

# The Real Choice Turkey Has to Make When It Comes to Israel

Nov 6, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**W**hile all eyes are fixed on the faltering Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israel is involved in another diplomatic standoff whose consequences may be just as dire for the future of the Middle East. The impasse in question is between Turkey and Israel -- erstwhile allies whose deteriorating relations undermine the security of the entire region. This conflict -- more than Ankara's outreach to Iran or tensions with the EU -- calls starkly into question the role Turkey will play in regional politics and peacemaking.

The current standoff between Turkey and Israel was sparked by the now-infamous Gaza flotilla clash of May 31. Ankara saw Israel's forceful interdiction of the flotilla and killing of nine Turkish nationals as violations of international law, and has demanded an apology and reparations. Israel saw the flotilla as a provocation irresponsibly endorsed by Turkish authorities, and has refused Ankara's demands and insisted its navy's actions were lawful.

While Israel previously dispatched high-ranking envoys in an effort to resolve the dispute, at present both sides seem to be digging in. Indeed, while the flotilla incident catalyzed the Turkish-Israeli conflict, serious trouble has been brewing between the two countries at least since the December 2008 Gaza war. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan not only walked out of a speech by Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos in January 2009, but has characterized Israel as the "principal threat" in the region and spoken approvingly of Hamas and hosted its leaders.

The motivations of Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP government for eschewing Turkey's alliance with Israel are unclear. It would be easy to write them off as mere populism -- what easier way to garner votes in the Middle East than going after Israel? And certainly domestic politics sits atop the AKP's agenda at the moment as the party completes a near total consolidation of power.

However, this explanation may confuse cause and effect. Public support in Turkey for close ties with Israel was not always low, and previous Turkish governments have made the national-interest case for the alliance successfully. Instead, it appears that Ankara's recent antagonism toward Israel is a result of its pursuit of "strategic depth," a concept popularized in Turkey by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. "Strategic depth" has meant distancing Turkey from the West and cultivating closer relations with Middle Eastern states like Iran and Syria.

Far from bolstering Turkish influence, however, deteriorating ties with Israel can only diminish Ankara's standing. Prior to the December 2008 Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, Turkey -- uniquely among regional states -- enjoyed the trust of both Israel and its Arab neighbors. This status allowed Turkey to serve as a mediator in Israeli-Syrian peace talks from 2007 to 2008 -- the most serious negotiations on that track in years. Turkey has not only sacrificed the trust of Israel since then, but through its outspoken defense of Hamas and Iran, has distanced itself from the positions of Arab states who see Tehran and its proxies -- and not Israel -- as their "principal threat."

By itself, Turkish engagement with Iran and Syria would be potentially positive developments for the Middle East. Ankara has proved -- through its mediation between Jerusalem and Damascus, and its successful if ill-timed nuclear diplomacy with Iran earlier this year -- that it is interested in using these relationships for useful ends. However, by

viewing its foreign relations as a zero-sum game -- in which ties with Israel and the West must diminish in order for those with Tehran and Damascus to improve -- Turkey undermines its own role as a mediator in regional disputes. This represents a loss not only for Ankara, but for all nations interested in peace and stability in the Middle East who will regret Turkey's absence as a moderating force in a volatile region.

If Turkey truly desires to serve as a bridge between East and West and achieve "strategic depth," it would do well to shed such zero-sum thinking and find a way to repair its relations with Israel. Likewise, Israel must do its part by demonstrating a willingness to compromise regarding the flotilla incident and avoiding actions which exacerbate bilateral tensions.

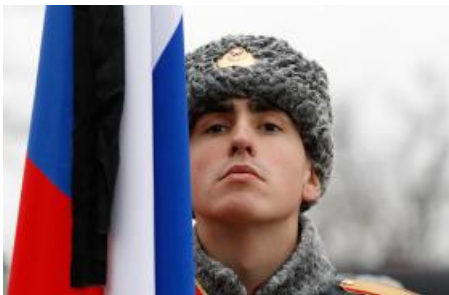
The choice facing Turkey has been sometimes mischaracterized as between Iran and its allies on one hand, and Israel and the West on the other. In fact, Turkey's choice is between opportunism and responsibility. Choosing the former may seem appealing in the short term to Ankara, but the long-term costs to Turkey and the region will be heavy.

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