

Kurds on the Way to Turkey:

How Israel Can Prevent a Crisis in Its Relations with Ankara

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(t ranslated from Hebrew)

Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's May 20 demarche calling Israeli acts in Rafah "state terrorism" signals that Jerusalem needs to act immediately to avoid fallout with Ankara.

Today, the Turkish-Israeli relationship faces a potential crisis. On the Turkish side, the readiness of the public to accept tight military, security, and political relations with Israel, the bedrock of the bilateral links, is being eroded by the ripple effects of the Iraq War. Many Turks, including the country's secular parties, the media, and the military -- staunch supporters of Turkey's alliance with Israel in the 1990s -- believe that Ankara and Jerusalem have different interests vis-a-vis Iraq. The thinking is that Turkey desires a strong central government in Baghdad in order to check Kurdish nationalism, while Israel hopes that the Kurds carve a niche for themselves against Baghdad to ensure that this new Iraq is a decentralized, weak, and non-threatening Arab state.

The fact that the Iraqi Kurds have made major gains as a result of the recent war, from powerful political posts in Baghdad to control of one third of the country's territory including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk -- home to a large Turkmen community -- has not gone unnoticed in Ankara, which is always wary about Kurdish nationalism. Besides, the presence of 5,300 Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorists in the northern Iraqi bastion of Kurdish nationalism touches on the open wound of the Kurdish question, a real trauma in Turkey rooted in the country's two-decade-long fight against the PKK. The memory of the fight against the PKK that cost Turkey over 30,000 casualties is still fresh.

This is the context in which to make sense of the recent allegations that Israel is pushing the cause of Kurdish independence in northern Iraq. The Turks now feel as worried as the Israelis would if they had heard that Turkey was making inroads among Hizbullah toward forming a Shiite state in southern Lebanon.

The liberal foreign policy elite in Ankara has its own reason to stay away from Israel. Following the EU's December 2002 promise to pave the way toward Turkey's membership provided that Ankara fulfills all of Brussels's expectations before December 2004, these people believe that Turkey has grabbed a real and solid chance of getting into the EU. This explains why today Turkey's position on a range of issues overlaps with that of Brussels.

While Israel's allies are mostly quiet about Turkey's relationship with Jerusalem, the governing Justice and

Development Party -- a conservative democratic movement rooted in Turkey's banned Islamist Welfare Party -- is taking advantage of this development to adopt an increasingly critical tone toward Jerusalem.

If these developments are indicators of things to come, the more Turkey's pro-EU secular elites turn towards Brussels, criticize Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories, or remain lukewarm toward Jerusalem due to concerns over the Kurdish issue, then the more pro-AKP conservatives and Islamists will take cover under these issues to attack Israel. If not addressed properly, these developments have the potential of destroying the sympathy of the Turkish public toward Israel and even undermining the Turkish-Israeli relationship. How can Israel overcome this conundrum?

Today, in the eyes of many Turks, Israel is guilty until proven innocent when it comes to its alleged involvement with the Iraqi Kurds. Hence, Jerusalem ought to implement policies to convince the Turks that it is not supporting Kurdish independence and that its vision regarding Iraq's future is not at odds with that of Ankara. Jerusalem should also consider harmonizing its strategy towards northern Iraq with Ankara.

Israel's goal should be convincing the Turks that it would not sacrifice its vital relationship with Turkey, a powerful nation of 70 million inhabitants, for the sake of its ties with 4 million Iraqi Kurds. The alternative to allaying Turkish fears over northern Iraq is a possible deterioration of the Turkish-Israeli relationship to unprecedented levels. Today, Jerusalem has all the reasons to turn the wheel back in the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

Dr. Soner Cagaptay is the director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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