

Turkey and Israel

Oded Eran

By the middle of 2010, Israel's relations with Turkey reached an unprecedented low. The incident on May 31, 2010, when Israeli commandos overpowered opposition on board a Turkish ship attempting to break the Israeli blockade on Gaza, was just the tip of the iceberg.

The deteriorating relations should be viewed, however, not just in the bilateral context. They may signal a more profound change in Turkey's *weltanschauung*. The ideological roots of the ruling AK Party and the disappointment resulting from the lack of a breakthrough in the negotiations for accession into the European Union have moved Turkey to reorient its foreign policy towards a greater emphasis on relations with the immediate neighborhood.

The shift in Turkey's orientation was given a theoretical framework in the book *Strategic Depth* by the current Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and more recently in his article "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy."¹ He himself and other spokesmen of the AKP deny the Ottoman element in this approach,² yet the Ottoman past, the common language and religion in large parts of Turkey's neighborhood, and Turkey's geo-strategic location are defining components of the policy. Beyond the intriguing comparison to the Ottoman past, the shift contains seeds of future friction with Israel, as well as with the European Union and the United States.

Syria and Iran

The marked change is best exemplified in Turkey's improved relations with two of its immediate neighbors – Syria and Iran. The longstanding disputes with Syria over Hatay Province, water rights, and Syria's support for the Kurdish party (PKK) have been pushed aside. The two countries have strengthened their trade relations and held joint military exercises (April 2009), and the two presidents have exchanged official visits to formalize the thaw in the relations.

This change created an opportunity as well as a problem for Israel. When after the Second Lebanon War Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert agreed to re-launch negotiations with Syria, stalled ever since the failed negotiations of 1999-2000 conducted with US mediation, Turkey was a natural go-between. For the US under George W. Bush, Syria was part of the axis of evil and the US could not resume the role of mediator, nor did it want to. Turkey stepped in and the five rounds of indirect talks that were held on Turkey's soil produced significant progress on the key issues of the conflict between Syria and Israel.

Playing host and go-between in an attempt to solve this major part of the Arab-Israeli conflict could not but boost Turkey's self-esteem. Indeed, the prospects of playing such a major role were a key reason for Turkey's minor reaction to the September 6, 2007 attack on the Syrian nuclear reactor, attributed to Israel. According to press reports, fuel tanks used by the jets attacking the reactor were found on Turkish soil.³ Turkey's belief in the importance of this diplomatic role was also underscored by Foreign Minister Davutoglu, who in the aforementioned article, referred to Turkey's mediation between Syria and Israel several times as evidence of the success of the policies he engineered.

The talks between Israel and Syria came to an abrupt end when President Asad of Syria broke them off as a result of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, Israel's military campaign designed to stop rocket launching from Gaza on civilian centers inside Israel. The new Likud-led Israeli government, sworn in on March 31, 2009, has opted not to pursue the talks with Syria, a legitimate decision but most probably not well conveyed and properly explained to the Turkish government.

The resumption of the currently stalled Syrian-Israeli negotiations, a development that should not be discounted, could entail further strains on Israeli-Turkish relations. The US administration under President Obama has turned US policy towards Syria around, and the policy of engagement has been noticeably applied. After a five-year absence, a US ambassador will be reinstated in Damascus. Meanwhile, the Syrian capital has been frequented by US Special Envoy to the Middle East Senator George Mitchell, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator John Kerry, and other US officials. While Israel will prefer the US as a mediator, Syria, given its much improved relations with Turkey, may nonetheless opt for Turkey. The US cannot ignore this Syrian preference without alienating Ankara. What may emerge, if Syria and Israel decide to resume talks, is a joint behind-the-scenes Turkey-US mediation effort, which both Israel and Syria could accept.

Directly linked to the Syrian-Israeli file is the new phase in Turkey's relations with Iran. The improved dialogue between the two has been a cause for concern to the transatlantic community as well as to Israel. For years, even before the AKP took control of the government in Ankara, Turkey turned a blind eye towards the shipments of arms from Iran to Hizbollah in Lebanon, using Turkish and Syrian airspace. As long as the military relations between Israel and Turkey flourished, Israel opted not to rock the boat and publicly ignored Turkey's role in the supply of weapons to Hizbollah. This perforce would change with Israel's demand from Syria, in the context of a negotiated settlement to their conflict, to end both the military relations with Iran and the role of conduit and supplier of arms to Hizbollah. A similar request would necessarily be addressed to Turkey as well.

The Iranian military nuclear program has emerged as another cause for tension between Israel and Turkey. In an interview on March 29, 2010, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan defended Iran, and when asked about sanctions against Iran he replied, "Sanctions have been imposed against Iran several times, but what is the result?...What we need is diplomacy, diplomacy, diplomacy. Anything else will do nothing but threaten global peace. And don't those who are exerting pressure have nuclear bombs of their own? Turkey isn't a nuclear power, but there is one country in

this region that does have nuclear weapons.” He did not respond directly whether he meant Israel.⁴

More significant was Turkey’s role, together with Brazil, in reaching the May 17, 2010 joint declaration with Iran. The central operative paragraph in this declaration is Iran’s willingness to deposit 1200 kg of low enriched uranium in Turkey. The terms of the declaration fall short of the demands of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, who continued in their efforts to adopt tougher sanctions against Iran. Beyond the new technical differences, the Turkish involvement is in stark contradiction to the “model partnership” that President Obama praised in his visit to Ankara, and a signal for further confrontation with Israel on the whole nuclear issue.

This will be a major test of the relations between Israel and Turkey, especially since in 2010 the latter is a member of the UN Security Council. On June 9, Turkey voted against UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which called for tougher sanctions against Iran on a matter viewed in Israel as existential – though Turkish high ranking officials asserted that Turkey will comply with the sanctions. It will be virtually impossible for the Israeli leadership to entrust Turkey with the role of a mediator with Syria while Turkey continues to side with Iran and Syria.

The Israel Angle

Prime Minister Erdogan is the leading critical Turkish politician against Israel, although not the only one. In recent months barely a week has passed without a statement by him criticizing Israel for its actions as he perceives them. Erdogan’s ideological roots are entrenched in Islam, and in his early political activity he was a member of the Muslim Welfare Party whose leader, Necmettin Erbakan, was prime minister for a short while from 1996-97.

The fact that Erdogan’s venom against Israel became clear only after Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in late 2008-early 2009 can be explained in several ways. One is personal and has to do with the visit Prime Minister Olmert paid Erdogan 72 hours before the operation started. Olmert could not be expected to tell his host about the pending operation, but a possible inference could have been that Erdogan knew of it. In addition, Turkey was

the first to open its doors to the new Hamas leaders who won the Palestinian elections in January 2006; on February 16 of that year Erdogan met with Hamas leader Khaled Mashal. As in the case of Israel's low key response to Turkey's role in the transfer of weapons to Hizbollah, its abstention from an angry reaction to the warm reception of the Hamas leader can be explained by the wish not to upset the military relations with Turkey. Erdogan's personal involvement with the İnsani Yardım Vakfı, the Turkish organization behind the aid flotilla to Gaza, could become another bone of contention between the two states.

Thus, Erdogan's reaction to Israel's operation in Gaza cannot be seen as just anger at the sight of the sufferings of Muslim brethren in Gaza. Rather, it should be seen as a combination of his ideological roots and the new role Turkey is seeking for itself in the Middle East. If this is the case, there is very little that Israel can do to mollify the current Turkish prime minister.

Israel's dilemma concerning the bilateral military cooperation could become irrelevant if the systematic weakening of the military's status in Turkey continues. In February 2010 more than 60 high ranking army officers, active and retirees, were arrested and charged with having planned a coup d'état. Among those arrested were the commanders of the navy and the air force, the two military branches with which joint Israeli-Turkish exercises were conducted. Regardless of the accusations' veracity, this must be seen as a part of the continuous campaign by the current Turkish government to end the military's role in Turkey's politics as the guardian of Kemal Ataturk's legacy. Some observers have explained Erdogan's pressure on the European Union to start accession talks as a way to enlist EU support for eliminating the army's traditional central role in Turkish politics and subjecting the army to the full control of the civilian authorities. Certainly Turkey's policy of "zero problems" developed by Foreign Minister Davutoglu further reduces the importance of the army as it concentrates on improving relations with past problematic neighbors such as Armenia, Syria, Iran, and the Kurds.

In any event, the military establishment in Turkey was the key promoter of relations with Israel. This cooperation will no doubt be reduced under the current political climate in Turkey, and the Turkish military is unlikely to spar on relations with Israel, which is clearly an insignificant issue

between the army and the government. Asked about agreements between Israel and Turkey, presumably in the area of defense, Erdogan replied that they were signed in the past and they remain valid. “Of course, some of the steps we take should not be subject to emotions, but events that may take place may force us to adopt different positions.”⁵

Though Israel’s defense minister Ehud Barak was well received during his visit to Ankara in January 2010, the military cooperation and the joint ventures in defense are unlikely to continue at the pre-2008 level. Erdogan’s answer on this issue may indicate a policy that will only allow the current agreements to run their course. The Israeli Air Force has been quick to draw the conclusion from the deteriorating relations between Israel and Turkey and shifted to Greece as an alternative airspace for training.⁶

In this context, it is to be anticipated that Turkey, as a NATO member, may try and curtail Israel’s cooperation with the organization. In recent years, Israel and NATO cooperated on upgrading their relations through the Individual Cooperation program (Mark I and II) within NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue. Even after the rise of the AKP to power, Turkey did not object to the growing relations between NATO and Israel. This may change and as decisions in NATO are adopted by consensus, Turkey may cast a veto on any Israeli participation in NATO activities.

Israel’s overall relations with Turkey will of course be influenced by Turkey’s relations with both the US and the EU. Blaming Turkey’s orientation towards the immediate neighborhood on the European Union’s failure to allow meaningful progress in the accession negotiations with Turkey is too simplistic an explanation. For Turkey, membership in the EU could demand tough decisions on domestic issues, which it can currently avoid. On the other hand, the failure of the European Union either to make Turkey face these choices by pushing forward the negotiations, or otherwise propose to anchor Turkey more closely to the EU by offering a clearer description of what Chancellor Merkel dubs a “privileged partnership,” may be described as a strategic blunder.⁷ Under the current political circumstances in Turkey and Europe, full Turkish membership in the EU would certainly add an extreme critical voice of Israel to the group of countries in the EU holding similar views, but from Israel’s point of view that could prove to be a less costly option than Turkey drifting away

towards a coalition with Syria, Iran, and sub-state organizations such as Hamas and Hizbollah.

A failure of the central government in Iraq in the wake of the US pullout could ignite each of the informal coalition partners and add to the whole region's instability. With Iran becoming a nuclear power, Turkey may not necessarily opt to acquire similar capabilities, but its mere alliance with a nuclear Iran may tilt the strategic balance in the region, raising serious questions and concerns not only in Israel but in Egypt, the Gulf, and even in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

The possible establishment of a Palestinian state either as a result of a negotiated settlement or by a UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) may create additional potential friction between Israel and Turkey. Notwithstanding its attitude towards Hamas, Turkey is expected to be one of the first to recognize the Palestinian state and offer it political support whenever disputes would arise between this state and Israel.

Furthermore, the Turkish private sector has been active in promoting industrial parks in the West Bank, which will add several thousand jobs to the Palestinian labor market. In general, stronger economic relations with Israel, especially in the energy sector, may replace the political and military relations. Turkey is fast becoming a major artery and hub for oil and natural gas. Whether as a consumer or a supplier, mostly of natural gas, Israel will seek Turkey's cooperation. Similarly, water can become another area where Turkey's role will become significant. Though in the past Turkey refused to be involved in water issues between Israel and Syria, it is clear that releasing more water by Turkey to Syria would ease the pressures on Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian state if Syria in turn releases more water flowing down the Yarmouk.

Conclusion

There is now sufficient evidence to conclude that Israel has lost Turkey under the AKP as a strategic partner. The shift in Turkey's foreign and regional policy will exacerbate tensions between the two, as Israel is unlikely to provide Turkey with the opportunities the latter seeks as a mediator. The implications for the strategic balance in the region should become a regular issue in Israel's strategic dialogue with the transatlantic

community, as the interests of both the EU and the US may come into conflict with Turkey's ambitions in the region.

Turkey's president, its prime minister, and other high ranking politicians deny a shift in Turkey's foreign policy. The initiative taken by Turkey and Brazil and then their vote on Security Council Resolution 1929 is, however, viewed in Washington and some European and Middle Eastern capitals with concern. Turkey will go to the polls twice in 2010-11, first in September 2010, to vote in a referendum on constitutional changes that are seen by the opposition in Turkey as an attempt by the government to increase its control of the juridical system. Then in November 2011, the country will vote in general elections. These two upcoming tests may explain the growing populist manner in which the current political leadership handles various issues, including foreign affairs. Yet Ankara may be required to recalibrate its public posture and tone down its public rhetoric to allay some of the concerns that it has recently raised.

Israel need not be provoked by Turkish statements and actions or automatically reject Turkish government initiatives. Any objections can be communicated in the proper diplomatic channels, avoiding a public rebuff. The incumbent prime minister will want to use any Israeli action for his populist policies and there is no good reason to oblige him. In general, the general elections scheduled in 2011 may not prompt a change in Turkey's politics and the AKP hold, and Israeli action and reaction would likely have a very marginal effect on the results.

Given the two electoral tests for the AKP government in the next 18 months, Turkey may continue to confound its traditional allies. A victory for the ruling party, especially in the forthcoming general elections, could seal the major change in the strategic Middle East balance. Such a change will force Israel to give a strategic response, among other options, by creating a "southern axis" of states equally concerned by the northern radical axis.

Notes

- 1 *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2010.
- 2 Interview to Sabah, December 4, 2009, and also Suat Kimiklioglu, "No, Turkey has no Ottoman Nostalgia," Project Syndicate, December 13, 2009.

- 3 *The New York Times* reported on October 10, 2007 that Israel shared with Turkey the intelligence on the reactor. *Der Spiegel* reported on February 11, 2009 that Prime Minister Olmert called the Turkish prime minister immediately after the operation had ended.
- 4 *Der Spiegel*, March 29, 2010.
- 5 *Der Spiegel*, March 29, 2010.
- 6 Hellenic Air Force website, May 25, 2010.
- 7 Turkey's chief negotiator with the EU, Minister Egemen Bagis, said that the term did not exist in the 110,000 pages of EU legislation. He added that Turkey could not assess something that did not exist. *Journal of Turkish Daily*, April 1, 2010.