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**Turkey after the Presidential Election:
A Difficult Challenge for Israel's Foreign Policy**
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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's victory in the first round of the presidential election (with 52 percent of the vote) signals the continuing dominance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkish politics. Erdogan has controlled Turkey for more than a decade, and is now planning on remaining in office for two presidential terms. As he made clear before the election, he has no intention of limiting himself to the ceremonial aspects of his new job, but wants to endow the position with substantive content. It is still unclear how in practice Turkey will function under this still unregulated form of executive authority, but because successful organization and obedience to the party are hallmarks of the AKP (and figure among the factors explaining the party's years-long success), it is safe to assume that appropriate solutions will be found to ensure smooth governance without public expressions of tension that may arise along the way.

During the election campaign, which overlapped with Operation Protective Edge, Erdogan devoted a great deal of attention in his speeches to the situation in the Gaza Strip; the issue also garnered much attention from the opposition. While it is almost certain that Erdogan would have been elected regardless of his harsh criticism of Israel (he would have found another target to attack), there is no doubt that the topic of Gaza was relatively convenient for him. The Israel-Hamas issue sidelined accusations in the domestic and foreign policy arenas that could have been much more prominent on the Turkish political agenda were it not for the Gaza crisis, such as the crisis of the Turkish diplomats and their families abducted in Iraq and still in captivity. Moreover, the Palestinian issue unites large segments of the Turkish public, and therefore dealing with it marginalized existing accusations against Erdogan that he has sown rifts among the Turkish population.

The particularly harsh criticism Turkey leveled against Israel during Operation Protective Edge figured among the reasons Israel decided not to cooperate with mediation efforts led by Qatar and Turkey, unlike previous rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas where Israel did not completely rule out the idea of Turkey as mediator, although in

practice the role played by Ankara was minor. It also seems that this time, the damage to the economic ties between Israel and Turkey will be more significant than in the past, because of the cumulative effect of the frequent crises between them in recent years. This is evident, for example, in tourism: Turkish Airlines has already announced the cancellation of one-quarter of its flights to Israel. At the same time, Turkey and Israel have managed relatively well to coordinate Turkey's humanitarian assistance to the Gaza population. Other than shipments of food and medicine from Turkey, Israel has also facilitated the transfer of generators and fuel to operate them, and has allowed for wounded Palestinians to be flown to Turkey through Ben Gurion International Airport. It is almost certain that the lessons of the *Mavi Marmara* affair are fresh in the memory of both sides as they approach the issue of humanitarian aid. While the Turkish organization IHH, which led the flotilla to Gaza in 2010, declared immediately after the Turkish presidential election its intention to send another flotilla to Gaza during 2014, perhaps the fact that Israel is complying with Turkish requests to ship aid will result in pressure from the Turkish government to delay the realization of the plan. This development would be particularly welcome, given the concern that this time a flotilla to Gaza would incur the risk of a potential confrontation (even if limited) between the Turkish and Israeli navies. Still, the overall experience gathered by Turkish aid organizations in recent years (internationally but specifically in Gaza) and the emphasis on large projects, such as the construction of a hospital in the Gaza Strip, should be viewed positively by Israel, as these indicate greater probability that the aid will go to benefit the Gaza population, rather than to misuse by Hamas.

Relations between Turkey and Israel have thus suffered another blow as a result of Operation Protective Edge. It is hard to imagine how the two sides will overcome the most recent crisis, and in the near future, it is doubtful that there will even be any desire to resolve it. Other than a scenario in which Operation Protective Edge leads to a fundamental change in the situation in the Gaza Strip, tensions between Israel and Turkey over Gaza will remain. During the operation, Erdogan said that as long as he is in power, no improvement in relations between the two countries could be expected. His success in being elected president in the first round for a five-year term gives rise to the concern that if he makes good on this promise, no improvement in relations can be expected in the foreseeable future.

For some years there has been an ongoing debate among the Israeli government and public on the right way to advance Turkish-Israeli relations. In many ways, those who have represented a pessimistic approach, whereby under Erdogan's leadership there are no prospects for Israel and Turkey, have – at least for now – been proven right. On the other hand, there is also truth to the claim from the opposite camp, that Erdogan and what he represents are not a passing phenomenon, and therefore it is necessary to fully utilize possible ways of cooperation, even if limited.

At present, and given the challenges Israel must tackle in the reality of Operation Protective Edge, Turkey need not be a priority on the Israeli government's political agenda. The brick wall that relations with Turkey have hit and the desire to prevent any further deterioration suggests that Israel's policy should be to ensure as little friction with Turkey as possible. After the election results were in, Erdogan, in his victory speech, sounded relatively relaxed and conciliatory compared to his earlier speeches. Perhaps this opening tone and his assumption of the presidency, which requires a less antagonistic approach both at home and toward the world, will ease at least a small portion of the profound tension between Turkey and Israel. Still, given Erdogan's blunt remarks on Israel in the past, it is very possible that this hope will remain unfulfilled.

