

Analysis

January 27, 2011

Summary: When one looks at the trouble-ridden relations between Israel and Turkey today, it may be difficult to imagine that the two countries viewed each other as close partners less than two years ago. Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Israel. Israel had close relations with the United States, and as such, constituted a natural regional friend for Turkey during the cold war. But as Turkish governments wanted to develop new relations in the Arab and Muslim world or expand existing ones, Turkey's closeness to Israel often constituted an important limitation. As part of Turkey's efforts to achieve "zero problems with neighbors," the country reached out to Israel and Syria for talks in 2008. However, these efforts collapsed with the Israeli attack on Gaza in December of that year. Feeling stung, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan concluded that Israel was not interested in peace, a view apparently confirmed by the Mavi Marmara incident. The Turkish-Israeli relationship may be encountering the possibility of being irreparably damaged, although it is doubtful that either side will benefit from it.

Background to Tragedy: The Decline of Turkish-Israeli Relations

by *Ilter Turan*

When one looks at the trouble-ridden relations between Israel and Turkey today, it may be difficult to imagine that the two countries viewed each other as close partners less than two years ago. Yet currently, while maintaining diplomatic ties and expressing aspirations that they would like to have better relations with each other, the two countries are continuing to move apart with no indication of improvement in the near future. What happened and why?

Background to Partnership

Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Israel. After Israel's founding, Turkish-Israeli relations, though occasionally suffering from the negative effects of Arab-Israeli problems, developed in a positive direction, leading each country to view the other as a partner for a variety of reasons. To begin with, after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish republic oriented itself fully toward Europe and took a limited interest in the Arab Middle East. Semi-colonial countries with traditional rulers hardly constituted attractive partners for a secular republic that was striving to develop into a modern country. Israel, on the other hand, was another

modern, western-oriented country with whom Turkey could identify.

Second, when Israel was established, the Cold War had already begun. Soon major Arab countries experienced regime change through military takeovers. The new leaders were anti-western and favorably disposed toward the Soviet Union, an understandable position since their countries had been the direct targets of western imperialism. Turkey, however, felt threatened by Soviet expansionism. Israel had close relations with the United States, and as such, constituted a natural regional friend for Turkey. For Israel, encircled by hostile Arab regimes, Turkey seemed to be a natural partner as well.

Third, the relationship grew more comprehensive over time as either side offered the other opportunities for cooperation. For example, the close cooperation between the United States and Israel regarding defense industries enabled Turkey to procure some of its materials and maintenance services reliably and more economically from Israel. For its part, Israel got to use Turkish territory for training its air force jet pilots since its own territory was too small to allow training flights.



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Lest one get the impression that the relations were mainly in the military domain, it should be pointed out by way of example that Israel was one of the main suppliers of irrigation technology to Turkey, while Turkish companies were active in the construction business in Israel. Furthermore, tens of thousands of Israelis took their vacations in Turkey.

Fourth, the smoothness of relations impressed the American friends of Israel, who extended their support to Turkey in resisting the anti-Turkish activities of ethnic lobbies in the United States. As Turkey experienced occasional difficulties in its relations with the United States, it felt that it could always count on the friends of Israel in America to come to its assistance.

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Relations were good, if not always as exemplary as they might have been. But potential difficulties were never absent. Israel was hardly well-regarded in Turkish public opinion. True, anti-Israel feelings were never so critical as to pressure the successive governments to entertain major policy shifts. But irrespective of political ideology, many Turks were critical of the harsh way the Palestinian population was treated and the reluctance that Israeli governments displayed in working for a solution acceptable to all parties. Also, as Turkish governments wanted to develop new relations in the Arab and Muslim world or expand existing ones, Turkey's closeness to Israel often constituted an important limitation. Although often identified as being moderately Islamist, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government pursued the same policy as preceding governments until 2009.

The Road Paved with Good Intentions

The AKP first achieved power in the elections of 2002 and returned to power in 2007. From the beginning, a key figure in the formulation of the AKP government's foreign policy had been Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu, advisor to the prime

minister. His influence came to be felt even more after Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül left the government for the presidency after the elections of 2007. Davutoğlu became the foreign minister during a cabinet reshuffle in 2009. His vision is to expand the role of Turkey as a multi-regional power. To realize this vision, Turkey must achieve a state of "zero problems with neighbors," and must help resolve other regional conflicts.

The problematic relations between Arab countries, Israel, and the Palestine problem constitute a challenging nexus, but one that needs to be addressed if peace is to come to the region. It is with this line of thinking that the Turkish government succeeded in persuading Syria and Israel to accept indirect proximity talks mediated by Turkey in 2008 in order to proceed to direct negotiations to resolve outstanding issues and sign a peace agreement. Both governments appeared to be interested and to trust Turkey. All indications are that an agreement was almost complete and only some questions of wording remained. Prime Minister Olmert returned to Israel from a trip to Turkey, creating the impression that he was going to finalize the agreement with his government. Instead, Israel launched its ever biggest attack on Gaza on December 26, 2008, ostensibly to stop arms imports into the area and rockets fired from Gaza into Israel.

The Turkish government was excited that its peacemaking efforts in the region would provide it with ammunition vis-à-vis constituents who argued that the government should adopt a more Islamic stand. The United States, critical of Turkey's growing relations with Syria, would have also been shown that engaging the Syrians in a peace effort was possible. Finally, Turkey would have confirmed its status as a regional leader. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Turkey felt betrayed. Instead of having contributed to the peaceful resolution of a major regional conflict, it felt that it had been deceived by Israel, which had been preparing for war on Gaza all along.

Mutually Driven Deterioration

In retrospect, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Gaza War constituted a watershed event in Turkish-Israeli relations. Erdoğan concluded that Israel was not interested in peace. Thereafter, despite efforts to exercise damage control



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on both sides, relations have continued to deteriorate. The first incident came in late January 2009 at the Global Economic Forum in Davos. The Turkish prime minister was disturbed by hardline talk from Israeli President Shimon Peres, whom he judged had been accorded extra time by the moderator. Feeling that he was not given an opportunity to respond, Erdoğan uttered exceptionally unkind words to the Israeli president and walked out of the panel.

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Despite efforts to mend fences since that time, deterioration continues. With the coming of the Netanyahu government in February 2009, in which Avigdor Lieberman became the foreign minister, difficulties have intensified. In the fall of 2009, Turkey cancelled joint air force exercises with Israel. In January 2010, the undersecretary of the Israeli foreign ministry, Daniel Ayalon, insulted the Turkish ambassador and apologized only under great pressure. And then at the end of May 2010 came the Mavi Marmara incident that resulted in the death of eight Turks and one Turkish-American citizen when Israeli Special Forces attacked, in international waters, the flagship of a flotilla carrying volunteers and humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Turkey put forth five demands after the incident: 1) the passengers should be returned, 2) the ship should be returned, 3) an international investigation should be launched, 4) Israel should apologize, and 5) Israel should pay compensation. Israel has already met the first two conditions. It has refused to apologize and pay compensation. Such a position is understandable since the Israeli government has not accepted responsibility for the incident and feels that it has done nothing wrong.

This renders the third condition, the independent investigation of the incident, a highly important matter. Yet, it is in

this domain that the greatest difficulty has been encountered. The United Nations Human Rights Council has conducted an investigation and issued a report, judging that Israel had violated international law and that the military had used disproportionate force. The United Nations Secretary General has appointed an independent commission headed by Geoffrey Palmer, a former prime minister of New Zealand. Alvaro Uribe, the former president of Colombia; Joseph Cienhanover, an Israeli businessman; and Özden Sanberk, a distinguished retired Turkish diplomat, are also on the panel. The UN Commission is expected to produce its report in February of this year.

Turkey and Israel have launched their own investigations and initial reports came in within months of each other. Because the Israeli report, known as the Turkel commission report, was completed sometime after the Turkish report, it addresses some of the points that were raised in the former. And because the progress of the Turkel commission was more widely shared with the public it was known that it judged the Israeli forces to have acted properly and within the boundaries of law even before the report appeared on January 22.

Damage May Become Irreparable

The reports of the independent commissions have already evolved into another issue of contention between Israel and Turkey. A UN Commission report on which all can agree is unlikely and probably impossible. We may expect intense debate and probably no action in the United Nations.

The current Israeli government appears to think that its hardline policy is the right one, and feels that it is supported by a majority of Israel's population. The Turkish government, on the other hand, will find it difficult to retract its demands. A rapprochement, therefore, appears distant. Other steps taken by respective governments render a rosy future even more difficult. For example, the Turkish prime minister has come to enjoy the popularity his positions have generated among the Arab publics. With so many Arab regimes in trouble, Erdoğan may feel that regional leadership is his for the taking. Furthermore, his constituencies have now become more sensitized than ever before to the plight of Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. This reduces his room for moderating his approach to Israel.



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The Israeli government, too, seems not to have sufficient interest in pursuing a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians and Syria at this time. More importantly, it has started to search for enhanced relations with countries with which Turkey has competitive relationships including Cyprus, Greece, and Armenia. As these continue to develop, both sides may harden their positions. They may discover that they now need each other less, or they may adopt more adversarial postures. The Turkish-Israeli relationship may be encountering the possibility of being irreparably damaged, although it is doubtful that either side will benefit from it.

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İlter Turan is currently a professor of political science at Istanbul's Bilgi University, where he also served as president between 1998-2001. His previous employment included professorships at Koç University (1993-1998) and Istanbul University (1964-1993), where he also served as the chair of the International Relations Department (1987-1993), and the director of the Center for the Study of the Balkans and the Middle East (1985-1993). Dr. Turan is the past president of the Turkish Political Science Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee and a vice president of the International Political Science Association (2000-2006). He has served as the program chair of the 21st World Congress of Political Science in Santiago, Chile, July 12-16, 2009. He is board chair of the Health and Education Foundation and serves on the board of several foundations and corporations. He is widely published in English and Turkish on comparative politics, Turkish politics, and foreign policy. His most recent writings have been on the domestic and international politics of water, the Turkish parliament and its members, and Turkish political parties. He is a frequent commentator on Turkish politics on TV and newspapers.

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