



BULLETIN

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Crisis in Turkey–Israel Relations

by Adam Szymański

Israel's intervention in the Gaza Strip in 2008/09 gave rise to a protracted crisis in its relations with Turkey, which also reflected differences in both countries' Middle Eastern policies and their domestic developments. Although a return to the quality of bilateral relations seen in the 1990s is unlikely, these relations can take a shape which would prevent an escalation of unnecessary tensions. This is something sought not only by Turkey and Israel, but also the US and the European Union, given an unfavourable impact of the crisis upon Middle Eastern stabilisation efforts.

Back in the 1990s, the Turkish-Israeli relations reached a level close to strategic partnership, parallel to the progress reached in the Middle East peace process in that time. Characteristic features of these relations included the tightening of military/intelligence and economic cooperation. But in the last decade, spells of correct relations alternated with tensions, in close correlation (just as prior to 1990) with Israeli actions in the Middle East.

In late 2008 and early 2009, a major crisis in bilateral relations was provoked by Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip. It was harshly criticised by the Turkish authorities, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and in response Israeli politicians signalled the possibility of recognising the 1915–19 massacre of Armenians as genocide. Significantly, Erdoğan left a Davos conference discussion panel after the moderator barred him the right of response to earlier pronouncements by Israeli President Shimon Peres. The tensions were heightened by anti-Israeli protests in Turkey and by a rise in anti-Turkey resentments in Israel. In the latter half of 2009, Turkey did not consent to Israel's participation in a NATO air manoeuvres, with Turkish TV presenting first Israel soldiers and, then, Mosad agents as murderers. The last named development directly provoked a diplomatic incident in January 2010, widely covered by international media: Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon received the Turkish Ambassador, Ahmet Oğuz Çellikol, in a humiliating manner. Although the Israeli authorities apologised and tensions were further reduced by Defence Minister Ehud Barak's visit to Turkey, the crisis in Turkey-Israel relations did not end.

Causes of the Crisis. The weakening of two-way relations and the present crisis should be attributed to changes going on in the international environment. What linked Turkey and Israel in the 1990s was primarily a similar perception of threats from the neighbouring Arab countries and Iran. But the picture changed in the early 21st century, with Turkey's adopting a new foreign policy doctrine which involves emphasis on seeking to resolve problems in relations with neighbours. A perceptible improvement in the country's relations with Iraq, Iran and Syria was accompanied by widening differences in relations with Israel, which stuck to the traditional isolationist doctrine in its Middle Eastern policy. There were also changes in the Turkish army and its attitude towards Israel, a matter of importance in a country where the military have had a decisive say on the strengthening of links with Israel. And in recent years, Turkish foreign policy has been increasingly influenced by civilian entities. Among the factors alienating the Turkish military circles were e.g. delays in the execution of military contracts (most recently, for Heron unmanned aerial vehicles).

Also contributing to the crisis were internal/domestic determinants. The Turkish government has been guided by pragmatic consideration, which included tapping Turkish citizens' strong support for the Palestinians as a means of mobilising the electorate prior to the local election of March 2009, diverting attention from problems linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and burnishing the country's image in the Arab world. But equally important was the emotional factor: Turkey's affinity for

Palestine (part of the former Ottoman Empire) and Erdoğan's sense of disappointment for not having been informed about Gaza intervention plans by visiting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Not without importance is the ideological profile of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamic roots—but it should also be remembered that even before that party's time in government Turkey reacted similarly to Israel's Middle Eastern activities, and that the present government's position on Gaza intervention is shared by the opposition.

The crisis has also been fuelled by differences over relations with Turkey within the ruling coalition in Israel. Minister Barak shuns criticism of Turkey and advocates good relations with that country, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, although critical, has also emphasised the importance of mutual contacts. But for politicians from the nationalist party Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, relations with Turkey are not a priority and they see no chances for a compromise on Palestine. Lieberman's activities, such as compiling a report that accused Prime Minister Erdoğan of stirring anti-Semitic sentiments, only add fuel to the fire. The divisions within the Israeli cabinet result in absence of a coherent policy towards Turkey, which makes any easing of tensions more difficult to achieve.

Importance of the Crisis for Turkish-Israeli Relations and for the Region. A return to the good relations of the 1990s is an unlikely prospect. The crisis is a sign of a new stage in mutual contacts, one fraught with tensions. But these tensions will prod both countries towards caution, needed to prevent a further worsening. Adjusting the Turkey–Israel relations to the new Middle Eastern determinants, something which has largely been achieved in Turkey's contacts with the US, remains a challenge. But for Israel, accepting Turkey's Middle Eastern policy revision will be harder to swallow than it was for the US. Both parties will have problems eliminating the influence of internal/domestic constraints, which impede reaching a compromise on Middle East issues (especially Palestine) and taking any reasonable stance.

Turkey and Israel will seek to prevent the present crisis from deepening. On the one hand, a disappearance of mutual trust will limit Turkey's room for acting as a "facilitator" in conflicts involving Israel (especially the Israel-Syria conflict), a role appreciated by the US. And on the other hand, the present situation may lead to Israel's still greater isolation in the region. For both parties, a deepening crisis would bring about trade losses (including absence of new military contracts), more radical public sentiments, and the possibility of relations with the US going bad. In their search of rapprochement, both countries may evoke positive historical experiences (such as hospitality to Jews in the Ottoman Empire), the community of democratic values and the benefits of new projects, such as a multi-function pipeline from the port of Ceyhan to southern Israel.

The crisis has been adversely impacting Middle Eastern stabilisation efforts. The limitation of Turkey's role of a "facilitator" in talks between opposing sides has the effect of reducing the already small group of countries capable of playing such a role. And if the crisis is interpreted as a harbinger of changes in the Middle Eastern alignment of forces to Israel's disadvantage, this may help radicalise Muslim world publics and make Arab countries' attitude towards that state more rigid.

Turkey and Israel may thus find themselves under pressure from external entities, fearing a deterioration in the regional situation. The US has already expressed its concern at the crisis, and is seeking to persuade both countries to avoid harsh words and to talk about benefits from cooperation. EU activity has yet to be noticed, but it is also in the bloc's interest to encourage Turkey and Israel to ease tensions. This could be achieved e.g. by Israeli action to improve the plight of the Palestinian population. And Turkey could make an attempt to mediate the release of Israeli serviceman Gilad Shalit, captured by Palestinians in 2006. The foremost role in EU activities should be played by those member states which have good relations with both Turkey and Israel.