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STRAINED ALLIANCES:
ISRAEL, TURKEY, AND THE UNITED STATES

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. KIRISCI: Let me welcome you to the panel on Strained Alliances: Israel, Turkey, and the United States, organized by the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings.

I am Kemal Kirisci, the TUSIAD Senior Fellow, and I would like to start by saying we apologize, we are running on Middle Eastern time, with a few minutes late. I hope you will forgive us. I assure you this is going to be a very interesting panel on a very timely topic.

I know many of you have been closely following the election in Israel and how the run up to the elections, and the results that have emerged from the elections, will impact on Israeli/U.S. relations.

Today's panel looks at that triangular relationship. There is the one between Israel and the United States, but there is also the one between Israel and Turkey and Turkey and the United States.

Turkey will be holding its parliamentary elections in June, so the run up to the elections are promising to be very heated, and I suspect Turkish/American relations and then maybe possibly Israeli/Turkish relations might also come up during that particular period.

With us, we have very good friends and colleagues. I would like to start with Sylvia Tiryaki. She is a Professor at Kultur University in Istanbul, but also one of the founders as well as the Deputy Director for the Global Political Trends Center in Istanbul. They had a long interest in Turkish/Israeli relations, and they have also been working very closely with our second panelist, Nimrod Goren, who heads the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, and he also teaches at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

I know from their publications and the programs they have been running

that they have a very close cooperation between themselves.

There is also Dan Arbell, a very good friend, and I am afraid a victim of the state of Turkish/Israeli relations. He has very recently published a report on this relationship, but I know he had been working on this report just about since when I started at Brookings in January 2013, and he has had to suffer the up's and down's, mostly the down's, of Turkish/Israeli relations.

Dan is currently a Nonresident Senior Fellow here at Brookings, but also teaches at the American University here in Washington, D.C.

The way we have planned to go about this panel is each speaker is going to reflect on the triangular relationship from the perspective of where they come.

Although Dan is a former Israeli diplomat, he will try to look at both relationships, Israeli/American as well as Turkish/Israeli relations, from Washington, D.C. Nimrod is going to repeat the exercise from Israel, and Sylvia will do it from the perspective of Istanbul.

I have had the pleasure and the excitement of participating in many events to do with Turkish/Israeli relations in the good old days. More recently, as you are all aware and as we will try to expand on, those relationships have hit rough waters in the literary sense of the word, in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although they are going through rough waters, the only point I would like to make which I am sure is going to come up, is the way in which trade and economic relations have not been affected by it. If anything, trade relations between Turkey and Israel have been increasing at a time when Turkey's trade relations with other countries in the neighborhood has been decreasing.

I am sure this issue will come up, and we will try to discuss also what the political significance of this might be.

Sylvia, the old saying "ladies go first," to the firing line here. We thought -- we conspired behind your back -- that maybe we should start with you as you have just come over from Istanbul, and I know you have attended a couple of events, both in New York as well as this morning in Washington.

Where do you see Israeli/Turkish relations right now with the Israeli elections left behind and Turkish elections looming in the horizon?

MS. TIRYAKI: Thank you very much, Kemal. This is the second time, right, when you are moderating me at The Brookings Institute. I hope this is going to be as good as the previous one.

Basically, I can start by referring to the time in memorial by mentioning that the State of Israel was recognized in 1949, but I am going to spoil the game a bit here and I am going to start out with our own contribution and production, and that is why I carry this heavy book, both in terms of its weight, I carry it from Istanbul just to show it to you, and I will carry it back, because that is the last sample we have. We have actually sold and given out many copies, so you can see how Turkish and Israeli relations are interesting, not only today but a couple of years ago.

Not only in terms of its weight, but also in terms of its content, this book is quite heavy. We published this book -- actually, this book was published by one of our advisory board members, Ambassador Alon Liel, and a former colleague of ours, Can Yirik.

When they published this book, when they finished this book, the book was a bit thinner. It did not include the Mavi Marmara incident. Unfortunately, before they were able to send it to the publisher in 2010, the Mavi Marmara incident happened and they had to include one more chapter, and therefore, this book is what it is now.

That is not all Global Political Trends Center does or is doing with

respect to Israeli/Turkish relations. In 2006, we were modestly instrumental in helping, let's say, Israeli/Syrian relations, but that was not before we started working and cooperating in 2012 with Mitvim that our work on Israeli/Turkish relations really deepened.

Even though the Israeli/Turkish relations are at its low nowadays, I can't complain personally, and speaking on behalf of Global Political Trends Center, we cannot complain about the lack of contacts between us, contacts between 2012 and 2015, the contacts between civil societies, Israeli and Turkish civil societies seriously increased.

Since we are here and we are going to speak on the same topic, I don't think it is really necessary to go into the nitty-gritty or the details of where we are. It is obvious what the relations are, where we stand, and what is also obvious, the relations should get better.

The question is not whether we should normalize the relations but the question is how to normalize them.

On the 16th of June, 2011, Mr. Sanberk, on the side of Turkey, and Mr. Ciechanover, on the side of Israel, when they signed the agreement, the reconciliation agreement, if you wish, the preconditions for normalization was an apology on the side of Israeli for the misconduct that led to the deaths on the Mavi Marmara ship, and compensation that was to be paid to victims or the families of the victims.

On the Turkish side, it was a promise that Turkey would not prosecute the Israeli commanders, and also the Israeli/Turkish relations or the diplomatic relations would be immediately or automatically restored.

Unfortunately, the report was leaked and the opportunity to normalize relations then in 2011 was missed at the time.

Meanwhile, the apology has been delivered, and even though it might

not be recognized as such all the time, it was highly appreciated by Turkey.

Compensation is still looming.

We have been assured many times that compensation is not an issue, that the amount of money to be paid by Israel as compensation to the families of the victims has been agreed to. Obviously, it is just a matter of when it is going to happen, not again whether it is going to happen.

There was the Gaza issue popping up in Israeli/Turkish relations in the form of not only as a precondition to normalize the relations, but also let's say as an intervening or blocking or interfering factor when the relations are about to be normalized, and that is what happened last year when the diplomatic relations were supposed to be reestablished at the ambassadorial level, and Turkish Ambassador Gunal was going to be posted to Jerusalem, but then he is now serving at his post in Ottawa, Canada.

The positive answer to the question of whether the relations should be restored, the answer is definitely yes. This question or this answer brings about a question of why they should be restored.

First of all, if they are restored, business would be happy, more than happy, I think the bilateral trade in 2014 was \$5.4 billion, perhaps oil and gas corporations can also play a role, but mostly why the relations should be reestablished is the regional stability or regional instability. Considering this should really bring the two countries -- make them hurry up with the reconciliation.

That wouldn't be the first time in history when the regional threats or the external threats would bring two countries to cooperate closely. Obviously, this time the threat is not what it was during the Cold War when the threat was considered to be U.S.S.R.

Although both countries are trying to manipulate or perhaps in a way

instrumentalize the regional threats for their own national interests, it is quite likely that the regional threats nowadays would bring them sooner or later to cooperate closely again.

Even though for Israel, ISIS is a tool or is used as a tool, and for Turkey, this ISIS threat is to keep it at arm's length as much as possible so that it does not strike back with full force. However, how absurd it might sound, this might really put the two countries to work together.

What can be done? I can say more about the reasons, what can be done for people like us, who believe the relations should be restored as soon as possible.

It seems, unfortunately, that for the time being, given the political stance on both sides, and presuming that there will not be a solution any time soon, I think the damage control mechanism is perhaps the prudent approach that should be here to preserve at least what we have, at least if the U.S. effectively helps to settle the Palestinian issue.

Even then with high probability, even when the relations are restored, I think it is going to be done more incrementally than otherwise, but having said that, that shouldn't hinder us from what we are doing, just the opposite, it should give us more fuel.

Thank you very much.

MR. KIRISCI: Thank you, Sylvia. I'd like to turn to Nimrod. This morning, there was a panel organized by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Nimrod, I thought, made a very interesting remark or observation, that Turkey did not really come up during the election campaigns in Israel. To me, that was somewhat striking, given that on the Turkish side, there are a number of leaders and politicians that cannot resist from making remarks that ruffle feathers in Israel and also in Washington, D.C.

Nimrod, I'm sure you have very interesting remarks to share with us, but I remain puzzled, if you could also maybe address why was this the case in Israel, and what does this mean in terms of the prospects of what Sylvia would like to see in Turkish/Israeli relations.

MR. GOREN: Thank you, Kemal. Thank you for hosting us here at the Brookings Institute.

We have been working for more than three years trying to fix a relationship which is very important for Israel, not only in terms of strategic considerations and economic considerations, but when you come with a vision of Israel better integrated into the region in which it is based, when you think of Israel as a country living at the same pace with the modern world, with its neighbors, being part of the region that surrounds it, then Turkey is a very important component of that.

For many years, that line that has been taking place between Israel and Turkey enabled for the first and perhaps only time to visit a Muslim country and feel very welcome there. It had a very deep effect on the Israel population and very warm sentiments towards Turkey, which I think deep down still exists in large part.

Over the last years, we see these relations going in a very different direction. Still, we are talking about a relationship. When we look at Israel and Turkey relations, even in the darkest days after the Flotilla incident, the relationship was still there.

We do not have Ambassadors but we have Embassies, and we do not have an official political cooperation, but we have a civil society cooperation and economic cooperation, so there is quite a lot for us to build upon when we look for a better political future, we can utilize all these unofficial mechanisms to help us reach that.

I think the process that the Center is doing together with the Friedrich

Ebert Foundation is trying to fill this need, providing experts, journalists, even diplomats from both sides, so they can look for ways to create this breakthrough and jointly analyze the region which is rapidly changing, and in which the changes have a lot of impact on both Israel and Turkey, and when Israel and Turkey look together to change the Middle East, they sometimes find some common opportunities and some common challenges.

Even during the last three years, we had some opportunities. Sylvia referred to 2011, before the draft agreement was leaked. A year ago, a draft agreement, almost the same draft agreement as in 2011, was ready and prepared, and political leaders were on the record stating reconciliation between the countries is just around the corner, and compensation for the Flotilla incident was already agreed up in terms of numbers, and formulas on how to bypass the issue of Gaza, and lift the blockade, there is an interest in maintaining the blockade, but giving Turkey some special role in helping Gaza, solutions were already found there.

Once again, there was another decision not to go sign this agreement, mostly because there was concern in Israel of the political interest in Turkey to actually mend the relationship, and the concern by the Israeli leadership of the very harsh anti-Israel statements, which has a very negative sentiment to how Israeli's perceive the future of the relation with Turkey, with conciliation around the corner.

After being very close once again to an agreement, we saw a drawback. We saw the war in Gaza last summer. We saw once again very harsh Turkish criticism. We saw the deterioration in the Israeli/Palestinian relations. Every time there is a new round of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, that immediately impacts prospects for a better relation between Israel and Turkey.

It has been so throughout history. We see it play out once again, because the Palestinian issue, and especially Gaza, is very important for the Turks. If

Israel does not make a solution, it is not likely to make progress under the government that was elected last week, and it will not be easy for Israel and Turkey to come back to have better relations.

The lack of talk between the leaderships is very severe, and that is another thing that does not work well for reconciliation.

When you go beyond this political consideration and you look at how Turkey plays out in the Israeli political scene, domestic scene, that is to your point, Kemal, in Israel, the conditions are rather favorable.

When there will be the political decision by the Israeli Prime Minister that is what he wants to do, that is what he thinks is right to do, and the Turks will be willing to play along and sign that agreement that was drafted in 2011 and redrafted in 2014, then the Israeli system will follow.

When Israeli's do not debate Turkey as part of their election campaign -- Turkey at the moment is almost a non-issue, partly because people do not really think there is a chance to mend relations, partly because it is not an issue too much. It is not the Palestinian issue which every Israeli has a strong position about.

It is almost a technical issue. That apology for the Flotilla incident, that was something they thought they would pay a big political price for doing, but eventually when that thing happened, they called for American support, or Americans providing the staging that gave legitimacy to Netanyahu. Israeli's regard of it was favorable, regarding that apology. Diplomatic move in order to restore relations with a country that is important to Israel.

Eventually, when you analyze the political map of the Middle East, Turkey is a country that needs and wants to have better relations and can benefit quite a lot, not only economically.

The Israeli public supported a political move towards Turkey in the past, and will be ready to support a move by the Israeli Prime Minister on this issue, and the key political players in the Israeli political scene at the moment, some of which were very vocal against Turkey in the past, mostly Avigdor Lieberman, now Foreign Minister, but perhaps not the next Foreign Minister, and Moshe Ya'alon, Minister of Defense, or used to be, both of them in 2013 do not change position and are willing to play along, and Lieberman as Foreign Minister last year was giving a green light to the move of the draft agreement.

Because of that, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was not involved in negotiations from the Israeli side, became involved, because once the Minister was okay, then the Prime Minister was willing to continue with the talks.

The political system is okay. The public is okay. If Netanyahu decides to go in that direction, I think he will have support. Whether it is feasible, I don't think it is feasible under the same agreement we had in the past because Israel will undergo unfavorable international conditions in the coming months, and it will be under more pressure from the U.S., from the U.N. regarding its position on the Palestinian issue, and with no progress there, I think Turkey will not be very happy to move along.

Still, there can be some pragmatic steps to change the sequence. As mentioned this morning in our discussions, the chances of upgrading diplomatic -- exchanging Ambassadors, putting Ambassadors in place to enable the countries to uplift their political --without saying normalization and reconciliation.

Until that happens, the importance of the unofficial track that has been going on, I think, is on the rise, and the importance of the U.S., which has strained relations at the moment, both with Israel and Turkey, may not have very high motivations to get engaged with these two countries or specifically with their leaders.

I think the U.S. can still play a constructive role in managing the situation so there is no further deterioration, in creating channels of communication between different officials from both countries and in supporting civil society initiatives and give backing to such initiatives.

MR. KIRISCI: Nimrod, thanks. You broke up the role of the United States towards the end of your remarks, and then I think that will ease us into your part of the panel here. I remember we got started roughly at the same time, and this coincided with the apology, with the role that the U.S. President, Barack Obama, played.

You and I, we were quite excited, and it was very interesting because unfortunately then, at the panel just the day before, they were extremely pessimistic about the prospects of an apology coming through, and the next day in the news, we found in the headlines there was the apology.

In the meantime, the United States has chosen to kind of remove itself from energetic involvement in efforts to revamp Israeli/Turkish relations. Maybe you could reflect on what you think the reasons might be, and what you might expect in the near future, Dan.

MR. ARBELL: Sure. Thank you, Kemal, for hosting this, and it is a pleasure to be with Sylvia and Nimrod.

Absolutely. I think when looking at the United States' perspective on this thing, if we just think about the fact that we are making very soon the fifth anniversary of the Mavi Marmara incident, I think no one, not the U.S., not Israel or Turkey, were expecting at the time back in 2010 that we would still be in this limbo situation five years later.

I think the deterioration which occurred in the aftermath of Mavi Marmara and the different attempts that were made at the time to solve the issue somehow got

taken by different developments and events that nobody had planned, but since then, have become a reality, which all three sides face.

I think the tragic thing about it is all three parties have sort of grown accustomed to the situation in which there is this disconnect between all parts of the triangle, but especially between Jerusalem and Ankara, and the parties have grown used to it and they have adopted this pattern of relationship where there is no political dialogue whatsoever, no defense relationship, no intelligence, hardly any intelligence cooperation.

The only thing that keeps the relationship afloat is the economic angle, which is very impressive, by the way, this \$5.5 billion in overall trade during 2014.

The fact that everybody is used to it and this has become the pattern reflects on how difficult this would be to get out of this situation. We all pointed out that back in 2013, President Obama was invested in this and he orchestrated the Israeli apology from the tarmac of Ben Gurion Airport, and had Prime Minister Netanyahu apologize to Erdogan. Netanyahu apologized. Erdogan accepted the apology.

There we were on our way to a compensation agreement, and hopefully reconciliation underway.

The level of commitment at that time in 2013, there is entirely a different level of commitment today in Washington. There is a different reality, there are different priorities for this Administration, and the relationship, as we all have said here, between Washington and Ankara and Washington and Jerusalem, have been strained over different events, not relating to Turkey.

For the U.S. to step in right now with all the issues that it has on its plate vis-à-vis Turkey, mainly the anti-ISIS coalition, the Syria/Iraqi situation, and all the things it has on its plate with Israel, namely the terrible relationship between Obama and Netanyahu, and the tensions over Palestinian, different comments made by Netanyahu.

For Mr. Obama and his Administration to step in to deal with Turkey right now, the Turkey/Israeli relationship seems not likely to happen any time soon. Since all parties have grown accustomed to it, there is no urgent need that the U.S. feels to address this point.

Obviously, the United States would love to have Israel and Turkey cooperating, Israel and Turkey working together, that all parts of the triangle would be back in business as they were in the glorious honeymoon period of the 1990s.

We all remember that period in which the defense cooperation, the intelligence cooperation, and terrorism cooperation flourished, tri-lateral, U.S. Air Force, Turkish Air Force, and Israeli Air Force were participating together in air drills in Turkish skies.

The Israeli defense industry refurbished American fighter jets that were supplied to Turkey. It was very closely knit, those honeymoon days are not likely to return. I am sure everybody would like to see some sort of return.

I think that the efforts that are made to enhance the dialogue on the civil society level and the think tanks, what Sylvia called this "fuel," which is so necessary to stimulate the relationship, I think it is essential.

I think at the end of the day you need the governments to work together. I believe the Israeli government and the Turkish government cannot do it just the two of them. I think you need third party involvement.

I think despite all the problems that exist between the U.S. and Turkey and the U.S. and Israel, at this point I think only U.S. intervention in this could get Turkish relations, Israeli relations off the ground.

I do agree with Sylvia. I think you need to adopt the incremental steps, and obviously the reinstatement of Ambassadors is a very important step.

I think perhaps on the practical level, again, if U.S. decision makers are up to it, you have to initiate a tri-lateral dialogue, a tri-logue, between the U.S. representatives, Israeli representatives, and Turkish representatives, convening them together in a setting addressing the situation in the region.

Turkey and Israel, as noted here before, have many similar interests when looking at the region. If it's the Syrian crisis or other issues, developments in the region, I think Israel and Turkey see a lot in common.

I think there is a political disconnect here that needs to be somewhat tied, but if the U.S. invites Turkish and Israeli representatives to a discussion of the region, addressing challenges and voicing concerns and perhaps finding ways, that's also something that I think should be pursued by the U.S. Administration.

I also share the skepticism and pessimism of my two other colleagues that it is not going to be easy, it is not going to be simple. If the Israeli elections don't produce the results that will bring a change on the Israeli side, the upcoming Turkish elections prevent, I think, any movement before June before elections take place on behalf of the Turkish side, I think we are in for a long ride.

I do hope that at a certain point the U.S. will decide to come back to it and give it another try because I think it is important for stability in the region, it is important for Israel, it is important for Turkey, and for sure, it is important for the United States.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Dan. I have a very quick follow up question, Dan. When you talked about the role of the U.S., you put the accent mostly on the Administration. Do you see a role for Congress, for example, here?

MR. ARBELL: Only the Republicans. No, I'm just kidding. I think, Congress, of course, can contribute from its angle and can encourage dialogue between

parliamentarians and initiatives, but I think it is mainly the U.S. Administration that has to carry the ball. Congress is second after the Administration.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Dan. Before we turn to the audience, Sylvia, I have a very quick question for you. Nimrod did a great job in reflecting on the domestic political scene during the run up to the elections, and the absence of Turkey as an issue. In many ways, it is a blessing in disguise that this was the case.

How do you see the other side of the medallion? So far, I have not really heard Israel coming up so far in Turkey, in the domestic political debate.

MS. TIRYAKI: There is no escape from Turkish domestic politics, right? Kemal, two months is a long time. We might hear some statements from our politicians or we might not. Senator McCain said in defense of Netanyahu has said like you know, politicians make statements.

We might hear statements which might be denied later on, but I don't see the Israel issue being a main issue in the pre-election campaign. I think the peace process is going to occupy our minds and the minds of the politicians much more, but that is my guess.

MR. KIRISCI: All right. Thanks, Sylvia. I think this is the moment when we should be turning to the audience and look forward to your questions. I will take the one in the front. Yes, please. If you could maybe briefly state who you are, the classic requirements.

QUESTIONER: Ken Dillon, Scientia Press. I'd like to ask, both Israel and Turkey, two great powers, have started to impinge on the area. Clearly, Russia, a regional great power if not a global super power, by conquering Crimea, presents a kind of new but also new challenge to Turkey and its foreign policy.

On the other hand, China is moving in everywhere in the world but

specifically it has this very interesting project now of the Chinese company which now has received the approval of the Israeli Cabinet to build a high speed rail link between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

I am wondering how this impingement of these two great powers is going to influence the process.

MR. KIRISCI: Let me take two more questions. In the far back.

QUESTIONER: Thanks. I am a Fulbright Fellow at Georgetown University. I am from Armenia. First, I want to say it is something like a déjà vu in many ways, talking about civil society, during the last 20 years I am hearing in Armenia and Turkey that civil society has a huge role to play and nothing has been changed, but what you said about the common goals and interests of Israel and Turkey in the Middle East, naming Syria and Iraq, but are there any interests which are bringing conflicts, for example, the Iranians, for example, the Egypt issue, the Hamash issue?

What is more, common interests or common conflicts? Thanks.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks. Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: I'm a former diplomat and current analyst. I'm a little skeptical about the statement that there is no intelligence collaboration. I imagine what might be going on is collaboration indirectly. Things are passed to Big Daddy and Big Daddy shares them with the third party. That is probably a lot less intelligence cooperation.

I would guess that a fair amount of particularly sensitive information, particularly timely information on terrorist attacks and so forth, is probably making it through the appropriate channels.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks for the observation there, from behind the scenes, I suspect, or something along those lines. We got started with Sylvia.

Maybe this time, Dan, I will put you on the line and we will work our way back up. I think the great powers impinging in the region through Russia and China is a very interesting and fascinating question, if you could.

MR. ARBELL: It is a very interesting point, and I think there are other regional powers that are impinging on the regional environment, mainly Iran and the rise of radical Islam, and the other trends which are also impacting the dynamics.

I think still Israel and Turkey, as I have said before, have a lot in common, and could use this common agenda that they have in order to open up and develop and to work for the benefit of the region in many aspects.

I think this question relates to something at a later stage. I think we are not there yet in terms of having Turkey and Israel -- each one has its relations with China and Russia, but I don't think we are at the stage where they are working to cooperate -- we are still at the very early stage in which not much is happening in this Turkey/Israel relationship except for the business side of it.

I think another aspect which was not asked yet but can also change dynamics is the whole natural gas element, which again, everybody was addressing that as a potential game changer, if Israel manages, and Turkey agrees, on laying an undersea pipeline from the Israeli natural gas fields to Turkey and from Turkey to Europe. That would have been also something that could have been enabled Israel and Turkey to cooperate and to their mutual benefit.

I think everything right now is in a state of semi-paralysis or total paralysis because of the political situation. I think the ball is in the political court. I think everything is pending on that and very little can move as long as this political dispute is not resolved, I'm afraid.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Dan. Nimrod?

MR. GOREN: Thank you. Russia is becoming an interesting issue. First of all, if you look at how Israel's foreign policy relates to the differences between the U.S. and Russia, it has not always adopted the position that Washington would have liked it to adopt.

Whether a change in identity of the Foreign Minister in Russia, affiliations, will change it or not, we will see. How much strained relations in Israel and Washington will impact Israeli relations with Moscow. We will see.

In terms of Israel and Turkey relations, the fact that Israel is building a region that is contradicting Turkey and takes into account Egypt and Cyprus and Greece, and these are countries that have better relations these days with Russia, and that makes it a country worth looking at as a factor.

You mentioned civil society, I think we are now looking at a different model of civil society. It is not the typical grassroots NGO, we are looking at a civil society that has opened up channels for policy work, and this is something the American think tank community is very accustomed to, but in Israel and Turkey, this is a rather new challenge, which didn't exist many years ago, and now enables policy work to be carried out, not necessarily only by the official channel, and it enables the officials to take part in policy debates which are under different auspices and binding for them.

It is often said that the regional interest between Israel and Turkey bring the countries together, but if you look at the region and you look at the Israel and Turkey's policies regarding the region, you see a lot of differences.

Turkey has a very strong anti-Assad position and Israel does not. Turkey has a very strong anti-Sisi position and Israel has the contrary. Turkey has a position regarding Gaza, regarding Palestine, which Israel doesn't agree with.

For many key issues in the region, Turkey and Israel actually are quite

far away from each other. Instead of avoiding it, you need to create a platform which will enable the people to understand what the interests of the other is, because for example, not many people in Turkey get what Israel's position is regarding Syria. Some in Israel don't get it. This is important to debate about.

The final word about the intelligence sharing, I don't know what is being shared and how, but what I do know is one of the only channels that has been publicized, meetings between top Israeli and Turkish officials in recent years, was between the heads of the intelligence agencies, reported in media, that they met a couple of times and it was reported. It wasn't kept secret.

That was also a sign to show that maybe the politicians are not talking but there are mechanisms between officials of both countries that if they do require this very sensitive work, they can still do it, and some Americans are helping it happen as well.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Nimrod. Sylvia, it's your turn. I'd love to hear your views about civil society relationships. You have had quite a bit of experience also with TESEV, an organization that has worked on Armenia and Turkish relations. Is the scene as depressing as was alluded to?

MS. TIRYAKI: I am handicapped here because I forgot to take my pencil, I'm trying to remember all the questions.

MR. KIRISCI: I'll provide you one.

MS. TIRYAKI: It would help me quite a lot. I agree with Nimrod that civil society as it stands today, I can't speak on behalf of the Israel's civil society, but in Turkey, I have been involved in civil society in Turkey for the last 15 years, and it has changed substantially, maybe not really from the grassroots, but the position and also what they are trying to do, I think, is much closer now to what you know here in the U.S.

as civil society.

I was working at TESEV for five years, so I have much more experience when it comes to TESEV. We at Global Political Trends Center have been conducting diplomacy on the Armenian issue and Cyprus issue as well.

The biggest problem is the Armenian side believed that civil society activities were here to replace or substitute -- sometimes it was not really translated into what they exactly planned to do.

I believe our overall experience is not discouraging, it is encouraging, and civil society usually picks up, and that is good news, where the politicians leave the scene or where the issue is left by politicians.

On the issue of intelligence, I don't know, and I hope you are right. I would be happy if more cooperation was done or if it's in place, it's great. I see the security threats as really something that they should come together.

With respect to Russia and China, as far as I can see, China's involvement is more economical still, and Russia's involvement is more territorial, and it's not only vis-à-vis Crimea.

I found maybe the most important development with respect to Russia in the region was the recent military agreement the Republic of Cyprus signed with Russia. That is something that should be taken into consideration, and not only by Turkey.

MR. KIRISCI: All right. I think we have a question here in the front from Natan, and I should also encourage questions from the back of the room.

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Natan Sachs from Brookings. Nimrod, you spoke about Netanyahu's interest or lack of price he would pay probably domestically, and I am curious what the logic there would be. From the Israeli perspective, as Dan mentioned, the hesitation was probably that the Turkish position would change later.

I'm curious in two respects. First, the assessment of Erdogan as a leader and the possibility he would change his mind, which in Israel is very strong that he is a volatile kind of leader.

Secondly, in terms of his political interests and public opinion, is the thesis that Turkish public opinion is very hostile to Israel? You mentioned it was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel. Perhaps that was an anomaly, and now we are back to some natural state where since public opinion is very favorable towards the Palestinians, since we are not looking at peace any time soon, and Erdogan does not have a political interest perhaps in changing reality; is that correct?

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Natan. Yes, right there.

QUESTIONER: My question is about the strengthening tri-lateral partnership between Greece, Israel, and Cyprus, since their cooperation has been increasing a lot over the last five years, both militarily, as it relates to energy, technology, and tourism.

With Turkey's continued incursions in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone, Israel made statements that were in support of the Republic of Cyprus, and their rights to explore in those waters, so I was wondering your thoughts on how you think this affects the possible future of normalization of ties with Israel. Thank you.

MR. KIRISCI: Thank you. Maybe if we could take the last question, we will have another round.

QUESTIONER: Thank you for your very insightful comments and discussion. I am a Visiting Research Fellow from Palestine. My question is about the fact that you talked about all these common factors that influence the relationship between Israel and Turkey, but I am also surprised why you haven't mentioned anything about the Kurdish issue, if it has any role in this unstable relationship.

We know the Kurdish issue is a very sensitive issue to the Turks, and the Kurds have also economic relations with Israel. Oil is important to Israel, and they get oil from Iraq. We have heard unconfirmed statements of Israel having some sort of presence in Arbil, and also some secret intelligence forces that might be helping the Kurdish militias in Southern Turkey.

Are these things important to the Turks or the Israeli's? Does it have any presence? Thank you.

MR. KIRISCI: Thank you. I think, Sylvia, we will start with you. There are some tough questions there.

MS. TIRYAKI: What Natan suggested was that there was a dormant, six year dormant state of nature, right. I do not think that's the case. When it comes to President Erdogan and what he can use or what he can say, he has the Palestine issue in his hands, Gaza issue. We can always expect some statements. As I mentioned, politicians make statements.

The exclusive economic zone and the limitation is between Cyprus and Israel. That is a very complicated issue because it is translated into the cooperation with respect to oil and gas.

Many people mention oil and gas, or they would be able to benefit greatly from the findings of oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. I remember years ago, Nico Rolandis, the former Greek Foreign Minister, wrote an article which was titled -- he called oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean the "Aphrodite's gift," he was actually suggesting that if it's not used in a proper way, in a smart way, if it's not shared among all, meaning Greek and Turkish, then it definitely is not going to be a gift, but it is going to lead to greater disaster.

I agree with him, and I think it wouldn't be helpful in terms of regional

cooperation at all, whether it comes to Israel or Egypt. I know the Cyprus settlement is not something to be seen soon, but if Turkish rights to oil and gas in the island are not going to be taken into consideration, it is going to always create a problem, because even in the last version, it was referring to hydrocarbons as an issue and to be administered by the Federal Government, so it was never supposed to be in the hands of one community or the other. So, it is likely to create more problems than solutions.

The Kurdish issue, we have an ongoing peace process in Turkey. Basically, it is considered more like a domestic issue, and I think Nimrod would be able to say more.

MR. KIRISCI: Nimrod, before I turn to you, I'd like to just say one word. If I heard you correctly, I may have misheard you, but I thought I heard you saying Israel was purchasing Kurdish oil. Is that right?

The only way in which that could be done is via Turkey. If Israeli companies, if there are any operating in Northern Iraq, in KRG, they would be operating via Turkey as well.

I am suspecting, not that I know anything from behind the doors or scenes, that Israel's relations with KRG and the Kurds of Northern Iraq is probably not a major issue high up on the Israeli/Turkish agenda. It was at one point back in 2006/2007, but since Turkish relations with KRG has come to the point where it is today, I would suspect that is not a major issue in Turkish/Israeli relations.

I still need to give the floor to Nimrod. Nimrod, please.

MR. GOREN: Yes. The friendship between the KRG and the militia in the southeast of Turkey. I don't think Israel is involved in any way in militia or any military group acting within Turkey against, and if Israel were doing so, that would be a big problem for Israel/Turkey relations.

On the other hand, I think they have to have cooperation with the Kurds in Iraq, and this basically aligns with the Turkish policy because they are the same Kurds that Turkey has, a very good relation. Companies and businesses will find a solution to conduct business, and I think both sides are okay with that, and it happens also with the way Israel helps Turkey export its goods' flow as well to Jordan and the Middle Eastern countries.

We are talking about successful economic relations. We are also talking about the countries de facto helping each other overcome different geopolitical problems that may damage their economic prospects. I think we have quite a lot of openness and flexibility behind the scenes there.

The question about Greece and Cyprus, the Israeli approach towards Greece and Cyprus became very evident when Israeli was looking for all kinds of allies to replace countries in the Middle East with which it used to have relations and did not believe it could continue to have relations with.

It began with the hopes of a political alliance, not an economic one. Not only Greece and Cyprus, it was also countries like Romania and Bulgaria. After a year or two, Israeli diplomacy understood it cannot gain the political gain it wanted to have from these alliances, so you have the cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, and yet Turkey doesn't like it, but I don't think this would be an obstacle from the Israeli side whenever there is a political opening with Turkey.

If you bring Egypt into this equation, that becomes more complicated, because Egypt is not only an economic partner for Israel, it is a strategic partner. Israel would not give up Egypt for the sake of a relation with Turkey.

If there is any movement that will bring Egypt and Turkey together, perhaps the U.S. or someone else, I think that will be an issue that will indirectly help to

bring Israel and Turkey together.

I would look also to that relationship as a key for future Turkey/Israel relations.

Israel and Turkey had quite okay relations in the first six years Erdogan was in office. Erdogan in 2005 was meeting with Prime Minister Sharon and other Israeli leaders. It is not by definition Israel cannot have normal relations with Erdogan, it had in the past, it can have in the future, definitely not one of our biggest friends to say the least, but perhaps a political partner.

MR. KIRISCI: Yes, Dan?

MR. ARBELL: Looking at the last five years, I think at different points and at different times, the Israeli's perhaps while they were hesitating with the apology, they were slowing down the process at a certain point, but in the aftermath of the apology, and I think since then, in the last two years, I think mainly Erdogan has been the main impediment to any progress.

If I don't talk about all these harsh statements or anti-Semitic statements, but just recently in February at the Munich Security Conference, when the Turkish Foreign Minister boycotted the conference because of participation of an Israeli official minister, it just sort of reflects the state of mind in which Erdogan is in after becoming President in August 2014, he vowed that under his watch, nothing positive will happen vis-à-vis Israel.

Clearly, he has an issue there which he needs to resolve with himself, among his constituency. I think that is a big problem there.

On Greece/Cyprus, I think while it was not an anti-Ankara access, de facto, the notion behind it was the fact that since the Israeli/Turkish partnership is removed from the puzzle, removed from the picture, Israel should do its utmost to fortify,

to strengthen ties in the region with other countries once the partnership with Turkey is gone.

I think over the years there have been creative ideas discussed in which even in the context of Turkey not recognizing Cyprus and despite the ongoing problem or conflict, there are creative ideas that were discussed, on natural gas, on energy, that will enable even Turkey to receive natural gas from Israel or from Cyprus while making sure that some of the revenues to Northern Cyprus are kept in some escrow account until the issue is resolved.

There are ways that Turkey, I think, has acquiesced to allow this Israeli/Greek cooperation in the field of energy, to hopefully benefit from that in the future, once deals are made and once exports begin to take place.

Finally, on the KRG, I agree with what Nimrod said. I just want to add Israel's support for independent Kurdistan was something that was expressed last year, much to the dismay of people here in Washington. Israel sort of back tracked on that, not changing officially the position, but less preaching for it.

I do agree the KRG does not serve at this point as a part of this Turkish/Israeli equilibrium.

MR. KIRISCI: Thanks, Dan. I'd like to chip in, if I may. As I listened to the remarks that were just made, like Nimrod, you made references to how from Israel's point of view if Turkey's relation with Egypt were to improve at the political level, this would clearly be a welcomed development.

Ironically, on the economic side, it works the other way around, where one fascinating aspect of Turkish/Israeli relations and this very complex picture is because of Turkey's or rather the Turkish President's position on the current regime in Egypt, Egypt is not renewing the agreement between Turkey and Egypt allowing Turkish

trucks to come to be ferried to Egypt and then unloaded on their way to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Instead, it is Israel that has come into the picture and made it possible for these very trucks to travel through Israel to the Haifa Port, on their way to Jordan and then subsequently usually Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

The reason why I am highlighting this, on the one hand, you have an extremely difficult political relationship that has extensively been highlighted, but then on the other hand, you have this relationship that involves official.

As much as the Turkish Ambassador is not there, you may not have diplomatic relations at the top level, the official relationship through a wide range of ministries, and we have just heard it is possible the intelligence services are interacting with each other, I think this is what I would argue makes the Israeli/Turkish relationship unique in the context of that neighborhood right now.

I think we have time for another very quick round of questions. I saw the hand that came up there. I think this will be it, one more question in the front. Please keep it brief. Let's have another round.

QUESTIONER: I would like to go to some more basic social and cultural differences, and how they participate in the relation or foreign policies, like how do they reflect on Netanyahu coming to the U.S. for a political speech, and how do they censor maybe their social media/communications?

MR. KIRISCI: Thank you. I think the question there was to do with the cultural context of Netanyahu being able to come and address the Congress. I wasn't very sure what the second part was. Nimrod?

MR. GOREN: Netanyahu coming to Congress and the way in which it was handled was a manifestation of the current difficulties in Israel/American relations. It

is not related to the relation with Turkey, perhaps indirectly so, because we are talking about the U.S. as a country that tries to bring Turkey and Israel closer together.

It a problem which is becoming an issue in domestic American politics, and support for Israel was a common position among supporters of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, and now it is becoming a much more divided issue, and I think the Israeli leadership should be very cautious in doing so, because it alienates a significant part of the American political system, the American citizenry in their position regarding Israel.

In terms of toning down tensions, I think this is something that will be looked into, the role of think tanks in regional politics. We are working with actors in a different country. Sylvia mentioned how they are working with partners in Cyprus, the Turkish Government, and I think our corporation enabled us to expand the bilateral work we have been doing into all kinds of other regional issues, engaging regional partners, and supporting perhaps each country in its conflict resolution efforts.

Bring the Egyptians in, bring the Palestinians in, bring the Turks, the Israeli's, and then you have a regional dialogue taking place by policy analysts for different countries, and that can later have an effect on diplomacy.

MS. TIRYAKI: The issue of Cyprus, it is slightly more complicated, and I don't think we have much time actually to talk about it in detail.

I just want to cite from Dan, he said that Turkey did not recognize Cyprus. Turkey recognizes Cyprus --

MR. ARBELL: Greek Cyprus.

MS. TIRYAKI: Turkey does not recognize its government of the Republic of Cyprus.

MR. ARBELL: That's what I meant.

MS. TIRYAKI: Turkey does recognize the state, it does not recognize the government. President Anastasiades, on the 5th of January, he backed out of the talks, which were not going well, but which were going somewhere, right. Since 2008, there have been talks.

I don't know at this stage -- Turkey has not delineated its exclusive economic zone with Cyprus. It did it with Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The situation there is quite mixed since Israel in 2010 did it with Greek Cyprus.

Actually, there are competing interests. The interests are crisscrossing. I think there might be a way how Israel can play a role, but at the political level, obviously not, so I would refer to what Nimrod said.

MR. KIRISCI: Dan, I'd like to squeeze in a question. I am fascinated with the way the discussion here has gone toward Eastern Mediterranean and Gaza issues there. It was about two and a half years ago that this issue became a very let's conspicuous issue, and it was in that context that we, I think, together came to realize how businesses, both on the Israeli side and the Turkey side, were very much lobbying official doom to support the notion of a pipeline.

In the meantime, the issue has receded. I think there are two important developments in that respect, and I wanted to hear Dan's and if you are interested, your responses, too.

One is just about two years ago, the world energy market dramatically transformed itself, and euphoria for the energy resources of the Eastern Mediterranean has kind of significantly diminished in terms of pure cost/benefit analysis, economically and politically.

There is another development. I think it relates to the very first question that was raised about great powers impinging upon the region, and one such great power

that is impinging upon the region in this particular context is Russia.

I would be very interested to hear the views of the panel very quickly, we have about six or seven minutes left, on the role of Russia.

Already the southern corridor, that is the pipeline that is to carry gas across Turkey to the European Union whose construction has just started, there are question marks about this project evolving into its second phase given the Russian decision to scrap the south stream and replace it with what has come to be called the Turkish stream.

I am hearing -- I am not an expert in the area -- I am hearing how this development is already undermining interest and capacity to continue to increase its exports of natural gas at a time when demand on gas is coming down. The Kurds were very much excited about pushing their gas in that direction.

What I am coming to, how do you assess Russia's perspective on this, and with the very first question that we started with?

MR. ARBELL: It is a very big question, we don't have that much time to elaborate. You mentioned the abundance of natural gas that is out there, that is under development, and obviously it contributes to the picture.

Also, on the Israeli side there are complications recently over a decision by the Israeli antitrust authority to dismantle the partnership between Israel and U.S. Houston based Noble Energy, which also seems to be slowing down this whole process of solving Israel's natural gas export puzzle, as letters of intent were signed with Egypt, with Jordan, with the Palestinian authority. That process has been slowed down.

You are right about the fact that businesses are looking for businesses and there is great interest in the business communities both in Israel and Turkey as to this pipeline.

The fact is that at the end of the day, the government has the final say on this. The government of Israel before deciding on putting all its eggs in one basket, meaning going for a pipeline with Turkey, will have to take the political realities into consideration.

As long as there is this political impasse between Jerusalem and Ankara, I think nothing will move, despite the fact there is clear business interests and it makes sense there will be a pipeline.

Connected to your Russia question, Turkey doesn't want to be dependent on Russian or Iranian natural gas, it wants to diversify its natural gas imports. Classically, Israeli gas in some context would be ideal in fitting into that picture as well as KRG gas.

Again, Russia is not playing a constructive role in this overall scheme of things.

MR. KIRISCI: Nimrod?

MR. GOREN: Yes. Optimism was very high at the beginning when people began talking about natural gas, and there was hope this would be the resource that would help all kinds of conflicts in the region, the conflict in Cyprus, the conflict with Israel and Turkey, and eventually people understand it is not such the unifying factor they hoped it would be, but something that even creates a new conflict, like was mentioned with Cyprus, Turkey, and Gaza, the northern part.

You know what, Israel found its way to negotiate with Egypt, with Jordan, with the Palestinians, and this is not something bad. In terms of the relation with Turkey on that aspect is okay.

I would prefer to say that improvement in Israel and Turkey relations comes to a point that is not about making more money but about helping Israel have a

better political reality in the Middle East.

I'm willing to see if trade volume goes a bit down, if prospects for peace and integration go up.

MR. KIRISCI: Thank you.

MS. TIRYAKI: Just to give you some numbers, on the proven reserves in the block handled by Greek Cypriots, is between 30 to 40 cf, it is much lower than they expected in the beginning. Just to compare how much gas we are talking about and at what political cost.

The calculation doesn't sound logical to me, to sacrifice so much political problems or create so much political problems for 30 to 40 cf. As far as I know, the LNG plan was not really something to be considered at this stage. As far as I know, Greek Cyprus, they are trying to use the Egyptian LNG since they have it anyhow.

What kind of role Russia can play? Would they like the Republic of Cyprus to move closer to NATO? Maybe. I don't think so.

MR. KIRISCI: All right. I think we have just about come to the end of this panel. If Nimrod will allow me, I am going to take issue with his final remark that he is prepared to see the trade volume between Turkey and Israel to diminish if in return there was a political breakthrough.

I'd like to assure you that I have absolutely no stake in any company that deals in trade between Turkey and Israel, but I have a feeling that given what is prevailing in the region, especially in the Middle East but also it looks like in the Ukraine, and the issue of Crimea, I have a feeling, it is my hunch, that as long as the Palestinian question remains as a challenge to the region or rather its resolution remains a challenge to the whole region, I think it is really that economic relationship that is going to keep Israeli/Turkish relations ticking over in the positive sense of the word.

It is with that final remark that I would like to thank you all for having joined us this afternoon, and I'd like to thank also Sylvia, Nimrod, and Dan, and the organizers.

Of course, I was going to do that. Michael, you shouldn't think that I'm doing this under pressure from the Center for Middle East Policy.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation has supported this event, and it is a foundation that I think Sylvia and Nimrod have worked for some time, and I, too, did work very closely when I was still a Professor in Istanbul.

Thank you, Michael, for Friedrich Ebert. (Applause)

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