

THE FRENEMY NEXT DOOR: TURKEY AND ISRAEL IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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Turkish-Israeli relations suffered a big blow because of the Mavi Marmara affair. As Turkey and Israel are working now on mending their relations, the question remains whether they will be able to avoid fierce competition in a relentlessly changing Middle East following the 'Arab Spring'. As there are also mutual concerns and incentives to cooperate, the term 'Frenmity' may be the best way to describe the future relations between the two. In such a complex relationship, the United States may be of help in increasing the elements of amity and cooperation.

Introduction

As the Arab states of the Middle East face the dramatic events changing the region's political configuration, two immediate non-Arab neighbors, namely Turkey and Israel, are not passively watching, and are continuing to try and mend their relations, thus far unsuccessfully. Prime Minister Netanyahu's apology to his Turkish counterpart notwithstanding (Keinon, 2013), the two sides are seemingly still quibbling on the question of compensation to the families of those killed in the May 2010 Mavi Marmara affair. The countries, who just four years ago had maintained extensive diplomatic, economic and security relations, are unlikely to restore the web of the past ties. The question remains whether they will be able to avoid fierce competition in a changing Middle East, even if they were to resolve their problems relating to the Mavi Marmara. Frenmity would be the best way to describe the future relations between the two (Özkeçeci-Taner, 2012, p. 122).

In the wake of the Arab Spring, Israel and Turkey have developed two different strategies for dealing with the developing situation. Israel, on the one hand, followed an overtly "hands off" policy towards the events in adjacent Arab states. It jealously adhered to this policy, even as more than 120,000 have been killed in Syria, and it stayed away from the public international debate on whether to punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons. Israel did, however, quietly lobby Washington not to cut aid to Egypt (Ravid, 2013) after the army pushed out the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president and government in July this year. Turkey, in contrast, has followed a very forceful and vociferous policy, calling for active intervention in Syria and helping anti-Assad groups. It openly denounced the new government in Egypt (Today's Zaman, 2013a) and has continued the policy of supporting the Hamas government in Gaza.

Comparing the interim score-sheets reveals some setbacks for the Erdoğan government against some gains for Israel. The survival hitherto of the Syrian regime, the loss of a presumably ideological sister government in Egypt and the emergence of a new Kurdish autonomous entity on its borders must be viewed from Turkey with concern, though these are not issues which will decide the political future of the AKP. Israel, on the other hand has witnessed the weakening of the Syrian army and Hezbollah, both of which have been bogged down in a war of attrition. It can also certainly expect better cooperation, albeit below the radar, with the military-led government in Egypt, which has already taken very strong action against smuggling into Gaza and against terror groups operating in the Sinai (Reuters, 2013).

Sketching the Lines of Amity and Enmity

Some of the gains and losses mentioned will be short term ones. Nonetheless, there are long-term processes, some of which began before the Arab Spring, that could result in structural changes in the region. Political borders, which were drawn almost 100 years ago, may be replaced by new ones, whether de jure as in the Sudan or de facto as in Iraq.

Similarly, there may be growth in the number of non-state actors in the region as some previously existing states have been split and the authority and effectiveness of central regimes have been gradually eroded. Both Syria and Iraq serve as evidence for this analysis and prognosis. Neither will return to their status as it has existed since the end of World War I. Both could witness years of internal violence, instability and the mushrooming of terror groups, which benefit from the emasculated central governments and security forces.

Among other possible consequences, one could add the growing distancing of external powers from the region, especially the US, and the further weakening of the Arab League.

This is, in broad terms, the geo-strategic arena that both Turkey and Israel will be watching in the next decade. They may not necessarily reach similar conclusions and they may find reasons for both cooperating and competing. The Kurdish issue is a clear example. For Israel, the emergence of an independent, non-Arab political entity in the region is a positive development, regardless of the location of the future borders of this entity. The view from Ankara is different. Turkey may feel the need at present to cooperate with the Kurdish Regional Government, but it must be deeply concerned by the implications of an independent Kurdistan on its own Kurdish minority. Active Israeli support for an independent Kurdistan would come into conflict with the wishes of Turkey. Interestingly, Turkey and Israel might share similar problems, concerns and ways and means of dealing with an independent Kurdistan and an independent Palestine. While Israel may want to have an open line to the political leadership of Kurdistan, Ankara may wish to have such a line to the leaders of independent Palestine. This could be a subject of a tacit agreement on rules of engagement or a free for all competition.

Syria, on the other hand, may become an area of cooperation. Turkey and Israel share a mutual interest in preventing this country from becoming an operational base for terror groups of all sorts. In principle, Israel should not object to Syria being within the Turkish zone of influence if that could become part of a regional understanding between Ankara and Jerusalem.

The issue of a nuclear Iran could be part of future understandings, and conversely, continue to be a bone of contention. While Israel does, and Turkey does not, view a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, both wish to prevent this situation. For Turkey, a nuclear Iran may pose a dilemma, whether to continue to rely on NATO's nuclear umbrella or to go nuclear itself. For the time being, Turkish leaders are calling for a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone as part of a possible diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear project (Today's Zaman, 2013b), and this may cause

them to double these efforts and denunciation of Israel in this respect. Here again, a process of reconciliation between Turkey and Israel may allow the two to become partners in the call for a peaceful Iranian nuclear project, though agreeing not to agree on how to get to a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone.

One domain where the state of frenmity cannot be sufficient is the energy market. Currently, the major part of Israel's oil imports pass through Turkey in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The discovery of large natural gas reservoirs off shore in the Eastern Mediterranean creates the possibility of Turkey, with a growing need for energy and for the diversification of its sources, becoming both a consumer and land of transit of gas to Europe. But beyond the domestic debate in Israel about the wisdom of exporting (Shamah, 2013), there is a quiet debate about the wisdom of putting too many (energy) eggs in the Turkish basket. The interruption of either oil or natural gas by Turkey seems unlikely as it would cause serious direct and indirect damage to that country, but Israel must be prudent in deciding these issues. Moreover, building future relations between Turkey and Israel solely on an economic base may not be safe and durable, so political assurances will also be required.

Conclusion

Conflicting policies on the one hand, and mutual concerns and interests on the other underline the complexity in current and future Turkish-Israeli relations and justify their characterization as frenmity. The United States can help increase the elements of amity and cooperation. While it is difficult to foresee a restoration of relations in the realms of defense and security, some of this can be recovered in the context of NATO, as both Turkey and Israel are interested in stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Both sides should not look at the settling of the Mavi Marmara affair as a substitute to full normal relations and both sides have to agree that restoring their respective ambassadors is important, but can serve as only one aspect of a return to normal relations. A deep, thorough joint review of the relationships is certainly called for. Regional and bilateral circumstances justify that. It may not eliminate conflict but it will increase the friendly factor in the frenmity.

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