

COMMENTARY

No. 26

Thursday, 28 July 2011

Can the Strategic Alliance between Israel and Turkey be revived?

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Israel has many reasons to be angry at Turkey. Beyond the wide economic and strategic ties between the two states, for many Israelis, Turkey symbolized a hope that peaceful relationships can be established between a Jewish and a Muslim state based on secular and democratic beliefs. The policy of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan towards Israel, however, has created deep rifts in this hope. Many Israelis tend to think that even if Israel has made certain mistakes in its attitude, the Turkish government could have discretely demanded an Israeli compensation, which would have made it less complicated for the two states to return to normal relations.

The uncompromising policy and especially the fact that Turkey deliberately chose to carry out the controversies with Israel openly and arrogantly has led many Israelis to believe that Turkey has decided long before to carry out a major shift in its foreign policy. This shift is mainly reflected in an intensive effort to focus on improved relations with the radical Arab states and to let its relationship with Israel hit rock bottom. Thus, all the discrepancies are no more than an excuse for the present Turkish government to justify a decision that was determined long before these controversies first appeared.

Turkey's behaviour with regard to the flotilla incident has been seen by many Israelis as a step that crossed red lines. According to various sources, high-ranking Turkish officials tried to create the impression in Israel that there were only so-called "peace activists" on the ships sailing to

Gaza and that there would be no violent opposition if and when Israel would try to establish control over these ships (especially regarding the Marmara). In reality things were totally different. As the incident unfolded, it was clear that there was a very violent opposition to the Israeli efforts to establish control of the ship. Nine activists on the ship were killed and some Israeli soldiers were wounded. After the event, Turkey championed the campaign in the international community against Israel.

At the same time, it must be recalled that Turkey also had good reasons to be resentful of Israel. The decision of the Ehud Olmert government to authorize Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan to carry out mediation efforts between Israel and Syria was a grave mistake. The Olmert government was well aware of the fact that the chances that such mediation efforts would end successfully were very low. The Syrian conditions for a peace treaty with Israel were known for many years and were previously never accepted by any Israeli government. One can hardly see the possibility that the Olmert government would be ready to withdraw to the 4 June 1967 borders with Syria and to remove thousands of Israelis from the Golan Heights.

Moreover, it should also be taken into account that the pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights is very low, due to the following main reasons:

- a. The fact that in recent years the international community, especially the United States, has focused their efforts on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. It should be recalled that the leading assessment in this regard is that there cannot be a dual effort to solve both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli-Syrian conflict.
- b. Furthermore, the tranquillity that prevails along the Israeli-Syrian border does not create any pressure upon Israel to move towards such a political agreement with Syria.

Under these circumstances, if Israel still wished to move towards a peace agreement with Syria and have Turkey as a mediator between itself and Syria, this should have been done by low-ranking officials and in a very discreet manner. If an intervention of the prime minister is considered, this should be done only if and when the prospects that a peace agreement would eventually be concluded are very high.

As could have been expected, the Turkish mediation between Israel and Syria ended with failure and humiliation of the Turkish leadership. There is no doubt that this failure has been a major cause in the tension between Israel and Turkey.

Another severe mistake that Israel made with regard to Turkey was the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert to Turkey (December 2008) just a few days before Israel launched its attack on

Gaza under Operation Cast Lead. Under these circumstances one could not avoid the impression, although without any basis, that Israel had informed the Turkish leader of its warlike intentions. Here again, the Turkish leadership was unnecessarily embarrassed.

A few months ago, Israel and Turkey started negotiations on reconciliation attempts. These negotiations are being carried out by rather low-ranking officials. Up until now these efforts have not led to any substantial improvement in relations between the two states. It seems that Turkey has agreed to get involved in such reconciliation efforts because it realized that its efforts to embarrass and isolate Israel in the international community have totally failed.

Although, from a strictly military point of view the Israeli military operation against the Marmara ship was not successful, this did not encourage the international community to exert substantial pressure on Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza as Turkey demanded. On the contrary, the ensuing debate eventually pushed the leading powers in the international community to state officially that in principle Israel has the legal right to establish a blockade over the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that Turkey's main ally in the region, Iran, seems to have lost a large portion of its regional influence and its power in recent months. Various assessments allege that its attempts to move ahead with its nuclear efforts have failed and its leadership is highly involved in internal rupture. Furthermore, Israel's ability to find at least a partial technological solution to the rocket threats has decreased the power of Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which are principal regional allies of Iran. Since the Turkish government has considered Iran as its leading ally, the weakening power of Iran in turn means the weakening of Turkey.

Another factor that has weakened Turkey's position in the region was the uprising in Syria. Turkey's large economies investments in that country are highly threatened by the turmoil. Moreover, Turkey is highly worried that this uprising would eventually lead to a flood of refugees entering its own territory.

Under these circumstances, Turkey might consider taking military measures on its border with Syria. Among others, it seems to be considering the option of invading Syria and creating a security zone. It is not known if this threat is concrete and what its exact scope would be if and when Turkey decides to undertake military measures towards Syria. It is also unknown if the aim of these military measures would be limited to the defence of Turkey's interests or if they would have more far-reaching goals such as bringing about a regime change inside Syria.

In any case, these circumstances might serve as a basis for a renewal of the strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey. The focus would be on the need of both states to cope with the negative implications of the instable situation inside Syria.

From Israel's point of view, the enhancement of Turkey's position inside Syria and the weakening of the Assad regime might be of far-reaching regional implications. As we know, Syria is a central factor in the Iranian axis in the region. Thus, the weakening of the Syrian power would consequently lead to the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah. These newly developing circumstances might compel both Israel and Turkey to come to the conclusion that maybe they should leave behind the unfortunate events that led to the deterioration in their relationship.

In Israel, there are growing voices calling for a certain readiness to apologize for the events, which led to the fatal collision on the Marmara. Thus, the reconciliation efforts that are supported by the US administration might eventually be responsible for a breakthrough that would satisfy both parties even if partially. If this happens it would open the gate for full and strategic cooperation between the two states.

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