

COMMENTARY

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Erdogan Needs a Spasm of Lucidity

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The ascendancy of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the presidency places Turkey on a trajectory that could usher in a new era unlike any other since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Erdogan was admired in and outside the country for his remarkable socio-economic achievements, yet at the same time intensely criticized for his egocentricity, crude prejudices, and a misguided foreign policy that may now haunt him as President unless he changes course.

Although there is much to say about his good intentions behind his adopted doctrine of 'zero problems with neighbours,' his grandiose notions about Turkey's role as a global power and the ever-growing pervasiveness of his political power base, the Islamic AK Party, have backfired, leaving behind a messy trail of foreign policy failures.

One of its casualties is Turkey's relations with Israel. For decades, Turkey has maintained good relations with Jerusalem (interestingly, Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel, in 1949), albeit with some up and downs, reaching its climax in the late 1990's.

During that period, the two countries became strategic allies and entered into a host of joint ventures, including military cooperation and sales, intelligence sharing, energy, extensive trade, and tourism.

The first major breakdown of their bilateral relations occurred in the wake of Israel's incursion into Gaza in December 2008, which was further aggravated by the Israeli commandos' interception of the Turkish vessel Mavi Marmara in 2010. The ship was sailing to Gaza carrying supplies of food, medicine, and building materials with the intention of breaking the Israeli blockade over the Strip.

Unfortunately, one Turkish-American and eight Turkish citizens were inadvertently killed resulting from “excessive and unreasonable” use of force, as was determined by a UN commission that investigated the incident.

Since then, Erdogan has never missed an opportunity to criticize Israel, accusing it of gross human rights violations and a host of other charges.

What followed was a series of events that gradually chipped away at their bilateral relations to the present status of mutual acrimony, accusations of gross wrongdoings, and outright political hostility.

What has particularly soured relations is Israel’s initial refusal to meet Turkey’s demand that Israel apologize for the death of the Turkish citizens. When Netanyahu finally conceded, Erdogan reneged on his promise to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel.

I personally worked behind the scenes and arranged for the initial high-level meeting between the two sides to iron out the sticking problem of the apology. I was directly told on several occasions by then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (now the Prime Minister) that “The moment Israel apologizes, the bags of the next ambassador are already packed, and he will be on his way to Tel Aviv in the next flight.”

Subsequently, other preconditions to the restoration of full diplomatic relations were added, including compensation and the lifting of the blockade over Gaza. Most recently, Davutoglu stated that no ambassador will be sent to Israel unless the blockade is lifted, period.

Erdogan’s condemnation of Israel reached its peak a few weeks ago. He compared the death of more than 2,000 Palestinians, killed during the Israel-Hamas war, to Hitler’s genocide, which enraged Israelis and prompted Netanyahu to further downgrade the Israeli mission in Ankara to the lowest level.

It should be noted that while the US and the EU consider Hamas a terrorist organization, Turkey, which is a NATO member, openly supports Hamas and provides economic aid to the organization to the tune of US\$ 300 million a year.

Recently, Israel’s Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon publicly accused Turkey of being a country that backs terrorism. He stated that “The command centre of Hamas’ overseas operation sits in Istanbul. Saleh al-Arouri [a senior Hamas official] is the man sitting there.” Israel accuses al-Arouri of being the man who orchestrated the abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers, which subsequently led to the Israel-Hamas war.

Many observers ascribe Erdogan's attitude toward Israel to his utter devotion to Sunni Islam, his support of Islamic extremism, and his tenacious campaign to instil Islamic values and culture throughout Turkey and other Muslim states.

Erdogan's ambition to assume the leadership of the Islamic Sunni world and present Turkey as a model of an Islamic democracy, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring, was bluntly rejected by every Arab state in the region.

Those who closely watch the Turkish domestic scene plausibly argue that the rise of anti-Semitism is a direct result of Erdogan's pronounced anti-Israeli sentiment. His diatribes against Israel continue as he recently characterized the Israelis as having "no conscience, no honour, no pride."

In fact, during the recent NATO summit, President Obama urged Erdogan to combat anti-Semitism in his country as this growing phenomenon only further harms relations between Turkey and Israel—the two most powerful nations in the region, whose cooperation is critical to regional stability.

That said, Erdogan's duplicity is put on full display when it comes to growing the Turkish economy, which is the central pillar that sustains his popular support.

While Turkey will likely cancel its energy deal with Israel (the construction of a gas pipeline to Turkey) because of intensifying political fissure, Erdogan continues to expand trade with Israel, which has reached a new record of five billion dollars this year and is expected to go higher in 2015.

This sorry state of affairs between the two countries further dims the prospect of improved relations from which both countries can hugely benefit, which could become even worse now that Erdogan has ascended to the presidency, if he does not change course.

The US and the EU continue to cooperate with Turkey out of strategic necessity. However, Turkey's Islamization under Erdogan and his deliberate compromising of Turkey's democratic principles by jailing journalists without trial, suppressing peaceful demonstrations and manipulating the justice system all point to a dangerous slippery slope, indicated by Turkey's Freedom House ranking of only "Partly Free."

Erdogan must realize that his policy of 'zero problems with neighbours' has been a dismal failure, his domestic policy that spreads fear rather than freedom will come back to haunt him, and his blind support of extremist groups such as Hamas will catch up with him. His treatment of Israel only exemplifies his poor judgment and the dangerous path he is treading.

It is clear that Erdogan wants to be remembered as the new Ataturk (the father of the Turks), surpassing the founder of the republic. He certainly would do anything in his power to preside as President over the hundredth anniversary of the Republic in 2023.

Erdogan may dream about that moment of glory, but he will not get there unless he is struck by a spasm of lucidity and realizes that should this trend continue under his presidency, it will eventually rob Turkey of its potential to become a significant global power, which Erdogan so badly aspires to.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

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