



PERSPECTIVES

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Get Tough with Turkey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish demands are unreasonable and an apology will not change the anti-Israeli policy of an increasingly authoritarian and Islamist Turkey. Israel's reluctance to criticize Erdogan's government is construed as weakness and Jerusalem should take off its gloves in dealing with Ankara.

A debate within Israel's government has been raging over how to respond to Turkey's demand for compensation and an apology for the Turkish flotilla incident last year in which nine Turks, while in violation of the naval blockade on Gaza, were killed by Israeli soldiers.

The Turkish demand is not reasonable. Even a UN investigation (the Palmer Committee) dealing with the issue has apparently concluded that Israeli actions were perfectly legal, much to Turkey's chagrin. Moreover, the Turks on the ship were provocateurs and members of a terrorist organization, and they violently resisted a legal attempt to take over the ship. As a matter of fact, Jerusalem deserves an apology and compensation from Ankara.

Yet, justice is not always triumphant and/or relevant in international relations. Indeed, Defense Minister Ehud Barak is reportedly willing to bow to Turkish demands, not because justice is on the Turkish side, but because he thinks that only an apology could repair Israeli-Turkish relations, which are deemed to be extremely important.

While good relations with Turkey are indeed quite valuable, the *status quo ante* is not likely to be restored in the near future. The deterioration in Israeli-Turkish relations is not related to Israeli actions in the Arab-Israeli arena or

elsewhere, but to a major reorientation in Turkish foreign policy under the ruling Islamist AKP party.

The recent electoral victory of the AKP will only strengthen the abandonment of the traditional Kemalist foreign policy that displayed a pro-Western orientation and reluctance to be drawn into Middle East politics. In contrast, the AKP-led Turkey is purposefully distancing itself from the West, wants to improve relations with the Muslim neighbors, and entertains ambitions to lead the Middle East and the Muslim world. Moreover, Ankara has aligned itself with the radical Islamist forces in the Middle East, siding with Iran, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Hamas in Gaza, and Hizballah in Lebanon.

Within the framework of the new Turkish foreign policy, good relations with Israel are a burden. Indeed, Israel-bashing has become a tool with which to overcome the historic suspicions of Arabs and Shiites toward the Sunni Turks. As such, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hardly lets a week pass without disparaging or criticizing Israel or the Jews, which undoubtedly fits well with the anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic sentiments prevalent in the Muslim world.

Therefore, an unjustified Israeli apology will not repair the relations, as Turkey is no longer interested in a strategic partnership with Israel. Moreover, such an apology will be used to humiliate the Jewish State and to strengthen the position of the Turkish premier as a champion against Israel. Israel's reluctance to enter in a duel of words with Erdogan is construed as weakness and only invites additional diatribes.

The new Turkish leadership is taking advantage of the weakness displayed by the Obama administration in its rejection of American regional preferences and in the attempt to weaken an American ally. Furthermore, the tensions between Jerusalem and Washington lead the Turks to believe that they can get away with a strong anti-Israeli posture.

Unfortunately, as long as the AKP stays in power, Israel should shy away from resuming security and intelligence cooperation – because the current Turkish government cannot be trusted with Israel's technology and secrets. After all, they may be transferred to Tehran the next day.

Similarly, Israel should not be fooled by the emerging competition between Iran and Turkey, two historic rivals, as the pro-Iranian Assad regime in Syria is challenged from within by forces (partly Islamist) supported by Turkey. Even if Syria remains a bone of contention between Iran and Turkey, the two countries still have many areas of cooperation such as opposing Kurdish

nationalism, dividing spheres of influence in Iraq, aiding Muslim Brotherhood elements in the Arab world, weakening a regional rival such as Israel, and a preference for an inactive US.

Israel should do more to present its case to the Turkish public. Large swaths of Turkey have not supported the AKP and dislike the Islamist tendencies of this government. The reservoirs of sympathy for Israel in Turkey should not be underestimated – among the educated, the business elites and the military – even though they are without much political influence at the present. Crucially, while infringements on the freedom of press have been spreading, outside anti-AKP voices are still heard.

Furthermore, Israel should no longer refrain from trying to exact a cost from a hostile Turkey. Turkey should no longer enjoy the “moderate Islam” label as its policies increasingly deviate from the West on an increasing number of issues. Small Israel can contribute to the removal of the “moderate Islam” mask Turkey is wearing and point out that it has become a Trojan Horse within NATO. Israel has sided on many occasions with Turkish interests in Washington. This must stop.

Moreover, Turkey’s democratic credentials need to be scrutinized in a much more critical way. The direction of Turkish politics is worrisome, as freedom of press is curtailed, as the independence of the judiciary is threatened, and as Erdogan attempts to build a centralized presidential system to suit his ambitions. As a matter of fact, Turkey is moving into greater authoritarianism as it gets closer to the Middle East.

Israel should not allow Erdogan to bully it. Israel’s leverage in Ankara is limited, but it can fight back – as it has nothing to gain from an increasingly authoritarian and Islamist Turkey.

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