



# Turkey's Return, Cairo's Concern

**F**IFTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, EGYPTIAN president Gamal Abdel Nasser burst onto the regional and international stage with a populist, anti-imperialist and pan-Arab agenda designed to shake the Middle East status quo and place Egypt in a position of unchallenged leadership. On the receiving end of Nasser's campaigns were the conservative, pro-Western Arab regimes and the region's non-Arab states: Israel, Iran and Turkey.

The world has turned more than a few times since then, and the flotilla crisis at the end of May marks a definitive role reversal. It is now Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who is the darling of Arab public opinion, thanks to his adroit blend of populist, Islamist and nationalist themes. Turkey's actions have highlighted Egypt's foreign policy ineffectiveness, beginning with its inability to broker a Hamas-Palestinian Authority reconciliation that is vital for breaking the logjam of Arab-Israeli diplomacy, not to mention its recent failure to reach agreement with up-stream African states on the distribution of Nile River waters, Egypt's lifeblood.

The flotilla episode highlighted Egypt's awkward status as de facto partner to Israel's partial blockade of Hamas-controlled Gaza. Most disturbing for Cairo is that Turkey's actions constituted unwanted meddling in Egyptian domestic politics, in support of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition group and the parent organization of Hamas.

Relations between Istanbul and Cairo date back to 1517, the year of the Ottoman conquest of Cairo. Hundreds of years of subsequent Ottoman rule made a profound impact on Egyptian society and politics. Ironically, the emergence of an independent Egyptian state was triggered in the early 1800s by an Albanian Ottoman commander in Egypt, Mehmet Ali (Muhammad Ali), whose forces would actually threaten the Ottoman heartland in the 1830s. The Ottoman Empire's remaining formal links with Egypt would eventually be severed by British occupation. The post-World War I Turkish republic established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire demonstratively turned its back on its former Arabic-speaking lands, in favor of a distinctive Western orientation. Still, the memory of having ruled over the Arabs remained, as did the sense that the Ottoman sultan had been betrayed by the Hashemite-led Arab nationalists who revolted with the encouragement of Great Britain. Conversely, the subsequent Arab nationalist narrative that dominated decades of Arab education was that the Arabs had freed themselves of 400 years of Turkish oppression.

Hence, the respective Turkish and Arab nation-building and state-building projects each had little interest or empathy with the other. Turkey's one significant foray into Middle Eastern politics during the 1950s was its joining the Baghdad Pact, whose effect, ironically, was to catapult Nasser into prominence.

The Turkish-Israeli strategic alignment in the mid-1990s was not at all to Egypt's liking, but official reaction remained low key, in contrast



to Syria's strident opposition. Ironically, the Erdogan government's strategic U-turn away from Israel in favor of friendly relations with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran, Bashar Asad's Syria and Hamas, is being received with even greater apprehension in official Egyptian circles.

Turkey's entry into the Gaza arena, bringing it to Egypt's very border, comes on the heels of Iran's own power projection there, through its patronage of Hamas and Hizballah, whom Egypt accuses of creating subversive networks in the Sinai Peninsula, i.e. sovereign Egyptian territory. Indeed, the Egyptian-imposed limitations on movement into and out of Gaza and its crackdown on smuggling networks stem from its anger with Hamas and Hizballah, as well as from its international obligations toward the Palestinian Authority, which was evicted from Gaza by Hamas in 2007.

Embarrassed by the outcome of the flotilla episode, particularly the widespread outrage in Egypt regarding the blockade and the anti-Mubarak rhetoric of demonstrators protesting Israel's actions, the Egyptian government moved quickly to deflect criticism by indefinitely easing the movement of people and goods between Gaza and Egypt. Official statements refrained from any criticism of Turkey, placing the onus directly on Israel. But the statements of flotilla participant Muhammad Al-Baltaji, who is deputy secretary general of the Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the Egyptian parliament, and the visits by leftist and Brotherhood members of parliament to Gaza, gave the subject a domestic political dimension that Egyptian officials found most distasteful.

Baltaji bragged to an interviewer that the flotilla participants had overpowered three Israeli soldiers and snatched their weapons. Pro-government commentators quickly reprimanded Baltaji for providing Israel with a public relations present, having confirmed Israel's claims that its commandos had been responding to violence. Moreover, said Abdullah Kamal in the Egyptian magazine Ruz al-Yusuf, Turkey's interest in the Palestinian cause was merely designed to advance its own agenda. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, he said, was supposed to represent a moderate, modern face of Islam, but the flotilla episode exposed it for what it was, an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Given the growing political ferment in Egypt regarding the succession of the ailing, aging President Hosni Mubarak and the flirtation between potential presidential challenger Mohamed ElBaradei and the Muslim Brotherhood, the flotilla episode and its outcome were clearly not what official Egypt had wished for.

The Mubarak government's next steps will surely bear watching, as it seeks to protect its vital interests in the region and insure political stability and continuity at home.

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