

THE MIDDLE EAST CROSSROADS

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**Israel's Apology to Turkey:
A chronically unpredictable relationship**

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In the past, the relationship between Israel and Turkey was characterized by ups and downs. Today, however, one can assert that within this relationship, Turkey is the initiator while Israel is usually left to react. Whenever Ankara found it necessary to bolster relations with Jerusalem, a warming of ties ensued. Conversely, when Turkey had decided to cool the relationship, as had happened in the wake of Operation Cast Lead in December 2008, the relations between the two countries suffered. In order to properly understand this complex reality, one must analyze the foundations of Turkey's foreign policy towards Israel with an emphasis on the worldviews held by current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was instrumental in shaping Turkish foreign policy.

Ever since Davutoğlu began his post, his office has been criticized both in Turkey and abroad. Nevertheless, he is considered a strongman, outlining the guidelines of Turkish diplomacy. His key principles are reflected in his book, *Strategic Depth* (2001), which denotes the underlying causes of Turkey's shift in attitude towards Israel. According to Davutoğlu, neither a Jewish Israel nor a Christian Lebanon belongs to the "natural environment" of the Middle East. He furthermore states that the close relationship between Turkey and Israel limits the potential of a Turkish maneuver, based on the Ottoman heritage.

Davutoğlu's road to the center of the Turkish political scene was paved in 2002 following the victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Newly elected Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed Davutoğlu as an adviser on foreign affairs. In 2009 he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs and has since led the

country's foreign policy approach colored by neo-Ottomanism – an approach that is based on Turkish-Islam Synthesis, which aims to restore Turkish influence in the areas controlled by its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Erdoğan has also contributed to reinforcing neo-Ottomanism by commemorating Sultans, namely Abdul Hamid II – chiefly because of his well-known expressed opposition to Zionism. For example, at a ceremony recognizing the degrees of the Palestinian Al Quds University, Erdoğan declared that his position on the issue of Palestine is not dissimilar than that of Abdul Hamid II. Abdul Hamid II was known for his refusal to aid Theodor Herzl in 1901 in allowing Jews to establish a sovereign state in the land of Israel. Nowadays students and teachers alike are exposed to this sort of material in schools, thanks to the new history textbooks composed under AKP inspiration.

Nevertheless, there were no significant changes to Turkish-Israel relations until December 2008. Turkey even served as a mediator in negotiations between Israel and Syria conducted at the time. The turning point occurred as a result of Operation Cast Lead in December 2008 - January 2009. A few days prior to the operation, then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Turkey. Despite the tight relationship with Erdoğan, Olmert chose not to update his counterpart about his intentions for Cast Lead. Erdoğan interpreted this as a stab in the back in light of Turkey's mediation efforts. Given the proximity of Olmert's visit to the start of the operation, Erdoğan also feared a backlash from the Arab world that could interpret events as a tacit Turkish approval to Israeli actions. As negotiations with the Syrians went up in flames alongside Gaza during Operation Cast Lead, Ankara was infuriated, blaming the failure of the talks with Syria on Israel. Erdoğan and the AKP have since seized every opportunity to harshly castigate Israel. Moreover, its adamant pro-Palestinian position has recognizably affected the Turkish public. For example, the Authority of Religious Affairs was able to raise 10 million Turkish liras (20 million shekels) in aid to the Palestinian people from Turkish mosques by the end of Operation Cast Lead. Education Minister Hüseyin Çelik called upon all students under the age of 18, including students from the only Jewish school in Turkey, to stand for a moment of silence in solidarity with the Palestinians. This shift in official as well as public attitude towards Israel has been documented in several academic surveys. In 2009, one survey reported that 90% of Turkey believed that Israel is the greatest threat to their country. Not surprisingly, these beliefs were shaded with anti-Semitism, as 64% of respondents said they would not want Jewish neighbors.

The first diplomatic incident invoking Turkish ire against Israel occurred during the Davos Summit on January 29, 2009 (a few weeks after the end of Operation Cast Lead). Erdoğan ostentatiously left the courtroom after roundly condemning Israel in the presence of Israeli President Shimon Peres, and returned immediately to his country. In the middle of the night, special bus lines activated by the municipality of Istanbul brought Erdoğan supporters to the airport, who welcomed him with a mix of Turkish and Palestinian flags. This incident, as well as others that have occurred since then, demonstrate that the Davos histrionics was an orchestrated move by Erdoğan. The Davos incident was the first in a series of events that further soured the relationship between the two countries, including overtly not inviting Israel to the 2009 NATO military exercise "Anatolian Eagle." Aspects of the strained relations were also detected in popular culture. In October 2009, the Turkish State Channel TRT broadcasted the series "Separation," which presented IDF soldiers as bloodthirsty murderers. A few months later, the movie *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*

was released, again portraying Israel in unflattering terms. The crisis reached its peak when Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon invited Turkish Ambassador Oğuz Çelikkol to admonish him following the screening of the film. The infamous “low chair” incident that ensued was interpreted in Turkey as an attempt to offend the ambassador.

Yet despite the aforementioned tense relations, the two countries maintained a somewhat functional relationship until the flotilla incident in May 2010, which resulted in the deaths of nine IHH activists. As a result, a severe decay in the foreign relations between the two countries followed, incorporating a significant change in Turkey's security strategy toward Israel. For the first time, Israel was listed in the “Red Book” (a classified document, published every five years, in which chapters are systematically leaked), which defines the external threats to Turkey. The 2005 Red Book, published under the influence of the Turkish military, recorded the Iranian threat and the Islamization of Turkey as its main threats. The 2010 Red Book however, formulated under the influence of AKP Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, lists Israel as a threat that undermines regional stability.

The UN sanctioned Palmer Report, which investigated the flotilla incident and was ultimately published in September 2011, was another milestone in Turkish-Israeli relations as it stated that Israel's naval blockade of Gaza is in fact legal. In effect, the report undermined the very justification of the flotilla. Ankara rejected the report's conclusions outright, and Davutoğlu declared a series of sanctions against Israel in order to lend validity to Turkey's position. This included freezing agreements, including ensuring freedom of navigation in the Mediterranean, as well as demoting its diplomatic ties to Israel as second secretary only. Concurrently, Erdoğan established the three requirements to restoring Israel-Turkey relations: a formal Israeli apology, monetary compensation for families of the dead IHH activists, and removing the blockade of the Gaza Strip. The last demand, which until then was irrelevant to the bilateral relations between the two countries, gave further credence to those positing that Ankara was not actually interested in repairing the relationship.

All things considered, the crisis pointed out that despite the military, trade and tourism ties between the two countries, a true friendship between the two nations never blossomed. In the past, so long as the Turkish army held decisive influence on the relationship, Turkish-Israeli relations were strong. As a matter of fact, as the military weakened and the AKP strengthened, relations deteriorated. While the Israeli apology at the end of President Obama's visit indeed brought a formal end to this crisis, the apology is not likely to bring significant change in the relationship but only a temporary lull in light of the ideological foundations of Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan's statements on February 27, 2013, in which he called Zionism “a crime against humanity,” also permeated the consciousness of the Turkish public. Only two days after this statement, an article was published on the employee website of the Turkish Ministry of Education entitled “Who is a Zionist and what is Zionism?” The article defines Zionism as the most dangerous threat to the wellbeing of Turkey and the safety of the entire world at large.

Another problem at hand is that Israel is now also unpopular among secular Kemalist opposition circles in Turkey, which see Israel's apology as the fulfillment of Erdoğan's rise. Many Kemalists believe Israel is merely cooperating with the AKP as

part of the US's "Greater Middle East Project" - one which promotes moderate Islam as a role model for the entire region. Other Kemalist circles claim a conspiracy exists between Israel and the AKP to fabricate public crises, while an alliance between them operates behind closed doors. Proof of this is the American radar stationed in the Malatya province in order to "protect Israel." The demonstratively anti-Israeli manifestations and anti-Semitic cartoons that appear regularly on Facebook and Twitter also reflect the mood described above.

For these reasons, the potential benefit of the Israeli apology depends on two main factors: first, an American initiative that will work consistently to rehabilitate the long-term relationship between Turkey and Israel. The tense relations between Obama and Netanyahu were interpreted in Turkey as an opportunity to severely criticize Israel, something that was not possible, for example, during President Bush's tenure. It seems that President Obama's recent visit to Israel and his strengthened relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu, as well as his intervention in the recent Turkish-Israeli crisis, should soften Turkey's stance towards Israel in the future. The second factor is the issue of Israel's future confrontations. A military escalation in Israel's southern or northern front, , could cause relations between the two countries to deteriorate once more, if and when Israel responds to such provocations. Turkey's pro-Palestinian policies may also exacerbate the relationship between Jerusalem and Ankara in case of an ongoing political deadlock. It is imperative to remember Turkey's desire to position itself as a mediator in regional disputes. His failed attempt as broker during Operation Pillar of Defense notwithstanding, Erdoğan will not miss an opportunity to appear as a mediator between Hamas and Israel. To be sure, Turkey's main goal is to become a "big brother" type concerning regional affairs in general, and the Palestinian issue in particular, while simultaneously serving as a key player in regional crises. In other words, the elements that will determine the future of bilateral relations are not necessarily in Jerusalem's hands. The apology, though perhaps in the short term is indeed seen as a solution, maybe leave Israel feeling in the long term as though Turkey bites the hands that feeds it.

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