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Turkey and Israel: Can Pragmatism Defeat "Bad Blood"?

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Turkish admiral who masterminded Turkey's maritime deal with Libya thinks the same agreement should also be signed with Israel. Many might be tempted to think there is too much metaphorical "bad blood" between Turkey and Israel to permit any degree of rapprochement. But subtle signs suggest this may not be the whole picture.

For the first time in several years, the word "Israel" is not automatically accompanied in Turkey by bold pejoratives like "baby killer" or "terrorist state." The reason appears to be an emerging intention in Ankara to see if pragmatism can overcome the "bad blood" that has arisen between the two states, which were strategic partners in the 1990s.

Turkey and one Libyan government are standing together in opposition to Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and the other Libyan government. Ankara's recent flexing of its muscles in the Eastern Mediterranean looks like the behavior of a neighborhood bully who wants to spoil the other kids' game because he wasn't invited to participate in it.

Motivated primarily by a desire to ratchet up its regional posture, Turkey recently made two major moves: it signed an agreement with the Libyan government in Tripoli creating a maritime link by which each country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) goes beyond 200 km of its territorial waters; and its parliament ratified a resolution to send troops to Libya to defend the Tripoli government.

Sinan Ülgen, head of the Istanbul-based think tank EDAM, explains:

> In recent years, Ankara's ill-fated regional policy coupled with its unconditional support to the Muslim Brotherhood has led to the estrangement of [Turkey from] Egypt and Israel. As a result, Turkey faces a consortium of nations in the region eager to leverage the natural resources of the Eastern Mediterranean, to the detriment of Turkey's interests.
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> For [President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, the deal with Libya is a formula to break Turkey's isolation and win support for its bid for what he regards as a fairer distribution of offshore resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The gunboat gambit in the Eastern Mediterranean was so unexpected that many observers were curious who may have advised Erdoğan to up the stakes in that way. The mastermind was Rear Admiral Cihat Yaycı, chief of staff of the Turkish Navy. "Without the president's realism and courage this would have remained an academic paper in a [library] shelf," Yaycı said. The admiration is mutual. In a speech at the inauguration of the Russian-Turkish TurkStream pipeline, Erdoğan praised Yaycı by name.

Now that the Libyan deal is done, Yaycı says there is one more thing Turkey should do:

> There is a very important step we must take now. We should sign with Israel, as soon as possible, the same [EEZ] agreement we signed with Libya. This step must definitely be taken.

One might be tempted to think there is too much metaphorical "bad blood" between the government of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkey's Islamist establishment. They might point out that Turkey and Israel have not exchanged ambassadors since May 2017, so any dialogue would be limited in diplomatic nature.

There are subtle signs, however, that this may not be the whole picture. In a recent speech, Erdoğan threatened that "no project [in the Mediterranean] without Turkey could survive economically, legally, or diplomatically." But he also said Turkey is keen to negotiate with any state actor except Cyprus [with which Turkey does not have diplomatic relations]. The phrase "any state actor except Cyprus" underlined that Israel is acceptable.

It could be legally and technically problematic if Turkey and Israel decide to delineate their maritime borders, which could result in a maritime zone off south Cyprus that Turkey claims as its own. Such a deal is not impossible, as

neither Turkey nor Israel is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982). Neither is the US.

Then there is the financial aspect. The ambitious 1,900-km pipeline that will carry Eastern Mediterranean natural gas to Europe is one of the EU's "Projects of Common Interest." It will reach from Israeli waters to Greece via Cyprus. On the western Greek mainland, the pipeline will connect to the planned Poseidon Pipeline, co-financed by the EU, and will run from the Greek-Turkish border to Italy.

This is not the cheapest route by which to transport gas into Europe. As one senior Turkish diplomat notes,

> This is a solution imposed on Israel. Israelis know that they can make a more feasible [natural gas transport] agreement with Turkey. And without any need to wait for a change in political leadership in either country.

Despite the absence of ambassadors in Ankara and Tel Aviv, the existing network of diplomatic ties could be enhanced for, in the words of the same Turkish diplomat, "a more objective, more independent, honest and mutually profitable deal that fully respects both countries' sovereign rights."

This could be overly optimistic, given the "bad blood" that has arisen between Turkey and Israel since 2010 (except for a brief normalization period between the end of 2016 and mid-2017). But remember: Turkey and Russia, with their deeply divergent interests in Syria and Libya, not to mention their ideological differences, are working as strategic partners in critical military procurement. Erdoğan's endless love affair with Hamas (and the Muslim Brotherhood) stands in the way of full normalization—but he may be inclined to downplay this ideological kinship as the nearest Turkish elections are more than three years away.

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