

Israel: Quo Vadis, Turkey?

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ABSTRACT

The Mavi Marmara tragic affair is viewed in Israel as part of a Turkish political maneuvering which gained momentum following the Arab Spring. According to this view Turkey under Prime Minister Erdogan has identified a vacuum created by the US phased withdrawal from the region, a decline in Egypt's traditional role and the growing European and American need for Turkey's involvement. In these circumstances, Turkey can assert itself as a regional power with domestic, regional and international political and economic returns. Championing the Palestinian cause and criticizing Israel bears hardly any price tag. Israelis and, especially, those who decide whether to accept Turkey's demand for ending the Mavi Marmara affair and restoring normal relations, question whether this is Turkey's strategy. The Arab Spring may produce major changes in the region's political map that would also affect Turkey and Israel. This is a time when a dialogue, rather than rupture and confrontation, would better serve their long term interests. Yet both governments are now entrenched in their positions. This calls for a non-governmental initiative to prevent further deterioration and search for a process to heal the relationship.

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Israel's rapidly deteriorating relationship with Turkey has aroused much concern in Jerusalem and other capitals, especially in Washington, which has in turn conveyed its apprehension to the government of Israel on the matter. The Israeli concern and debate regarding Turkey transcends the *Mavi Marmara* affair and instead raises a serious long term strategic question relating to Turkey's orientation: Quo vadis, Turkey?

The Past Modus Vivendi

Turkey, beyond being the first Muslim country to recognize Israel, was perceived by the Israeli government and public as part of the friendly camp, sharing with Israel an association with the trans-Atlantic European-American community, as well as a lack of trust in their Arab neighbors. Diplomatic relations grew slowly but steadily, as did economic and military cooperation.

The distant past has also contributed to Israel's view of Turkey. To the Jewish people, whose collective memory is burdened with exile, persecution, and pogroms, the experience of the Ottoman Empire's sheltering of Jews is cherished and appreciated. As a young diplomat in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I dealt in Jerusalem with Syrian Jews who, with the full knowledge and assistance of the Turkish government, fled through Turkey. In Washington I helped to prevent the passage in the US Congress of the "Armenian resolution." I write this not in pride but in appreciation of the assistance Turkey rendered to Syrian Jewish refugees.

Towards the end of the 20th century and until 2009 relations expanded, on the diplomatic level as well as in the area of defense and security. The rise to power of the AKP was not viewed in Israel as a bellwether, and between 2002 and 2008 both governments learned to live with the Middle East realities and maintain their close cooperation. Thus, the Turkish government reacted in a very circumspect manner to Israel's responses to Palestinian terror and to Israel's attack on Hizbullah in 2006, while Israel turned a blind eye to the fact that most of the Iranian supplies to Hizbullah were transferred through Turkish airspace. Furthermore, the

Israeli government under Prime Minister Olmert agreed to entrust the Turkish government with the role of mediator in the indirect negotiations with Syria. Both the President of Israel and its Prime Minister paid official visits to Turkey, in 2007 and 2008, respectively. This recent history is reproduced to refute the contention that it is the Islamic affiliation of the ruling AKP that dominates Israel's current approach to Turkey.

The strong emphasis by the Turkish government on an Israeli apology and compensation for the casualties in the Israeli operation on the *Mavi Marmara* fails to convince the Israeli government and public that the genesis of the current crisis was that affair. Warning bells rang long before, when the Turkish government heavily criticized Israel for Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (late 2008–early 2009), when Prime Minister Erdoğan stormed out of the Davos debate with President Peres, when Turkey held military exercises with Syria, and when Turkey started to warm its relations with Iran. But mostly it was Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's approach to Turkey's position, stature, and role in the Middle East that sparked Israeli concern. Zero problems with Turkey's neighbors is viewed in Jerusalem as tantamount to serious problems with Israel, since it means tolerance of Iran's nuclear effort, cooperation with the pre-Arab spring Assad regime in Damascus, and support for Hamas in Gaza.

The concerns cannot of course hide the fact that Israel erred in Prime Minister Olmert's (understandable) failure to inform his Turkish host just a few days earlier of the impending Gaza operation or a short time before the operation commenced (which is not understandable). Upon his election, Prime Minister Netanyahu decided not to pursue the negotiations with Syria. This was a legitimate decision and in hindsight even wise when one observes the demonstrations in Syria, which may eventually unseat Bashar al-Assad. But Prime Minister Netanyahu failed to call his Turkish counterpart to express Israel's appreciation for Turkey's role and to assure him that if and when negotiations resume Israel would favorably consider Turkey's role. Almost everyone in Israel views the treatment of Turkey's Ambassador by Israel's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs as childish and uncalled for.

As with many other cardinal strategic issues, there is not one single Israeli position concerning the state of affairs with Turkey. The inner cabinet composed

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of the Prime Minister and key ministers, including the defense and foreign affairs ministers, was split on the issue of accepting the Turkish government's current two major demands – apology and compensation. Some ministers, however, rejected the formula reached by the Israeli and Turkish members of the committee appointed by the UN Secretary General to investigate the *Mavi Marmara* event. One of these was Minister Ya'alon, who joined the negotiations with

the Turkish side at a late stage, and another was Foreign Affairs Minister Lieberman. Upon the publication of the Palmer Report, the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem reacted by accepting the report, adding, "As advised in the report, Israel once again expresses its regret over the loss of life, but will not apologize...Israel cherishes the significant ties, past and present, between the Turkish and Jewish peoples. For that reason, the State of Israel has made numerous attempts in the last few months to settle the dispute between the two countries, but regrettably, these attempts have not been successful" (September 3, 2011).

Differences between the Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister

The Jewish New Year in late September 2011 served as an opportunity for several Israeli political leaders to grant interviews to the press. Prime Minister Netanyahu, in an interview to the *Jerusalem Post*,¹ was asked about his conciliatory tone in his UN General Assembly speech, when he said, "I extend [the hand of peace] to the people of Turkey with respect and good will."² He added, "I think sometimes restraint in language is useful. We can only hope that this will be viewed as such by other parties in the Middle East. It is not always the case, to say the least."

Netanyahu was referring to several statements made by Prime Minister Erdoğan in his tour of the region and Africa. In speaking to the Arab League in Cairo he called Israel "a spoiled child," adding, "Israel will break away from solitude only when it acts as a reasonable, responsible, serious, and normal state."³ In an extensive interview in *Time* magazine, Erdoğan claimed that the UN Security Council has adopted "more than 89 resolutions on prospective sanctions related to Israel, but they have never been executed."⁴ Prime Minister Erdoğan must have been misunderstood – to the best of my knowledge the UN Security Council has never referred to sanctions in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using

his argument, the Turkish Prime Minister then challenged the structure of the Security Council: “The entire world is literally a slave to the decisions of these five permanent seat holders.”

Netanyahu lost his restraint when asked about Erdoğan’s allegations of Israel’s killing tens of thousands of Palestinians. After calling the allegations outrageous he cited OECD reports to claim Turkey acts against the freedom of the press and noted that the issue of Turkey was raised in his talks with other leaders at the UN General Assembly: “The direction of Turkey, is of concern to many nations in the region, not just Israel...not merely to Cyprus and to Greece...We don’t have to add to this turbulence and instability [in the Middle East] with irresponsible statements and irresponsible actions.”

In another interview the same day⁵ Netanyahu said that “Turkey had opted to turn in another direction and he did not know whether it would ever return to where it was before. If Turkey would wish to arrest the deterioration and normalize relations, Israel would be promptly ready. I thought we should not bow our head in front of these unjustified attacks. There is also a measure of justice and national honor that have to be preserved. We did not give up on Turkey, but it is Turkey that gave up on us.”

The views in the Israeli government on meeting the Turkish demands differ, as revealed in an interview granted by Defense Minister Ehud Barak. Explaining that he understood security, national pride, and power no less than Lieberman and Ya’alon, he insisted that the whole issue of the apology was misrepresented. “Israel was not asked to apologize on imposing a blockade on Gaza, on blocking smuggling or stopping the boats, and on using force. The Palmer Report says these are legal and were done according to the law. Israel was asked to apologize for operational mistakes, to the extent they were made, which are connected to the loss of lives....Since a sad event took place and people were killed, the choice should not be between apologizing or not. It would be better to reach a settlement of relations with Turkey, of which a part would be an apology and the establishment of a voluntary fund for compensation, while another part would be a commitment by Turkey not to pursue the Israeli command soldiers, not to go to the International Court, and if an individual might do that, the Turkish government or the Turkish families would not join.”⁶

Barak did not refer to the third Turkish demand, namely lifting the blockade on Gaza, and the assumption is that Israel views this as either a marginal issue or a condition that was already met when Israel and Egypt relaxed their policies

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to power, but obviously they were not sufficient to deter, for example, Israel’s aerospace industries from significant deals in Turkey or Prime Minister Olmert from entrusting the negotiations with Syria in Turkish hands. Turkey’s reaction to the Gaza operation and Erdoğan’s storming out from the debate in Davos rang the alarm bells.

The question that is therefore asked in Israel is not whether to apologize but whether meeting Turkish demands would dramatically change the bilateral relations. While it is acknowledged that Turkey is a regional power and that it is in Israel’s interest to maintain positive relations, it is not clear whether past relations could be even partially restored.

Defense Minister Barak seems to believe it is possible. “They initiated the friction with us but I still maintain that we do not have an interest in becoming entangled with Turkey. It is not written in stone that we need to be enemies. We do not need to join in an adversarial relationship. Turkey is one of the four most important states in the Middle East.”⁷ But Barak himself put the finger on some of the issues that arouse deep concern among those in Israel that claim that meeting the Turkish demands would not restore and heal relations.

Barak refers to Turkey’s wish to become a regional power. It is clear that Turkey has identified a vacuum in the region and is eager to step in and leverage it to its advantage. The US declared its intention to reduce its military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan long before the Arab spring erupted. The failure by the US to generate movement in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations has not helped the regional perception of the US, either. The Arab spring has weakened Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as other significant regional players. Reading the emerging political map of the Middle East correctly, Turkey quickly removed its support from Mubarak, Qaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad, and joined NATO’s operation in

on importations into Gaza. If the Turkish demand refers to the naval blockade, it would be difficult to square it with the Palmer Report’s reference to the legality of the blockade.

For a while the *Mavi Marmara* affair had shifted the debate in Israel on Turkey to the question of an apology – but only for a while. Questions on Turkey’s orientation began to appear on the Israeli political screen ever since the AKP’s rise

Libya, emerging as the champion of the New Middle East, at least in the eyes of public opinion. Accepting NATO's request to deploy the radar system on its soil is a small price to pay for keeping the US and Europe, which are concerned with Turkey's political direction, not more than mildly critical.

But in Jerusalem the view is that on Israel Erdoğan has no holds barred, brushing aside requests from Washington to moderate his tone and language. During an official visit to South Africa in early October 2011, Erdoğan criticized the Israeli government for conducting state terrorism, killing tens of thousands of Palestinians while Israelis sleep peacefully, and then claimed Israel is a threat to the region because it possesses an atomic bomb.⁸ This and similar statements raise the question in Jerusalem as to how an apology would change the Turkish government's view of Israel, especially regarding issues raised by Erdoğan that have nothing to do with the *Mavi Marmara* affair. In the view of many in Israel, these statements indicate a calculated shift in Turkey's position towards Israel. If Israel continues to refuse Ankara's demands, Turkey could continue to issue vitriolic statements at very little domestic and external cost (a few articles in the Turkish press call upon the government to halt the onslaught on Israel).⁹ If, however, Israel decided to meet the Turkish demands, the Turkish government could present this as a vindication of its policies, regardless of the Palmer Report, gaining more points in the region and giving no assurances that it would stop its attacks on Israel. At this stage, the Israeli government may opt for a policy of "wait and see" in the assumption that sooner or later Turkey will incur political and economic difficulties, which may make the Turkish government more amenable to compromises.

A Way Out

The exploration for natural gas in the Mediterranean has given another cause for Ankara's ire concerning Israel. Israel has discovered significant reservoirs of this commodity and in order to avoid conflicts negotiated and concluded an agreement with Cyprus delineating the maritime border of economic interests. The agreement does not refer to the question of Northern Cyprus, and while the whole question of offshore gas explorations in Cyprus has little to do with Israel, the technical agreement threatens to become another bone of contention in Israeli-Turkish relations. On the other hand, the discovery of large quantities of natural gas in the Mediterra-

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nean also holds one of the keys to the restoration of the bilateral relations. If Israel decides to divert the export of gas to Europe, one of the two major methods would be using the Turkish web of pipelines. A major economic venture of such a magnitude would be an opportunity for both sides to reconsider their relations, replacing the former security based relations with economic mutual interests.

But healing the relations between Turkey and Israel will take a long time. It is clear that the time for an apology, compensations, and some gestures relating to the Gaza blockade has passed. The questions raised in Jerusalem as to Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East create the need for a much deeper pre-dialogue process of clarifications. The process may be equally difficult for both countries, as Israel might be asked to present its view of Turkey's role in the Middle East and especially in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Turkey will be asked to explain statements comparing Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians with the Holocaust, Israel's nuclear capabilities, etc. Without such a process the relations might further deteriorate with damaging statements and counter-statements. It is not clear whether the two governments are at this stage ready and capable of conducting such a soul-searching exercise. It might be that Track Two activities would provide a better and more useful method of laying the ground for a political reconciliation. In such a Track Two activity, former politicians, diplomats and businessmen should be involved. In any event, however, it would be hugely irresponsible to leave the current state of affairs unattended.

The release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit who was kidnapped by the Hamas some six years ago may provide an opportunity for opening a new, more positive chapter in the bilateral relations. Turkey has contributed to the softening of the Hamas terms and its assistance is appreciated in Israel. This opportunity should not be missed.

Endnotes

1. September 28, 2011.
2. Prime Minister website, pmo.gov.il.
3. *BBC News*, September 13, 2011.
4. The digital version was published on September 26, 2011.
5. *Israel Hayom*, September 28, 2011.
6. *Ma'ariv*, September 28, 2011.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Telegraph*, October 5, 2011.
9. "Turkey's Rift with Two Nations Worry a Top NATO Official," *New York Times*, September 30, 2011.