

Religion as a Factor in Israeli - Turkish Relations: A Constructivist Overlook

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Abstract *The influence of religion in the foreign policy has recently begun to be discussed among the scholars of international relations field. That the role of religion as an attribute of individuals and communities and in its institutional connections with the state cannot be ignored has started to be widely accepted. This study argues that besides the material reasons stemming from realpolitik, there are also behind the scene, certain “cultural codes” that have played an important role on the actions and discourses of Turkey’s leaders on the foreign policies and especially on the deterioration of Israeli - Turkish relations. This study seeks to find the effects, if there are, of religion in the Israeli - Turkish relations by exemplifying Turkey in its relations with Israel to see whether the recent rupture is a result of the religious orientation of AKP government.*

Keywords: Religion and Politics, Religion in International Relations, Turkish-Israeli relations, Foreign policy of AKP, Constructivism

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The influence of religion in the relations between states is one of the intellectual challenges to the scholars of the international relations (IR). Whether religion has a role in the making of foreign policies continues to be a question in IR. It is possible to compile some examples of religious rhetoric that have been used by the leaders around the world, however this still raise the question whether they were arisen from the leader's religious affiliation as foreign policy attitude or they were just due to different geopolitical circumstances, electoral conditions or interest group pressures.

The role of identity in Turkish foreign policy is recently discussed as Turkey is now under the rule of a political party with roots in the political Islamic movement. At the beginning of its government period, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have pursued Western oriented policies until recently. Then, it is asserted that its policies have inclined towards the Middle East and that there occurred a *shift of axis* in Turkey's foreign policy. Does this "change" mean that Turkey's population has become more Islamist or was it a response of Turkish leaders to the emerging geopolitical circumstances and opportunities? Or, does the reason of deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations may be found in the religious affiliations of the country's policymakers? It is the argument of this study that the role of religion as an attribute of individuals and communities and in its institutional connections with the state cannot be ignored.

This study argues that besides the material reasons resultant from *realpolitik*, there are also behind the scene, certain "cultural codes" that have played an important role on the actions and discourses of Turkish leaders and on the deterioration of Israeli - Turkish relations. Considering that the essence of a state is its identity deriving from its culture, one may assert that religion is inherent in a country's national identity, shaping its institutions and shaping its foreign policy interests. This study further aims at analyzing Turkish foreign policy whether it has been shaped recently by religiously affiliated identities. Every religion desires to influence and arrange the society and the mundane authority toward its understanding and its interests. So, the examination of the relationship between religion as a sociological ingredient rooted in the social structure and the political field should be based on this reality.

Within the light of this background, this study seeks to illuminate the place of religion in the policies of Turkey and to explain how religion might affect foreign policy making processes. Where does religion take part within the socio-political structure? What sort of relationship may be built between religion and politics? And to what degree the religion influences the foreign policies of states? Is a leader's religion a cause or reason of his/her foreign policy or is it just a rhetorical rationalization to persuade others? Does religious affiliation of a leader may be a predictor of which side a leader will take in a dispute? As for the Turkey-Israel case, is it really Islam that forces the country's leaders to take a stand towards Israel? And finally, are the religious affiliation and orientation one of the reasons behind the deepening alienation between Israel and Turkey in recent years?

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the relation of religion-politics and foreign policy attitudes would be examined. Second, the understanding of politics in Islam and the reflection of this understanding on the foreign policy making processes would be elaborated. And finally, Israeli - Turkish relations would be analyzed so as to reveal whether Islam has had an impact on deepening alienation between the two countries.

The Nexus of Religion and Politics

The relation of religion and politics has long been the subject and the *problematique* of many researches. That the religion and the politics enter into relation is inevitable from a theoretical perspective is widely accepted today. The examination of the relations between individual religious and political attitude and the one between religion as a social institution and political organization

leads the researcher to the conclusion that the religion may be influential in determining the political actions.

People exist within the society that shelters sui generis cultural patterns. Accordingly, one may assume that personality is an individual expression of cultural structure while culture is the collective expression of the individual.¹ As for religion, it is a component of culture and a constituent of social structure as a social institution. The people born into a society with specific religion, values and beliefs. Ultimately, this paves the way for the influence of these cultural codes on the formation of political points of views, ideologies and etc. Throughout the history, religion has been in a relationship with the fields such as law, politics, economics and ethics that form the social structure. Therefore, it has also been an important factor on the identity formation processes.

It would be deficient to consider a society's culture as independent and separate from its socio-economic structure since neither tradition nor institution may be found unattended and isolated in the complexity of social structure. Religion is not independent from this verdict. Considering the religions as the sociological realities of the countries; it would not be realistic to assert that religion has no relation with the politics. Contrarily, as a component of the social world, the religion would influence the other components of the complete and it would be influenced by them at the same time. Therefore, religion has the power to transform the politics and vice versa.

However, the relationship between religion and politics is *paradoxical* and *complex*. Religion deals with the sacred whereas politics deals with the profane. Likewise, the basic power envisaged in politics belongs to this world while the power in religion is transcendental and from another world. Both religion and politics put emphasis on social relationships but with a difference: the former emphasizes integration for congregational bonds whereas the latter for order in society. The differences between religion and politics may be multiplied and seen from this perspective; the two concepts seem to be in conflict because of the contrasting ideas. Still, their interaction is incontestable. This study defines religion as a symbolic system that carries within multiple meanings. Thus, religions are not static or absolute doctrines; they are interpreted and reproduced by individuals. Clifford Geertz's definition of religion in his article "Religion as a Cultural System" is one of the definitions that do not consider the religion as a fixed meaning system, but as a cultural system capable of generating multiple systems of meaning:

A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²

Hence, this conceptualization leads to the idea that religion in itself cannot become a political force and that the way the religion arranges behaviors depends on how individuals use, interpret and produce the doctrine; therefore *how individuals use its political potential makes the religion political*.³ That's how religion circumscribes, defines or qualifies the political activity. The persistent settlement activity of Israel in West Bank since the 1970s, for instance, is based on the religious premise that those territories were divinely allocated to the Jews 2000 years ago. Today, building settlements in the territories has become one of the ways of polling. Even in relatively secular states, a political activity may need a religious obligation which Raymond Firth calls "canopy syndrome." According to Firth, in most Western countries, political leaders invoke a postulate of Almighty God to confer blessing and guidance on the nation and this is intensified in times of crisis.⁴

The political dimension of religion may emerge when questions of authority arise. In these times, religion may operate as a social movement with its own political dimension. The prominence of Muslim Brothers in Egyptian elections and the victory of the Islamist En- Nahda party in Tunisia are the examples of how religion may turn into a social movement and then a political party and may come to power with the promise of a stable society that is less vulnerable to contradictions.

Apart from giving meanings to the world, religion is a system of political manoeuvre. The individual interests may be translated into common public interests via the religion so as to achieve

a goal of a political community. It also forms a basis for political mobilization. The current political events in the Middle East characterized as Arab Spring usually take place after the Friday sermons demonstrate how rituals may be transformed into political activities.

The Role of Religion in International Relations

Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon which plays various roles in peoples' lives by being the source of world views, source of identity and legitimacy⁵. Hence, a country's religious heritage may affect its orientation towards foreign policy. A state may use claims of common religious heritage that would culminate with cooperative, collaborative foreign policies; but on the other hand it may lead to aggression if one state uses common religious heritage for instance to assist foreign insurgencies and civil wars. Therefore, religious differences may be used *instrumentally* as a justification for aggression or non-cooperation.

As this study addresses religion which is inherent in the shared beliefs, ideas and in the cultural codes of a society and its influence on foreign policy attitudes, then the analyses would be built upon the constructivism theory which deals fundamentally with the issue of the role of the ideas (targets, threats, fears, identities) on shaping the policies and it puts emphasis on norms, perceptions, and values.

According to Alexander Wendt⁶, human associations are determined by shared ideas rather than substantial powers and the interests, and identities or culture of the actors are not given by the nature, rather they are constructed by the shared ideas in question. Religion is typically viewed as one aspect of culture, thus its influence on IR is theorized in the context of culture. Religion's influence in the interactions of states is one of the issues that are neglected in the international relations field. The role of religion in foreign policies of states still remains a controversial question while it emerges as a significant factor in certain analysis of international relations field. The reasons of disregard for religion are found in several trends.

In the first hand, it may be assumed that Western centric social sciences rejected the religion as an explanation of the world, so did the international relations field. As the study of international relations is heavily influenced by behavioralism and the use of quantitative methodology, religion is seen as immeasurable to base the assumptions.⁷

With modernization, the understanding that the world may only be explained via the scientific, rational and legalistic means has become dominant and the religion as an explanation is totally rejected by social thinkers. Modernization theory declared the demise of the primordial factors as ethnicity and religion and offered a Western type of development that would lead to the re-shaping of local societies. However, modernization has emerged as an ideology rather than a reality; that's why it was resisted and as a result religious resurgence occurred. Ironically, the resurgence of religion is attributed to the modernization. The creation of a counter-culture rooted in traditions and religious beliefs emerged as an organized criticism and rejection of modernity, therefore the efforts of modernization have failed and caused a religious backlash.

In Middle East, this trend has been manifested in the movements such as Sanusi movement in Libya, Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria and Jordan and Jewish fundamentalism in Israel. Eroding credibility of the secular regimes created a vacuum of political and moral authority and religious organizations were well positioned to fill the vacuum.⁸ The traditional religious institutions such as churches, mosques or synagogues began to be used for political purposes and through a selected re-interpretation of sacred texts such as Bible, Qur'an or the Torah, new politicized interpretations have emerged.

The rise of that kind of religious "fundamentalist" groups and the Iranian revolution which is perceived as a threat to West and its institutions have convinced political scientists that the

religion might have certain effects on the international relations field, but with an unfavorable treatment. Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis (1993) and Mark Jurgensmeyer's New Cold War thesis (1993) are the most recognized approaches that take into account the role of religion in international relations. Huntington's thesis would see the light of the day with the September 2001 bombings of the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington DC. This watershed event made difficult, if not impossible; to overlook the fact that at the very least there exists religiously motivated people who seek to influence the international status quo.⁹ This event was seen as a religious one, thus located Islam against the West.

Huntington's thesis was based on the assumption that the fundamental source of the conflict would be primarily cultural and that the principal conflicts in global politics would be between nations and groups of different civilizations.¹⁰ Considering culture as the part of a larger construct of civilization, Huntington argued that religion was a defining feature of the culture concept¹¹ and that a country's religious heritage determines its enemies and allies, thus cooperation and conflict between states. As people define their identity according to ethnical and religious bases, they are likely to see an "us" versus "them" relation¹² and this helps specify the state's international allies and enemies. George W. Bush's speech following September 2001 events was one example of "the west vs. rest" understanding, accepting the countries that would be with U.S. as allies, and the ones who would stay neutral as enemies.

Huntington's thesis has been argued and criticized until today. Giacomo Chiozza, after analyzing Huntington's thesis through various examples, reached the conclusion that while tensions and contrasts might arise, the civilizational factor is unlikely to be their main underlying cause and that civilizational differences seem unlikely to become the dominant factor that shapes the patterns of enmity and friendship in the international arena.¹³ Likewise, Jonathan Fox after examining the outcomes of the Minorities at Risk dataset, ended up with the conclusion that although there is some support regarding Huntington's thesis about Islam in the West; there is not any general sign of an increase in civilizational conflict from a broader global perspective.¹⁴ Rather than locating religion as the reasons of the conflict or as the new threat against the Western civilization after communism, this study mainly sees religion as a pattern in formulating foreign policy attitudes, as one of the guides taken by the foreign policy makers in the policy making processes.

Certainly, it should be kept in mind that, a religion is not a monolithic entity and that it may shelter various understandings within. Islam, for instance, has different interpretations in Iran and Turkey, thus these differences might have varied potential influences on the foreign policy activities of these countries.¹⁵ Hence, how is religion prevalent in international relations? Jonathon Fox offers three ways that religion influences international politics. Firstly, religion is a source of legitimacy for both supporting and criticizing government behavior both locally and internationally.¹⁶ An extreme example of this is found on the calls for war that are justified as holy war. Aside from being a means to mobilize support for policies, religion can be an important element of stability of international system.¹⁷ Secondly, religion/religious affiliations might influence political attitudes, behaviors, thus decision making processes. As religion is composed of a value oriented meaning system, it is likely that foreign policies might be motivated by religious concerns or religious worldviews.

This situation is clear in U.S. foreign policy towards Middle East. Walter Russel Mead argues that Christian religious heritage is important in U.S. foreign policy as "religion shapes the nation's character, helps form Americans' ideas about the world, and influences the ways Americans respond to events beyond their borders"¹⁸. Jody Baumgartner and Peter Francia have found, by using data from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, that religion is a significant factor in predicting support for Bush administration's unpopular Middle East policy among the believers in biblical prophecy as they believe that Bush administration's go-it-alone foreign policy, hands-off attitude towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war on Iraq are not simply the actions of a national interest, but part of an unfolding divine plan.¹⁹ Additionally, U.S. policy towards Israel cannot be explained independently from biblical interpretations by excluding religious factor, by just appealing to material national interests. The neo-conservatives and evangelicals believe that in order to establish the Kingdom of Heaven, the Jewish state should be re-established on the promised

lands. Therefore, the existence of the Jewish state is needed for redemption. This understanding musters up relatively strong support in United States and has become one of the powerful assets for the Israeli lobby in U.S.²⁰

The approach of Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict bears, too, the traces of influences of religious worldviews. He contends that Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be solved unless the issue of Jerusalem is solved and that the Jerusalem issue cannot be solved unless the issue of Al-Aqsa mosque is solved.²¹ This motivation prevails in the attitudes of Palestinians and Israelis, both make claims to the same territory based on religion. These examples clearly demonstrate that religious worldviews might be influential in foreign policy attitudes. Thirdly, religion may occur in international relations field as an international issue when domestic issues cross the borders and begin concerning the other states. Religion might be a motivation for interventions. Iran provides military support for Shi'a minorities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Islamic Chechen region has received support from states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Abkhazia.²² On the other hand, religious fundamentalism, religious terrorist groups and political Islam have become transnational religious phenomena.²³ Religious terrorist groups include numerous members from various countries and they act internationally. It has become a fact that there are *mujahideens* from all around the world involved in the ongoing civil war in Syria and two of them have been caught by Turkish authorities after they killed one Turkish soldier and one police officer in Niğde on 19 March 2014. It has been revealed that they belong to Albanian and Kosovan nationalities and that they came to Syria for fighting in the name of God.²⁴ Political Islam has also become transnational due to information and communication technologies of globalization²⁵ and it seeks to spread the influence of its ideology worldwide.

If a general conceptualization is made, it might be suggested that religion as a systemic cause limits, selects, reproduces and mediates the range of foreign policy decisions, and the cause might appear as power in realist school, as interests in liberal school, as rules in the institutionalist school and as ideas in the constructivist school.²⁶ If not a monolithic force, religion is the important aspect of the international system influencing, transforming, reshaping foreign policy decisions by manifesting itself in the belief systems and actions of individuals.

The Politics of Religion in Turkey

Islam as a religion is constituted not only by faith but also by adherence to law. Additionally, Islam is also a "social religion" laying down the rules that arrange the relations between the people.²⁷ As a result of this understanding, all aspects of life and institutional settings within the community of Islam are arranged according to this body of divine law. Islam, like Judaism, does not deny its relation with the politics. Theoretically, Islam determines the person who would govern the society, the authorities of the ruler and the rights of the ruled. The political discussion within Islam is not about the source of sovereignty, but mostly about determining the Islamic groundwork for legitimacy. Likewise, as the dean of the El-Azhar University defines, Islam is an emancipatory power within the cultural framework, so it is a means for the liberation of Egypt, as a nation, from its colonial past.²⁸ Islam has been inherent in the political life since the very foundation of Turkey.

Despite nearly nine decades of aggressive secularization, Islam still continues to retain social and political position in Turkey²⁹ and Islamic card has always been part of a political agenda in the country³⁰. The outline of Turkish political activity might be divided into three movements³¹ which were dominant during the disintegration period of the Ottoman Empire and these ideological settings would play a role in shaping the current political arrays of modern Turkey. The ideological movements that search for a solution to the impasse of the Empire had three different political agendas. Reformist movements sought for Ottomanism while nationalist movements saw Turkism as a solution.

As for religious movements, Islamism would save the Empire from that retrograde situation. Nationalist movements ultimately evolved in time into the Republican People's Party

(CHP) whereas the ideologies of religious (Islamism) and reformist (Ottomanism) movements were gathered in the political stances of Democratic Party (DP) in the 1950s and National View Movement in the 1970s. And the other parties with religious tendency derived from this movement: the National Salvation Party (MSP), the Welfare Party (RP), Virtue Party (FP) and the Felicity Party (SP). It must be noted that not only religious parties appealed to Islam in their political activities, but also the parties situated in the right and the center used Islamic card in their political agendas.

According to John Esposito, the policies of Turgut Ozal, (the Prime Minister in the 45th Government and the leader of the Motherland Party) were the greatest contribution to the legitimization of political Islam as he adopted Turk-Islam synthesis and advocated that Islamic heritage was the fundamental pattern of Turkish identity and national solidarity.³² The recent Islam-leaning party which is one of the outcomes of the divisions in National View Movement emerged after the “post-modern coup d’etat” on 28 February 1997 is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that has been ruling Turkey during the last decade. AKP was founded, in August 2001, by the members of pro-Islamist parties mentioned above and the main founders of the party, all come from the National View tradition. Unlike its predecessors who claim that if Turkey joins EU, it would be a province of Israel³³, AKP is in favor of EU membership and it does not have explicit anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist rhetoric; however, this would change with Israel’s strike in Gaza on 2008. The chain of events beginning with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza during Davos Summit would then lead to the deterioration of mutual relations, and Turkey’s discourse regarding Israeli policies in general, and its actions in the West Bank against Palestinians in particular would begin to be interpreted as anti-Zionist.

On the other hand, AKP has based its identity on pluralism, citizenship consciousness and free market economy whereas SP still reconstructs its identity on morality. AKP is also a coalition of different Islamic groupings. However, this is not to say that AKP won the elections because it vowed for an Islamic order, nor for having an Islamic agenda to apply after coming to power. AKP’s success lies within the resentment of the population against deteriorating economy and high inflation, and political infighting among the members of the coalition of that period under Bulent Ecevit. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that in the political history, conservative ideology has been shaped generally by Turkish nationalism, by religion as a value system and by capitalism as an economic system, hence one might claim that Islam as a moral system is subordinate to Turkish nationalism.³⁴

AKP is also different from its similar forerunners for not refraining from emphasizing the importance of faith in the life of Turks and for not being apologetic about its Ottoman past.³⁵ Therefore, AKP shelters both religious and reformist ideologies which emerged during the disintegration period of Ottoman Empire. As for foreign policy, it is visible that there has been a change in foreign policy of Turkey over the last decade after AKP’s coming to power. The denial of the memorandum which would give permission for disposal of Turkish territories by U.S. troops for launching an offensive against Iraq in 2003, Turkish military’s not taking part in the operations in Iraq, its refusing to get involved in fighting in Afghanistan despite its being part of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) were the signs that Turkey would follow another path in foreign policy under AKP’s rule. Contrary to the former years, Turkey has inclined more on the regional affairs and it has begun to pursue a pro-active policy towards the issues within the region. To do so, it has reinforced its religious identity to mend fences with its neighbors and has become actively involved in Middle East.³⁶

However, this is not to imply that before AKP’s administration, Turkey did not pursue policies to develop relations with Middle Eastern countries. It was supportive of Palestinian cause without straining its relations with Israel and it was attempting to mend its relations with Syria. In the late 1990s, Ismail Cem, then Minister of Foreign Affairs had offered “region focused foreign policy” towards the Middle East that would be replaced with security centered approach. By doing so, Ismail Cem sought to develop good relations with the countries of the region. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Turkey’s proactive policies in the Middle East began to draw attention with AKP’s policies and they are generally welcomed by Arab Street and by Arab countries. One may find the fact that Sunni interpretation of Islam, as a common religious heritage, is a cement between

Turkey and the most Arab states. On the other hand, this explains well the positive stance of Arab states regarding Turkey's involvement in Middle Eastern issues as a regional power might also be emphasized as a possible useful counterbalance against Iran which is seen as hostile power by the Arabs, based on the historical rivalry between Shiites and Sunnis.

Additionally, the fact is that Turkey has emerged as a democratic country with a religious identity has refuted, in the eyes of the Arab people, the generally accepted idea that Islam cannot be side by side with democracy. As for the rhetoric towards Israel, it is inevitable that a country criticizing the actions of Israel would win the hearts and minds of the Arab public opinion as well as the approval of Arab administrations. Hence, Turkey's criticism against Israeli policies has paved the way for this recognition and it has been a catalyst for the rise of Turkey in the region who does not refrain from "angering" Israel and U.S. Despite the fact that Israel has been a valuable security partner of Turkey, its policies against the Palestinians have not been approved by the government and the latest events culminated with the breakdown of the mutual relations.

Given the fact that Erdoğan's criticism of Israel arises from Muslim sensitivity to a certain degree; may Turkey's policy toward Israel be read as the outcome of the policy makers' Muslim identities? Or, are they just necessary steps that should be taken in order to realize the national interests of Turkey in the region? To understand this, one should search for a shift, if there is, in Turkish foreign policy and should look into Turkish-Israeli relations whether the deterioration is due to Islamic delicacy or it is a part of an agenda in the pursuit of national interests.

Israeli - Turkish Relations: Stuck in AKP's Islamist Policies?

When Turkey-Israel relations are examined in the historical context, it would become clear that the religion has been a factor of the development and the deterioration of mutual relations. In the 1990s, for instance, developing relations was due to preventing Turkey's "Islamisation" and in the second half of the 2000s deteriorating relations were, to a certain degree due to Muslim sensitivity and religious affiliation that could not stay quiet against the Israeli actions towards "Palestinian Muslim brethren (a characterization usually made by PM)"

Golden Years of Mutual Relations: 1990s

1990s were the golden years of the Turkish-Israeli relations. The warm climate created by the Middle East Peace Process, the warming of Turkish-U.S. relations, and Turkey's search for the allies against Iran and Syria which were backing PKK actions have been important determinants for developing the mutual relations. After all, there was one important reason that cannot be ignored. According to Baskın Oran, the rising of Welfare Party in Turkey was met with concern by military and bureaucratic elites; hence this paved the way for the rapprochement with Israel which was seen by Turkish authorities as the only democratic, secular and Western oriented country in the Middle East. Those groups believed that by developing the relations with Israel, any effort for establishing economic and political relations with Islamic countries would thus be prevented.³⁷

This understanding clearly demonstrates that religion, no matter in what way it is interpreted (negatively or positively), might be a powerful factor in determining the political attitudes. This political stance adopted by the military and bureaucratic elites of that time would also diminish the effect of religion in domestic politics, so the power of Welfare Party. Similar argument was advanced by Efraim Inbar, an Israeli scholar; "Turkey's relation with Israel which is secular and Western oriented, supports the Westerner Turkish elites on their struggle with the identity of Turkish society³⁸" Therefore, it might be claimed that there is a powerful link between the rapprochement with Israel and the efforts to protect the secular system of Turkey against Necmettin Erbakan's (then Prime Minister) efforts to realign Turkey's foreign policy towards

Islamic countries and domestic policies towards Islamist ideology³⁹, hence to “Islamize” both domestic and foreign policy. Hereby, by referring to “radical Islam threat”, steps were made towards developing the relations with Israel in every field. The alliances that were made and the treatments that were signed are based on the threat of Islamization, thus securing Turkey against such developments. A block was sought to be established with Israel against the alliances that were planned to be founded with Islamic countries.

As a matter of fact, this effort has reached to a level that, according to Ali Balcı, Erbakan was forced by the military and diplomatic circles who were afraid of his religiously motivated agenda, to continue the good relations with Israel.⁴⁰ Thus, Erbakan was not powerful enough to realize his promises about Israel that he had given during the election campaign.⁴¹ Based upon the fact that public opinion might be influential on foreign policy making processes; it may be claimed that religious sensitivity of Turkish public opinion regarding the Palestinian situation during the Al-Aqsa Intifada has had effects on foreign policy discourses of Turkish leaders even before AKP’s rule. The stance that Israel has taken towards the Palestinians during the Al-Aqsa Intifada which began in 2000 was met with high level reactions among the public opinion in Turkey and what was happening in Palestine was perceived by the majority of the Turkish public opinion as persecution against Muslims. In such a circumstance, the rhetoric of having warm relations with Israel has lost its legitimacy. The reactions reached to so high levels that the sensitive social attitude made the President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to give a speech that criticized Israel in the 16th OIC Conference: “The violent actions undertaken against our Palestinian brethren after the Friday prayer in the Harem al-Sharif, one of the holiest places of Islam, have deeply wounded the Muslim World. Appealing to violence cannot be accepted⁴²”. Likewise, the killing of 70 Palestinians in Jenin during the Al-Aqsa Intifada has been protested in many cities of Turkey such as Erzurum, Urfa and Istanbul. The pressure coming from the public opinion has made Bulent Ecevit, then Prime Minister, criticize harshly the Israeli actions. In that speech, Bulent Ecevit defined what was happened in Jenin as genocide. The exigency that lies under those speeches has given prominence to the role of solidarity emanating from religious similarity of the two peoples. From this point of view, it might be argued that mutual relationship has become problematic beginning from this date, even when a “secular” government and President were in the office.

As is seen from the analysis above, it is clear that the ties between Turkey and Israel have become a zone of contestation over Turkey’s national orientation and a source of polarization between contending segments of society⁴³, i.e. between seculars and conservatives. For instance, during the demonstrations of Welfare Party supporters who were against the growing ties with Israel, there were placards proclaiming “Turkish Media are the Servant of Israel”, “This is Turkey, not Israel”, “Turkey will not become Israel”⁴⁴. The criticism of a foreign policy issue during a domestic struggle between the military and the society clearly demonstrates Israeli antipathy among religious circles of the Turkish society. And either implicit or without consciousness, there has emerged, to a certain degree, anti- Semitic tendencies fostered by Israeli actions towards the “Muslim Palestinians” who were, in the eyes of the public, cruelly behaved and dismissed from their territories.

Consequently, during the 1990s, the close ties between Turkish military and Israel was interpreted by the Turkish public opinion as serving Israel’s anti-Islamic agenda in the Middle East. Relations with Israel have become a phenomenon inside Turkey among the public opinion and the issue has become a polarizing element in Turkey. The relations with Israel mobilized certain groups as opponents (Erbakan’s party, Islamist politicians and opinion leaders) and some others as proponents (especially Turkish military elite). During the visit of David Levy, then Israeli Foreign Minister to Turkey in 1997, Cengiz Candar, a veteran Turkish journalist, had analyzed the problematic relations with Israel as follows: “If a Muslim country in the Middle East pursues a foreign policy relevant to Israel, this would strengthen Israel while neutralize that country. Besides, this would eventually erase that country’s power of influence not only in the Middle East but also in the international arena” by also adding that “in case of emergence of the clashes, the sympathy would undoubtedly be towards the Palestinians who were being targeted by Israeli soldiers.”⁴⁵ With

the AKP in power, this trend would gain speed and with the Israeli strike on Gaza in 2008 the rupture in the Turkish-Israeli relations would begin.

The AKP Period: Relations in the Shadow of Religious Orientation?

Between 2000 and 2008, Turkey has played the mediator role between Israel and Arab countries. By doing so, AKP government has equated Israel and Arab states. Israel, in the eye of this government, is no more sine qua non strategic partner of Turkey. In this period, Israel has been criticized more loudly because of its actions; Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned Israel's assassination of Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, and defined Israeli operations in Gaza as "state terrorism."⁴⁶

As well as AKP's stance regarding Israel fostered the ground that the party represented, it was also the sign of being able to take action against Israel despite the U.S. The visit of Hamas leader, Khaled Meshal after the Palestinian elections on 2006, was a sign that Turkey could pursue a policy independent from U.S. and Israel while at the same time, this visit revealed the sympathy of AKP towards Hamas. On the other hand, while the world saw the elections as illegitimate, AKP government has accepted the results as legitimate. The sympathy towards Hamas was clearer in some of the Turkish newspapers that covered the election process in Palestine. Whilst relatively "secular" newspapers demonized Hamas, as a terrorist organization killing innocent civilians, Islam-leaning newspapers (among them the ones close to the government) were more sympathetic to Hamas and their coverage were more legitimizing.⁴⁷

That the mutual relations which were once reached a peak in 1990s began to deteriorate with the AKP's rule is criticized by Israel too. The former consul general of Israel in Istanbul, Moti Amihai has said that "Turkey's recent change in policy is due to concerns that the country's chances of joining the European Union are dwindling"⁴⁸. Furthermore, according to the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Aharonoth, the growing trend of Islamification and deepening ties with Syria, Amihai said, are the result of the Erdoğan government's feeling that the Turks cannot serve as mediators between Israel, the Palestinians and the Syrians."⁴⁹ AKP's changing policy regarding Israel and the Middle East in general has been interpreted by Israeli policy makers as a shift of axis towards Muslim countries. Various Jewish columnists and Israeli politicians defined this shift as "Islamization" of Turkey. The chain of events starting with the Gaza strike on 2008, the Davos crisis on 2009, Mavi Marmara Flotilla incident on 2010, Israeli disturbance of a TV serial named "Separation" that has become a highly controversial topic between Israel and Turkey and finally low chair crisis on January 2010 were interpreted as the outcomes of the Islamist policies of AKP government. These expressions demonstrate that Israel, itself, has linked the cause of divergency in mutual relations with religious affiliations of the policy makers. Within this context, the developing relations with Iran and Syria have been perceived as shifting to a more Islamist axis in the foreign policy.

Therefore, it might be claimed that the fundamental problem regarding the mutual relations could be found in the ever increasing pressures against the Palestinians. As well as the principles such as morality, human rights are on duty in this issue, one should not refrain from demonstrating which is clear: *the Muslim sensitivity* and *the disavowal of Zionist policies*. Likewise, it should be kept in mind that AKP's founding members are coming from the National View tradition. Some high level figures of the AKP has in the past vehemently criticized Turkey's relations with Israel and argued that Turkey should lead the Islamic community rather than cooperating with Israel.⁵⁰ It should not also be neglected that by the time AKP came to power, both international and domestic conjuncture was about to change. There has been a government change in U.S. and the new president would seek for soft power instead of hard power in Middle East.

Additionally, inside the country, military elites have begun to retreat from politics, leaving this area to the civil initiative; thus the relationship between Israel and U.S. has begun to be questioned. Within this climate, it might be argued that AKP is more "comfortable" in explaining its views; and that the belief that the relations with U.S. cannot be established by disregarding Israel

has proved to be false. This changing conjuncture has given chance to realize the policies that come into existence with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's thoughts that rebuke Turkey with the Caucasus, Balkan and Middle East identities as well as its being an Asian and European country. Correspondingly, Turkey has to pursue a multidimensional foreign policy. When the rapprochement with Iran in AKP's first years of government is taken into consideration, it is clear that Turkey is determined to pursue a more independent foreign policy and that it anticipates more active policy in Muslim world and in the old Ottoman territories.⁵¹ As well as these insights are based on the geostrategic calculations, they also arise from *Islamic ideological sensitivities*. Ahmet Davutoğlu, who has been the main architect of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East wrote in his influential book which he published as a professor before he entered politics that Turkey's traditional approach to the Middle East was influenced by "Turkey's alienation" and "being torn about the culture of the region and regional balances," as well as "prejudices about the Arab image that was put at the center of foreign policymaking."⁵²

By 2002, the postulate that Turkey and Israel are the sole democratic, secular and Western oriented countries in the region and that they are strangers in the Middle East has begun to fade away. AKP government has not only emphasized Western identity but also the Ottoman and the Muslim identities of the Turkish society. Therefore, common grounds with Israel regarding the identity field has also wiped away.⁵³

According to constructivism, ideas and state identity are determinant on the foreign policies of states. In this context, there has occurred a change on the Turkish state identity and this paved the way for developing close relations with Arab and Muslim world, hence Israel has become of secondary importance. The fact reveals that religion, whether Christianity, Judaism or Islam, is influential on the foreign policy making processes.

As for today, there is not, at least publicly, any relation between Turkey and Israel. Turkey's expectations regarding Israeli apology for the killing of nine Turkish civilians in the Mavi Marmara Flotilla have been foiled by the pro-Israel Palmer Report. Turkey's package of measures and sanctions against Israel in response of the Report has triggered a tension never before seen in the history of the Turkey-Israel relations. Likewise, Erdoğan's claiming Israel as a threat for the region and for its environment since Israel has nuclear weapons demonstrates how mutual relations have entered into quagmire.

Conclusion

A change of paradigm has been occurred in Turkish foreign policy with AKP's coming to power generally and with Davutoğlu's visions regarding the foreign policy particularly. Emphasizing the impact of history, geography, common cultural and religious heritage, Davutoğlu was relatively successful in turning public sympathies in the Arab world toward Turkey. Today, Turkish flags and portraits of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are brandished in most the Arab world. This process of close cooperation with the countries in the Middle East was explained as Turkey's rupture from the West as a result of its locating itself on the same axis with Iran and as a result of the emerging anti-Semitic rhetoric in the Turkish political language. These comments are based on Erdoğan's criticism regarding Israel and Davutoğlu's "Friend of Arabs" profile that he has drawn both in theory and in practice. It is a fact that according to Ahmet Davutoğlu's understanding of foreign policy, culture, history and religion are the important factors while making foreign policy and from a constructivist theoretical perspective this positioning is not erroneous since this theory contends that foreign policy attitudes are in line with the identities of the actors and the actors' behaviors are compatible with the social environment and cultural structures. Thus, the policy makers search for conformity with social values and norms. As the norms are internalized by the actors, they become a part of the identity; so the separation between norm and interest blurs. Hence, the interest is intrinsic in the identity. Religion as an institutionalized social structure plays a role in determining the interests. This is the background of the Davutoğlu's interpretation of the foreign

policy making processes and it clearly explains the role of religion in foreign policy. So, it might be argued that rather than talking about the “religionization” of Turkish foreign policy, it is more accurate to talk about a shift from realist to constructivist perspective of foreign policy. To claim that Davutoğlu or Erdogan is anti-Semitic that is why they pursue such policies against Israel is far from being scientific. Besides, it should be remembered that Jews are the part of the history that Davutoğlu refers. One might be angry with the Israeli policy makers and policies but the Jewish people as a whole should not be held responsible for what has happened. Today, Turkey emerges as a democratic country albeit with a religious identity. Turkey’s condemnation of the massacre of Muslims in China, Sinkiang while Arab and Iranian officials kept their silence gave Turkey and Erdoğan high level popularity among the Muslims as a whole and the opportunity to become the leader of the Muslim world. In the meantime, in his speech after the latest parliamentary elections, Erdoğan’s calling his party’s victory as the victory of people “from Istanbul to Bosnia”, “Izmir to Ankara”, “Ankara to Damascus” and “Diyarbakır to Ramallah” raised the questions whether he is looking for the leadership of the Sunni Muslim world.

This study has sought to demonstrate that religion might be influential in state behaviors by exemplifying the Turkish-Israeli relations. The author of this study has reached the conclusion that there are signs that religion has been potent in policy making processes and that religious affiliations of the policy makers have also impact on these processes and on the foreign policy attitudes towards Israel.

Notes

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³ Sultan Tepe, *Beyond Sacred and Secular: The Politics of Religion in Israel and Turkey*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 52

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⁶ See Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, (1992):397-398

⁷ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 9

⁸ Manochehr Dorraj, “The Crisis of Modernity and Religious Revivalism: A Comparative Study of Islamic Fundamentalism, Jewish Fundamentalism and Liberation Theory”, *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No.2, (1999):228

⁹ Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*,16

¹⁰ See Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.72, No.3, (1993):25-29

¹¹ Carolyn M. Warner, Stephen G. Walker, “Thinking About the Role of Religion in Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 7, (2011): 119

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- ²¹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, (Istanbul: Kure Yayınları, 2007),395
- ²² Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 64
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- ⁴⁰ Balcı, “Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası ve İsrail: 1990'lar ve 2000'ler Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme”, 123
- ⁴¹ During his election campaigns, Erbakan's rhetoric was excessively anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist. Erbakan had promised that when he came to power, he would invalidate all the alliances and agreements between Turkey and Israel and he would abolish the defence agreements and security cooperations. However, when he became Prime Minister, he was not able to realize his promises. His action against Israel was harshly criticised by anti- Israel Muslim circles.
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- ⁴⁵ Cengiz Candar, “Türkiye Kudus'un Neresinde?”, *Sabah*, <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/1997/04/10/y12.html>,
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