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The Question of an Israeli Apology to Turkey for the Flotilla Episode

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The positive dynamics generated by Turkey's assistance in combating the enormous forest fire on Mt. Carmel and the discussions in Geneva between Turkish and Israeli representatives raise again the issue of an Israeli apology to Turkey for the results of the forced takeover of the *Mavi Marmara*. On the one hand, the position represented by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman contends that not only is an apology to Turkey surrender to terrorism, but that in any case no gesture will rebuild the relationship. The opposing claim argues that Israel's strategic interests in the region direct it to swallow its pride and apologize. In light of the most recent contacts between Israel and Turkey it appears that Israel is tending towards an apology. If that is indeed the case, the focus shifts from the question of whether Israel should apologize to the question of how and for what. The contents, form, and context of an apology in the political arena are of utmost importance.

An apology in the international political arena may be an effective tool, but it is also potentially problematic and can lead to the deterioration of relations instead of their improvement. Therefore, it must be wielded with caution and savvy. Israel has several apology formulae to consider should it decide to apologize to Turkey. The first – most convenient from Israel's point of view – is a simple expression of sorrow. An expression of sorrow does not entail taking responsibility but creates the impression that an apology was rendered. A short time after the forced takeover of the *Mavi Marmara*, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman delivered various expressions of sorrow for the loss of life and injuries suffered. However, these statements were embedded in speeches concerned primarily with justifying the event from the Israeli perspective, thus reducing their significance and impact. Should Israel choose again to express sorrow, the message must take center stage and be directed at the people of Turkey. Only then will it be more effective than the preceding expressions of sorrow and help Israel improve its image on the international arena.

An expression of sorrow is not equivalent to an apology, and therefore it is no surprise that the Turks are demanding the latter. An apology entails responsibility, and therefore if Israel chooses to apologize, this decision will lead to a discussion on the measure of responsibility it is willing to assume. In other words, for what is Israel willing to

apologize? Clearly, even if Israel does decide to apologize, it is possible to devise a formula that minimizes responsibility and upholds its position. However, should Israel also decide to pay compensation to the injured and the families of those killed, this could be viewed as taking responsibility, i.e., the payment of even symbolic compensation has far ranging implications. Thus, the decision on an apology and the decision on compensation are inextricably linked. The question of compensation is no less complex than that of an apology, because it could open the door to a whole host of discussions and lawsuits that in the long run could contribute to resolving the crisis but in the short term could further inflame passions on both sides.

The issue of responsibility will ultimately determine if the negotiations between Turkey and Israel succeed or fail. The crux is that the ramifications far exceed the flotilla affair and extend to the meaning of an apology and compensation for previous Israeli military operations for which no compensation has been paid as well as for future operations. Should Israel apologize and compensate Turkey, the inevitable question will be: why did Israel not do so in similar cases? Indeed, Prime Minister Netanyahu has stressed that an apology would not serve as a basis for suits against IDF soldiers. Such an apology would have to explain Israel's position on what happened and include a "but" after the apology. It is doubtful that Turkey would agree to such a formula.

Whether Israel again expresses sorrow, apologizes, or refuses to make any other gesture towards Turkey, an apology – certainly one given in a political context – is clearly not a magic wand. For example, a few months before the flotilla affair the Turkish ambassador was humiliated; Israel finally apologized using a formula acceptable to the Turks, but the apology was not followed by improved relations between the countries. On the contrary, the relations continued to deteriorate. Thus it is worth raising the question as to the willingness of the two sides to propose an apology and accept it. In the case of the ambassador, the apology was forced on Israel, and even though Turkey accepted the apology, this did not reflect forgiveness. In the end, the good that came out of the apology was minimal.

In light of Turkey's assistance with the Carmel fire, the atmosphere has changed somewhat. Israel is now willing to consider an apology, while the Turks, despite President Gül's declaration in September that Turkey would not forgive even if Israel does apologize, are sending the message that they are willing to be more forgiving than in the past. Still, even if the leaders of Israel and Turkey make such a move, the long term success of an apology –leading to conciliation – depends on the willingness of the citizens of the two countries to apologize and to forgive. In its absence, the leaders' good intentions to resolve the crisis by way of an apology might lead to a dead end and an even more complicated situation. If the apology is met with opposition by the Israeli public, the Turks will doubt its sincerity and trustworthiness and consequently its ability to lead to a change or any kind of significant result will be slim at best. Conversely, if the Israeli public feels that the citizens of Turkey are unwilling to forgive, they will challenge the need to support an apology that will not lead to resolving the crisis. Thus, the apology

might prove to be ineffective. It appears that both sides are aware of this and therefore there are discussions about a formula acceptable to both sides – a compromise that would protect Israel's positions but also be acceptable in Turkey.

A compromise formula invites an additional option, namely, an expression of mutual sorrow. This possibility has not been debated thus far in the current crisis, at least not publicly: Israel alone has been called on to apologize, although FM Lieberman has demanded a Turkish apology. Perhaps a mutual expression of sorrow is what can help extricate the parties from the dead end they find themselves in and in the long term improve their relations.

Israel is now facing a serious dilemma. If Israel is interested in trying to regulate relations with Turkey, it appears it has no choice but to consider how to accede to the Turkish demand for an apology and compensation. On the other hand, Israel surely questions whether Turkey's intention is reconciliation or continuation of aggression against Israel despite the apology. For now, it appears that it will be difficult to agree on the issue of responsibility. Turkey will surely want a greater admission of responsibility than Israel can or is willing to propose. Thus, despite the willingness to apologize expressed by Israel, it is unclear if it can do so if Turkey does not demonstrate some flexibility given its role in the episode.