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Turkey's Strategic U-Turn, Israel's Tactical Mistakes

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The Turkish-Israeli crisis touched off by the Gaza flotilla episode encapsulates the evolution of the two countries' bilateral relations with one another in recent years. While the Turkish government has been slowly changing its strategy toward Israel by tilting more and more toward the Arab and Muslim worlds, Israel has helped push it further in that direction by a number of egregious tactical mistakes.

Ankara's strategic shift began some years ago when it aligned itself with Israel's two implacable enemies, Hamas and Iran. Turkey's new alliances could not be explained away as a mere humanitarian gesture toward the Palestinians or an attempt to contain Iran through engagement. Given Iran's and Hamas's unflinching opposition to Israel's existence, Turkey's support for them cancels out, in effect, its alignment with Israel. Oddly, neither ordinary Turkish citizens nor members of the intelligentsia seem to grasp the impact on Israel of Ankara's shift. To illustrate the point, one can imagine the reaction in Turkey were Israel to declare its support for Armenia against Turkey (to be sure, the

parallel with Iran breaks down over the fact that Armenia possesses no nuclear weapons and has not declared its opposition to Turkey's right to exist). Similarly, one may ask, how would Turkey have responded to an Israeli invitation to Abdullah Ocalan, the head of the Kurdish PKK opposition (the AKP government has hosted Hamas leader Khalid Mash`al), or if Israel had organized a flotilla to provide aid for the Kurds of Turkey?

Viewed from a historical perspective, this is not the first time that Turkey has tilted towards the Arab world at the expense of Israel. Nonetheless, the current case differs from earlier ones in a number of important respects. In previous instances, Turkey's attempt to curry favor with Arab countries was in response to a concern over possible Arab moves that could directly harm Turkish interests, for example, the Arab threat not to sell oil to Turkey after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. In the latest incident, by contrast, Turkey's actions were proactive, done on its own initiative. In addition, although Turkish leaders in the past occasionally employed harsh words against Israel, never has Turkish rhetoric been as intense, inflammatory or sustained as that employed by Prime Minister Tayyip Recep Erdogan, beginning with last year's confrontation with Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos. Erdogan's actions mark the first time that a Turkish prime minister has taken the lead in posing as the savior of Palestinians facing Israeli repression. Similarly, while Turkey's moves toward Israel in the past were motivated by considerations of *realpolitik*, Erdogan appears to be guided by a quasi-messianic approach that eerily resembles the actions of Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser during the 1950s and '60. Lastly, although the sympathy of the Turkish people with the Palestinians is of long standing, it has never appeared as deep-rooted and all-encompassing as in the aftermath of the flotilla crisis.

The reasons underpinning Turkey's altered posture are manifold. One important explanation is the quiet revolution under the AKP government in both the domestic and foreign policy spheres. Paradoxically, its new Islamic ideological and political orientation turns it into a friendly competitor with Iran over the leadership role of the Islamist, pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli stance. This, together with the AKP government's success in cutting the Turkish military's influence down to size, enabled the government to deliver a severe blow to the strategic alignment with Israel. Moreover, sacrificing this alignment for the sake of close relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds was perceived as producing considerable dividends for Turkey, and particularly for PM Erdogan. With such moves Erdogan has assumed the role of an Islamic and Palestinian hero, and the Turkish state has catapulted itself onto center stage as the rising tiger of the Middle East. Such achievements encourage even more assertive moves in the same direction.

Israel's own flagrant errors played into the hands of the Turkish government, while also feeding the Turkish street's antipathy towards Israel. The deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations began gathering force during the December 2008 Gaza war, when Israel failed to notify Ankara of its intent to attack, as it had done with Egypt. Without entering into Israel's considerations, Turkey's rivalry with Egypt, Ankara's pro-Palestinian sentiments and Erdogan's allegedly injured honor went a long way to explain the open negative shift demonstrated at the Davos meeting. Other Israeli "contributions" to the decline of the relationship included declarations by some Israeli officials of their opposition to any mediating role by Turkey between Syria and Israel. Especially insulting, and ultimately embarrassing for Israel, was the demonstratively humiliating way in which Turkey's ambassador to Israel was treated by Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister.

Hence, the ground was well prepared for a crisis, which the flotilla affair provided in spades. Israel knew beforehand that the AKP was in one way or another linked to the IHH organization (Insani Yardim Vakfi), headed by Bulent Yildirim, which was the moving spirit behind the flotilla. Israel's mistake was that it chose the greater of two evils. By confronting the *Marmara* and causing the death of nine Turks, it inflamed both the Turkish public and the ruling elite against Jerusalem. Huge street demonstrations encouraged Erdogan to further sharpen his extreme stance towards Israel, which in turn further incited the public. Up until that point, Turkey and Israel had no real problems on the level of bilateral relations. Their disputes had to do with other issues, particularly their differing outlooks regarding the Palestinian issue. Now, with the death of Turkish citizens, people-to-people relations between Turkey and Israel have been dealt a severe blow. Governments come and go but healing the enmity that is developing between the two nations will be very difficult if a more sober and level-headed approach is not adopted by the two countries.

Because of the inherently asymmetrical nature of Turkish-Israeli relations, Israel appears to be the main loser from their deterioration. Still, Turkey too stands to lose from the new situation. As it increasingly assumes a more Iranian-like radical stance, Ankara's credibility as a stabilizing power in the region is likely to be damaged. Second, it has further diminished its chances for playing the role of mediator between Syria and Israel, a task which is strongly coveted by the architects of its newly activist foreign policy. Lastly, the surge in popularity of the AKP government, exemplified by huge anti-Israeli demonstrations which Erdogan's inflammatory speeches helped unleash, may boomerang against him in the longer run. Even now, concurrently with the anti-Israeli demonstrations, similarly large ones have been taking place against the AKP, organized by the Kurds. At bottom, Israel will not be able to serve

indefinitely as a diversion from the Turkish government's domestic and external problems.

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