

## COMMENTARY

No. 71

Monday, 27 August 2012

### **Diplomacy of Rabbis**

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We are all aware of the dismal state of the relationship between Israel and Turkey, which deteriorated as a result of Operation Cast Lead (which began in the last days of December 2008), the Davos meeting between President Shimon Peres and Tayyip Erdogan (in January 2009) and the cancellation of the joint naval manoeuvre (that was supposed to take place in October 2009). And as a result of the *Mavi Marmara* event (at the end of May 2010), the relationship between the two countries plunged to a new low. Neither of the countries hosts ambassadors of the other, and the investigative committees that functioned over the past two years did not succeed in bridging the differences of opinion. Each of the two countries has demands of the other, and the state of affairs between them seems to be “stuck”.

There are many people in Israel and Turkey who are very dissatisfied with the present condition of relations between the countries, and long for the warmth and brotherhood that characterized the cooperation in many areas that the two countries enjoyed in the past. Irrespective of politics, it is clear that during the past two years the trade relations between the two countries have not only not contracted, but have even expanded. El Al has stopped flying to Turkey, but the Turkish airline maintains a number of flights every day between the two countries and the planes are full.

Behind the scenes some Turkish friends of Israel are working to improve the relationship between the countries. One of them is Adnan Oktar, a Turk, Muslim believer and friend of Israel, who, for the past twenty-five years published many books and articles under the pen-name of Harun Yahya, dealing with issues regarding Darwinism, Communism, history, philosophy and religion. He has accumulated many supporters, and according to the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre of Jordan, in 2010 he was among the fifty most influential people in the Islamic

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world today, for his dissemination of creationism in an Islamic context, and other extensively distributed publications on Islamic topics.

Oktar has accumulated more than a few rivals also, who try everything possible to silence him. He was accused of being Holocaust denier because a book under the title *The Holocaust Lie* was published under his pen-name in 1995. However, Adnan Oktar officially denies writing this book and states that his pen-name Harun Yahya was misused. This book does not reflect his opinions and the book was published without his knowledge.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001 he published a book in which he claims that true Islam rejects terror, and since then he has been endeavouring to promote inter-faith dialog and to encourage mutual understanding. In his articles and books he often quotes the prophets of Israel and the vision of redemption and global peace that they gave to the world. Oktar publicly supports the right of the Jewish people to live on the land of its fathers with sovereignty, in independence and in true peace with its neighbours, whether Arab, Turkish, Iranians or others, and therefore his detractors claim that he is actually an agent of the Mossad.

Adnan Oktar, being an Islamic thinker, prefers to conduct a dialog with believing Jews, because he finds a common cultural basis with them. From his point of view, a god fearing Jew is his brother, as is any person in the world who believes in the One who dwells above. Abraham—the “Father of Many Nations” —is the ancient father of all monotheists, and therefore there is no reason that they should bicker over anything. Peace, brotherhood and cooperation between people are the supreme values in the eyes of the Creator, and therefore war, conflict and death are contrary to His will.

This belief of Oktar moved him to invite to Turkey a delegation of Members of Knesset from the religious side of the Israeli cultural map, in order to open a dialog between official Israel and the Turkish political stratum. And more specifically, with the religious Justice and Development Party (or AKP), which has ruled Turkey since 2002. The Israeli delegation included Members of Knesset Rabbi Nissim Ze'ev and Rabbi Yitzhak Cohen, who is also deputy minister of the treasury. The rabbi of Geneva Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak Dayan, Rabbi Benjamin Abramson, an adviser to the Sanhedrin and the writer of these lines also participated. The delegation conducted two days of hearings, one in Ankara the capital, and one in Istanbul. These discussions included dozens of people from the boiling cauldron of Turkish politics, most of whom are members of the Islamist party, AKP. This party is not homogeneous, and many are its shades and variations. Just try to imagine a religious party in Israel that includes Satmar, Shas, the Degel Hatorah, Aguda, Mafdal, the Jewish Home, Believers in the Torah and Avodah, the Conservatives and the Reform, all together in one party. Apparently the wolf will live with the lamb and the tiger will lie down with the kid before a party such as this will be established in Israel; however in Turkey the Party of Justice and Development is such. This apparently is the reason that it can be the largest party and therefore it rules; Israeli politicians please take note. It has within it many

shades, radical as well as moderate, modernists as well as traditionalists, in whom the belief in the Almighty unites everyone. It is natural that those among them who met with the Israeli delegation were also those who relate to Israel with a warmer attitude than that of their Prime Minister, Rajab Tayyip Erdogan.

The discussions touched on every subject, without circumventing any problem and without skipping any obstacle. The points under discussion were the conflict between Israel and the Arabs, especially Hamas, the incident at Davos, the *Mavi Marmara* affair and the entire relationship between Turkey and Israel. The central meeting was held in Ankara on Wednesday August 15, with about twenty members of the Party of Justice and Development. The meeting began with an atmosphere that was somewhat tense; however, the atmosphere warmed up with time and the two sides arrived at the joint conclusion that the joint challenges confronting Israel and Turkey today—Iran, Syria, Lebanon and more—are much greater and more fateful than the negative events of 2008-2010. The meeting concluded with the decision to establish a joint committee of three members from each side in order to continue the dialog, whose mission will be to create a situation where the governments of Israel and Turkey will be able to find a way to restore their relationship to the good situation that existed in the past. The discussions were conducted with an atmosphere of brotherhood and affection radiated by Adnan Oktar.

The meeting was headed by Mr. Yasar Yakis, who released the following announcement:

*Statement by Mr. Yasar Yakis, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey:*

*On 15 August 2012 we shared an Iftar with a delegation from Israel. The Iftar was followed by a friendly exchange of views. The Turkish participants included former Minister of Health Mr. Halil Sibgin, other former Ministers and former Members of Parliaments and me. The Israeli delegation was composed of Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak Cohen, Deputy Minister of Economy; Rabbi Nissim Ze'ev, Member of Knesset; Yitzhak Dayan, Chief Rabbi of Geneva, Switzerland; Dr. Mordechai Kedar from the Bar Ilan University; Rabbi Ben Abrahamson, consultant to Sanhedrin; and Mrs. Shoshanna Bekerman, Spokesperson of Nissim Ze'ev.*

*The meeting was organized by Mr. Adnan Oktar's organization in the JW Marriott Hotel in Ankara.*

*The two delegations had a friendly exchange of views on the present situation of the relations between Turkey and Israel. They pointed out that the strained relations did not serve the interests of either side.*

*Various ideas were voiced during the meeting in order to find an exit from the present impasse. However, no concrete proposal emerged from the meeting since this was the very first encounter between these two delegations. Therefore it was decided that both*

*delegations designate a team of three members and that these members remain in touch by exchanging messages and narrow down the scope of the subject. It will not be easy to focus on specific proposals if the scope of the debate is kept wide.*

*The members of the team will try to work out concrete proposals and prepare other meetings in the future if the proposals become mature enough to justify the holding a new meeting.*

The previous minister of health in Erdogan's government, Halil Sibgin, published a similar announcement, and added:

*It is a good thing to see that there are efforts on both sides to improve and develop Turkish-Israeli relations, which have deteriorated after the Mavi Marmara incident. I believe, however, both parties should strive harder to improve these relations. These efforts will contribute to both regional and global peace.*

It must be emphasized that at no time did the Israeli and Turkish delegations see themselves or present themselves as representatives of their governments or the heads of their governments, and their goal was entirely to create mutual understanding and an atmosphere of openness among the members of the political stratum so that the process of discussion and decision-making will be more comfortable for both governments. Although these discussions were not official meetings between the countries, it was clear that the government of Turkey was aware of the visit, because a Turkish police cruiser accompanied and provided security for the members of the Israeli delegation in all of its movements. The participation of Rabbi Yitzhak Cohen, deputy minister of the treasury, was not a secret to the Israeli government. The Israeli delegation also met with a representative of the Republican People's Party (CHP - the secular party of the opposition), and from this congenial meeting the delegation emerged with a positive feeling as well.

It is important to note as a parallel subtopic that Turkey went out of its way to facilitate the task of the delegation. Funding was entirely provided by Adnan Oktar, and it included flights from Israel, internal flights, a hotel, transportation and strictly kosher food. During the entire stay Oktar's people stayed close to us and took care of all our needs. A person only invests many thousands of dollars if he believes that the goal is important, and the restoration of a functional relationship between Israel and Turkey is important to Adnan Oktar. These days, in which there are few Muslims who are willing to identify with Israel, the activity of Oktar on behalf of the people of Israel and the state of Israel must be praised; here are his words on peace and brotherhood between Israel and her neighbours:

*Mr. Oktar has been asked about the purpose of the visit, and answered: The purpose of this visit is to establish the friendship between Israel and Turkey, to secure that there is no tension between the two countries, to show that our love and compassion to the Jewish people dating back to a long history has been persisting without any harm coming to it. There are some people who show enmity to the Jewish people. This has been a slap-down response to them...*

*It is a desire from the heart, for good, for relations between Turkey and Israel to be better, for Turkey and Israel to be allies... We think things will be good, that it is important to collaborate with Israel, that it is important for us to be in alliance with Israel, because they are descended from the Prophets. They are the descendants of the Prophets Abraham and Israel...*

*The work we have been carrying out about Israel are by nature oriented to prevent some disasters. We secure peace. We prevent wars and bloodshed. We advocate freedom. Is this something wrong? By no means. We make sure that they become friends with Turkey. Is this good or bad? Good."*

I don't know how close Adnan Oktar is to Erdogan's ear, but the series of meetings with people of the ruling party that he organized for the Israeli delegation was impressive, and proves that he is very close to some of the people of the ruling party. This is especially obvious given that it was, as much as I know, the first time in recent years that an Israeli parliamentary delegation has come to Turkey. I do not claim that Oktar and the members of both delegations have created a revolution in Israeli-Turkish relations, but we clearly felt that Israel is dear to many in Turkey in general and particularly to some among the ruling party, the Party of Justice and Development, and that they feel that the time has come to find the way to enable Israel and Turkey to bring to a close to the present miserable chapter in the relations between the two countries.

## **Diplomacy and Tradition**

The delegation to Turkey may be seen in a wider context: for years the Islamic world around Israel has been becoming increasingly religious. Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Gaza (already an Islamic state for five years, in case you have not noticed), and of course Iran - in all of them a cultural shift has occurred, and as a result, a political change in the direction of Islam, each one according to its own style and course. There will be those who will say "these Muslims are all radical, all terrorists, all want to throw us into the sea, because we are a Jewish, democratic, Western and 'liberal' state." Those people have a point, because there will always be preachers and imams who will justify this opinion. However, reality is much more complex than one thinks, and just for comparison: how many streams of Judaism are there among the 13 million Jews in the world? Then how many varieties of Islam can there be among 1.5 billion Muslims?

I do not claim that there are no extremists and terrorists in the Islamic world, but there are also others, who are not radical and not terrorists, and who see themselves as no less faithful to Islam than the extremists. Just as is the case among us, many Muslims form their religious world according to their own spiritual values, according to the way they have been educated and according to the image of their cultural worldview that has been crystallized in the course of their adult life. There are among them many who are willing to accept the Other as he is, even if he is a Jew, Israeli and even Zionist. The courageous among them will show this; those who are even bolder will support and fund activities intended to strengthen the standing and the regional strength of the state of Israel, but the most courageous will not try to hide their support for Israel from the media or from the public in their country. The most prominent example of these courageous ones is Adnan Oktar.

Surprisingly, it seems that Muslims who are faithful to Islam feel more comfortable with traditional Jews, who share with them faith in the Master of the Worlds, and it may be that the arduous and laborious path of Israel into the heart of the Muslim world that surrounds it may be paved by rabbis, with their beards, their skull-caps and long black coats. I do not claim that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must really enlist as cadets the men who warm the benches of the Porat Yosef or Panevezys yeshivas , but - on the contrary - apparently the appropriate people to conduct a discourse with Muslims who are faithful to their religion and tradition are not the disciples of the cultural school of Shimon Peres, Yossi Beilin or Alon Liel.

The path to our neighbours' hearts, both those who are more and those who are less sympathetic, is ultimately paved with personal contact. The delegation to Turkey proved, at least to me, that it is important for Israel to be represented in a way that will make it easier for our traditional neighbours to accept us, and that the state of Israel is not entirely secular and liberal. We have among us enough traditional people, who are also traditional in appearance, and who, because of the respect that our neighbours have for tradition, actually makes them more capable of finding the way to manage the contacts between Israel and its neighbours so as not to generate cultural aversion. It is also important that they speak the languages of the area - Arabic, Turkish and Persian - and it is important that they will undergo professional training in the conduct of negotiations and diplomacy. It will be easier for them to come to diplomatic achievements with our Muslim and traditional neighbours, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister Office should take this issue into consideration.

May peace and the mercy of Allah and His blessing be upon you, my dear readers.

**Note:** This article was originally published in Hebrew in *Makor Rishon* and the English translation is reproduced here with permission of the author. Web link: <http://israelagainstterror.blogspot.co.il/2012/08/mordechai-kedar-diplomacy-of-rabbis.html>

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