



The Turkish-Israeli Reconciliation: A Balance Sheet

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 348, July 6, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Turkish-Israeli reconciliation – while raising legitimate moral questions – yielded terms very much in Israel’s favor, compared to where things stood recently. Legal threats have been averted, Turkish pressure over the siege of Gaza has been lifted, and the prospects for full Israeli participation in NATO activities are significantly brighter. The rapprochement should have no ill effect on Israel’s relationships with other friends and allies in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In Israel, where last week's headlines often feel like ancient history, the cabinet's decision on the reconciliation package with Turkey faded fast. It was replaced by anguish and anger over the murder of a Jewish 13-year-old in her bed, and the shooting attack on a family car that took the life of the father – foul deeds that have yet to be denounced by Palestinian leadership.

Still, the Turkish-Israeli reconciliation remains a bold government decision that was taken in defiance of popular sentiment. The cabinet vote, seven to three in favor, was in roughly inverse proportion to public opinion.

The decision represented a conjunction of grand strategy and manipulative diplomacy; of national security and business interests; of cold calculation and identity politics; of raw power and legal finery. At the end of the day, the reconciliation leaves Israel morally bruised but strategically better off.

Many in Israel were outraged by the deal, in part because it did not (and indeed, could not) provide for the return of two individuals and the bodies of

two soldiers held by Hamas. Others are angered by Israel's apology and payment for the *Marmara* incident.

The *Marmara* was the lead vessel in a Turkish flotilla that was seeking to breach Israel's legal blockade of the terrorist entity in Gaza in 2010. Israeli commandos raided the vessel, and nine Turkish nationals were killed in the melee. On board the ship were a large number of activists from IHH, a radical Islamist group in Turkey.

For the Turkish victims' families to be paid millions in compensation – albeit *ex gratia* – is not easy for Israelis to accept, particularly in light of the Palmer report that stated unequivocally that Israel acted within her rights during the raid. Several of the IDF soldiers who were involved have tried to petition the courts against the payment.

There is no hope, moreover, even among supporters of the deal, for a true change of mind on Erdoğan's part with regard to Israel. His hostility towards Israel is deeply ingrained, as is his sympathy towards Hamas. Our close associates of recent years, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, all view Turkey with extreme suspicion.

Why agree to the deal, then? The answer lies within the realm of strategic calculation, as well as within the dynamics of the negotiations. A cost-benefit analysis should be made not in the abstract, but against the background of what had already been conceded and what has now been gained.

The most painful “give” – the apology (not for the operation itself, which was legal under the law of the sea, but for “operational mistakes” during the raid) – was already made in March 2013, under heavy pressure from the Obama Administration. At the time, the principle of compensation was also agreed upon, roughly at the levels ultimately incorporated in the agreement. Three other considerations stood in the way, however, and a fourth constraint was added in 2014. But all four obstacles were overcome by mid-2016.

Politics: As long as Erdoğan was still fighting to impose his new model of Turkish constitutional practices, centered on an empowered presidency, Israel saw no need to lend him a helping hand. Once he had solidified his position, however, it became pointless to wait for a different political proposition in Ankara. Meanwhile, political changes in Israel secured Netanyahu against the prospect of an aggressive parliamentary campaign by the hard right to protest the decision.

Legal issues: It proved more difficult than initially expected to ensure an end to all claims and procedures launched against Israel and Israeli officers in the wake of the *Marmara* incident. Given the potential for trouble (demonstrated by the Turkish-instigated Comoro Islands appeal to the ICC), these issues had to be worked out in detail.

Gaza: Again and again, in his aggressive (and occasionally anti-Semitic) style, Erdoğan promised to insist on a “third condition” besides the apology and compensation: the lifting of the “siege” on Gaza. Working in close association with Qatar, he placed himself at the service of Muslim Brotherhood offshoots across the region, including Hamas.

For Israel, this was a deal breaker. Hamas cannot possibly be allowed to trade freely, or the Strip will soon be inundated with Iranian arms. Thus, a broad range of face-saving alternatives was offered to the Turkish side, designed to enable Erdoğan to retreat while claiming to advance.

The sides ultimately agreed to these terms: Turkey will be allowed to build a power station and other facilities in Gaza. (This is actually a prospect welcomed by Israel, since the IDF is acutely aware of the need to overcome power and water shortages there). But all relevant supplies will be unloaded at Ashdod Port, inspected, and driven in by truck through the Kerem Shalom Crossing. In effect, the Turkish government conceded Israel's point.

Terror infrastructures: By the summer of 2014, Israel could no longer tolerate the presence in Turkey of an active Hamas terror network. This is not only because Salah al-'Aruri claimed responsibility on Hamas's behalf for the abduction and murder of the three teenagers in June, but also because of his central role in the plans to launch a wave of terror and subversion to destroy the PA, foiled when Israel arrested some 100 of his operatives in the West Bank.

For Turkey, a member of NATO, to harbor and abet a major terrorist organization that most other member states (bar Norway) designate as such became increasingly untenable. Turkish diplomatic contacts with Hamas will remain intact, but Israel won this point as well.

Thus, the balance sheet of the deal – when viewed in context – justifies the decision to commit to it. The Israeli policy of slow progress, showing no eagerness to cut the deal, paid off in view of what has been achieved.

There is one more vital consideration in the deal's favor. Integral to the deal, if not explicit in it, is the assumption that the reconciliation with Turkey will

remove the obstacles to full Israeli participation in NATO activities. Unlike other Mediterranean Dialogue countries, Israel comes not as a supplicant but as a major potential contributor on a wide range of subjects, from intelligence to desert tactics. Rapid reaction will be needed to make good use of this opportunity.

In any case, Israel's friends and allies in the Eastern Mediterranean – Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus – have no reason to worry about the implications of this rapprochement. No return to the Israeli-Turkish military alliance of the 1990s (or the late 1950s) is in the cards. Better diplomatic and economic channels in the region are in everyone's interest.

It remains to be seen whether the deal signals a deep change in Turkish orientation. Meanwhile, every effort should be made to cement the links of truly like-minded nations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family