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Question Marks on the Way to a Turkey-Israel Agreement

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In recent weeks there have been increasing reports that Turkey and Israel have progressed in talks on an agreement to resolve the *Mavi Marmara* crisis. In particular, the two sides have significantly narrowed the gaps on the compensation that Israel will pay. Yet notwithstanding this positive trend, and though it is an important Israeli interest to restore diplomatic relations with Turkey, several concerns about the current timing should be noted. These concerns should not prevent Israel from moving forward, but they are reason to proceed with caution.

The corruption exposed in Turkey in mid-December 2013 placed the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in particular, in a defensive position. In response, Erdogan took a series of problematic steps, including the transfer of hundreds of police officers and investigators from their jobs, and constitutional changes that restrict the independence of the judiciary and place limitations on free use of the internet. In addition, attacks on journalists critical of the government have continued. The fact that Erdogan directly confronted religious leader Fethullah Gulen, who has several million supporters in Turkey, also undermined some of the basis of AKP support. Consequently, and given the economic difficulties resulting from the domestic turmoil in Turkey, there is a sense that the AKP needs some foreign policy achievements that will balance the negative picture. One such achievement is the resumption of peace talks on the future of Cyprus in early February, with more significant American support than in the past. Another achievement could be reaching an agreement with Israel. If in the past such an agreement was perceived as possibly endangering Erdogan politically more than helping him, it appears that now there has been a change in approach in the AKP.

Furthermore, Turkey is entering a more sensitive period, with three election campaigns expected to take place in the next two years. On March 30, 2014 local elections will be

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held in the country. Even in previous election campaigns, there was a close connection between the local and the national campaigns, and in light of the accusations of corruption against the AKP, it certainly appears that these elections are a test of sorts for the ruling party. On the basis of the local election results, Erdogan will also decide whether to run for the presidency (in direct elections to be held in the summer of 2014) or to change the constitution of the AKP so that he can run for the fourth time in the 2015 parliamentary elections (and perhaps even make them earlier to prevent the opposition from growing stronger). From this point of view, it appears that the upcoming elections are significant and that Israel does not have an interest in strengthening Erdogan in the run-up to the elections (if in fact, it has any influence in this context). On the other hand, given that in polls conducted in Turkey since the corruption was revealed the percentage of support for the AKP is still high, the chance of a significant change appears small (other than perhaps concerning the mayor of Istanbul). In spite of the corruption scandals, it appears that a considerable percentage of the Turkish public still thinks that the existing alternatives to the AKP are worse.

With the Prime Minister facing increased criticism and while his government is challenged both domestically and internationally, the current situation gives rise to concern that if Erdogan's conditions for closing the *Mavi Marmara* chapter were fulfilled, he would exploit them for domestic political purposes. Since his domestic political struggle could continue for many months, any Israeli move, whether of a kind that could lead to a formal end to the affair or continued discussions, might be cynically exploited by Erdogan.

There are several complicated subjects in the relationship between Israel and Turkey, and the question of the end of the *Mavi Marmara* affair must be seen in their light. Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq and perhaps later even in northern Syria is an old-new factor in Israel-Turkey relations. Israeli-Kurdish cooperation, an Israeli strategic interest, may be contrary to Turkish considerations. The new face of Syria as it crystallizes in the coming years is a subject for Israeli-Turkish cooperation, at least when it comes to the fight against terror. However, it could also develop into competition for areas of influence and over areas of military freedom of action. The entire question of exporting natural gas from Israel's economic exclusive zone in the Mediterranean is connected to Turkey's diplomatic and economic moves, both toward Israel and toward other players such as the Republic of Cyprus, Russia, and the European Union. This is an issue with significant, long term economic and diplomatic implications for Israel.

Thus while the government of Israel must continue to conduct quiet negotiations with Turkish government representatives, the domestic political developments in Turkey, as well as developments in the immediate environment of Israel and Turkey and in the international arena, are important factors to be monitored. The continuation of the political process between Israel and the Palestinians, for example, has implications for

Israel-Turkey relations. An agreement with Turkey now could ease Israel's feeling of international isolation, but this may prove a short term achievement, and a failure to reach an agreement with the Palestinians would undoubtedly lead to public Turkish condemnations of Israel. Other issues, such as gas export to and through Turkey, can also be put on hold, since here too, the complex set of considerations go beyond the narrow question of accepting all of Turkey's conditions in order to end the *Mavi Marmara* affair, which occurred nearly four years ago.

