

Turkey, Israel and the US in the Wake of the Gaza Flotilla Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The questions about the direction of Turkish foreign policy have been voiced once more following the flotilla crisis between Turkey and Israel, which coincided with Turkey's vote in May against a UN Security Council resolution on Iran. Is Turkey turning its back on the West? In the unfolding debate, one can see that such questions are being asked in order to send a tacit message of intimidation to Turkey or to give it a warning, rather than to conduct an honest inquiry into Turkey's foreign policy direction. To explain the recent changes in Turkish foreign policy, this commentary, instead, proposes to look at the transformations in the US role in the Middle East. It argues that ignoring the fundamental change in the global order while treating Turkey's every attempt to adapt to the new conditions as a form of "axis shift" are efforts to analyze Turkish foreign policy with parameters of a bygone time.

The Gaza Flotilla crisis and the diplomatic entanglement that ensued brought to light the competing visions on how to achieve a stable and peaceful Middle East. This crisis has shown, once again, that Turkey and Israel's strategic relationship does not necessarily mean that the two countries see eye to eye when it comes to regional security. Furthermore, this incident has put the US in the difficult position of having to make a choice between two of its strongest allies in the Middle East. Turkish-American relations have already been evolving and taking on new dimensions as a result of the new global dynamics in the post-Cold War era. This change, recently characterized by the concept of "model partnership," has been in the making for some time. The flotilla crisis came at a moment when Turkish-American relations are being redefined and are reaching a new level of interaction. Because of Israel's very close relationship with the US, the flotilla crisis has implications for the unique tri-lateral relations

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that exist between Turkey, Israel, and the US. The transformation in relations between these countries needs to be seriously examined. So far, analysts have chosen to reduce Turkish foreign policy

to a question of Turkish loyalty to the West. An assessment of the flotilla incident and an analysis of where Turkish-American relations are headed will be crucial in understanding the basic premises of the questions raised over Turkey's foreign policy direction.

Flotilla Incident and Israel's Responsibilities

In the early hours of May 31, 2010, the world woke up to a brutal drama played out on the high seas. The Israeli army's special operations teams attacked an international aid flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza. Breaching international law, the Israeli army attacked the aid flotilla 73 miles off the coast of Gaza in international waters. After this raid by Israeli commandoes, 9 civilians, 8 of whom were Turkish citizens and one American-Turkish citizen, lost their lives. Over 50 people were injured. The flotilla was carrying civilian passengers and 10,000 tons of aid. It was attacked by nearly 30 zodiacs, four frigates, two submarines, and three helicopters. While Israel had previously attempted to divert attention from the blockade of the Gaza strip, the raid has brought the siege to the forefront of the global agenda. Despite manipulations by the Israeli propaganda machine, the response of the international community against the flotilla attack has been tough and firm. The Netanyahu-Lieberman government ended up isolating itself from the world. And contrary to the intentions of the Israeli government, the Gaza blockade, which aimed to isolate Gaza from the world, resulted in the isolation of Israel.

The Gaza blockade drew reactions from a wide array of international bodies, human rights groups, and non-governmental organizations including the United Nations, Amnesty International, the Red Cross, Oxfam and others. International reports described the blockade of Gaza as illegal, unacceptable, unsustainable, and inhuman. They go as far as to characterize the blockade as a form of collective punishment for Palestinians living in Gaza.

An independent investigation into Israel's attack should be conducted removing it from the taint of the Israeli authorities' propaganda. In terms of international law, the nature of the attack and the way it was carried out should be carefully examined. No ship or naval vessel can be stopped or searched without the

permission of the country whose flag the ship is flying. In addition, according to the Hague Convention of 1907, even if Israel had been in a state of war with any of the involved groups or countries, it would have been prohibited from capturing the vessels.

Neither the blockade of Gaza nor Israel's claims and legal interpretations regarding it has any bearing on its acts of aggression in international waters. Israel committed a crime against humanity due to the fact that the attack was carried out as a deliberate military act against civilians under protection. Israel also committed a 'crime against peace' because there was no declaration of war between the parties involved. It is essential to underline that Israel did not find any weapons in its detailed search after it seized the ships, undermining its claim that this flotilla posed a threat to Israel's security.

Turkish-Israeli Relations

Until the early 2000s, relations between Turkey and Israel were primarily conducted at the bilateral level, and have been considered within the equation of Turkish-American relations. While it was the first Muslim country to have recognized Israel, Turkey has explicitly declared its opposition to Israel's aggressive policies. This opposition has been, on occasion, expressed by the deterioration of diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, enhanced military and commercial relations did develop as of the 28 February process (1997) when the Turkish military intervened in civilian politics through a memorandum. This phase in Turkish-Israeli relations was misleadingly characterized as Turkey and Israel having established a very strong 'strategic alliance.' However, by early 2000, the strength of this relationship had yet to be tested and a new period began when Prime Minister Ecevit accused Israel of committing genocide in April 2002. This period of tension persisted throughout the second war in Iraq. The Middle East has witnessed three wars in just 7 years: the invasion of Iraq (2003), the Lebanon War (2006), and the Gaza War (2008-9). Two of these wars were carried out by Israel, which have seriously impacted Turkey's perception of Israeli policies in the region.

In this period of wars, Turkey insisted on diplomacy. Turkey did not join the US-led coalition during the second war in Iraq. Instead, Turkey conducted very intense diplomatic efforts with its neighboring countries in order to ensure the stability in war-torn Iraq. In the 2009 Iraqi elections, these efforts yielded results by significantly contributing to the maintenance of relative stability, as several excluded political participants were integrated into the election process. In a similar vein, having followed a pro-active diplomacy supporting peace in Lebanon, Tur-

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key lent its active support to the efforts of government formation in the country. And most relevant to this current crisis, Turkey has been one of the few countries that have not remained silent in the face of the humanitarian drama unfolding in Gaza. Already at the Davos Summit in 2009, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan stunned the international community by standing up and expressing his vocal and direct criticism of Israel's unilateral Palestine policy before the world public opinion. Turkey's active diplomatic efforts have not been confined to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel's policies towards Gaza and the Palestinians; it also mediated indirect talks between Syria and Israel. Turkey's mediation efforts did not produce the hoped for results because Israel launched its war on Gaza (Operation Cast Lead) at the same time that Turkey and Israel were debating the final text of the agreement between Israel and Syria.

Israel's war on Gaza placed a high-level of stress on Turkey and Israel's bilateral relations, inaugurating an era marked by mutual mistrust and a lack of confidence. The Netanyahu government has not taken any steps to fix this crisis of confidence in bilateral relations; instead Israel has pursued very provocative and diplomatically unacceptable policies. Turkey's goodwill – manifested in the fact that Turkey did not veto Israel's membership to the OECD only a few days before Israel's attack on the humanitarian aid flotilla – yielded no positive results on the part of Israel to change its negative attitude.

In this context, Israel is responsible for the deterioration of relations between the two countries. Israel will either contribute to the efforts of establishing a peace and stability zone in the Middle East, which is enthusiastically supported by Turkey, or continue to face deep crises and conflicts with Turkey and the region. Last month, Turkey set up a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. These kinds of basins of stability could flourish and develop into a solid ground to build peace in the Middle East, which would include Israel. However, Israel has to make a serious commitment to peace and stability in the region or it will continue to be viewed as an outsider as opposed to an organic part of this regional geography.

Turkish-American Relations

The structural framework in which Turkish-American relations are inserted began when Turkey joined NATO in 1952. The technological superiority of the

US military as well as the basic character of the Cold-War alliances brought about a hierarchical military relationship between the two countries. The NATO structure worked well as long as there was one common challenge, the Communist Soviet Union, and the ideological threat it posed to the United States and Turkey. Turkey played a significant strategic role and received full support of the US during the Cold War years.

Following the Cold War, many analysts made the case that Turkey would eventually lose its strategic importance. However, this proved to be incorrect. For example, there have been new economic opportunities and common goals in the energy sector, especially in Central Asia. During the 1990s, although Turkey experienced economic and political crises, it still worked closely with its NATO allies. In the 2000s, Turkey started recovering from its political and economic problems and began defining its interests on its own terms.

In the context of post-9/11 events, the US demonstrated a go-it-alone attitude towards the Middle East and virtually abandoned multilateral diplomacy. Turkey filled the vacuum left by the shortcomings of US diplomacy in the region. Differences between Turkey and the US emerged as the two allies had distinct perspectives on how to solve regional problems. This was clearly seen when the Turkish parliament declined the US request to invade Iraq through Turkey in 2003. This was the most significant sign of change in the hierarchical relationship that long characterized US-Turkey relations. During the rest of the Bush administration, crises became a normal component of Turkey-US bilateral relations.

Since September 11, 2001, American foreign policy and the future of the global system have occupied a central place in current international affairs debates. The neo-con arguments became increasingly influential during the last years of the Clinton administration and found resonance in the Bush administration. In the aftermath of the 9/11 events, we witnessed the deterioration of already weakened international institutions and the “global order.” The end results were, among other events, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the tacit support for the Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza. The overall political cost of all these policies was roundly criticized by many and analyzed as the paramount example of American “unilateralism.”

Yet, a new era for bilateral relations started with Barack Obama’s election as President. The growing convergence of bilateral opinions on regional problems, which had previously sparked crises, helped the formation of what President Obama called the “model partnership.” The model partnership proposes that bi-

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lateral relations should be based not on a perception of hierarchy but on mutual understanding and cooperation. It also allows for a more diversified relationship and cooperation on various areas such as military, technology, diplomacy, education, economy and agriculture. In the context of a model partnership, dis-

agreements on issues do not necessarily create crises but may lead to meaningful high-level dialogue. It also proposes that the partners work closely so as to mitigate misunderstandings and misperceptions even before they occur. This process could be summarized as early diagnosis, direct dialogue, and close cooperation.

We can analyze the recent strains on the bilateral relationship in the context of this transition from strategic partnership to model partnership. We can expect this process to be difficult for both sides as they adjust to the new realities with new expectations of their own. It will surely take time for Turkey and the US to change their traditional attitudes towards one another.

One can identify two main areas of difficulty to be overcome in order to create a varied and sustainable relationship. The two main impediments are psychological and geo-political. The psychological dimension has to do with the 60-year-old hierarchical nature of the relationship. It will be difficult for the US to understand that Turkey is acting based on its own interests and not necessarily for or against US interests in the region. Turkey will learn to strike a balance between its own interests and the expectations of its long-time allies. In terms of the geo-political challenge, Turkey lives in this neighborhood and its relations with its neighbors are multi-fold. More often than not, Turkey's relationship with one country affects its relations with another. Hence, the US will need to see Turkey as a robust regional ally with diverse interests and alliances, not simply as "our guys in Ankara." The US needs to be flexible and pragmatic enough to realize the value of Turkey's efforts in bridging the gaps between the US and some of the regional actors. This transitional period will benefit from a reduction in tensions in the relationship and will require mutual appreciation of one another's domestic political limitations.

The United States has entered into six different wars since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its involvement in wars in Panama, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq (twice) has shown that the US has become a force causing frictions more than fostering mutual understanding appropriate for the nature of the post-Cold War

global system. Towards the end of the second term of the Bush administration, similar criticisms and perspectives began to be offered by prominent American thinkers, politicians, and even in the military. Notably, in military circles these criticisms centered around three major issues: 1) multi-polarity and multilateralism, 2) emerging powers, and 3) a post-American world. These discussions were further encouraged by Obama's election to the presidency, which appeared as an influential and inspiring factor for the establishment of a new and different approach to the changing global order.

Obama came to power strongly utilizing the rhetoric of change. There was an expectation, both domestically and internationally, that he was going to follow a very different route from that of the Bush administration. Although he started off his administration as a spectator to the Israeli attack on Gaza, Obama underlined that his administration's attitude in dealing with global problems was going to involve more dialogue and a more democratic approach. Especially on the issues of Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq, he pledged that he was going to demarcate his policies from the previous administration's approach and policies. However, he first had to take a step backward on the Afghanistan issue, and then, he let the Iraqi crises continue moving on its unclear course.

Similarly, the Obama administration's approach to the Iran issue is now swinging in the opposite direction after Iran accepted the IAEA's October 2009 offer on a fuel-swap through the recent diplomatic efforts of Brazil and Turkey. Since its election to the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member, Turkey has been conducting serious diplomatic efforts with Iran. Turkey and Brazil, whose involvement was particularly visible during the Nuclear Summit in Washington, DC in April 2010, brought the IAEA's offer to the Iranians once again. Iran agreed to the Vienna Group's former offer by accepting that Iran gives 1,200 kilograms of its low enriched uranium (LEU) to Turkey for a period of one year. This step was considered a very serious one by specialists closely following the nuclear negotiations. But instead of responding positively to the agreement, the US seems fixated on imposing sanctions against Iran. In order to render this agreement irrelevant, questions were raised on a number of issues. These questions seem to focus on the quantity of LEU Iran might possess other than the 1,200 kilograms to be sent to Turkey and on the fact that Iran has not pledged through this agreement to discontinue its nuclear enrichment program. While there are certainly aspects of this agreement that may need closer scrutiny and further discussions, it nonetheless signifies an important achievement of diplomatic efforts, the importance of which the Obama administration has emphasized repeatedly with respect

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to many international issues and global challenges. The Obama administration’s current attitude unnecessarily closes the door to a solution through negotiations and exacerbates global inequities instead of tempering them.

Turkey and Brazil’s efforts did not contribute only to the solution of the Iranian nuclear issue in particular. They also opened a door to overcome the inefficiencies of international institutions and the general global legitimacy crisis in the post-Cold War context more generally. They contributed directly to debates over emerging powers, a multi-polar and multilateral world, and a post-America international environment. If a new international system is to be established and the economic and political problems in the current system are to be solved, diplomacy on the Iran nuclear issue could constitute a milestone. Turkey has been focusing its efforts on establishing a regional system based on a “zero-problem-with-neighbors” policy. Turkey has created a ‘road-map’ that could guide diplomatic efforts with regard to the crisis over Iran, as well as the situation in Iraq and for the Israel-Palestine dispute.

Turkey’s diplomatic success on the Iranian nuclear issue begs a central question. Turkey and Brazil have contributed positively to the process by securing Iran’s agreement to the demands of the international community. In this way, a concrete first step has been taken against the possibility of Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. But this triggers another pressing question: will the first step taken against Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons by the international community be followed by measures against Israel’s existing nuclear stockpiles? If the answer is no, then it would be legitimate to talk about the impossibility of creating a stable regional architecture of non-proliferation in the Middle East.

The door for dialogue and negotiation opened by the Turkish and Brazilian efforts should not be closed by embargo measures. Such a step would not only damage the search for an equitable global system but also bring about serious consequences. In the past, sanctions have not been successful where tried, whether against Iran, North Korea, or Iraq. At the same time, the United Nations sanctions become meaningless, as the US waters down the measures just to ensure Russian and Chinese acquiescence. Nor are the consequences of sanctions on Iran even well thought out, as they lack serious consideration of how the regional picture, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, would be adversely affected by such designs.

The Obama administration that came to power with the slogan of change cannot sustain its rhetoric by pursuing policies at the UN consistent with those of the Bush administration. Turkey did not only achieve an opportunity for Iran to reach out to the international community through its diplomatic efforts, but also provided the Obama administration with a true opportunity to realize the promise of its positive discourse. The benefit of taking advantage of this opportunity far outweighs the cost of wasting it. At a time when Obama speaks of a “model partnership” with a country like Turkey, it would be in everyone’s interest if Obama followed the example set by his ally in Ankara.

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Turkey, whose confidence derives from its recent economic success, now realizes that it has a great potential to act as an honest broker in the region. Turkey’s diplomatic initiatives in the region bore fruit in the cases of Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. Turkey’s diplomatic efforts in the Iran nuclear deal and its following “No” vote at the UN Security Council demonstrated the complex relationship, as opposed to a uni-directional one, between Turkey and the US. The US benefits, in this case, from Turkey’s leverage on this issue. Although some American officials initially dismissed Turkey’s vote, now Turkey is being asked to continue its efforts on the diplomatic front. Turkey’s engagement with Syria had been similarly dismissed at the beginning but now the US is considering increased diplomatic relations with Syria. As we can see in these examples, model partnership has to include more empathy, careful consideration by the governments, and of course good will on both sides.

The two countries can pursue either a comprehensive approach or a fragmented approach to resolve regional conflicts. Ankara fully supports Washington’s comprehensive approach in Iraq, Afghanistan, and more recently in the Middle East peace process. It appreciates Washington’s new strategy that treats these conflicts not as isolated issues but as regional problems, by taking into consideration the concerns of neighboring countries. However, Ankara also believes that the US fails to pursue the same comprehensive strategy in dealing with Turkish-Armenian relations or in its attitude towards Iran.

Today, Turkish and US perspectives towards the Middle East have never been more similar. This opportunity should not be wasted. In fact, it should be turned into a long-term relationship that leads to mutual empowerment. In order to do

that, Turkey needs to better explain its objectives, vision and road map. Similarly, the US should spend more time understanding Turkey's position, giving more credit to Turkey's engagement strategy with the regional actors.

Is Turkey Changing its Axis?

In what direction is Turkey heading? Is Turkey turning its back on the West? Questions like these are being asked more and more in recent years, especially within certain circles. Such questions started to be voiced more loudly following Prime Minister Erdoğan's stern rebuke of Israeli President Shimon Peres over the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza during the 2009 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. Similar criticisms were leveled against Turkey especially after the flotilla crisis, and also Turkey voting in May 2010 against a UN Security Council resolution to impose new sanctions on Iran. One needs to inquire as to whether questions about Turkey's foreign policy are being asked in good faith. Do these questions stem from a serious curiosity about Turkey, or from a desire to intimidate it? Considering the course of developments and the content of comments made, we can see that such questions are being asked in order to send a tacit message of intimidation to Turkey or to give it a warning, rather than an honest inquiry into Turkey's foreign policy direction.

Why are we discussing whether Turkey has experienced an "axis shift"? To answer this question, we must look towards the history of political developments. As part of the status quo of the Cold War balance of power, Turkey was made a wing country confined to playing the roles cast for it. It was assumed that the geographic, political and sociological boundaries envisaged for Turkey with the establishment of the republic were final. The six-century-old imperial past and the opportunities as well as the responsibilities this tradition brought to Turkey were ignored, and it was considered unnecessary for Turkey to pursue a policy other than playing the role given to it within the polarization of the Cold War. Tensions experienced as a result of repeated military coups starting in the 1960s and deep domestic crises made Turkey so focused on domestic politics that it was unable to take any important foreign policy initiatives.

By the 2000s, Turkey had made important strides by learning lessons from the processes it had gone through. These developments mostly depended on the steps taken in the areas of economy and politics to ensure stability domestically.

But comparable progress was not made, up to then, in foreign policy. A natural reflection of the transformation experienced in Turkish economy and politics

made itself felt in Turkish foreign policy as well. From 1989 to the 2003 Iraq invasion, Turkish foreign policy remained stagnant and still largely reflected the logic of the Cold War. But with the sec-

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ond war in Iraq, time had come for Turkey to make a decision. This decision was taken with a vote in the Parliament on March 1, 2003 that refused to let US soldiers go through Turkish territory to invade Iraq. Since that day, Turkey has evolved from an ordinary wing country of the Cold War era towards a central country determining its position on its own. Instead of trying to understand Turkey's recent foreign policy initiatives with concepts like "axis shift" or "change of direction," one needs to consider them as part of a larger effort to adapt to the transformation process in today's world order. Here, we should emphasize that those opposing Turkey's foreign policy progress in recent years continue to see today's world order through the lens of the 20th century.

With its social imagination, and historic and strategic depth, Turkish foreign policy was galvanized with the invasion of Iraq. The Justice and Development Party government's initiatives, which had began with modest steps, stressed the use of "soft power." The economic growth seen during this period ensured both Turkey's newly gained self-confidence and enhanced its soft power. Divisions and shrinking of political and economic power in many Middle Eastern countries were becoming rampant. At the same time, the Caucasus and the Balkans were becoming more and more unstable. Turkey, however, emerged as a serious regional power with the importance of its strategic depth and expanding sphere of influence.

In its present form, Turkey is not a foreign power, which threatens its region. On the contrary, it has offered a "third way" in conflict areas by spreading stability to its surroundings and creating a "gravitational field" providing structural expansion to complex politics and emerging economies of the region. In this process, efforts to manipulate the rapidly changing perception of Turkey in its expanded neighborhood can be divided into two groups. Members of the first group argue that Turkey is uncomfortable with its newly emerging social and political borders, which exceed its geographical borders. The second group, in a more subtle approach, includes those preoccupied with transforming Turkey's political depth into a usable tool. Their approach is to quickly condemn Erdogan as a contemporary Gamal Abdel Nasser or a diluted neo-Ottoman. In fact, Erdogan is not a leader created by the Israeli problem, nor is Turkey a post-colonial country like Egypt. Any analysis omitting these two facts will remain flawed and hinder recognition of the truth.

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actually a result of the same “broadening of perceptions” in Ankara. With this step, Turkey along with Brazil, not only made an effort on the Iran issue but also opened a door towards breaking the bottleneck, created by the post-Cold War global context. They made actual contributions to discussions on a new balance of power in a multipolar, post-American world. In that sense, we must say that there is no reciprocity of axis discussions. Essentially, Turkey is getting rid of its Western-centered and Eurocentricist conditionedness. We know that this perception has been discussed and questioned for a long time not only in Turkey but also in the West; so it is crucial to understand that this tendency is appropriate for the *zeitgeist* and it needs to be salvaged from anachronism.

Turkey’s “no” vote against the UN Security Council’s new sanctions on Iran’s nuclear enrichment program, often cited by some as evidence of an axis shift, is

Turkey, using its own potential, has tried to contribute to new pursuits emerging in the international system after the end of the Cold War. Thus, the claim that Turkey’s axis has shifted is unfounded. Ignoring the fundamental change in the global order while treating Turkey’s every attempt to adapt to the new conditions as part of its “axis shift” should be seen as an effort to analyze Turkish foreign policy with parameters of a bygone time. Paradigms dominant in mid-20th century no longer correspond to Turkey’s contemporary realities.