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Upheavals in the Middle East: Cause for Rapprochement Between Turkey and Israel?

Ofra Bengio

Discussions between Turkey and Israel regarding a resolution to the flotilla crisis beg the following questions: What makes and breaks relations between the two countries? What impact have the upheavals in the Arab world had on them? And, will current circumstances lead to improved relations?

Historically speaking, ups and downs in bilateral relations between Turkey and Israel were linked to developments in three arenas: the domestic scene in Turkey (but not that of Israel), the state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and upheavals or wars in the region. Until recently, bilateral problems were seldom an issue. The 1990s, or what was called “the decade of the military” in Turkey, brought about strategic alignment with Israel. But since then, the AKP’s rise to power ushered in an era of gradual estrangement. With regard to the Palestinian issue, while the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Agreement triggered a rapprochement between Ankara and Jerusalem, the 2008-9 war in Gaza caused severe divisions. As for an example from the third and most important arena – upheavals and wars in the Middle East – the 1991 Gulf War was an impetus for the improvement of relations, whereas the 2003 Gulf War marked the beginning of Ankara and Jerusalem’s parting of ways.

In the current decade, like the two previous ones, Israel and Turkey are grappling with a new period of upheaval and instability. These include the “Arab Spring,” “the Kurdish Spring,” the regional repercussions of the formation of new entities, or states, or possible splitting of states, and the expected withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. In all likelihood, these

developments will negatively impact both Turkey and Israel and thus act as a catalyst for renewed rapprochement.

For Turkey, the Arab Spring means economic loss in Libya, Egypt and Syria. It also forebodes the loss of an ally, Bashar al-Asad, and the subsequent loss of political clout in other countries in the region. In the case of Bahrain, when Ankara opted to side with the Sunni government rather than with the Shi'i uprising, this response revealed Turkey's concern with the looming rise of Shi'ism and the regional implications thereof.

The so-called Kurdish Spring is another destabilizing force in the region. For Turkey, the ongoing Kurdish uprising – the *serhildan* – also represents the main domestic threat. The illegal PKK organization continues to attack soldiers, and the legal Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) recently announced the establishment of “democratic autonomy” in the Kurdish region of Turkey. The participation of Syrian Kurds in the uprising in Syria may enhance cooperation between the Kurds of these two countries, making the Kurdish Spring more ominous for Ankara. Taking a look at other developments in the region, such as the establishment of the new state of South Sudan; the entrenchment of the Kurdish entity in Iraq; and the possible splitting of Libya and Yemen, all suggest that the nation-state and its borders are no longer as sacred as they were in the 20th century. On Turkey's mind is the possibility that the Kurds might reorient their political objectives into a similar parlance.

The planned withdrawal of American forces from Iraq is likely to be another destabilizing element for Turkey and its neighbors. In its aftermath, Turkey and Iran will be put at loggerheads as they rush to fill the vacuum left by the Americans. There is already a sharp rivalry between the two in their struggle for hegemony in the region. In addition, Syria, Bahrain and the Palestinian issue are other areas of friction between Turkey and Iran. Accordingly, it seems that the marriage of convenience between these two regional powers is turning sour.

Of course, due to the loss of its tacit ally in Egypt, the Arab Spring has severe repercussions for Israel, too. Also on the horizon is the threat of the rise of Islamism and the upheavals on the northern borders with Syria and Lebanon. The stability of Jordan might also prove another cause for concern. With regard to the Palestinians, the establishment of South Sudan is likely to give further impetus to the Palestinian state, which has already reached a critical mass and enjoys ever-growing support from the international community.

It seems that the combination of these developments has had sobering effects on both Turkey and Israel. As they scramble to bring back some stability to their respective realms of influence, the changed threat perceptions for both countries has forced these two states to try and adapt themselves to the volatile and changing regional order. Externally, strong encouragement from the Obama Administration to solve the diplomatic crisis between these two US allies serves as a strong motivating factor to bridge differences, as well.

This is the background to the ongoing talks between Turkey and Israel that are aimed at overcoming the flotilla crisis of May 2010, in which nine Turkish citizens were killed.

In theory, circumstances appear ripe for the improvement of relations between Turkey and Israel, as both seem willing to mend fences. However, this crisis is different from earlier ones and, thus, finding and implementing reasonable solutions is proving to be a more difficult task. In the past, crises involved third parties. The flotilla affair, however, was a crisis of by bilateral dimensions. In the aftermath of this incident, honor, blood and pride assumed an important place in the discourse and politics of both countries. Moreover, this particular event occurred at a time when both countries' governments are more ideological than previous administrations. On the ground, severe damage has been inflicted upon people-to-people relations and societies in both countries feel genuinely hurt by the turn of events in the last few years.

On the table at present are Prime Minister Erdogan's conditions for rapprochement: Israel will have to apologize, pay compensation to the families of the casualties and lift the siege on the Gaza Strip. However, Israel is wary of these terms, which some political voices consider to be humiliating. In addition, it has no guarantee that agreeing to Erdogan's demands will result in a sincere warming of relations. Consequently, finding points of negotiation and compromise has become a seemingly insurmountable endeavor.

Despite these difficulties, strategic and state interests may force the parties to overcome their differences. Prime Minister Erdogan has maximized the gains from his anti-Israeli stance, and in Israel the government is apparently under pressure to reach a compromise – even if it involves an apology and doling out compensation. Still, if understanding is reached it will not restore the cordiality of the 1990s but will, at least, clear the air between the two countries. In this case, relations should be rebuilt on new foundations, putting emphasis on reciprocity, symmetry and mutual respect. In the last few years anti-Semitism has gained ground in Turkey. The authorities in Ankara should do their utmost to fight this new trend. Civil society in both countries should also play a greater role in improving relations between the two peoples. On another level, if strategic cooperation is resumed it should be aimed at forestalling dangers emanating from neighboring countries such as Syria or Iran, but should not be targeted against domestic elements. Thus, for example, Israel should refrain from providing Turkey with military know-how to fight the Kurds. (Ironically, Jerusalem is being falsely blamed by the Turkish press for supporting the PKK against Turkey.) As the appropriate government officials proceed to put an end to the diplomatic crisis, Ankara and Jerusalem should use the common denominators and values that united them in the past to guide them in the reinvigoration of bilateral relations.

Ofra Bengio is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

Special thanks to Paul Rivlin for acting as editor in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman's absence.

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