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Spring is in the Air? On the Thawing of Turkey-Israel Relations

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The Israeli apology to Turkey for operational errors during the takeover of the *Mavi Marmara* in May 2010 and the agreement between the sides to start a process of normalization in relations is a major development, long awaited in Israel, Turkey, and the United States. While many have questioned whether this apology at the current time is sufficient to restore relations, the negotiations underway since the *Mavi Marmara* episode have made it very clear that without such an apology there was no chance of restoring relations. From this perspective Israel's move is correct, and even if there are other crises in the future between Jerusalem and Ankara, at least this open wound between the two peoples is in the process of healing.

An analysis of the ongoing factors that led to the Israeli apology underscores that it was the Arab awakening that helped bridge the positions of the two parties. The threat of Syria's disintegration and the related security ramifications is what to a considerable extent tipped the scales on both sides. In addition, Israel has long sought to reach a compromise with Turkey, but for various reasons did not actualize this goal. Indeed, the agreements reached are not fundamentally different from the formulas presented just before the Palmer report was leaked to the press in September 2011. However, at the time there was concern in Israel regarding a potential "diplomatic tsunami" in the context of the Palestinians' planned statehood appeal to the UN, and a fear that even if Israel apologized, nothing positive would come of it. Therefore, an important element in the current development is not only that Israel apologized, but that the apology was accepted.

An analysis of the immediate factors behind the recent development highlights the central importance of the United States in helping foster a compromise between the parties, and in particular, President Barack Obama's visit to Israel. The fact that this far-from-simple step of an apology by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was backed in the form of a request from the US President helped the Israeli public accept the move and helped the Turks display the necessary flexibility to end the crisis. In addition, it was previously Operation Pillar of Defense that demonstrated to the Turks the extent to which they had lost their influence as an intermediary in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, the

easing of restrictions following the ceasefire helped the Turks display flexibility concerning the third condition they had demanded of Israel, namely, the lifting of the naval blockade off the Gaza coast.

Several challenges are expected now concerning the thaw between Israel and Turkey, foremost among them Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's planned visit to Gaza later this month. While the visit might have taken place irrespective of the Israeli apology, Israel must still prepare for it in such a way that there will be as much coordination as possible with the Turks. Ultimately, Turkey is a player that supports the two-state solution, and there are enough points where Israel can show good will toward the Palestinians and Turkey can be of assistance. As for the Iranian nuclear issue, this threat is perceived quite differently in Israel and in Turkey, and although Turkey does not wish to see Iran with military nuclear capability, it still supports the path of negotiations and at least publicly would oppose a US or Israeli attack.

In spite of these challenges, if the process of normalization agreed upon in the phone call between Netanyahu and Erdogan does in fact ensue, there could be a positive impact in a number of areas. From the standpoint of security, there was good reason for IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz to give his blessing to restoration of the relations. Even if cooperation between the militaries remains minimal and essentially unseen, there is still much value in having open channels of communication between the two sides, given the challenges facing the two countries at this time. Furthermore, the thaw with Turkey will allow renewed cooperation between Israel and NATO, which both sides enjoyed in the past.

Economic relations, which even at the height of the crisis served to a large extent to prevent complete deterioration, can be expected to develop further for several reasons. First, there will be a better atmosphere for companies to trade among themselves, and this will almost certainly translate into an increase in the volume of trade. Second, there is potential for cooperation in the context of gas discoveries off Israel's coasts: Turkey can be both a consumer of and a route for exports. Third, there are already initial signs that Israeli tourists plan to return to Turkey, and with a strengthened Turkish economy, Turkish tourists may also come to Israel. Finally, it is possible that Israeli security exports to Turkey will also be renewed.

From the point of view of civil society, there is wide scope for cooperation. Issues such as relations between the majority and the minorities and between religion and state, as well as domestic violence, are challenges confronting both societies, and therefore organizations on both sides that deal with these challenges can benefit from shared learning processes. The already existing cooperation among academics in the two countries can be expanded. In the field of culture, Turkey has invested significant sums in renovating the Saraya building in Jaffa in order for it to become a Turkish cultural center in Israel, but because of the crisis in Israel-Turkey relations, it has not opened it to the

public. Now that normalization is on the verge of return, the building might be inaugurated and assist in promoting cultural exchanges between the two countries.

In conclusion, while Turkey-Israel relations remain far from a state of renewed flowering, and it is not likely that they will return to what they were in the 1990s, the Israeli apology is an important and essential step in restoring the relationship. It is important to try to make the most of this step that exacted a considerable price from Israel, even though the crisis in relations in recent years has left bad feelings on both sides that will complicate any desired improvements.

