difference of perception between the two, with Israel putting a stronger emphasis on using opportunities while Turkey was more sensitive to dealing with threats.

### *Different ideological and conceptual positionings*

While the events of 2011-2021 all had local dimensions, the personal, tactical or ideological ties linking the various arenas made regional leaders as well as researchers look for unifying narratives that could explain the various regional developments. From this point of view too, Turkey and Israel found themselves on opposing sides. First, they did not conceive regional dynamics similarly. Second, they positioned themselves on opposite sides of the lines dividing the Middle East.

### *Two different conceptual approaches*

The first difference between Turkey and Israel's positioning is the way each country defined the dynamics at stake. Some presented regional events as a struggle between different axes formed by states and domestic players fighting to determine the identity of the Middle East. Generally, the main axes were defined as "Sunni-moderate" revolving around the Gulf countries and Egypt, "Muslim Brotherhood" whose main Arab state player was Qatar, and "The Resistance" led by Iran. Another way to describe the dynamics was

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closer-israel-egypt-ties-1001402766.

<sup>46</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jordan Gets First Natural Gas Supplies from Israel," sec. Utilities - Natural Gas, *Reuters*, January 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/jordan-israel-gas-idUSL8N2960Q9>.

<sup>47</sup> Yoel Guzansky et al., *Pitching Abraham's Tent: The Human Dimension of UAE-Israeli Normalization*, Issue Brief (Washington DC, United States - Tel Aviv, Israel: The Atlantic Council, Emirates Policy Center, and Institute for National Security Studies, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Gaith al-Omari and Simon Henderson, "UAE to Fund Israel and Jordan's Solar/Water Deal," *The Washington Institute for Near East Polic*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-fund-israel-and-jordans-solarwater-deal>; Bruce Riedel and Natan Sachs, "Israel, Jordan, and the UAE's Energy Deal Is Good News," *Brookings Institute* (blog), November 23, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/11/23/israel-jordan-and-the-uaes-energy-deal-is-good-news/>.

to define two camps around the status quo/change-revisionism dichotomy. Admittedly, this analysis overlaps with the axes-based interpretation of events. However, the choice of terminology is in itself political. Israeli and Turkish politicians or analysts generally chose different ways to present events in the Middle East. In Israel, they focus on the identity-based axes,<sup>49</sup> whereas Turkish observers<sup>50</sup> have preferred the “status quo/change-revisionism” dichotomy, underlining the democratic dimension of the change. This, of course, was linked to each country’s positioning. Israel preferred interpreting the situation in a way that it could be among the “moderates,” while Turkey found advantages in presenting itself as a herald of change and democracy.

In the last years of the decade, another conceptual struggle has put Turkey and Israel on opposing sides: the definition of the geographical space in which they preferred to ascribe their actions, between Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

For Israel, the rise of the Eastern Mediterranean as an analytical framework to study the region has been a blessing.<sup>51</sup> For decades, the Middle East had been perceived as being characterized by the conflict between Israel and its neighbors. Within this narrative, Israel was regularly presented, at least in official statements, as an enemy to most other players in the region and its actions were described as a main source of regional instability. The Middle Eastern lens underlined Israel’s relative isolation and its role was generally perceived negatively, even though the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen did add nuance to this perception. Within the Eastern Mediterranean region, however, Israel was increasingly integrated. It has cooperated with its neighbors from Athens to Cairo through bilateral agreements or the EMGF and played a positive role by promoting stability through the exploitation of gas, presented in the most emphatic speeches as a source of economic prosperity and political development.

For Turkey, on the other hand, the situation was different. Within a Middle Eastern framework, Ankara’s role was easier to manage. It tried to mediate between competing parties, developed good relations with players from both sides, or in the worst case, chose to side with the Arabs and thus could not be totally isolated. But in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey became the isolated ‘bad guy’.<sup>52</sup> The Turkish government’s claims to an Exclusive Economic Zone that would fairly consider the length of its coast and not give an unfair advantage to the Greek islands positioned in frontal opposition with Greece and the RoC. While the latter developed an active policy in the region, signing agreements with, among others, Egypt and Israel, Turkey found itself growingly isolated. This isolation

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<sup>49</sup> Itai Brun and Sarah Feuer, “In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle over the Shape of the Middle East,” *Strategic Assessment* 24, no. 1 (2021): 5–20; Dania Koleilat Khatib, “Security Implications of Axes Rivalry in the Middle East,” Research Paper (Rabat: Policy Paper for the New South, December 2020), <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/security-implications-axes-rivalry-middle-east>; Mark A Heller, “Israel as a Regional Power: Prospects and Problems,” in *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. Henner Fürting (New York, United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> Şaban Kardaş, “Prospects and challenges of normalization in Turkey – Israel relations: A Turkish view,” Billet, *Observatoire de la vie politique turque* (blog), August 27, 2021, <https://ovipot.hypotheses.org/15714>; Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, “A Revisionist Response to the News Status Quo Building Process,” Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies (blog), April 10, 2018, <https://www.ankasam.org/a-revisionist-response-to-the-news-status-quo-building-process/?lang=en>; Marwan Kabalan, “What Will the Middle East Look like in 2019?,” *Al Jazeera*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/1/what-will-the-middle-east-look-like-in-2019>.

<sup>51</sup> “Israel and the Mediterranean: A New Space for Regional Belonging”, (Meeting Summaries from a Research and Policy Group), (Mitvim the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, The Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, The National Security Studies Center at University of Haifa, May 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Asli Aydıntaşbaş et al., “Overview: Fear and Loathing in the Eastern Mediterranean,” in *Deep See Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines*, European Council on Foreign Relations MENA Program, 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern\\_med#menuarea](https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med#menuarea).

was obvious as the EMGF was established, including most of the regional states but not Turkey. Ankara reacted to this isolation by increasing its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which led to condemnation by various regional and international players. As such, Ankara found itself further isolated and presented by other governments as the disruptive dangerous player threatening regional stability. To some extent, Turkey had become in the Eastern Mediterranean what Israel had been in the Middle East.

*Turkey's and Israel's special positioning within the competing ideological axes in the Middle East*

However one interprets the events in the Middle East, Ankara and Jerusalem found themselves on opposite sides. Turkey was perceived as a key player in the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated axis, even being presented sometimes as one of its leaders.<sup>53</sup> The regional players that Ankara supported were indeed generally close to the political Islamist ideology, which also characterized the ruling AKP and the personal vision of Turkey's president.<sup>54</sup> In the Gulf, Turkey's ally is Qatar, another country strongly identified with the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt, Erdoğan's strong proximity with the Muslim Brotherhood and its leader Morsi as well as his feud with Sisi fit the axes-focused analysis.<sup>55</sup> Turkey has also become a shelter for political exiles close to the Muslim Brotherhood who fled after Sisi's takeover.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the Turkish government welcomed prominent Hamas figures and politically, financially and logistically supported the Islamist Palestinian movement.<sup>57</sup> In Libya too, Turkey's ally, the Government of National Accord of Sarraj, was close to the Muslim Brotherhood and strongly supported by Qatar. Finally, the Turkish intervention in Syria included growing support for militias defined by a strong Islamist, if not jihadist identity. The Syrian National Army (former Syrian Free Army), Ankara's main Syrian ally, is composed of various militias of the Islamist nebula. As such, Turkey's position within the axes-based configuration is obvious.

On the status quo/change-revisionism axis, Ankara was on the revisionist side, linked to the revisionist dimension of Erdoğan's foreign policy. The Turkish president has been increasingly critical of the international order, regularly attacking the UN structure and more specifically the Security Council, an attack summarized by the motto "the world is greater than five." As part of this policy, the Turkish government developed links with other revisionist countries like Iran, Russia, and Venezuela.<sup>58</sup> In the region, Turkey also positioned itself as a revisionist country, presenting it as support for democratic forces.<sup>59</sup> The support for Morsi and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian rebels, the Hamas movement in Palestinian territories, or the diatribes against the Saudi monarchy after the

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<sup>53</sup> Günay, "The Roles Turkey Played in the Middle East (2002–2016)."

<sup>54</sup> Hakkı Taş, "Erdoğan and the Muslim Brotherhood: An Outside-in Approach to Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Turkish Studies*, June 13, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2085096>.

<sup>55</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Erdogan Lauds Brotherhood Ally as Turkey Mourns Morsi," *Al Monitor*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/erdogan-speaks-morsi-death.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Abdelrahman Ayyash, *The Turkish Future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood*, (New York, United States: The Century Foundation, 2020), <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/>.

<sup>57</sup> "Hamas Operations in Turkey," (Tel Aviv, Israel: Israeli Security Agency, 2018), <https://www.shabak.gov.il/english/publications/pages/hamas-operations-in-turkey.aspx>; Laura Pitel and Mehul Srivastava, "Erdogan and Hamas: He's Presenting Himself as Leader of Muslim World," *Financial Times* September 9, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7447e141-3d3f-4d98-953d-179e15909a7e>.

<sup>58</sup> Imdat Oner, *Turkey and Venezuela: An Alliance of Convenience*, (Washington DC, United States: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2020), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/turkey-and-venezuela-alliance-convenience>.

<sup>59</sup> Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East Regionalism: The Arab Spring and Competition for Discursive Hegemony between Egypt, Iran and Turkey."

assassination of Khashoggi were all presented as siding with the forces defending the will of the Arab people for change against the tenants of the status quo. The July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey also enabled Ankara to underline the relevance of the democracy/autocracy dichotomy on its own soil, with Erdoğan being presented as the herald of democracy not only in the Middle East but in Turkey itself against forces opposed to change and sometimes connected to one another. For instance, the Turkish government accused the UAE of having financially supported the Turkish putschists for several years.

In Jerusalem's case, the choice of allies within the regional struggle was at first by default. Anti-Zionism and the fight against Israel are at the core of Iranian state ideology, and the players linked to the Muslim brotherhood regularly express their hatred of Israel, sometimes putting this hatred into action. Therefore, Israel had only limited room for maneuver and was naturally inclined to support the "Sunni moderates" with whom it had its best relations. Within this context, the Israeli government gradually increased its interactions with this axis, especially after 2014, when Sisi, representative of the axis in Egypt, took power.<sup>60</sup> Under the pressure of the two opposing axes' activities, as well as the support of U.S. President Trump, the proximity between Sunni moderate Arab regimes and Israel eventually led to a more affirmed alliance. The development of links with Egypt and Jordan, as described earlier, as well as the establishment of relations with the UAE and Bahrain intensified official links between Jerusalem and the Sunni moderate axis. The more-or-less secret contacts between Israeli and Saudi officials completed the process and led to the reciprocal identification of common interests between Israel and the Sunni moderate axis, which took an increasingly public, recognized, and concrete form.

Jerusalem's closeness with the Gulf monarchies, the Hashemite regime in Jordan, and Sisi in Egypt inscribes it strongly with the "status quo" camp. Behind this network of alliances is the desire shared by Israel and conservative Arab autocrats for the status quo to continue. As mentioned earlier, the Israeli leadership worried about the possible consequences of domestic instability in the region, which only increased after the Egyptian revolution and the rise to power of an anti-Israeli figure in Cairo, which threatened to jeopardize Egyptian-Israeli peace agreements, a key element of Israel's security. After the end of Morsi's rule, however, as the Egyptian autocrat Sisi proved to be a strong ally, Israel's support for the region's conservative forces increased. As such, because of deep-rooted assumptions about the Middle East, confirmed by the events of 2011-2021, Israel increasingly openly sided with the region's status quo forces.

The corollary of these different positioning in the revisionist/status quo or democracy/autocracy struggle was a focus on different actors in Arab societies. Erdoğan successfully built for himself a positive image within the Arab masses. Enjoying legitimacy as one of the Middle East's few elected rulers, the Turkish leader presented himself as the defender of the Arab street's aspirations and actively occupied the void left by Arab leaders on the Palestinian issue. This strategy had important successes: all available opinion polls have constantly shown Erdoğan as the favorite regional leader among the Arab populations.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the Turkish government and its representatives have regularly attacked several Arab leaders. Egypt's Sisi, UAE's Muhammad bin Zayed, Saudi Arabia's Muhammad bin Salman, and Syria's Assad have all been targeted by verbal attacks from Erdoğan and

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<sup>60</sup> A. Murat Agdemir, "The Arab Spring and Israel's Relations with Egypt: A View from Turkey," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 223–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2016.1221154>.

<sup>61</sup> Abdu Wahab Kayyali, "Whither Erdogan? Regional Leadership and the Struggle for Arab Hearts and Minds – Arab Barometer," *Arab Barometer* (blog), April 21, 2021, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/04/whither-erdogan-regional-leadership-and-the-struggle-for-arab-hearts-and-minds/>.

his supporters. Unable to rely on public support in Arab societies<sup>62</sup> and identifying a series of Arab leaders as potential allies, Israel built its regional strategy on strong links with these leaders.<sup>63</sup> As part of this policy, Israeli officials have developed a strong network with some of their Arab counterparts, more openly demonstrating these links in public events. As such, the opposition between Israel and Turkey on the change-democracy/status quo-autocracy line found its expression not only at the regional level but also within various Arab countries, oftentimes between the people supporting the Turkish leader and their rulers developing relations with Israel.

As a whole, Israel and Turkey differed in how they presented regional dynamics, on which sides they chose within these dynamics, and on which actors they focused on in the Arab world.

### *Some nuances and their significance*

The points that I mentioned must all be nuanced to fully understand Israel's and Turkey's positions and roles in the Middle East from 2011 to 2021.

First, it would be misleading to take both countries' activities as being decided only by 'axes dynamics'. Turkish and Israeli regional policies can only partially be explained by this approach. Here too, Israel and Turkey did not adopt the same attitude. Israel had limited choices in its political relations and adopted a tactic based on regional integration. Therefore, compared to Turkey, it was bound to be truer to its 'axis'. Ankara, on the other hand, could navigate between various countries, adopt an autonomous policy, and remain relatively fluid in its regional positioning.

However, this does not mean that Jerusalem was fully committed to the agenda of the 'Sunni moderate' players, nor that it had no motives of its own in its foreign policy. Israel remained mostly outside of the Libyan civil war and out of the Yemen conflict, despite having allies deeply involved in both arenas. In the Syrian field of operations too, Israel acted mostly according to its own interests, especially after the end of the humanitarian operation in Syria. Israel's bombings exclusively targeted Iranian-linked facilities in Syria with the aim of limiting Tehran's military installations. These bombings may have indirectly weakened Assad, but they were not coordinated with his opponents or aimed at supporting a side in the Syrian civil war. Israel's intervention in Syria, in other words, was based only on Israeli interests. While Israel's Middle Eastern policy brought it closer to a certain group of states with shared interests, it did not prompt it to adopt a resolute regional policy beyond the arenas in which it had direct interests.

Turkey's loose attitude to the various axes and camps of the Middle East is even more obvious.<sup>64</sup> In Syria, Ankara knew how to find temporary common ground with Tehran

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<sup>62</sup> Omar Akour, "Hundreds Protest in Jordan against Gas Deal with Israel," *The Times of Israel*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hundreds-protest-in-jordan-against-gas-deal-with-israel/>.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Hoffman, "Counter-Revolutionary? A Deeper Look at Israel's Relationships with Arab Autocrats," *Responsible Statecraft* (blog), January 28, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/01/28/counter-revolutionary-a-deeper-look-at-israels-relationships-with-arab-autocrats/>; Jonathan Hoffman, "How Arab Autocrats Benefit from Newfound Friendship with Israel," *Responsible Statecraft* (blog), October 18, 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/10/18/how-arab-autocrats-benefit-from-newfound-friendship-with-israel/>; Lily Galili, "Why Israel Is Now Delighted about the Arab Spring," *Middle East Eye*, January 1, 2021, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-israel-now-delighted-about-arab-spring>.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey Martini, "Turkey and the Arab World: Mixed Views and Interests," in *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Research Report, RR-2589-A (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2020).

and Moscow, and through them with Assad, when it fitted Turkey's interests. The consultations between Russian and Turkish leaders,<sup>65</sup> as the latter launched an operation against Kurdish forces in Northern Syria, and the Astana forum in which Turkey, Russia, and Iran claimed to settle the Syrian conflict between themselves are good examples of trans-axis contacts and cooperation between players from different axes. Ankara's motives in its interactions with the 'Muslim Brotherhood axis' or the hierarchy between Turkish national interests and the axis' objectives are questionable: The mobilization of Syrian mercenaries in Libya or Nagorno Karabakh points to the fact that in several cases, Turkey made use of its partners for its own national interests more than it was a partner fighting for a wider group's position. Similarly, the new Turkish policy of regional appeasement started in 2021 with a series of actions towards Ankara's neighbors, including the UAE, shows Turkey's ability to free itself from strict adherence to axis dynamics.

On the revisionist/status-quo dichotomy, or the one between rulers and people, the contrast between the ways Turkey and Israel approached Arab societies must also be nuanced. The rapprochement between Erdoğan, Putin, and Rouhani on Syria weakened the Turkish claim that Ankara supported change and democracy in the Middle East. The end of the decade saw even greater flexibility by Ankara and Jerusalem on this issue. The use of soft power tools by Israel in its relations with numerous Arab neighbors openly aims to widen the pro-Israeli base within these neighbors so as not to rely solely on rulers for the development of Arab-Israeli relations. Turkey too has nuanced its position. In 2021, Erdoğan's tone of appeasement towards his Arab counterparts was clear, as were some attempts to bridge gaps between Turkey's leadership and the rulers of the Arab world. Both countries thus understood the limits of focusing only on one part of the Arab societies, although their links are still unequally spread within these societies.

Finally, regarding the geographical framework, while the Eastern Mediterranean analysis is comfortable for Israel and the Middle Eastern one is, to a certain extent, better for Turkish interests, both countries, by their actions more than their discourses, blurred the lines between the two arenas. Israel, by developing its links in the Eastern Mediterranean and with the Gulf countries in parallel became a knot between both subregions and a key link in the chain of the slowly emerging axis starting in Athens and ending in Abu Dhabi. Turkey also linked various operation zones together. The most striking example of that was its decision to send material and Syrian mercenaries to support the Libyan government in exchange for the signature of an agreement delimiting the Turkish-Libyan maritime border according to the Turkish position. By doing so, the Turkish government joined together the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, and its own competition with Greece and the RoC in the Eastern Mediterranean. In both cases, if those policies enabled each country to maximize its assets in various arenas, they also created risks by linking different hotspots and thus making possible the spillover of one arena's tensions into another.

These nuances call for a series of observations. First, they emphasize, once again, the special status of Turkey and Israel in regional developments. As outsiders, with a certain, although debatable, distance from the events in Arab countries, they enjoy a bigger autonomy. Given this autonomy and their capacities, they could choose the intensity of

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<sup>65</sup> Rémi Daniel, "Turkish-Russian Relations: A Puzzle That Shakes the Middle East," *Turkeyscope* - Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, June 15, 2021, <https://dayan.org/content/turkish-russian-relations-puzzle-shakes-middle-east>.



their commitment to the groups they interacted with, according to their national interests. The proximity or integration within groups was a way to promote their own agendas rather than a submission to a wider group's plan. In addition, due to both countries' strength, their actions shaped regional dynamics by changing the balances of power on the ground or by linking arenas together. Their positions, given their respective levels of influence, also calls for nuance when considering the simplistic divisions of the Middle East into camps, since here we have two states of first rank influence that were able to, at least partially, free themselves from axes-based dynamics for their national interests.

#### 4. Turkish-Israeli relations and its foreign policy implications

When the Arab uprisings began, relations between Ankara and Jerusalem were already tense.<sup>66</sup> After the rapid and intense development of political and security-based links between the two countries during the 1990s, and a few years under the AKP government in which both states maintained these good relations, the first rupture occurred following the 2008-2009 Israeli "Cast Lead" operation in Gaza. Erdoğan reacted harshly to the operation, accusing Israel of massacres against civilians and famously attacking Israeli president Shimon Peres during the Davos Forum with his "One Minute" speech. In 2010, the Israeli naval operation against the *Mavi Marmara*, a ship claiming to break Gaza's blockade, during which nine Turkish citizens were killed added to the tensions between the two countries.<sup>67</sup> In 2011, the relations between Turkey and Israel were thus already at a low point.

In the following part, I will analyze how these relations are connected to Ankara's and Jerusalem's regional policies by focusing on three processes: the first normalization between 2013 and 2016, the tensions between the two countries between 2018 and 2020, and the second normalization started in 2021. Bilateral ties between the two countries adhered to certain dynamics related to complex configurations. However, the regional shocks, as well as the way both governments reacted to them had an undeniable impact on their relations, for better and for worse. By analyzing this network of ties, we will also see how the balance of power between the two sides was determined by their regional policies.

Before going into the vicissitudes of Turkish-Israeli relations during the 2011-2021 decade, one must underline that two fields succeeded in escaping the diplomatic instability and political tensions of this period. First, bilateral trade steadily progressed regardless of political vicissitudes, linking both economies more strongly, with unbalanced exchanges that benefitted the Turkish side.<sup>68</sup> Second, Ankara and Jerusalem maintained, separately, excellent relations with Azerbaijan.<sup>69</sup> In Turkish eyes, Azerbaijanis are their closest allies

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<sup>66</sup> Shira Efron, *The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2018); Umut Uzer, "The Downfall of Turkish-Israeli Relations: A Cold Peace between Former Strategic Allies," *Israel Affairs* 26, no. 5 (September 2, 2020): 687-97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2020.1806563>.

<sup>67</sup> Orna Almog and Ayşegül Sever, "The Mavi Marmara: An Embattled Voyage and Its Consequences," in *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 61-100, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2_4).

<sup>68</sup> Paul Rivlin, "Economic Relations Between Israel and Turkey," in *Contemporary Israeli-Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 177-93, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2_7).

<sup>69</sup> Oğul Tuna and Gökhan Çinkara, "The Potential for Azerbaijani Mediation of Turkish-Israeli Relations," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/potential-azerbaijani-mediation-turkish-israeli-relations>.

– “one nation, two states” – and both societies are linked by strong, emotional ties. For Israel, Azerbaijan is a client of Israeli military equipment, a provider of energy transiting through Turkey, and an important ally in Jerusalem’s struggle against Iran. Although we cannot speak truly of a Turkish-Israeli-Azerbaijani triangle, Baku succeeded in developing good ties with Jerusalem and Ankara on parallel tracks. These ties found their expression, among others, during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, in which Baku freed Armenian-occupied territories using both Israeli and Turkish weapons and with vocal support from Ankara.

### *2013-2016, a slow and fragile normalization*

Between 2011 and 2013, relations between Ankara and Jerusalem remained tense and at a low point. Then, both countries’ leaders, Netanyahu and Erdoğan, started a reconciliation process with the support of then U.S. President Barack Obama. This slow process led to the signing of a normalization agreement between Turkey and Israel in 2016.<sup>70</sup> To reach this agreement, Netanyahu accepted to call Erdoğan and apologize for the mistakes that could have been made during Israel’s intervention on the Mavi Marmara and pay compensation for the families of the people killed during the operation. The normalization agreement foresaw the end of the Turkish judicial processes for the Israeli officials involved in the Mavi Marmara incident and an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries.

The slow rapprochement between Turkey and Israel between 2013 and 2016 is undoubtedly linked to the conflicting dynamics impacting the two countries’ relations with the Middle East. On the one hand, both countries had to deal with an unstable region in which threats against each of them were numerous. Under these circumstances, there was a common interest in easing bilateral tensions. In other words, both countries felt in a fragile position after the first two years of the Arab uprisings and feared their uncertainties. It was the time, for example, when Turkey admitted that, despite its more positive efforts, it had entered a “precious loneliness” and Israel was still unsure regarding the developments in its neighboring countries, among others Egypt. This made it easier for them to respond to Obama’s pressure to renew diplomatic ties. Moreover, both still had common interests in the Middle East. At that time, Ankara’s strong opposition to Assad, who was himself supported by Iran, put Turkey and Israel on the same side in this conflict against Tehran’s ambitions.

On the other hand, the fact that it took three years between Netanyahu’s first call to Erdoğan, and the signing of the normalization agreement underlines the difficulties existing at the time. Besides strong personal animosity between the two leaders and pressure from their public opinion, it signals the already diverging paths that both countries had entered in the regional arena. With the coup by Sisi in 2013 and its regional implications, the intensification of the Syrian civil war,<sup>71</sup> and a general heating of regional tensions, the dividing lines between the various players in the Middle East were gradually making their impact felt. For Israel and Turkey, it was getting increasingly clear that their regional positioning put them on opposite sides, which explains the slowness of their efforts to normalize.

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<sup>70</sup> Oren Liebermann and Elise Labott, “Israel, Turkey Strike Deal to Normalize Ties,” *CNN*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/26/middleeast/israel-turkey-relations/index.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Soli Özel and Selin Nasi, “How the Syrian Civil War Shifted the Balance of Power in Turkish–Israeli Relations,” in *Contemporary Israeli–Turkish Relations in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 139–75, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05786-2_6).

As such, the normalization process between 2013 and 2016 and its characteristics emphasize the delicate position of both countries, which were still feeling a relative regional weakness but starting to enter regional dynamics, which widened the gap between them. In addition, Jerusalem's readiness to give in to Ankara's requests concerning the Mavi Marmara incident points to an asymmetry in Turkey's favor at the time.

### *2018-2020, open tensions*

Turkish-Israeli normalization did not last long. Following the decision by then U.S. President Trump to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, the relocation of the U.S. embassy to the city in 2018, the protests it created in Gaza and Israel's reaction to them, Erdoğan renewed his diatribes against Israel. In addition, the two countries' ambassadors, along with the Turkish consul in Jerusalem and the Israeli consul in Istanbul, were sent back to their countries. Diplomatic relations were accordingly downgraded to the level of *chargés d'affaires*, although the embassies were not closed or downgraded themselves. It was followed by two years of intense tensions between Ankara and Jerusalem, with numerous points of friction and a general freeze of political activities between the two countries.

This rupture also resulted from the wide gap that separated Turkey and Israel, with both countries aligned with opposing camps in regional struggles, which fueled the tensions between them. The support by Turkey for Islamist movements, whether they be the Hamas terrorist group or Morsi in Egypt, was seen by Israelis as Turkish support to Israel's enemies. When Turkey changed policy in Syria and temporarily aligned itself with Russia and Iran, it was cooperating with countries that constituted threats to Israel. On the contrary, the Israeli rapprochement with Greece, the RoC, Sisi's Egypt, and the UAE positioned Jerusalem in a clear anti-Turkish alignment, sometimes even more than what Israel would have wanted to be. As such, the two countries' regional policies put them on paths of both divergence and confrontation. This created additional tensions between Ankara and Jerusalem and obstacles for their potential rapprochement, since better relations between Turkey and Israel could be negatively perceived by each country's new allies. The U.S. administration, for its part, was not interested in investing effort to improve Turkish-Israeli ties. Thus, regional divisions, no matter how loosely Israel and Turkey respected them, rendered the complicated relations between the two countries even more challenging. In this context, it is noteworthy that both countries' common ally, Azerbaijan, was also outside of the Arab turmoil due to its geographical position and ethnicity.

The character of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy also accentuated its disagreements with Israel. The increasingly assertive Turkish presence in the region, its Islamist political positioning, and its appeal to the Arab masses did not leave the Israeli-Palestinian conflict untouched. On this point, the personal intervention of Turkey's president Erdoğan played a key role. Erdoğan has felt a strong connection with the Palestinian cause and identified the void left by Arab leaders as an occasion to position himself as the Defender of Jerusalem, which could also have domestic benefits. He vocally opposed Trump's decision on the city, and Israeli actions in the Al Aqsa Mosque, organized numerous summits of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation on the issue, and expressed his support for the Palestinians. Beyond his personal feelings regarding the city, such activities also perfectly fitted Erdoğan's more general regional policy: It marked Turkey's involvement in regional issues, it positioned Turkey as a strong Muslim country and it increased the Turkish president's popularity among the Palestinian masses. Similarly, Jerusalem, as well as Palestinian territories and Israel's Arab cities, witnessed an increase in Turkish visibility, with the growing intervention of Turkish institutions like the TIKA development agency. This Turkey involvement in Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian issues were

badly perceived by the Israeli government.<sup>72</sup> Turkey was perceived as a disrupting actor and the forced entry of Ankara into Palestinian affairs created a new and important point of friction between the two countries. Meanwhile, this brought Israel closer to its new moderate Sunni allies, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, whose positions in Jerusalem were also threatened by Turkey's actions.

The rapid deterioration of relations in 2018 at Turkey's initiative was another important indicator of Ankara's and Jerusalem's positioning and the balance of power between them. The fact that the Turkish president adopted such a radical stance on Palestinian-Israeli issues underscored the perceived strength of Turkey's position. Ankara had decided to adopt a radically autonomous line. It had taken a distance from Washington and was managing the Syrian crisis with Russia and Iran. In the Eastern Mediterranean too, Ankara was affirming its position through military means. From a regional perspective, Turkey's harsh tone against Israel in 2018 was thus only one of many phenomena that point to the strength and autonomy then felt by Ankara, which believed it could be autonomous from the United States and thus violently opposed Washington's decision on Jerusalem. Turkey also assessed that it had reached a level of regional strength that enabled it to abandon good ties with Israel. The same logic, which was accompanied by a more assertive tone characterizing Turkey's Middle Eastern policy, led Ankara to think it could and had to act on the Jerusalem issue and to do so in a violent way. As such, the diplomatic and political crisis between Turkey and Israel and the way it unfolded, more specifically the leading role Ankara played in it, point to a situation where Turkish demonstrations of power and regional affirmation, happening also in other arenas, put Turkey in a position of force in Turkish-Israeli relations.

### *2021-... a new era?*

Starting in 2020, Turkey started sending positive signals to Israel. Erdoğan started mentioning the possibility of another normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations, claiming that "problems with the leadership" were the main obstacle in the process, a sign of the impact of bad interpersonal relations between Netanyahu and Erdoğan. Although the cycle of violence of May 2021 between Israel and the Palestinians slowed down the process, the rapprochement between the two countries was renewed after the elections of a new Israeli government and president. Erdoğan focused his efforts on the latter, Itzhak Herzog, with whom he has been in regular contact and who visited Ankara on March 9, 2022. After a series of bilateral visits, the two countries exchanged ambassadors in the summer of 2022. Although it seems impossible to return to the days of strong ties of the 1990s, prospects for Turkish-Israeli relations are now much improved compared to a few years ago or even to 2011.

This new attitude of Turkey as well as the Israeli reaction are clear signs of the shift in the balance of power between the two countries. Historically, Turkey benefitted from an asymmetrical situation in its favor in its relations with Israel. Since the establishment of ties between the two countries, the Israeli side, for strategic and symbolic reasons, always had a stronger interest in good relations with Turkey than the other way around.<sup>73</sup> The conditions of the 2016 normalization, and especially Israel's attitude, inscribed themselves

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<sup>72</sup> "Israel plans to contain Turkish influence in the Old City of Jerusalem," *Middle East Eye*, accessed September 10, 2022, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/145401>.

<sup>73</sup> Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*.

in this configuration. The situation in 2021 was radically different.<sup>74</sup> At that time, the side pushing for normalization was Ankara, while Jerusalem reacted slowly, cautiously, and with limited enthusiasm.

Putting this change in its wider context underlines two Turkish failures and two Israeli successes. From a tactical point of view, it seems that Israel's softened integrated policy bore more sustainable fruit than the assertive ambitious line followed by Turkey. Admittedly, Ankara became a key actor in the region, with 2020 being a year of wide range, multi-arena, assertive Turkish activities in the Middle East. Turkey was active in Syria and increased its involvement in Libya and presence in Northern Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean. If we add to that the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Turkey's involvement was crucial, 2020 was undoubtedly the peak of Turkish regional involvement. However, this strategy isolated Ankara so much that these successes did not guarantee a sustainable position of power.

In fact, it created a general reaction against Turkey.<sup>75</sup> Several regional players, Jerusalem included, openly presented the need to contain Turkey as one of their objectives when developing their cooperation and the various regional initiatives, in particular the ones in which Israel was involved (EMGF, Abraham Accords), found in Turkey's activities additional incentive. After having demonstrated its strength in 2020 and having led to important successes on several arenas (the GNA's victory in Libya, the Azerbaijani victory, more attention from Western partners to Turkey's position in the Eastern Mediterranean), the Turkish strategy backfired and Ankara found itself isolated in 2021, which put it in a relatively weaker position, accentuated by Biden's election in 2020. On the other hand, by focusing on soft power and by developing its links with other actors, Israel strengthened its position. It diminished the threatening feelings it could create among its neighbors and increased the benefits that its partners could get from good relations with Jerusalem. The country's new bilateral and multilateral links improved its regional integration, which relied less on Turkey's goodwill. In this context, the relative value of having better relations with Turkey sharply declined.

This changing balance of power between the two countries is revelatory about the wider regional balances. What weakened Turkey and strengthened Israel was not only their tactical choices, but also the fate of the camps they supported. The end of the decade saw the weakening of the 'Muslim Brotherhood' or 'revisionist-change' camp against the 'moderate Sunni' or 'conservative' one. Ten years after the first unrests in the Arab countries, and after various ups and downs, the status quo forces seem to have regained control of almost every arena and the region seems under the control of autocrats who generally identify with the 'moderate Sunni' camp (with the important exception of Syria's Bashar al-Assad). These developments were linked to regional dynamics that went beyond Turkey's or Israel's activities, and the victories of the 'moderate Sunni' camp were happy surprises for Israel, which did not, as mentioned earlier, really have a choice in which camp it chose to side with. In any case, the balance of power between Turkey and Israel was also directly impacted by these regional balances of power. Turkey's allies lost significance; Israel's allies strengthened their grip on regional developments. This put

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<sup>74</sup> Karel Valansi, "Turkey Is Seeking a Fresh Start with Israel," *Atlantic Council* (blog), March 10, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/turkey-is-seeking-a-fresh-start-with-israel/>.

<sup>75</sup> Nigar Göksel, "Turkey Recalibrates Its Hard Power," International Crisis Group, August 13, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-recalibrates-its-hard-power>; Rich Outzen and Soner Çağaptay, "The Third Age of Erdoğan's Foreign Policy," The Center for European Policy Analysis, February 17, 2022, <https://cepa.org/the-third-age-of-erdogans-foreign-policy/>.

Ankara in a more delicate position vis-à-vis Jerusalem. As such, the latest developments in relations between Israel and Turkey are not only signals of each country's failure or success, but also one of the many indicators of the 'status quo' camp's victory in the regional struggle.

By analyzing the two countries' regional tactics through the lens of their relations and the underpinning balance of power, I can state that Turkey's strategy bore important short-term fruit that enabled it to be more assertive against Israel, especially from 2018 to 2020, but that the Israeli strategy was more successful in the medium term, enabling Jerusalem to reverse the asymmetry of power between the two countries. This assessment of both countries' tactical choices must be nuanced by an important point: Turkey's ambitious and autonomous line enabled it to swiftly move from an open showdown with Israel to a softer, more open tone. Ankara's loose relations with its regional Muslim Brotherhood partners as well as its open choice to put its national interests above considerations on regional dynamics made it possible for the Turkish government to make a U-turn without giving too much weight to what its partners may think. Conversely, Israel's strong integration into a network of Middle Eastern states limited its capacity to accept Turkish offers because of possible reactions from its friendly neighbors. As such, while the countries' different strategies weakened Ankara comparatively to Jerusalem, Turkey's relative freedom in its diplomatic moves made it easier to reconcile with former foes like the UAE and can be an asset for future Turkish-Israeli relations. Ankara's actions against members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas members included, are good examples of this. Meanwhile, Israel must take into consideration the worries created among its partners by a possible rapprochement with Turkey, which limits its choices and slows down the implementation of policies.

Finally, the improvement of Turkish-Israeli relations starting in 2021 must be analyzed as part of a more regional pacifying trend. This year saw a general easing of the inter-axis struggle in the Middle East.<sup>76</sup> Bridges were built between countries generally identified as sitting on opposing sides of this struggle. For instance, the UAE made diplomatic efforts toward Iran, numerous countries of the Arab world tried to improve their relations with the Syrian regime, and a political process was launched in Libya. In this context, the diplomatic offensive of Turkey towards former nemeses Egypt, the UAE and Israel, while obeying its own dynamics, was also made possible by the emergence of a more stable, less tense regional order.

## 5. Conclusion

In 2011, Israel and Turkey, with leaders who had room to maneuver domestically and with structural similarities in their regional positioning, faced a series of shocks in the neighboring Arab states. The political turmoil induced by these shocks and the weakening of various regional actors created both risks and opportunities for the two countries, at a time when the presence of global powers, especially the United States, was being redefined. Both Ankara and Jerusalem identified this new configuration, although they tended to interpret it differently. The former saw it as a struggle between moderate and Islamists while the latter looked at it through the lens of an autocratic status-quo/

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<sup>76</sup> Brandon Friedman, "Regional Solutions to Regional Challenges in the Middle East?," Tel Aviv Notes, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, November 30, 2021, <https://dayan.org/content/regional-solutions-regional-challenges-middle-east>.

democratic revisionism dichotomy. This difference of interpretation, added to differences in personal affinities, ideological choices, and use of capacities, put Israel and Turkey on diverging and often opposite tracks during the decade. This contrast widened sharply in the second half of the decade, when Ankara increased the hard-power dimension of its policy, while Jerusalem worked on its regional integration in the Eastern Mediterranean and then in the Middle East in cooperation with Turkey's rivals.

Looking at these policies from the perspective of Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations and of the balance of power underlying them, the Israeli success is obvious. Whereas the links between the two countries were characterized by an asymmetry in Turkey's favor, now they are balanced, and some analysts even say that Israel has the upper hand. In other words, the decade saw a relative strengthening of Israel and a relative weakening of Turkey, which signals that Jerusalem's regional policy was more successful than Ankara's. However, the attempts to reset bilateral relations in 2020 have shown two important things. First, Turkey remains an important regional player that Israel cannot ignore. Despite all its reservations, Jerusalem still prefers to have Turkey on its side rather than as a rival. Second, Ankara's autonomous regional policy is an important asset for Turkey. Free from axis considerations, the Turkish government has been able, in a relatively short time, to renew contacts with important regional players that had been Turkey's rivals and thus improve its position rapidly. As such, the undeniable strengthening of Israel vis-à-vis Turkey has not been as radical as to create a total ascendancy, and the present situation that is favorable to Jerusalem may change if Ankara's new diplomatic moves continue being successful.

Turkey's and Israel's strategies from 2011 to 2021 and their outcomes can also be analyzed through the lens of the two countries' regional status. With a power vacuum emerging in the regional scene, did Ankara and Jerusalem's activities bring them to the status of regional power? Regional power can be defined by three main characteristics:<sup>77</sup> willingness, capacity (and the strategy to implement this capacity), and acceptance by others. Regarding willingness, Turkey openly claimed a regional role and acted accordingly since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. Israel for its part preferred first to remain as far as possible from regional dynamics and explicitly voiced its role as a regional power tardily and cautiously, mostly for its domestic audience. Even after the country's regional integration, and while Israeli leaders enjoy their country's new regional status, Jerusalem still wants to keep a relative distance from some aspects of regional developments.

Turkey and Israel had notable capacities from 2011 to 2021 compared to their neighbors and their actions and decisions have had a regional impact. Ankara had important advantages compared to Jerusalem, which enabled it to act more freely, fluidly and autonomously. However, this autonomous and assertive policy ended up backfiring, as others felt threatened and have since developed a network of links to counter it. Therefore the role Turkey claimed for itself in the region was not accepted by its neighbors. Moreover, within the Arab world, the pro-Turkish elements and the axis of change aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood ended up being on the losing side of the regional struggle, further weakening the Turkish position. Conversely, Israel, which had fewer possibilities to align, knew how to use the victory of the status quo camp, its common interests with this camp, its assets, and the realignments in the Eastern Mediterranean to foster its regional integration and acceptance as a regional key player.

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<sup>77</sup> Daniel Flemes, "Conceptualising Regional Power in International Relations: Lessons from the South African Case," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, New York: Social Science Research Network, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1000123>; Martin Beck, "The Concept of Regional Power as Applied to the Middle East," in *Regional Powers in the Middle East: New Constellations after the Arab Revolts*, ed. Henner Fürting (New York, United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

This reflection helps us understand why and how the power dynamics between Turkey and Israel changed so dramatically from 2011 to 2021 and underlines two important characteristics of each country's regional position: both are rising but still incomplete regional powers and there is an important complementarity between their weaknesses and strengths.

A new era has opened in 2021, both for the Middle East, where many of the processes that had defined the region for a decade have concluded, and for Turkish-Israeli relations relaunched by President Erdoğan. This analysis has shown that both Turkey and Israel may benefit from developing their bilateral ties further. While a return to the strong ties of the 1990s seems unlikely, the new regional context creates conditions for a rapprochement with a more balanced basis than what had been the case since 1948. At a time when Iranian pressure and the US withdrawal, not to mention the consequences of the war in Ukraine, create a need for stronger regional alignments, Turkish-Israeli links could be crucial and beneficial for Turkey, Israel, and their Arab neighbors. Better cooperation and coordination between Ankara and Jerusalem could also create a powerful axis, with a vast variety of efficient tools at its disposal. At a time when each country tries to diversify and balance its regional policy, it could find within the other a complementary partner. Moreover, such rapprochement could also have positive repercussions for the Arab world. After ten years in which the tensions between Ankara and Jerusalem accentuated regional crises, renewed contacts could increase regional stability.



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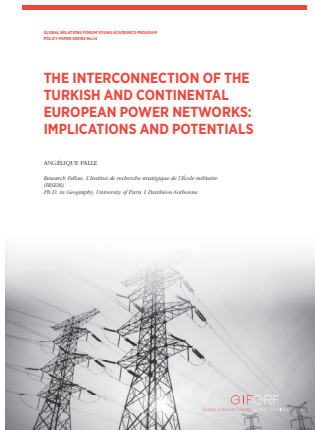
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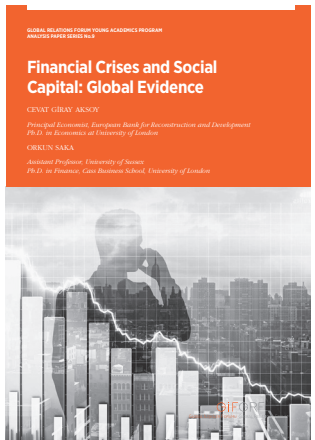
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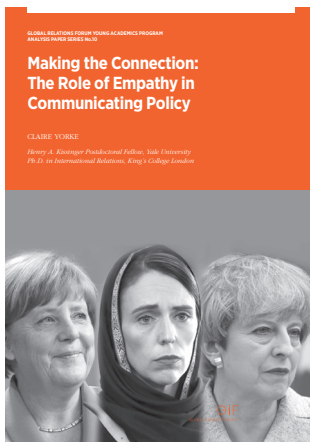
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