

How America Can Help Its Friends Make Nice

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It has been more than two years since the confrontation over a Gaza-bound flotilla plunged Israeli-Turkish relations into a deep crisis. Left to their own devices, Turks and Israelis have been unable to overcome mutual suspicion and domestic obstacles to bridge their differences. These days, there is a degree of openness in both Israel and Turkey to the idea of reconciliation. However, there are still tensions between the parties, especially because of recent Turkish indictments against senior Israelis involved in the June 2010 flotilla episode -- during which Israeli commandos attempting to enforce the Gaza blockade boarded a Turkish vessel, leading to a melee in which nine Turks were killed and many others, including Israeli soldiers, were injured. A rapprochement will therefore probably require American mediation.

President Obama has a unique opportunity to help rebuild a strategically vital relationship between these two American allies. While their relationship is unlikely to return to past levels of strategic cooperation, normalizing it could advance important American interests in Syria, Iran and the eastern Mediterranean.

The Arab Spring provides a strong incentive for Turkish-Israeli reconciliation. Middle East unrest has challenged Turkey's "zero problems with our neighbors" policy, casting Turkey and Syria as adversaries. At the same time, the region's revolutionary tremors have shaken the cornerstones of Israel's national security, even raising doubts about the future of its peace agreement with Egypt as the possibility of a Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Cairo becomes more real.

Moreover, both Israel and Turkey fear that a powerful Iran could fill the void in the region. The Turks are increasingly worried about what they regard as an Iran-sponsored Shiite axis spanning the region. Meanwhile, the Israelis feel that their window to stop Iran's nuclear program is closing.

The situation in Syria could seal a reconciliation deal. The two countries share grave concerns about their common neighbor and a desire to see the government of Bashar al-Assad out of power. After some equivocation, Israel now

prefers the devil it doesn't know to the one it knows; there is broad consensus among Israeli officials that the end of the Assad government would deal a blow to Iran and could dissolve the anti-Israeli axis binding Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, the politically powerful Shiite militant group in Lebanon.

After a decade of warming to Syria's ruler, Turkey has, over the past year, begun to confront Syria: Turkey not only hosts the opposition to the Assad regime, including the civilian Syrian National Council, but is also arming parts of it, like elements in the Free Syrian Army.

Turkey has made it clear that Mr. Assad has to go. But it needs American support to play a more assertive role in the coalition against Mr. Assad by bolstering the Syrian opposition, both politically and militarily.

However, because Turkey fears that it might be left alone in conflict, it has shied away from deeper engagement, like setting up safe zones that might invite direct confrontation with Syria. That is, in part, a result of Washington's own cautious Syria policy, which has relied on United Nations diplomacy rather than direct measures to support the armed opposition.

Turkey seems interested in intervention inside Syria only if America and NATO back such an endeavor. A Turkish-Israeli dialogue on Syria could bolster Israel's interest in regime change and enlist Israel to generate American support. A normalized Turkish-Israeli relationship would also open opportunities for cooperation against the Assad government, with the Turks taking the political and regional lead and the Israelis providing intelligence and additional practical assets. The parties could also address shared concerns over the fate of the huge suspected chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria.

Any Israeli contribution would, of course, have to be invisible in order not to create a sense that Israel was behind the Syrian uprising. This makes Turkish-Israeli cooperation against Mr. Assad even more valuable, for it would allow Israel to provide untraceable assets to support Turkey's efforts to undermine the Assad government.

While the strategic benefits of improved relations are powerful, Turkey is unlikely to pursue reconciliation unless Israel satisfies its demand for an apology for the flotilla episode. A compromise formula negotiated by emissaries -- an Israeli apology for operational mistakes -- was previously rejected mainly because Israel didn't feel it had secured a firm Turkish commitment to refrain from legal action against Israelis involved in the raid and a clear path to normalizing relations. Rather, it was concerned that Turkey might merely pocket the Israeli apology, use it to bolster its domestic standing ahead of elections and continue to publicly criticize Israel.

Today, the situation has changed. The confluence of interests in Syria provides an opportunity; both sides stand to gain from a compromise that leads to normalized diplomatic ties.

A successful reconciliation process could begin with Israel's offering an apology for operational mistakes and expressing remorse for the loss of life. Israel has already agreed in principle to provide compensation to the families of the Turks killed in the incident. Turkey would refrain from indicting any Israelis involved in the operation. These steps should open the door to an immediate upgrade in bilateral ties, including reinstalling ambassadors, renewing high-level visits and commencing a strategic dialogue on Syria and other pressing regional issues.

Apologizing to Turkey is a highly sensitive topic in Israel because most Israelis see Turkey as responsible for provoking the flotilla clash. But now that Israel's national security establishment is firmly in favor of a reconciliation initiative and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expanded his governing coalition, Israel is better positioned to pursue normalized ties with Turkey. Indeed, the influence of the loudest cabinet voice opposing the initiative -- Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman -- has been diluted by the inclusion of former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz's Kadima Party in the governing coalition. If Mr. Netanyahu believes that a deal is in Israel's interest, he has the votes to make it happen.

The United States should actively push its friends to reconcile. It would bring two of America's closest Middle East allies back together, a welcome boost for Washington's efforts to confront widespread upheaval in the Middle East.

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