

## Offending the Turks

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Articles & Testimony

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The diplomatic spat between Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon and the Turkish ambassador Oguz Celikkol on Monday was the worst thing that could have happened to the already strained Ankara-Jerusalem ties.

Relations between Turkey and Israel have weakened dramatically after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Ankara in 2002. In the aftermath of the Ayalon-Celikkol incident, bilateral ties between states face their biggest crisis since they established diplomatic relations in 1949.

To save its ties with Turkey, Israel needs to implement a strategy that tackles the AKP's anti-Israeli policies and rhetoric without simultaneously offending the Turks. As difficult as this balance sounds, it is Israel's only choice. Given the AKP's mostly negative attitude toward Israel, if the proud Turkish public is offended by Israeli actions, it would certainly sound the death knell of Turkish-Israeli ties.

The incident occurred when Ayalon summoned the ambassador to reprimand him over a Turkish TV show that depicts Israeli intelligence agents as baby snatchers. After keeping Celikkol waiting in the hallway, and instructing the camera crews to film this awkward moment, Ayalon seated the ambassador on a lower seat than his own, asking the cameras to film this symbolic humiliation as well.

As soon as footage of the incident made it to the Internet and TV screens, a diplomatic row ensued. The Turkish government demanded an apology for the encounter that the Jerusalem Post has called "undiplomatic treatment." Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman came forward defending Ayalon, and in retaliation, the Turkish government might call Celikkol back to Ankara.

Despite the AKP's recently adopted harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric, Jerusalem has shied away from responding in kind until Monday's incident. Even when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yelled, "Peres and his people know well how to kill people," directly at the Israeli President during the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in early 2009, the Israelis acquiesced, and Peres called Erdogan to make up.

Now, Israel has finally responded in kind -- except that its response might be just the wrong kind.

Just as Israeli governments do not bash Turkey or run TV shows depicting the Turks as evil, Turkish politicians should not be bashing Israel, nor should Turkish TV be broadcasting shows portraying the Israelis as evil -- a fall 2009 series that aired on Turkey's publicly-funded TV network cast Israeli soldiers as bloodthirsty killers hunting newborn Palestinian babies.

Yet as Israel now takes issue with anti-Israeli propaganda in Turkey, the trick is to do so without offending the Turks. In other words, should Jerusalem choose to tackle anti-Israeli propaganda, it must do so without throwing the baby out with the bath water by humiliating the Turks as a nation or their institutions.

The Israeli government has to distinguish between its response to the AKP's policies and its public statements towards the Turks. If not, an offended Turkish public is in the offing, and this will not bode well for the future of Turkish-Israeli ties. Sadly, this seems to have been the outcome of Ayalon's unbecoming treatment of Celikkol, a respected figure who hails from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an institution that has stood for and built strong ties with Israel. After the Ayalon-Celikkol incident, it will be difficult to find one Turkish diplomat in favor of their ministry's traditional policy toward Israel.

For a long time, Israel restrained its reaction to the AKP's anti-Israeli rhetoric, and now that it has chosen to respond, it is doing so in the wrong way. A January 11 statement that the Israeli Foreign Ministry issued to protest the aforementioned Turkish TV series exemplifies this point. Instead of addressing the government-related nature of anti-Israeli propaganda in Turkey, the Israeli statement launched a salvo against Turks as a nation, asserting, "The Turks have absolutely no right to preach morality" to Israel. After this statement and the Ayalon-Celikkol incident, not even the staunchest Turkish supporter of good ties with Israel will have the chutzpah to defend Turkey's relations with Israel.

There is a good reason for Israelis to care about the future of Turkish-Israeli ties. If countries could be likened to ships in the stormy waters of Middle East politics, Turkey would be a large, powerful vessel patrolling these waters. Israel should respect this Turkish ship and strive to keep the passengers on board on its side, even if the ship's captain may not be fond of the Jewish state. For this powerful ship sails and can drop anchor ever so close to Israel.

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