



INSS Insight No. 272, August 2, 2011

**Between Resignation and Apology:
Israel-Turkey Relations and the Silent Revolution**

Oded Eran and Gallia Lindenstrauss

The announcement by the Turkish military's Chief of Staff and the top commanders of the land forces, navy, and air force of their early retirement represents the final stamp in the process of the military's neutralization as a significant domestic political player. This process lies at the core of a silent revolution underway in Turkey since the ascent to power of the Justice and Development in late 2002, which eroded the status of the army, seen as the secular shield of Turkish politics, and cracked this and other aspects of Ataturk's legacy. The process of neutralizing the intra-national political power of the army is of major significance for what is happening within Turkey, but is also important in terms of foreign affairs and security policy, and in particular, Turkey's relations with Israel.

The dramatic changes in the high command of Turkey's armed forces put the hope to rest – if the hope existed – that it would be possible to revive Israeli-Turkish military cooperation. The many personnel changes as well as the indictments against dozens of officers mean in effect that the army will make no attempt to challenge the government's Israel policy. Furthermore, following the success of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party in eroding the army's status, a concerted effort will be made by the government to maintain this achievement and prevent the army from reemerging as a player with significant political influence on the internal Turkish arena.

Under these circumstances, the question arises whether there is any point to Israel apologizing to Turkey for the results of the takeover of the Mavi Marmara. Turkey has repeatedly stated that it will not forego such an apology as a precondition for rebuilding relations with Israel, alongside compensation and an end to the blockade on Gaza. The Turkish representative to the Palmer Commission, appointed by the UN Secretary General to investigate the events of last year's flotilla, has tried to downplay the extent of the disagreement between Israel and Turkey, comparing what happened to an accidental spilling of a cup of coffee, after which one must apologize and pay for the dry cleaning bill. The analogy is inaccurate for many reasons, but that seems to be the extent of the

apology that Israel is currently capable of making, i.e., a limited apology focusing on operational failures.

Notwithstanding that such an apology would not lead to significant changes in the security dimension of Israeli-Turkish relations, there are factors that explain Israel's willingness to offer a limited apology. These factors will almost certainly affect the relations between the two nations in the near future, even if the two sides are currently unable to reach some sort of agreement.

The first factor is American pressure. The relations between Israel and Turkey are not only bilateral but for many years have also been part of a triangle, with the US constituting the third side. The Arab spring has brought Turkey's importance as a US regional ally into sharp focus, as America's other allies in the Middle East have been significantly weakened and/or undergone changes rendering them less reliable. In this context, the deterioration of Israel-Turkey relations, which even before the Arab spring was viewed negatively by the US, is particularly problematic. The US is applying significant pressure on both Israel and Turkey to rebuild their relations. Against the other difficult problems in the Middle East, the strained relationship between Israel and Turkey is, from the point of view of the US, a temporary mishap that must be repaired before it generates further negative results in its wake.

Another factor is the need to have working relations between Israel and Turkey in light of the changes that have already occurred in the Middle East and the instability resulting from the Arab spring, particularly in Syria. Renewed military cooperation at the level that existed in the 1990s should not be the objective, rather cooperation of a very basic nature, which will be needed, for example, if the situation in Syria grows even more unstable. Israel, as Defense Minister Ehud Barak recently said, cannot allow itself not to have relations with at least one key state in the region, i.e., Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey. The changes in Egypt and the uncertainties regarding its future, the open confrontation with Iran, and the fact that there is virtually no contact with Saudi Arabia mandate a certain improvement in relations with Turkey.

A further consideration is the attempt to protect the soldiers who participated in the takeover of the Marmara from lawsuits. The concern that the Palmer report, when published, will serve as a basis for lawsuits against IDF soldiers and the attempt to gain Turkey's commitment not to instigate such lawsuits are another component of Israel's willingness to make a limited apology. Whether this is Israel's primary motive or whether this is also a means to prime Israeli public opinion to swallow an apology it is overwhelmingly opposed to, remains an open question. In any event, the Israeli judicial system is apparently persuaded that there will be no legal strings attached after an apology is issued.

An additional factor concerns trade relations between Israel and Turkey. Economic ties have managed to develop and even flourish despite the political tension, given the fact that in many ways Turkey and Israel have complementary economies. The Justice and Development Party also places much emphasis on using foreign policy tools to promote the Turkish economy. Nonetheless, should the tension between the two countries heighten, more and more businesspeople on both sides are liable to fear bilateral commercial cooperation.

At the same time, it is clear that every worsening of Israel's relations with the Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip, will erase some of the positive results that may result from an apology, whether Erdoğan visits the Gaza Strip or not. Furthermore, the announced resignations of the army leaders and the general concerns of other officials would limit the Israeli-Turkish dialogue to the level of functionaries in the Foreign Ministry, with all that is implied by this situation.

In conclusion, the resignations of the Turkish army heads bespeaks the end of a process that has taken place over some years, i.e., the weakening of the Turkish military as a political player in the intra-national political arena. From Israel's perspective, this is an inconvenient situation because in the past the Turkish military was the force that pushed for closer cooperation with Israel. Israeli policymakers should acknowledge that this situation is probably irreversible, at least for the foreseeable future, and that the erosion of the army's political power has the widespread support of the Turkish people. There is also full agreement in Turkey that Israel must apologize for the events of the flotilla. It is still unclear whether Israeli willingness to issue a limited apology will satisfy the Turkish public and its decision makers. A limited apology will also not restore Israeli-Turkish relations to their 1990s heyday, but there are compelling reasons – connected mainly to strategic changes and the possible emergence of a new strategic balance in the region – for Israel to express the willingness to make such an apology.

