

Israel: A Micro-component of a Turkish Macro-Foreign Policy

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The latest episode in one of the most popular soap operas in the Middle East – Turkish-Israeli relations – has once again managed to capture global headlines. The recent crisis erupted after [David Ignatius' October 16 Washington Post](#) column reported that Turkey and its National Intelligence Agency (MIT) director Hakan Fidan had handed over the names of Iranians in Turkey working with the Israeli Mossad to officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran. While the U.S. and Israel have confirmed Ignatius' report, Turkey chose to deny it and claimed that the article was a form of psychological warfare designed to discredit Turkey's growing reputation in the world. Nevertheless, given Erdoğan's rhetoric since the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in May 2010 and Turkey's policy towards Israel in recent years, the MIT may well have acted against the Israeli Mossad to undermine Israeli intelligence-gathering on Iran. If this indeed was the case, then Hakan Fidan was acting within the narrow context of deteriorating Israeli-Turkish relations and ignoring or disregarding the importance of Israel's intelligence sharing relationships with Europe and the U.S. This would be in line with Turkey's new "independent global power policy."

Despite Turkey's official denial of Ignatius' report, the rocky history of Turkish-Israeli relations since Erdoğan assumed power makes it credible. Erdoğan's rhetoric prior to the Israeli apology in March 2013 was especially harsh. This was particularly so just after the Mavi Marmara episode, during which nine Turkish activists lost their lives when they tried to break the Israeli naval blockade on the Gaza Strip. Erdoğan gave a speech on June 1, 2010 in the Turkish parliament that branded the Israeli action as an act of state terrorism and declared that Turkey's relations with Israel will not be the same. In addition, he

seemed to threaten Israel by saying “Turkey’s friendship should be appreciated as much as its hostility.”¹

Three days prior to the speech, Hakan Fidan had been nominated as the director of MIT. One might argue that from the very beginning of his tenure as director of MIT, Fidan adopted Erdoğan’s hostile attitude towards Israel. Erdoğan’s anti-Israel rhetoric combined with the fact that Fidan is believed to have close ties with officials in Iran has made Israeli officials extremely uncomfortable. This discomfort was publicly expressed by Israel’s Defense Minister Ehud Barak in 2010.²

In 2011, Erdoğan’s harsh rhetoric about Israel was transformed into a concrete sanctions policy by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The Turkish foreign minister sees close Israeli - Turkish relations as an obstacle to Turkey’s regional maneuverability, which in his view should be based on Turkey’s Ottoman past. Davutoğlu’s sanctions centered on the formal suspension all military ties with Israel. In other words, the mistrust between the two sides had reached a historical peak prior to the U.S.-brokered Israeli apology in March 2013.

Fidan’s MIT has also taken an active role in Turkish domestic politics. It has pursued “Ergenekon”, the alleged ultranationalist covert network that was formed by former and active senior military leaders and Kemalist civilians, and whose members were convicted of plotting to overthrow the AKP government. Fidan has also played a critical role in peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Overall, he made the MIT an indispensable instrument for Erdoğan. Fidan’s more visible role, and the increased MIT influence and activities, has generated rumors that the intelligence agency is eavesdropping on the public’s telephone calls. These rumors have almost become an expression of collective paranoia among the Turkish public. In addition, Fidan has consolidated his bureaucratic control by successfully unifying all of Turkey’s intelligence institutions – Police and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) – under the MIT’s control in the name of a Joint Intelligence Coordination Center.³

¹ “Türkiye’nin dostluğu ne kadar kıymetliyse, düşmanlığı da o kadar şiddetlidir,” Turkish NY, June 1, 2010. [Last accessed: October 22, 2013] <http://www.turkishny.com/special-news/56-special-news/31514-turkiyenin-dostluu-ne-kadar-kymetliyse-dumanl-da-o-kadar-iddetlidir#.UmZqPvnIYqc>

² “Ehud Barak: Hakan Fidan sırlarımızı İran’a açabilir,” Haber7Com, August 2, 2010. [Last accessed: October 22, 2013] <http://www.haber7.com/dunya/haber/578393-ehud-barak-hakan-fidan-sirlarimizi-irana-acabilir>

³ “MİT yeni sistemle kontrolü ele aldı,” Yeni Çağ, August 23, 2013. [Last accessed: October 22, 2013] <http://www.yg.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/habergoster.php?haber=87973>

However, despite the prominence of the MIT under Fidan, its actions should not be understood as a mode of behavior apart from Erdoğan's overall *modus operandi*. In fact, Fidan and the MIT's actions are very much a part of Turkey's new "independent global power policy." In order to understand the broad contours of this policy and its impact, as well as the deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations, one has to take into account the Turkish military's (TSK's) position in Turkish domestic policy and Erdoğan's ambition to expand Turkey's military-technology industry.

Due to the Islamic backgrounds of the party's founders, many feared for the future of Turkish-Israeli relations when Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Prior to 2002, Israel had enjoyed strong relations with the Turkish military (TSK) and historically, Israeli-Turkish relations had been directly dependent on the TSK's strength in the Turkish politics. Hence, the AKP's victories over the TSK in three different political battles constituted a significant negative development for Turkish-Israeli relations.

The first blow to the TSK was the reformation of the National Security Council in 2003. This reform changed the number of members on the council and was carried out within the framework of the European Union's seventh reform package. Until that point, TSK generals had enjoyed a solid majority in the council. And despite officially being an advisory body only, the council was known to be an influential force that was able to impose its will on the Turkish government.

The second defeat for the TSK was Abdullah Gül's nomination and election as president of Turkey. Prior to elections, the TSK had unsuccessfully opposed Abdullah Gül's candidacy in the name of secularism because Mrs. Gül wears a headscarf.

The third blow to the TSK was Erdoğan forceful arrests of generals and other senior military officers for allegedly organizing a coup d'état against his government. The army's chief of staff during this period (2011), General Işık Koşaner, protested the arrests and resigned from his post. Erdoğan seized the opportunity and nominated the current chief of staff General Necdet Özel who accepted Erdoğan's marginalization of the TSK as a political player. Since Erdoğan's defeat of the TSK, he has been left without serious domestic political adversaries. Therefore, one might say that Israeli - Turkish relations were a casualty of the elimination of the TSK from Turkish politics.

The other important indication of Turkey's new independent global power policy is Turkey's growing military-industrial ventures, particularly in technology. The

Mavi Marmara crisis with Israel prompted the Turkish media to question whether the Turkish military had the capabilities to stand-up to Israel. Many retired military officers-turned-analysts pointed out that Turkey was not in a position to fight Israel because the Turkish military used an American Identification Friend and Foe (IFF) early-warning system that defined Israel's air force fighter aircraft as an ally, or "friend."

Hence, in 2011, to remedy this shortcoming, Turkey's leading military-industrial technology firm ASELSAN produced and installed new IFF software in Turkish fighter planes that excluded the Israeli planes from the friends' early-warning list.⁴

This ambition was not limited only to the IFF system. Turkey also launched national armament projects like "Milgem" (warship) , "Anka" (UAV), "Atak" (attack helicopter) and "Altay" (tank). The main purpose of these programs was to create maneuverability for Turkey's foreign policy by reducing its dependence on the West. Turkey's rapprochement with China is also a direct consequence of this policy. The two countries held a joint military exercise in Turkey in 2010. It is vital to note that despite U.S. protests, the drill was carried out with Iranian support: Iran opened its air space and provided fuel to Chinese war planes. Strategic relations between China and Turkey are expected to further improve with the Turkish decision to buy a Chinese missile defense system. While this decision has not been officially approved by the Turkish government, it is notable that Turkey chose to purchase the defense system from China rather than purchasing similar technology from its NATO allies.

Another possible indication of Turkey's increasingly independent foreign policy is the rumor that Turkey is arming al-Qa'ida-inspired Jabhat al-Nusra against the Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) Kurds. If these reports are true, then this is yet another step that may widen the rift in Turkey's traditional alliance with the West.

In conclusion, the latest episode in the Turkish – Israeli saga is only a small part of Turkey's move towards a new "independent global power policy." Turkey's aspiration to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council as a representative of Muslim nations is yet another indication of this new foreign policy orientation. Turkey's ambition is to create a military and economy less reliant on the West that would liberate Turkish decision-makers from what they feel is an excessive dependency on the West's technology and economic aid. This shift toward a multi-dimensional foreign policy built on a definition of the

⁴ "İsrail artık Türk F-16'sı için dost değil", Sabah, September 11, 2011. [Last accessed: October 22, 2013] <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2011/09/13/israil-artik-turk-f16-icin-dost-degil>

Turkish state's essence rooted in Islam places Israel in a difficult situation vis-à-vis Turkey. If this new foreign policy orientation proves to be successful, Israel's apology and other gestures will probably do little to change Turkey's future attitude and policy towards Israel.

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