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Turkey and Israel in the Aftermath of the Gaza War: Relations at a Crossroad?

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The recent Davos incident in which Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan demonstratively walked off the stage during his debate with Israeli President Shimon Peres was not an accident. Rather, it was the culmination of a long process of changing Turkish priorities under the two AKP governments and a new configuration of Ankara's foreign policy's role in the region. The main principles of this policy, however conflicting they may be at different times, are the following:

1. Playing a pivotal role in the region.
2. Multilateralism, i.e. courting Arab and Muslim countries of the region while maintaining its ties with Israel.
3. Engaging its neighbours for the sake of insuring "zero conflicts" with them.
4. Playing the role of mediator in various regional problems.
5. Attempting to strike a new balance between its European and Middle East policies.
6. Setting an example of a democratic Muslim state for Arab and Muslim countries, in contrast to Iran.

The most important transformation under the AKP is that it has turned Islam

into a platform for advancing its bid for regional leadership. Thus, the AKP engaged Hamas and granted it legitimacy, rather than ostracize it as most other countries did. The invitation to Hamas's senior personality in Damascus, Khalid Mash'al, to visit Ankara in early 2006, was a harbinger for things to come. Unlike Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Jordan, Ankara did not raise the spectre of Shi'i Islam, allowing it to pose as neutral party in the Sunni-Shi'i conflict raging in the region and thus enhance its stature in the Muslim world. Similarly, in the last few months and especially after the war in Gaza, Turkey has sought closer ties with Arab and Muslim countries due to domestic political and economic considerations in advance of approaching local and national elections, and in order to obtain aid from Arab oil-rich countries at a time of economic crisis. At the same time, it continued its attempts to play the role of mediator, using both its European and its Middle Eastern credentials.

Turkey's relations with Israel should be seen against this background, as well as the sea-changes that have occurred in the region since the AKP's advent to power in Turkey in 2002. The 2003 US-Iraq war sparked a deterioration in Ankara's relations with Washington, and also had negative effects on Turkey's perceptions of Israel's role in the region, especially regarding Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, the Turkish military elite, the chief architect of Turkey's close links with Israel, lost of its hold over the political system and thus its ability to dictate foreign policy lines. Moreover, the growing friction between this elite and the AKP government, manifested in the still-unfolding Ergenekon scandal, only added to the ambiguity toward Israel. At the same time, Turkey has developed close relations with its erstwhile hostile neighbor, Syria, thus lessening Turkey's need for a strong ally in the south to counterbalance Damascus. Similarly, for the ruling AKP, the Islamic Republic of Iran appeared much less threatening than it did to previous Turkish governments. Added to all of this was the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly the outbreak of the second intifada in Fall 2000, and the more recent war with Hamas in Gaza, which severely damaged Israel's image in Turkey.

Capping these changes is the fact that the long-standing, inherent asymmetry in Turkish-Israeli relations became even more pronounced under the AKP. Turkish politicians have no qualms about vehemently attacking Israel because of its policies towards the Palestinians, while Israeli politicians tread delicately on tiptoes regarding any issue that touches on Turkish sensitivities. For example, Israeli politicians refrain from any reference to Turkey's policies regarding the Kurds, let alone criticizing them. As for the Turkish media, most of its reports on the Palestinian problem are one-sided and biased against Israel. Israeli attacks against Palestinians are always reported, but the Turkish media rarely dwells on Hamas terrorist attacks

against Israel.

Israel has been concerned with the spread of anti-Semitism in Turkey in recent years. *Kavgam*, (*Mein Kampf*), was a best-seller in Turkey. [1] The immediate causes for the rise in anti-Semitism are not clear. It could be the result of the strengthening of ultra-nationalist trends, or that the very ascent to power of an Islamic party has legitimized it. One thing is certain: the Turkish government has not done enough to fight this phenomenon. Whereas Germany and other states forbid the publication of *Mein Kampf*, the Turkish government did not do so, on the flimsy pretext of protecting democracy. By contrast, official Israel has done its best to take into consideration Turkish sensitivities on the Armenian issue, including lobbying in Washington against attempts to achieve US recognition of the massacres of Armenians during World War I as genocide.

All this prepared the ground for the outburst of Turkish attacks against Israel and support for Hamas in the wake of the three-week Israeli military offensive. Erdogan led the way by warning Israeli leaders that “history will judge them for the black stain they are leaving on humanity”. [2] He even went as far as to declare that the blood of the dead Palestinian children would not be left on the floor, and that Israel’s deeds were "a crime against humanity". [3] Taking their cues from him, the media and the Turkish street escalated their anti-Israeli, and at times even anti-Semitic attacks to a point which surpassed those voiced in Arab countries. No wonder, then, that Erdogan came to be considered a hero by Gazans, Iranian and Syrians. The main problem, therefore, is that a great deal of damage was done on the level of people-to-people relations between Israelis and Turks, relations which were quite amicable for many years and which will be much more difficult to mend than those in the official political-diplomatic sphere.

Nevertheless, there is ample reason to think that Turkey and Israel will be able to overcome this latest crisis, however serious it may be, due to underlying common interests. They have no serious problems on the bilateral level. They have never engaged in a war against each other, nor do they pose any sort of strategic menace to one another. Moreover, for all the changes in the geostrategic map in the region, Turkey and Israel still share common threat perceptions. Both countries dread the day when Iran might have nuclear weapons, and the military in Turkey most certainly would like to continue maintaining intimate strategic ties on this score. Similarly, both need to share information and technological know-how for combating international terror networks. As in the Iranian case, Israel serves as a bulwark against real or imagined threats emanating from Turkey's Arab neighbors. Turkey’s aspirations to play the role of mediator may also help to bury existing grudges. Nor are common economic interests to be belittled.

Finally, Israel remains important to Turkey as a balancing power in the region, as well as an advocate for Ankara in different international forums.

To sum up, although Turkish-Israeli relations under the AKP governments have lost much of the intimacy of the 1990s, the bonds of mutual interests are still strong enough to enable the two partners to overcome occasional crises.

[1] More than 100,000 copies were sold in early 2005. *The Guardian*, 29 March 2005

[2] *Al-Jazeera*, 6 January 2009.

[3] *Cumhuriyet* as quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, 12 January 2009.

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