

Spies, lost Jews and pop stars: The Israel-Turkey love-hate affair goes beyond politics

Natali Oknin, the Israeli absurdly detained in Istanbul for spying, says she'll never return to Turkey. But despite yet another diplomatic crisis, this time wisely de-escalated, the cultural dialogue between Turkey, Jews and Israel is going through an unprecedented, and riveting, renaissance

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For a whole week, Israelis were glued to their TVs and screens, watching the ongoing saga of an Israeli couple arrested in Istanbul and accused of being spies.

It all started when a security guard at Istanbul's latest tourist attraction, the Camlica Tower, informed the police that Natali and Mordi Oknin took a photo of one of the palatial residences of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The tower's observation decks offer stunning, photogenic views of both the European and Asian neighborhoods of Istanbul.

The saga smelt of the absurd from the start. Taking the photo did not break any law. The claim they were spies was unfounded paranoia. The popular opposition Turkish journalist, Nevsin Mengü cynically questioned whether Israel really needs tourists to take fuzzy cellphone photos when its satellites could do a far better job at it.

It took no time at all for Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, known for his love of Turkey, to get involved. Shortly after, Israel's Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, and its Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, got moving. Time was of the essence and the three leaders became national heroes for acting quickly, directly connecting with Erdogan, and winning the Oknins their freedom. Early last Thursday morning, Israelis awoke to the good news that the couple had arrived back in Israel on a private jet during the wee hours of the morning.

Upon their return, the couple, both bus drivers, were interviewed over and over again on news outlets to share the stories of their very own Midnight Express.

In contrast to the movie that has haunted Turkey's public image ever since it was released, they noted that they'd actually been well-treated by the prison

guards. But they had been separated and the absence of kosher food meant Natali subsisted on bread and water. Natali, an ardent fan of Turkish telenovelas, was asked if she would ever return to Turkey. Her answer was simple: "I do not wish to."

During their detention, the main star of the Oknin saga was Natali's daughter, Shiraz Ben-Harush. She individualized the fears and frustrations of her mother and of her half-brother, Natali and Mordi's son who is only five years old and was awaiting anxiously for their return.

Shiraz appeared on one of Israel's most popular weekend TV interview shows on the Friday evening after the Oknins had been released. The show 'Ofira and Berkovich,' sets the agenda for many Shabbat dinner debates, playing off the more level-headed Ofira Asayag with former soccer star Eyal Berkovich, Israel's 21st-century Archie Bunker, who often spews racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs. Joining them was Turkey expert and former Director of the Foreign Ministry, Alon Liel.

In no time, the discussion devolved into whether Erdogan was a dictator, and if Israelis should be afraid to go to Turkey. Liel stressed that it was not dangerous and explained how throughout the saga, Israel maintained an open line to Erdogan's right-hand man and advisor, Ibrahim Kalin.

Berkovich gave a long rant about Erdogan being a dictator (Israel's popular satirical show, 'Eretz Nehederet,' featured a far more vivid and humorous portrayal days before, ending up with Erdogan putting Israel's president in jail). Ofira countered with the contention he is a dictator with a heart: hearing that the Oknin's five-year-old is on the autism spectrum, he supercharged his efforts to secure their quick release.

Now that the dust has settled, it's clear that Erdogan did not in fact mastermind the Oknins' arrest; indeed, he apparently only heard about it just before it nearly became a full diplomatic fist-fight. The real ground zero seems to be that over-zealous security guard who must have imagined himself playing a telenovela hero who uncovers a Mossad network, together with a prosecutor who misread his government's anti-Israeli rhetoric as a green light to overplay his hand.

It also appears that Turkey's strongman Interior Minister, Suleyman Soyulu, might not have been privy to what was happening behind the scenes: he staunchly defended the Oknins' arrest just days before their release,

predicting they would be charged with "political and military espionage," while negotiations were already in train.

Ironically, the whole affair might just lead to renewed ties between Israel and Turkey. Unlike Netanyahu, both of Israel's newish leaders, Bennett and Lapid, opted for de-escalation, which must have pleased Erdogan as well, facing the staunchest domestic opposition in his 18 years in power, and with the Turkish Lira crashing this week to over 11TL to the dollar.

Liel rightly pointed out that the public thanks by top Israeli officials lent him the legitimacy he was looking for. And it was a win for Israel's premiers too, squashing a long drawn out hostage diplomacy scenario while seizing the moment to open a direct channel of communication with Erdogan, who needs Israel now more than ever to bring him back to the center of regional politics.

Even though Natali Oknin's decision to avoid Turkey in the future has obvious proximate reasons, long gone are the days when Israeli Jews flooded Turkey in huge numbers. It's still a major transit hub, using Turkish Airlines to reach global destinations, but unlike the Oknins, most don't stay for a visit, even if the country retains a warm spot in many hearts. The Oknin affair is hardly going to enthrill more potential tourists, despite the fact that it's likely to be a one-off case.

As an Israeli citizen who has lived in Turkey on-and-off for over 20 years, I don't feel this hesitancy. I have always spoken Hebrew there, whether with my now-grown daughter, born and partly raised there, with other Israeli expats, with Turkish Hebrew-speakers (both Jews and non-Jews), and with the growing number of Hebrew-speaking Palestinians who live there. There might be specific locales where I do this less, but in all my time there I only have had one or two minor run-ins. Overall, Turkish people are welcoming to Israelis, and interested in Israel.

For Palestinians, it is not the Oknin saga that will make a difference. Turkey is a key education hub for Palestinian students from Gaza and the West Bank, and it is also a magnet for Palestinian citizens of Israel, for study or invest or reside. Israeli Arabs did not cancel their visits wholesale in the wake of the Oknin arrests.

But they, too, face arbitrary and sometimes harsh treatment. Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank face increasing pressure from rising hostility towards Syrian refugees, which spills over into anti-Arab antagonism. There

have been several cases where Palestinians have been jailed on flimsy grounds.

Just how the Israeli media largely ignores its Arab citizens at home, it also has turned its back when Israeli Arab citizens were held in Turkey. Just before COVID struck, a young Israeli Arab was detained and jailed after a random ID check; he was alleged to have attacked a police officer. When those detained are Arab, there is no diplomatic fallout and their release is often dependent on the work of legislators from the Joint List negotiating to free them, with the cases barely making the headlines.

Despite the reinvigorated fear of Israeli Jews to visit Turkey, plenty of Israeli musicians have shrugged those fears off – and their Turkish fans have embraced them.

Mark Eliyahu, a master of the *kamancheh*, a stringed instrument, has a huge Turkish following and just played a concert this weekend in Ankara. Yinon Muallem, a darbuka and oud player, has lived in Istanbul for almost two decades, accompanying many top Turkish musicians. Few can match the fame of the Israeli Ladino and Spanish singer, Yasmin Levy, who has toured there for years, packing concert halls. She once proclaimed that Turkey is her "second home."

And, of course, there is the mega-star Linet, who has millions of Turkish fans. Specializing in the Arabesk genre (the Turkish equivalent of Israeli Mizrahi music), Linet is a regular on Turkish TV, has sang with some of Turkey's most famous stars, and has become a household name. She is such a fixture in Turkey that some fans were unaware of her Israeli origins but in interviews, she confidently points out she is an Israeli.

What unites these musicians is that they are much bigger in Turkey than in Israel. Further, they are all of Mizrahi or Sephardic backgrounds; in fact, both Yasmin Levy and Linet's families are of Turkish origin. Their fame in Turkey highlights the complicated lives they live between different cultures and conflicts.

The lives of Turkish Jews, who often live between Turkey and Israel, has at long last found the spotlight, thanks to the Netflix series, "The Club," a fictional narrative of the trials and tribulations of a Turkish Jewish woman released from prison for murder during the 1950s, and whose estranged daughter eventually makes her way to the new State of Israel.

The narrative arc of the series is a beautiful story that, for the first time, exposes Turkish audiences to the hardships Jews (and other non-Muslim communities) faced in Turkey during the era of enforced, homogenizing 'Turkification,' including the repercussions of the discriminatory wealth tax, which deliberately impoverished non-Muslim minorities, and the suppression of minority cultures, which led many of them to make their way to Mandate Palestine, or later to the new state of Israel.

For the small Jewish community in Turkey today, hearing Ladino spoken brought back bittersweet memories of a lost past, while the voice of Yasmin Levy in one episode connects a larger Turkish audience to the subject matter. It is not too hard to understand the lives of Linet and Yasmin Levy as a continuation of this story, the next generation of Israelis connected to Turkey by a far from fossilized cultural heritage.

The Oknin affair exploded right after Linet made Israeli prime time for the first time in decades, as a contestant in the competition to represent Israel in the upcoming Eurovision. She was welcomed graciously despite her mostly being unknown to the average Israeli; her extraordinary singing talent shocked the judges. One of the judges, Margalit Tzan'ani, an iconic Mizrahi singer of Yemenite origins, embraced her on stage.

There was a strong sense that after all these years Linet had found her way back home.

For Linet, this was a form of closure; she had unsuccessfully attempted to represent Israel in the 1993 Eurovision contest. In the late 80s and early 90s, Israel was a very different place: Mizrahi singers like Linet were confined to clubs on the geographical and social periphery. Linet then left Israel to start a career in Turkey, and has lived between the two countries for almost three decades.

But she didn't quite receive a whole-hearted reception. Critics, including some within the Turkish-Israeli Jewish community, badgered her for failing to do full army service and for taking part in an anti-Israeli protest following the following the 2009 Mavi Marmara crisis. Some even portrayed her as a traitor. It was a telling reminder that Israel has pushed aside so many cultural gems from within the Mizrahi world, not least Linet, who never gave up on being both Israeli and Turkish.

Sadly, in some strange way, the stories of Linet and Natali Oknin intersect. Both were women who believed in a different Middle East, where they can

cross borders and become part of a much more richly heterogenous region. Where Natali dared to discover the other, Linet ventured into a world she once belonged to, was embraced there, but was then shunned by some in the place where she was born and raised. I certainly hope that, taking a cue from Linet, Natali Oknin too will rethink her decision never to visit Turkey again.

As for Linet, regardless of whether she ends up representing Israel in the Eurovision contest (though that would thrill a Turkish audience bereft of Eurovision representatives since 2012), I hope she too finds her place and gets the respect she clearly deserves. Just as Turkey is rediscovering its Jewish past, perhaps Israel should ask itself why these musicians have found a home in Turkey and yet have at times been silenced in the home where they were born and raised.

If anything, the Erdogan years have shown that the desire for dialogue and cultural exchange between Israel and Turkey can never be entirely suffocated by political diktat or by diplomatic absurdities.

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