

## Lose-Lose for Turkey and Israel?

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkish-Israeli ties, born in March 28, 1949 when Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel, effectively ended on May 31, 2010. This happened as IDF commandos boarded a convoy of ships reportedly bringing humanitarian assistance to Hamas-run Gaza.

Previously, Israeli officials had pleaded with the Turkish officials not to allow the convoy to set sail from Istanbul, suggesting that it would be intercepted if it entered Israeli waters. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government nevertheless let the mission sail. In the ensuing scrimmage in the Mediterranean, the commandos boarding the ship were faced with stiff resistance from members of the convoy. Bloodshed followed; troops killed a number of people, and wounded more, including at least 14 Turkish citizens.

This episode means that bilateral ties between Turkey and Israel are effectively over, at least for the foreseeable future. Not only have the two countries lost each other, but they have also lost a bit of themselves.

Israel has lost its second most important ally, a rare friend in a hostile region, and with this a major part of its security. Since the 1950s when Turkey and Israel established a secret treaty known as the Peripheral Pact, Israel has trusted Turkey as the only genuine regional ally, rain or shine. For instance, the treaty stipulated that, if attacked, Israel could park its navy in Turkish waters. Effective May 31, 2010, Israel cannot trust the AKP government to defend it.

Turkey has lost what makes it special: its ability to be Muslim and Western at the same time, a uniquely Turkish characteristic. They had it coming ever since the AKP took power in 2002.

Turkish-Israeli ties have been on a downhill trajectory, which began with the AKP's sharp criticism of Israeli policies following Operation Cast Lead. While some dismissed this rhetoric as domestic politicking, it was the ideological periscope of the AKP's subsurface foreign policy. The AKP did not have any intention of aligning with Israel. Rather, it went along with Israel until the opportunity presented itself to call off the relationship.

Its rhetoric served as the litmus test of what lay ahead.

The Israelis, having few real friends in the region and therefore not knowing what to do with harsh rhetoric coming from this rare ally, first denied the problem and then overreacted.

In the incident known as the "low chair affair," Israeli Foreign Ministry officials decided to humiliate the Turkish ambassador by seating him on a low chair in a televised meeting. In the ensuing scandal, the entire Turkish nation felt insulted, rallying behind the AKP's negative criticisms and stance toward Israel.

This is also what happened on May 31. Turkey is a proud nation; perhaps this is its hallmark. It would have been enough for it to turn against Israel had the Israelis bloodied the nose of one Turk. Hence, after news of bloodshed surfaced, tens of thousands of protesters gathered across Turkish cities, chanting "Down with the Zionist state," and "We are all Hamas."

Surprisingly, T-shirts and headbands with these slogans were readily available, perhaps signaling that for some, the crisis was anticipated. The AKP government then recalled its ambassador and canceled three bilateral military exercises. AKP officials have called Israel a "pirate state," and a "terrorist state," and right-wing pundits have followed, illuminating a Nasserite trend -- Israel is fast becoming the country-whose-name-shall-not-be-uttered in Turkish politics. The AKP also added that Turkish-Israeli relations would not be revived unless Israel recognizes Hamas and lifts the blockade on Gaza. This provides another avenue for the AKP to say that Turkish-Israeli ties are dead.

For Israel, this means that Turkey has switched camps. From now on, barring a change of government in Ankara or a change in Israel's policy toward Hamas, Turkey is on the other side of the Middle East debate regarding Israel. What is more, Turkey cannot be expected to act as a mediator between Israel and its neighbors, a role some had suggested Ankara could play under the AKP.

The trick for Israel is to make new calculations to win back Turkey's support. Israel now sorely lacks the region's strongest power that has watched its back for decades, and there is no replacement in sight.

For Turkey, the challenge is to remain true to itself. Ever since 2001, Turkey's Muslim identity has come to the fore as a precious feature praised in Washington, Brussels and Tel Aviv. Being Muslim does not make Turkey unique though; there are, after all, 57 other Muslim-majority countries.

Rather, what made Turkey special was the country's unique Western overlay in domestic and foreign policy, specifically its secular democratic political culture, NATO membership and good ties with Israel.

If Turkey is to continue to be unique, this view has to drive its policy.

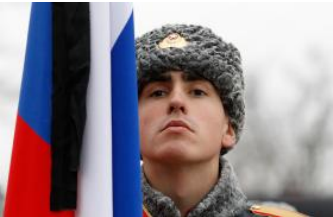
For now, the effective end of Turkish-Israeli ties is more than just an issue of bilateral relations between these two important states. This is also the end of at least a bit of Turkey as we have come to know it.

May Turkish-Israeli ties rest in peace.

This op-ed also appears in the June 6 edition of Hurriyet Daily News.

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