

Operation Protective Edge: Deepening the Rift between Israel and Turkey

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Operation Protective Edge deepened the crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey, as evidenced in a number of ways. During the campaign, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made very strong statements about Israel, among them, that Israel has been carrying out “systematic genocide” against Palestinians since 1948,¹ that Israel has “surpassed Hitler in barbarism,”² and that Israel is killing Palestinian women “so they cannot give birth.”³ In one instance, Erdogan even indicated that Israel-Turkey relations would not improve as long as he was in power.⁴ Furthermore, Ankara declared three days of mourning over the events in Gaza,⁵ and demands were voiced that Turkey’s Jewish community apologize for Israel’s actions.⁶ Turkish opposition members did not voice different views from those expressed by Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and even accused the government of failing to match the bellicose rhetoric with practical actions. In particular, opposition figures again made the erroneous claim that the NATO radar based in Malatya in eastern Turkey is intended, inter alia, to provide information to Israel, specifically about what is occurring in Gaza.⁷ Violent demonstrations were held near the Israeli embassy in Ankara and the consulate in Istanbul; in turn, the Israeli Foreign Ministry reduced the diplomatic staff in both cities and announced that Israelis had better avoid travel to Turkey. There have been calls in both countries to boycott goods from each other.

Despite its initial hesitation, Israel allowed Turkey to transfer large scale humanitarian aid to Gaza and transfer wounded Palestinians from Gaza to Turkey.⁸ Even though most of the aid was coordinated by the Turkish governmental aid organization TIKA and the Turkish Red Crescent, also

prominent among the organizations that took part in the effort was IHH, one of the main driving forces behind the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla in May 2010, an event that brought the tension between Turkey and Israel to new heights.⁹ During Operation Protective Edge, IHH even announced that it was considering sending a flotilla to Gaza, and following the Turkish presidential elections (apparently it did not want to raise sensitive issues before the elections) the organization announced that the flotilla to Gaza would embark during 2014.¹⁰

The process of deterioration in Turkey-Israel relations is not new. However, in late April 2014, in an interview with an American media outlet, Erdogan, referring to the bilateral friction, stated that an agreement between the two countries on normalizing relations was expected to be signed in the coming weeks.¹¹ While measures taken by Turkey in response to the events in Gaza were not fundamentally different from other manifestations of the increased tension between the two countries, the scope and severity of the rhetoric made this crisis especially severe.

Several factors led to the most recent rift in relations. First, there is a correlation between the state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general and events in Gaza in particular on the one hand, and Turkish-Israeli relations on the other. Every time there is a crisis between Israel and the Palestinians, and especially if it is as serious as the crisis in the wake of Operation Protective Edge, tension increases between Israel and Turkey. For example, in 2002, then-Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit described the events in Jenin during Operation Defensive Shield as “genocide.” In recent years, Gaza has become a focus of the debate in Turkey about the Palestinian issue. The close ties between the AKP and Hamas reinforce the Turkish emphasis on events in the Gaza Strip.¹²

Second, given the tension between Turkey and Egypt over the ouster of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood-led government, the initiatives proposed by Egypt to end the fighting between Israel and Hamas were perceived as challenges to the initiatives proposed by Qatar and Turkey. Already in mid-July, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman accused Qatar and Turkey of sabotaging the possibility of a ceasefire agreement.¹³ Erdogan’s criticism of Egyptian President Abdel el-Sisi, whom he called a “tyrant,” and of Egypt’s policy toward Gaza in the current conflict, led to a rebuke of the Turkish diplomatic representative in

Egypt (the Turkish ambassador to Egypt was already expelled in November 2013).¹⁴

Finally, the proximity of the Turkish presidential elections, which were scheduled to take place on August 10, 2014, provided fertile ground for Erdogan's harsh comments about Gaza in election speeches around the country. Erdogan, who needed more than 50 percent of the vote in order to be elected in the first round of the elections, chose to highlight this topic, on which there is a broad consensus in Turkey and which is identified with his term as Prime Minister: milestones in the deterioration of Israel-Turkey relations in connection with Israeli policy toward Gaza were the incident between Erdogan and then-Israeli President Shimon Peres during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2009 as well as the *Mavi Marmara* affair.

Hamas ultimately accepted Egypt as the principal mediator, evidence that in this round of conflict, Turkey was at a disadvantage.¹⁵ Furthermore, it appears that Turkey is playing second fiddle in relation to Qatar as well. Yet another indication of Turkey's limited influence over diplomatic events in the Middle East was the fact that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon skipped Ankara during his shuttle diplomacy in the region to promote a ceasefire.¹⁶ On the other hand, it appears that US Secretary of State John Kerry attributed greater importance to the mediation efforts of Qatar and Turkey and included their Foreign Ministers in a meeting he convened in Paris in late July in an attempt to end the fighting.¹⁷

During Operation Protective Edge, the influence of Turkish policy on Israel's calculations was limited, and if Qatar and Turkey indeed successfully sabotaged the ceasefire agreement at the start of the campaign, the influence was essentially negative. While many in the West dismissed the Turkish rhetoric as excessive, it nevertheless perhaps contributed to a general line of condemnation of Israel.

In contrast, Turkish policy toward Gaza in recent years has had a much greater impact. Many of the Israeli restrictions on the passage of goods to Gaza were eased after the *Mavi Marmara* crisis and as part of the talks between Turkey and Israel intended to resolve the crisis. In addition, based on the conclusions of the Turkel commission, which investigated the events surrounding the flotilla, a change was made in procedures for documenting and investigating IDF operations that are likely to engender international criticism.¹⁸ Presumably these changes also had practical manifestations in the

nature of the actions during Operation Protective Edge. Moreover, decision makers in Israel cannot ignore the threat Erdogan made in 2011 (even if it is not likely to be carried out) that next time, a humanitarian flotilla to Gaza, such as the one currently organized by IHH, will be escorted by ships from the Turkish navy.

The deterioration in Israel-Turkey relations against the backdrop of Operation Protective Edge raises certain questions about the general claim that mutual dependence, especially on economic issues, will curb major deterioration in relations. In the year prior to Operation Protective Edge, the volume of trade between Turkey and Israel was some \$5 billion (compared to about \$3.5 billion in 2012), and if not for the operation, it would have likely reached a new high. Turkish Airlines, which operated between seven and eight daily flights to Ben Gurion Airport (making it the largest foreign air carrier at the time from this airport), canceled two daily flights in the aftermath of the campaign, as fewer Israelis were now willing to fly through Turkey because of the hostile atmosphere in the country toward Israel.¹⁹ During the operation, the Turkish energy minister announced that talks between Turkey and Israel on the option of natural gas exports from Israel to and from Turkey were frozen for now.²⁰ In light of the volume of economic activity between the two countries, one might have expected that the public debate in both nations would include more moderate voices, but in fact, there were no prominent voices contradicting the dominant hostile discourse.

In conclusion, despite the many efforts undertaken in recent years to rehabilitate Israel-Turkey relations, it appears that the crisis, which deepened against the background of the campaign in Gaza, has struck a heavy blow to relations, and it is currently not clear how this can be overcome. The latest crisis may be especially serious because of the tumultuous relations between Israel and Turkey in recent years, which deprived Jerusalem and Ankara of the stable foundation that could be relied on to reduce tension. Israel in 2014 was more steadfast in its refusal to accept Turkish mediation efforts than in similar cases in the past. That being the case, it appears that unless a fundamental and positive change occurs in the situation in Gaza, the subject will continue to be a focus of considerable tension between Israel and Turkey, and bilateral relations will not return to the path of normalization.

Notes

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- 2 Gulsen Solaker and Jonny Hogg, "Turkish PM Erdogan Says Israel 'Surpasses Hitler in Barbarism,'" *Reuters*, July 19, 2014.
- 3 Tulin Daloglu, "Erdogan Uses Gaza as a Campaign Tool," *al-Monitor*, August 4, 2014.
- 4 Serkan Demirtas, "Turkey-Israel Ties Can be Worsened Further," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 19, 2014.
- 5 "In Rare Move, Turkey Declares Three Days of Mourning for Gaza," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 21, 2014.
- 6 Roy Yerushalmi, "Turkish Jews Urged to Apologize for 'Israeli Killing of Muslims,'" *Ynet*, July 17, 2014.
- 7 "Despite Foreign Ministry Denial, CHP Insists Turkey's Kurecik Serving Israel," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 21, 2014.
- 8 "Foreign Ministry Opposes Turkish Red Crescent Request to Bring Aid to Gaza," *Ynet*, July 25, 2014.
- 9 Thus, for example, in a telethon, the IHH raised some \$5.5 million for the residents of Gaza. See Fatih Şemsettin Işık, "Envoy to Qatar: Two Countries in Solidarity with the Gazan People," *Daily Sabah*, August 12, 2014.
- 10 "Turkey's IHH to Send New Flotilla to Break Gaza Blockade," *Daily Sabah*, August 11, 2014.
- 11 "Erdogan: Reconciliation Agreement with Israel Expected to be Signed in Coming Weeks," *Haaretz*, April 29, 2014.
- 12 For more on this see Gallia Lindenstrauss and Süfyan Kadir Kıvam, "Turkish-Hamas Relations: Between Strategic Calculations and Ideological Affinity," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 2 (2014): 7-16.
- 13 "Turkey Spars with Egypt over Failed Gaza Cease-Fire Bid," *Today's Zaman*, July 18, 2014.
- 14 "Egypt Summons Turkish Envoy over Erdogan Slur," *al-Jazeera*, July 26, 2014.
- 15 Gokhan Bacik, "The Turco-Egyptian Feud and the Palestinian Crisis," *Today's Zaman*, July 20, 2014.
- 16 Lale Kemal, "Turkey's Foreign Policy in Serious Disarray," *Today's Zaman*, July 23, 2014.
- 17 Barak Ravid, "Kerry's Latest Cease-Fire Plan: What Was He Thinking?" *HaaretzBlog*, July 27, 2014.
- 18 "Goldstone 2? No Need for Alarm; IDF Acted Appropriately," *NRG*, August 13, 2014.
- 19 Itay Blumenthal and Danny Sadeh, "Turkish Airlines Reducing Activity in Israel," *Ynet*, August 8, 2014.
- 20 "Turkey Rules out Energy Alliance with Israel until Gaza Peace: Minister," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 4, 2014.