



PERSPECTIVES

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The Importance of Interests in Israel-Turkey Reconciliation

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Israel-Turkey reconciliation deal boils down to mutually beneficial interests; not trust, and certainly not sympathy. This deal will bolster Israel's security as well as its international standing, making the price worthwhile.

Israel's once-close relationship with Turkey began losing its luster in 2003, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected prime minister. The deterioration never caused an actual rift between the countries, but it was clear that the Islamist Erdoğan, who is now Turkey's president, was leading his country toward a conflict with Israel.

It seemed, when he was first elected, that Erdoğan was going to be able to navigate Turkey – which was at the height of its regional power – toward Middle East hegemony. His backing of the 2010 effort by the Mavi Marmara-led flotilla to break the maritime blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip was an attempt by Ankara to expand its reach and become a player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Erdoğan's object was in part to manifest the regime's anti-Israel position, and in part to win political gains within the Arab world or at the very least on the Arab street.

But the plan followed an unexpected script. Nine Turkish nationals were killed and others were injured during a raid on the Marmara by Israeli commandos. It seemed, for a moment, that Turkey was going to be able to undermine Israel in the international arena over the justified actions taken by those commandos.

Turkey sought to realize its leverage through international mechanisms that are under significant Arab and Muslim influence. But then the impossible happened: A UN commission of inquiry headed by the New Zealander Geoffrey Palmer, an esteemed maritime law expert, stated unequivocally that first, under international law, Israel was within its rights to impose a maritime blockade on the Gaza Strip; second, the naval commandos' raid on the vessel seeking to breach the cordon complied with the enforcement standards allowed under international law; and third, the Israeli military used excessive force during a legal operation.

Turkey tried to challenge the conclusions, which collectively represented a valuable achievement for Israel. At the end of the process, in which the US played a major role, it was understood that if Israel made an official apology and offered restitution to the Marmara victims' families, it would be possible to carve out an agreement with Turkey by which Ankara would relinquish all claims against Israel. In other words, Turkey would accept the UN commission's findings and normalize the now chilly relations with Israel.

The Marmara case could have been concluded years ago, but both Israel and Turkey dug in their heels, at times unreasonably so. During US President Barack Obama's visit to Israel in 2013, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to Erdoğan for the incident, dispelling the doomsday prophecies that had predicted a crippling blow to Israel's national honor, international standing, and deterrence. Nothing was taken from Israel as a result of the move, and Turkey was not better off in any way.

After considerable soul-searching and effort, Israel was able to pursue a reconciliation deal with Turkey. This required two concessions: first, Israel's apology; and second, its pledge of \$21 million in restitution to the Marmara victims' families, to be paid through a humanitarian assistance fund set up by the Turkish government. This was not an admission of guilt or a claim of responsibility.

In exchange, Turkey relinquished any claim against Israel and agreed not to cooperate with any legal action taken against Israelis over the 2010 raid. Both parties also agreed to resume full diplomatic relations. Turkey has agreed to remove any objections to Israel's inclusion in various international organizations, and will facilitate greater cooperation between the two countries in a region where turmoil and upheaval are the order of the day.

Israel stood its ground and relinquished nothing with regard to the Gaza blockade. It did, however, agree to let Turkey ship aid to the Gaza Strip via the Ashdod Port – a move that could take place regardless of any deal – and

pursue civil projects in Gaza. This will ease the Palestinians' considerable plight and serve Israel's interests by facilitating such alleviation. The deal does not in any way play into Hamas's hands, so it is little wonder the terrorist group is displeased with it.

Hamas leadership blasted Erdoğan for his "capitulation" to Israel, especially since the deal included a Turkish pledge to prevent any anti-Israel terrorist activity from taking place on its soil – a pledge that undermines Hamas's headquarters in Istanbul.

Ankara also announced that Turkish intelligence services will work to locate two Israelis believed to be held in Gaza, as well as secure the return of the remains of Golani Brigade Staff Sgt. Oron Shaul and Givati Brigade Lt. Hadar Goldin, both of whom were killed during Operation Protective Edge, and whose remains were abducted by Hamas.

It is unclear where the notion that this effort would precede the deal came from. Turkey did not and does not have any sway over Hamas in this matter. This issue will be decided by Hamas's military wing, the Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades. Turkey lacks the ability to influence the Brigades, especially now that it has agreed to expel their operatives.

It is possible that in the future, should Hamas grow more dependent on the Turkish government, Ankara's sway will grow as well. But even if this were to happen, the process would be years in the making, not weeks.

At the end of the day, the Israel-Turkey reconciliation agreement boils down to interests; not trust, and certainly not sympathy. This deal will not usher in a new golden age in Jerusalem-Ankara relations, but it will normalize relations with a major Middle Eastern power.

Still, the deal cannot in any way be allowed to undermine Israel's growing alliances with Greece and Cyprus, or its solid ties with Egypt. On the contrary: this is the time to bolster them further.

Once the terms of the Israel-Turkey deal are set in motion, it will be in Israel's best interests to pursue moves that highlight trade ties – a natural gas deal may prove prominent – and joint ventures on a government level.

Most importantly, the deal anchors Israel's right to both impose and enforce a maritime blockade on the Gaza Strip. Israel does not enjoy many "allowances" in the international arena, and the price paid to achieve this one was worthwhile.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror is the Anne and Greg Rosshandler Senior Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is also a distinguished fellow at JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy. He was a former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, Military Secretary to the Defense Minister, and Director of the Research Division in IDF Military Intelligence.

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