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From Zero Problems to Zero Sum Game and Back: Towards a Thaw in Israel-Turkey Relations?

Gallia Lindenstrauss

When states and organizations crave good news in the area of nuclear proliferation prevention, they may be wont to ignore the bare facts or misinterpret them in an optimistic vein. This in turn creates a sense that there is still time in which to effectively stop the production of fissile materials for the production of nuclear weapons.

Israel viewed Turkey's dispatch of firefighting planes to help put out the enormous forest fire on Mt. Carmel very positively. It brought about the first significant breakthrough toward mending the broken Israel-Turkey relations since flotilla affair this past May. Israel's forced takeover of the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* led to a freeze in relations that were already tense, partly the result of Turkey's response to Operation Cast Lead. The positive dynamics created by Turkish aid to Israel reflect a certain desire on the part of both states to resolve the crisis, though it is uncertain if this is enough to clear the hurdles on the way to a significant improvement of relations.

It seems that since the flotilla episode, Turkey and Israel have been engaged in a zero sum game. Turkey has demanded an apology and compensation for the victims of the *Marmara's* forced takeover; Israel has refused Turkish demands, claiming that the flotilla was a planned, violent provocation and that no other army in the world would act differently under similar circumstances. Israeli public opinion has overwhelmingly opposed an apology, which is seen as surrendering to the Turks. However, from the Turkish perspective, if the Turks would accept Israel's expressions of regret made immediately after the flotilla, it would seem as if Turkey were conceding its repeated public demands for an apology and compensations. To these conditions is the additional demand by Turkey for Israel's full removal of the blockade on the Gaza Strip, and Israeli steps to ease the blockade have apparently not been deemed sufficient.

The fact that Israel and Turkey have come to the point of being caught in a zero sum game is in stark contradiction to the principles currently guiding Turkey's foreign policy. According to the "zero problems" approach initiated by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey must make serious efforts to resolve the problems it has with its neighbors and even strive for maximum cooperation with them. This policy has led to

closer relations with Syria and Iran, as well as attempts to mend relations with Armenia. The irony, of course, is that there were barely any problems in Israel-Turkey bilateral relations, but that the zero problems policy is precisely one of the elements that generated the worst crisis in the history of their relations. The closer ties between Turkey and Iran and Turkey and Syria, as well as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's harsh statements about Israeli policy, have led to the Israeli assessment that Turkey is prepared to sacrifice its relations with Israel in order to improve its relations with its other neighbors.

While Erdoğan has indeed become highly popular among Palestinians and in overall Arab public opinion as the result of his image as a staunch opponent to Israel, there have also been costs to the anti-Israel policy. First and foremost, this policy has bolstered the claim that unlike in the Cold War era when Turkey was firmly Western, today it is looking eastwards. Erdoğan's harsh anti-Israel statements have strengthened suspicions against Turkey both in the United States and the European Union. Moreover, Turkey, which aspires to increase its influence in the Middle East and continue to serve as a mediator in a number of intra-regional conflicts, cannot afford to be in a position in which it has no direct positive channels of communication with Israel.

From Israel's perspective and despite its dissatisfaction with some of Turkey's actions, escalation with Turkey makes it more difficult to cope with Israel's existential threats, especially those coming from Iran. When Turkey, while trying to mediate between Iran and the West about the nuclear issue protested what it deemed Western hypocrisy in demanding a nuclear-free Iran without addressing Israel's nuclear weapons, this made the struggle over world public opinion on Iran all the more difficult. The fact that Iran is using Turkey in order to overcome some of the damage inflicted by the international sanctions against it undercuts the effectiveness of the sanctions to obstruct the Iranian nuclear effort. Moreover, Israel will not benefit from an attempt to push Turkey further into a situation where it is identified with the radical axis in the Middle East. Some in Israel are hoping for a change in government following Turkey's parliamentary elections, apparently scheduled for June 2011, and therefore they worry that an Israeli concession regarding the flotilla would be understood as a victory for Erdoğan. In actuality, Erdoğan's political standing in Turkey is firm even without scoring points on the Israeli issue.

To a certain extent, both Turkey and Israel are interested in improving relations, but the fact that Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli fire is something that will greatly affect any future relations. The issue of the apology and compensation, also complex from a legal point of view, may be partially resolved at the government level, but will continue to figure prominently in the media and public opinion in both countries. In addition, the implications of such an apology and compensation exceed Israel-Turkey relations. Those who oppose a thaw in the relations between the sides will continue the zero sum game discourse and present the concessions made by their side as obsequiousness to the other side. Should a thaw in relations occur, both countries will have to make a serious effort to

stress their common interests, such as the fact that in principle, they are partners in the war against terrorism.

Even if a solution is found soon for the flotilla-related crisis, it will be a long time before relations are fully mended. It is doubtful that the Turkey will want to renew security relations, and it is equally doubtful that Israel will want to cooperate on security issues in light of Turkey's growing closeness in recent years with Syria, Iran, and Hamas. More time will have to pass before Israeli tourists feel comfortable vacationing in Turkey again. In terms of economic relations, a significant part of the dealings between Israeli and Turkish companies have continued undeterred by the political crisis. Presumably, however, there could be a change in relations at the level of academic and civil society cooperation, which were damaged by the crisis.