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Turkey and Israel: The End of the Affair?

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By Christopher Phillips

As the dust from Israel's 31st May attack on a Gaza-bound Turkish aid ship continues to settle, and the various sides push their own accounts of who violated which international laws and protocols, one thing is for certain: Turkish-Israeli relations are in dire straits. Despite a long history of friendship, tensions between the two have been simmering since Tel Aviv's sudden invasion of Gaza in December 2008, further exacerbated by Israel's public humiliation of Turkey's ambassador and Ankara's improving ties with the Jewish state's enemies in Tehran and Damascus. However, the events 77 miles off the coast of Gaza, in which 4 Turks were amongst the 9 activists killed, has brought matters to a new low with Turkish PM Erdogan declaring the raid a 'massacre' and recalling his ambassador to Tel Aviv. So why has this decline come about?

Commentators in the pro-Israel camp have been quick to blame Ankara's hostility on the Islamist roots of Turkey's ruling AKP party. According to this narrative, the AKP, angry at continual rejection by the EU, is turning its attention eastwards to recast Turkey in the Ottoman role of dominant power in the Middle East. One writer, the Dayan Centre's Joshua Teitelbaum, even went far enough to accuse Erdogan of waging 'Jihad' on Israel. Yet such analysis is severely flawed. The AKP have been in power since 2002 and, until the Gaza war of 2008, enjoyed excellent relations with Israel: extending military and economic cooperation and mediating Tel Aviv's peace talks with Syria. Certainly no such Islamist ideological opposition to Israel was visible in those first six years.

Similarly Turkey has in no way turned its back on Europe. The EU remains Turkey's principal trading partner, an economic relationship that has prompted the unprecedented growth that is allowing Ankara greater financial clout in the Middle East. Far from an Islamic idealism, Turkish foreign relations under the AKP has been characterised by a flexible realism. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's notion of 'zero problems with neighbours' has allowed Ankara to maintain and indeed strengthen its ties with Europe whilst abandoning historical hostilities with Russia, Greece, Syria and Iran in order to enhance Turkey's influence in its surrounding countries.

The decline in relations with Tel Aviv is therefore better explained by Israel's bizarrely provocative behaviour towards Turkey, rather than a renewed Islamic idealism in Ankara. Indeed, until recently Israel too could be considered a neighbour with which Turkey had 'zero problems', as illustrated by the first six years of AKP-Israel harmony. Yet Israel has seemed foolishly insensitive to Turkish national pride in its recent actions. Erdogan felt personally betrayed, for example, in 2008 when he had spent hours mediating a potential peace deal between Tel Aviv and Damascus, only for then Israeli Premier Olmert to scupper the talks by launching the Gaza invasion without any consultation with Ankara. Similarly current Israeli Foreign Officials deliberately humiliated the Turkish ambassador in 2009 by making him sit in a 'low chair' during a televised interview, prompting public outrage in Turkey. Now, following the flotilla crisis, despite Israel's pleas that they had asked Ankara not to sanction the convoy, four bodies returned home to Turkey who had been shot at point-blank range by their government's supposed ally – a difficult position for any leader to justify to an angry nationalist population.

Yet these actions point to a wider trend in the Middle East on behalf of both actors. For Israel, it displays an even greater siege mentality than usual under the stewardship of Premier Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman. This government's willingness to discard any international criticism whether it be over the Gaza blockade or stolen western identities to assassinate Hamas leaders in Dubai, and their direct refusal of US wishes to halt West Bank settlements, suggests a leadership convinced of its own rectitude and steadfast refusal to compromise, whatever the costs to its international image. In this light, losing its oldest and most important Muslim ally is a price it seems strangely willing to pay.

For Turkey, we see an emerging regional power that has less and less need of an ally whose actions are increasingly indefensible. In the end, Israel is a tiny market of 6 million consumers, whilst the Arab and Muslim Middle East offer much more. Ankara, one suspects, would rather not have to choose, but conversely, Erdogan will be aware of his rising star in the Middle East as a champion of the Palestinians – even if his primary motivation remains Turkish national interests.

As such trends continue, Israel should be cautious not to disregard Turkey's importance. This is no powerless Arab dictatorship but a thriving, militarily strong, democratic regional giant. Moreover, Western states, notably the US, have long looked to Turkey as its role model in the Muslim World: proof that Islam and democracy can be compatible. At the final analysis, Tel Aviv should understand that, from a realist perspective that ignores the power of domestic lobbies and sentimental attachments, Turkey is far more important to American and European long-term objectives in the Middle East than Israel is. The last thing Tel Aviv should do is to deliberately provoke circumstances whereby the West has to choose.

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