

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 338 28 Tammuz 5756 / 15 July 1996

TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS: CRISIS OR CONTINUED COOPERATION?

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For the first time in the 73-year history of the modern, secular Turkish Republic, the Turkish Grand National Assembly on July 8, 1996, narrowly approved Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the pro-Islamist Refah Party (RP), as prime minister. (Refah is usually translated as "welfare," but "well-being" or "prosperity" is probably closer to the actual meaning in Turkish. The party's symbol displays a full stalk of grain.)

Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows

Erbakan, whose party came in first — with slightly over 21 percent of the vote — in last December's parliamentary elections, has formed a coalition government with former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller of the center-right True Path Party. This is truly an example of the old adage that politics makes strange bedfellows. Professor Çiller, an American-educated economist, is a staunch secularist, sees the alliance with the United States

and NATO as the cornerstone of Ankara's foreign policy, favors continued liberalization and privatization of the Turkish economy, and seeks Turkey's admission as a full member of the European Union (EU). She has championed the strengthening of Turkish-Israeli ties in all fields, and sees the cooperation between Ankara and Jerusalem as instrumental in Turkey's playing a significant role in the international efforts to bring about Arab-Israel peace and regional economic development and stability.

If one were to judge only on the basis of Erbakan's record and past rhetoric, her views and his are diametrically opposed on many key issues. Hopefully, the other political adage that "where you stand depends on where you sit" seems to be operating in Ankara, and the realization of the responsibilities of office and the views of his secularist coalition partner have already caused the Refah leader to temper his previous declarations.

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In the past, Erbakan castigated Turkey's close ties with the U.S, NATO and the EU, calling instead for an Islamic "just order" that would abolish interest, eliminate Western influence, strengthen ties with Muslim states, and create an Islamic Common Market. He specifically advocated improved relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which Turkish intelligence sources have confirmed has worked to undermine secularism in Turkey and whose agents have been implicated in political assassinations in Turkey.

Erbakan's Past Rhetoric a Cause for Concern

Over the past decades, the 71-year-old Erbakan has compiled a record of personal declarations that are not only anti-Israel but in some cases blatantly anti-Semitic. He called then Prime Minister Tansu Çiller an "Israeli puppet," told voters their choice was between supporting "Greater Israel or Greater Turkey," and listed Jerusalem, together with Sarajevo, Chechnya and Ngorno Karabakh, as Muslim areas he would "liberate." Most recently, on May 21, following Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon, he charged that because the coalition government of Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz's Motherland Party (ANAP) and Çiller's True Path (DYP) had concluded a military agreement with Israel, they were agents of "the Jews who bombed our Muslim brothers." Therefore, he warned, a vote for any party other than Refah in the June 2nd municipal bi-elections was giving "a vote to the Jews. Islamic martyrs and saints will strike them down!" (The RP won an unprecedented 33 percent in the smaller towns.)

This diatribe occurred only three days after a Refah supporter had tried to kill President Süleyman Demirel, allegedly in protest over the Turkish-Israeli agreement. Erbakan called the assassination attempt a "despicable act," but continued his vitriolic rhetoric.

Erbakan helped bring down the previous government by initiating parliamentary inquiries into Çiller's financial dealings, alleging illegal profiting from car and electric utility contracts and charging that some \$6 million had been unaccounted for. Were she indicted in this Turkish "Whitewater," Çiller would be barred from politics temporarily, and if convicted, permanently. One of the conditions for Çiller's agreeing to the Erbakan-headed coalition was that the inquiries against her would be stayed, if not dropped. Politics surely makes strange bedfellows!

How Long Will the New Coalition Survive?

Despite the ideological differences between the RP and DYP, and the personal attacks of Erbakan against

Çiller, she has now become Foreign Minister in Erbakan's cabinet and is slated to assume the premiership for two years at the start of the coalition's third year. Few believe the current government will last that long. The new coalition government was approved by the slim margin of 276 to 265. There were some defections from the DYP of some stalwart secularists and from the RP of a few hard-line Islamic fundamentalists who feel Erbakan betrayed his principles by agreeing to suspend the inquiries. Emotions ran so high that after the vote, one True Path supporter of Çiller punched another party member who had broken party discipline to vote against the coalition with the Islamists!

The betting in Ankara is that the coalition is unlikely to last more than a year, with some giving it 6 weeks and others 6 months, before the government loses a vote of confidence and new elections are called.

Netanyahu Addresses Erbakan

In what may be a victory of hope over experience, since twice in the past — in 1956 after the Sinai Campaign and in 1980 after the Knesset's adoption of the Jerusalem Law — Ankara reduced the level of its diplomatic ties with Israel, government sources in Jerusalem express cautious optimism that the general direction of the new Turkish government's foreign policy will not fundamentally change, particularly with regard to Ankara's strategic ties with Israel and support for the peace process.

On July 8, following the approval of the new government in Ankara, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu dispatched a letter expressing "heartfelt congratulations" to Erbakan on his appointment as Prime Minister of Turkey. "I attach great importance to the relations between Israel and Turkey, in light of both the rich history we have shared and the interests we have in common." He noted that the "Jewish people recall the role of the Ottoman Empire as a refuge" from the persecution the Jews faced in fifteenth century Spain. (In 1992, Israeli President Haim Herzog participated in the festive commemoration in Istanbul of the quincentennial of the welcome offered by the Turkish Sultan to the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.)

In his message, Netanyahu alluded very diplomatically to Erbakan's previous anti-Israel declarations: "I am aware that in the past you expressed views concerning the region which were not always in accordance with our own positions. However, we must look forward towards the future which awaits us, of shared opportunities, cooperation and peace."

The Israeli premier said he wished to "reaffirm to you that Israel under my leadership seeks peace and will continue to seek peace with the entire Muslim world." (Netanyahu made the same point in his address before a joint session of the American Congress on July 10, distinguishing between Islam as a great world religion, with whose adherents Israel sought peaceful relations and whose religious institutions within Israel would be fully protected and accessible to all peaceful pilgrims, and his commitment to continue fighting against militant Islamist terrorist groups, which he pointed out had distorted the true meaning of Islam.)

Netanyahu said he hoped to "complete the journey begun by the first Likud government in 1977 with the breakthrough of peace with Egypt. My commitment to bringing this long journey to its successful and comprehensive completion is unwavering. Turkey under your leadership can and must play a critical role in this historic process." The Israeli prime minister added that he would "welcome the possibility of meeting with you at an early opportunity either in Israel or in Turkey, as you see fit." Foreign Minister David Levy sent a similar message to Foreign Minister Çiller, who had reportedly called him to reassure the Israelis that Turkish foreign policy would not change.

Broad Support for Continuing Turkish-Israeli Ties

Within Israel there is a broad consensus in both Labor and Likud that good relations with Turkey are in Israel's national interest. Within Turkey as well, all the secularist parties from the Socialist left to the moderate right — who together garnered more than 75 percent of the vote in the December 1995 elections — have been supportive of close ties with Israel, although they have sometimes been critical of specific Israeli policies, especially concerning the Palestinians.

When interviewed by CNN shortly after Erbakan's designation as premier, former Prime Minister Shimon Peres commented: "Governments may change but basic interests remain."

The recently expanded ties between Ankara and Jerusalem certainly reflect common interests. These range from a concern over Syrian-supported terrorism and irredentist demands against Turkey (for Hatay, ceded by Mandatory France in 1939) and Israel (for the Golan), to Israel's successful diplomatic campaign last year to win European Union approval of a customs union with Turkey. A November 1994 agreement to share intelligence and police cooperation to combat drug dealing and terrorism has benefited both sides.

The March 1996 Free Trade Agreement is projected

to increase bilateral trade from the current less than \$500 million to \$2 billion annually by the year 2000. In addition, there are increasingly important joint ventures in Turkey and the Turkic republics. For example, Israeli industrialist and entrepreneur Stef Wertheimer is working to establish a joint Israeli-Turkish industrial park in Izmir, and Israeli agricultural experts and irrigation equipment manufacturers have, with U.S. encouragement, introduced water-saving technologies and methods for improving crop yields, animal husbandry, and fish raising both in southeastern Turkey and in the Turkic republics. In addition, an estimated 300,000 Israeli tourists last year spent \$240 million in Turkey.

Defense industry cooperation includes a \$650 million contract that Israel Aircraft Industries has been awarded by the Turkish Air Force to upgrade 54 of its U.S.-supplied F-4 Phantom jets with sophisticated Israeli radar systems, air-to-air missiles, and advanced avionics. Since both Israel and Turkey employ the same American weapons systems, it was logical for them to conclude in February 1996 a reciprocal military training agreement for their air and naval personnel.

This latter agreement aroused a storm of criticism in Syria, Iran, and initially even in Egypt, until the Turks reassured Cairo that the planes would be unarmed and that Ankara had similar agreements with 16 countries, including Egypt. Within Turkey, this growing strategic relationship with Israel has been endorsed by all the secular parties from the social democratic left to the nationalist right.

Netanyahu's letter to the new Turkish prime minister is a clear indication that Jerusalem hopes that after he is fully briefed by the civilian and military members of the National Security Council, Erbakan will realize that the ties with Israel are indeed beneficial to Turkey.

Since his designation as premier, Erbakan said he would cooperate with the West, seek full membership in the EU, and increase ties with the Islamic, Central Asian and Balkan countries, with which Turkey has "spiritual and historic links." Reassuring the U.S., NATO and the EU that he would abide by previous agreements, Erbakan however stipulated he would not implement those that are "against national security and national interests." This was interpreted as an allusion to the recent Turco-Israeli military agreement.

On July 2, in a statement issued after meeting with a U.S. delegation headed by Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff, Erbakan made no reference to the Turkish-Israeli military agreement, but declared: "Israel must abide by United Nations decisions and, as a first

step to secure peace in the Middle East, withdraw from the territories it invaded, including the Golan Heights." It should be noted that this statement was fully consistent with the Turkish position on the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israel conflict since the 1950s. After the 1967 War, Turkey's position was similar to that of the European Community in its Venice Declaration. That declaration differed from the American position in that in addition to calling for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories in exchange for an end to Arab belligerence and recognition of Israel's right to exist within secure and recognized borders, Turkey and the Europeans favored the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. When the Palestine National Council met in Algiers in November 1988, Turkey was among the first to grant immediate recognition to the "State of Palestine."

Ankara Takes a More Active Role in Mideast Peace Efforts

In December 1991, after the start of Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in Madrid, Ankara formally raised the level of its relations with both Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization to embassy status. Since January 1992 when five multilateral working groups connected to the peace process were set up, Turkey has been an active participant, especially in the groups dealing with economic development, water, and arms control and regional security. (So far, Syria and Syrian-dominated Lebanon have refused to participate in the multilateral working groups.)

Before her November 1994 visit to Israel, Prime Minister Çiller headed a 200-member delegation to the Middle East and North African Summit in Casablanca. There she expressed the view that "Turkey can play an important role in the new architecture of the Middle East...due to its geostrategic location and involvement in various regional organizations."

In Israel she followed up this theme by noting that regional progress would come step-by-step, beginning with Turkish-Israeli projects: "Then we can come up with interlinking institutions for the whole area. Egypt can be included, likewise Jordan. We can open up further, if more countries are willing to take part." She met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat in Gaza and pledged Turkish help for housing and other infrastructure projects, noting that Turkish firms had gained wide experience in construction projects in the oil-rich countries of the region during the oil boom of the early 1980s. This offer was welcomed by Palestinian officials.

During her visit to Jerusalem, she summed up Ankara's vision of Turkey's growing regional role: "If you want the peace process to continue, economic cooperation is the only way to sustain it. We have a key position in the Middle East and we want to live up to our responsibility." It is to be hoped that Prime Minister Erbakan will not try to block continued progress in Turkish-Israeli relations and may even come to share his foreign minister's vision and see Israel as a positive element in the region.

Domestic Challenges Facing the New Turkish Government

The new government will have to grapple with formidable economic and social problems: inflation of over 80 percent, a reported 10 million unemployed or underemployed among a rapidly growing population (now 62 million), an immense and growing budget deficit, unproductive state enterprises, and the cost of fighting the decade-long, Syrian-backed, armed insurrection by the Marxist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). This has resulted in nearly 20,000 persons killed, and an exodus of some 3,000,000 from the war-plagued villages of eastern Anatolia into the big cities.

The Basis of the Refah Party's Popular Appeal

The RP won the mayoralty in Istanbul, Ankara, and other important and largely secular cities through well-organized grassroots campaigning among these millions of displaced villagers who live in overcrowded slums, by promising clean government, housing, and a wide range of social services that the "corrupt" secular parties had failed to deliver. (An Israeli parallel might be Shas, an American one Tammany Hall.)

The dynamic young Refah mayors have been pragmatic and have refrained from Erbakan's extremist rhetoric. Upon election, Istanbul Mayor Tayip Erdogan visited the Chief Rabbi to assure him that he would work for the benefit of all citizens, irrespective of religion. The Refah mayor of Ankara took care to invite Israeli ambassador Zvi El-Peleg to a dinner he hosted for foreign diplomats, even placing an Israeli flag before his place.

As a further indication of the new government's readiness to dialogue with Israel, a Refah member of parliament attended the reception given by El-Peleg on July 2, honoring famed Turcologist Bernard Lewis, who is Jewish, on his 80th birthday.

While Erbakan served in junior posts in three coalition governments in the 1970s, it remains to be seen how effectively he will govern. He is an engineer

by training and has some business experience. Now he will be responsible for any administrative failures. Already his reputation as "Mr. Clean" is being questioned by allegations that he registered party property in his own name and that some 25 percent of the funds collected for Bosnian relief ended up in RP coffers.

Erbakan knows not to again antagonize the military, the self-appointed guardians of Kemal Atatürk's secularist principles. On September 6, 1980, a demonstration by Erbakan supporters in the Islamic fundamentalist city of Konya, ostensibly to protest Israel's Jerusalem Law, degenerated into calls for restoration of the *Sharia* (Islamic law) and the burning of the American and Israeli flags. For the military this was the last straw at a time when Turkey was racked by extremist right and left violence. Six days later the military stepped in, banned political parties and arrested their leaders. Erbakan was tried but not convicted of violating the constitutional ban on religious parties. The military stepped down and multi-party politics resumed in 1983.

To show that he learned his lesson, Erbakan's first act as premier-designate was to lay a wreath at Atatürk's tomb. In the National Security Council, Erbakan has one vote. President Demirel and the other eight political and military leaders are all secularists and support ties with Israel. Binyamin Netanyahu's recent condemnation of Syria as a terrorist-supporting state, noting its support of the PKK and other anti-Turkish groups, was welcomed in Ankara, especially after the concern expressed by Demirel and others that Premier Peres and President Clinton were whitewashing Assad in hopes for a quick agreement.

In his address to the U.S. Congress, Netanyahu emphasized that if Syria genuinely wanted to achieve peace with Israel, Assad had to finally stop his tactical support for terrorist groups and make a strategic choice for peaceful relations with his neighbors.

While there is widespread support within Turkey for improving relations with Israel, there is also considerable sympathy for the Palestinians, and this goes beyond the religious elements who voted for Erbakan. If Israel's negotiations with the Palestinians are seen to stall, all parties in the Turkish Parliament may be expected to blame Israel, as they have in the past.

Moderate Religious Identification May Help Turkish-Israeli Ties

The Netanyahu government's religious-secular coalition and renewed emphasis on Jewish religious values may also resonate with the moderate religious elements in Turkey. Explaining why she had agreed to join a coalition with Erbakan's pro-Islamist party,

Mrs. Çiller told a CNN interviewer on July 9, that she had not abandoned her principles. "We stand for secular government and further democratization." Personal religious piety was consistent with this. "I represent the secular government and men and women who believe in our religion." She pointed out that some 80 percent of the Turkish people wanted a moderate government and opposed any kind of extremism. She saw her role as helping to bring East and West together. Looking toward the U.S. and the European Union, she declared, "everyone should be reassured. We will set an example for Europe on how to live side by side with different cultures." This was possibly a pointed reminder to the Europeans of their failure to prevent "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia and other examples of racism and religious intolerance, such as that directed against Turkish families in Germany and other Western European countries.

As noted, under an agreement between the Turkish and Israeli agriculture ministries, Israel has introduced highly efficient drip irrigation and other water saving techniques in the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) area. Already cotton yields have been doubled and water consumption halved in pilot projects. In this way, Turkey hopes to raise living standards in this largely Kurdish area, reduce the appeal of the PKK, and thereby reduce emigration to the cities. This ranks high on the agenda of Prime Minister Erbakan, who has long advocated developing industry and agriculture in the provincial towns of Turkey. His support has also come from small businessmen and farmers in Anatolia who feel that they had lost out to the large industrial corporations and international trading companies based in Istanbul and Izmir. (The fact that some of these companies are Jewish-owned may partly explain the political appeal in the hinterland of his inveighing against them in the past.)

Thus if the new government in Ankara continues to follow traditional Turkish pragmatism, it will find many areas of common interest with Israel.

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Published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1996, 95pp.

Separate English and Hebrew editions - NIS 25 (\$10.00)