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- Israel’s apology and Turkey

After making it through passport control, I walked into the lounge and settled down for a peaceful early breakfast at Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport. When I looked at the television on the wall, I noticed that Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Shayetet 13 commandos carried out an operation on the Mavi Marmara boat which was part of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla organization, carrying humanitarian aid and construction material. During the operation which took place on the high seas, the civilians on the ship resisted and when the clash ended, there were nine dead, many wounded civilians, and yet others arrested on board. But I had to catch the plane. I was a passenger of the first flight from Turkey to Israel just after the Mavi Marmara operation. It was 31 May 2010.

The operation was a milestone in the Turkish-Israeli relationship, which became fragile after the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan walked out of the World Economic Forum in Davos after a hot debate on Gaza with Israel’s President Shimon Peres on 29 January 2009. The revanche was the humiliation orchestrated by Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Daniel Ayalon, on the Turkish Ambassador to Israel, Ahmet Oguz Celikkol, in January 2010.

After the operation, Turkey quickly carried the incident to the international arena and demanded the release of its citizens. Several countries condemned the raid and the United Nations Security Council promptly called for a full investigation of the attack.1 Turkey swiftly processed diplomatic complaints to the UN and called for global pressure on Israel. After the quick release of the civilians, Israel initially

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* Everything is in Order Within the Chaos
refused to cooperate in an international investigation of its raid.

Despite the deteriorating relations between Turkey and Israel, both parties were willing to consolidate the relationship. On 30 June 2010, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Israeli counterpart secretly met in Brussels to discuss possible solutions. The meeting ended silently. Later, Israel formed the Turkel Commission, which was led by retired Supreme Court Judge Jacob Turkel. In the meantime, the UN Secretary General established a ‘Panel of Inquiry on the 31 May Flotilla Incident’ on 2 August 2010. Sir Geoffrey Palmer was appointed as the head of the panel and both parties were represented to investigate the incident.

Turkey put forth its conditions for the normalization of relations:
1- Israel has to present a formal expression with the use of term “apology” for conducting an operation towards civilians on the high seas.
2- Israel has to pay reparations to the families of those killed.
3- Israel has to lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

However, Israel responded to the conditions with a different perspective:
1- Israel preferred to say it regretted the incident and the loss of lives, but intentionally did not use the word “apology”.
2- Israel also voluntarily offered to compensate of the families of those killed for their loss, but not as a part of a guilty plea.
3- Israel rejected any policy change towards the Gaza Strip.

Both the Turkish Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs underlined and repeated Turkey’s conditions in various speeches. Moreover, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, pressured Turkey and Israel to hold secret talks for a possible resolution of the crisis. During this process, the release of the Palmer Report was delayed a few times in order not to block any possible progress in the negotiations.

In fact, over time both countries have helped each other whenever necessary in the face of disasters. For example, Israel immediately sent its search and rescue teams to Turkey after the 1999 earthquake. While the secret talks were ongoing, Turkey sent two firefighting aircraft to Israel to help put out the Mount Carmel forest fire on 3 December 2010. As a result, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, called his Turkish counterpart to express his appreciation for Turkey’s assistance. The phone call encouraged the parties to hold another meeting in which Joseph Ciechanover, a senior Israeli diplomat, and the Turkish Foreign Undersecretary, Feridun Sinirlioglu, met in Geneva on 5 December 2010.

Netanyahu had to manage the domestic pressure which was opposed to an apology for the flotilla raid. Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs, was not supportive of Netanyahu’s inclination to issue an apology and said: “If we wanted
to apologize, we would have done so right after the flotilla. Israel is showing weakness, embarrassment, and inability to withstand pressure.”

The release of the Palmer Report on 2 September 2011 tightened the noose between the two states. The report clearly noted that “Israel's decision to board the vessels with such substantial force at a great distance from the blockade zone and with no final warning immediately prior to the boarding was excessive and unreasonable.” Since Turkey was waiting for the issuance of the UN Report, with a brief explanation by Foreign Minister Davutoglu, it downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary and recalled all its envoys above that grade to Ankara. Davutoglu added that all military agreements between the two parties would be suspended. He also stated that Turkey would strengthen its naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean. The Israeli Prime Minister’s office responded to Ankara’s actions with a clarification: “As for the Israeli ambassador to Turkey, he had completed his term a few days ago, regardless [of Turkey's expulsion] and has already parted with his Turkish colleagues, is expected to return to Israel in the coming days.”

In addition to the downgraded diplomatic ties, a criminal investigation was initiated in the Bakirkoy Prosecutor's Office in Istanbul against Netanyahu, Ehud Barak (the Defense Minister) and Israeli Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi who were accused of murder, injury, attacking Turkish citizens, and piracy. After Turkish Intelligence provided the profile of 174 Israeli officers that participated in the Mavi Marmara operation, the indictment was updated to include their names. The Turkish Ministry of Justice announced that the Prosecutor’s Office had completed its probe on the file on 9 May 2012. The trial started on 6 November 2012.

On 22 January 2013, Israel held national elections as a result of which the political configuration completely changed. The election ended with the rise of the center-left and center-right parties and Netanyahu initiated negotiations to form a government. Netanyahu succeeded in convincing the Yesh Atid and Habayit Hayehudi parties to join the Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu government by signing a coalition agreement leading to Israel’s first coalition government without the presence of ultra-Orthodox parties in a decade.

President Obama’s first visit to the Middle East after his reelection initiated a new start in relations between Israel and Turkey. The first signals were evident with his speech on 21 March at the Jerusalem International Convention Center. Obama underlined the increasing loneliness of Israel by saying that “given the frustration in the international community about this conflict, Israel needs to reverse an undertow of isolation.” He also added that “as more governments respond to popular will, the days when Israel could seek peace simply with a handful of autocratic leaders are over. Peace will have to be made among peoples, not just governments.” At the end of his visit to Israel, Obama asked Netanyahu to call Erdogan in order to express Israel’s regret for the loss of human life. After the brief phone conversation, Obama expressed
his ideas with these sentences: “I am hopeful that today's exchange between the two leaders will enable them to engage in deeper cooperation on this and a range of other challenges and opportunities.”

The Israeli side explained its apology as follows: “in light of Israel's investigation into the incident which pointed to a number of operational mistakes, the Prime Minister expressed Israel’s apology to the Turkish people for any mistakes that might have led to the loss of life or injury and agreed to conclude an agreement on compensation/non-liability.” Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that as “Israel substantially lifted the restrictions on the entry of civilian goods into the Palestinian territories, including Gaza, and that this will continue as long as calm prevailed. The two leaders agreed to continue to work together to improve the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories.”

Over the past three years, the regional dynamics have radically changed. The “Arab Spring” that started from Tunisia to Egypt, also spread to Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. After the turmoil, the Muslim Brotherhood won the presidential elections in Egypt leading to an Egypt which is very different from the one with which Israel signed the Camp David Agreement. Egypt is not only critical of the military agreements with Israel but also a vital neighbor to control the Gaza Strip. However, the IDF’s drone operation leading to the killing of Ahmed Jabari, the chief of the Gaza military wing of Hamas, on 14 November 2012 led to intensive missile attacks by Hamas, the al-Qassam Brigades and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. During these clashes, where Israel received 1450 missiles from Gaza; questions were raised regarding the security of the Gaza Strip’s border with Egypt. The collapse of the natural gas deal between Egypt and Israel also contributed to the breaking up of the warm relationship between the two countries.

The cooling of relations between Egypt and Israel created an opportunity for Iran to fill the gap by “enhancing relations with Egypt which has been a constant priority in Iran’s regional policy.” The initiation of a direct flight between Cairo and Tehran after 30 years is solid proof of a newfound rapprochement between the two countries. On the other hand, Israel is building up a ‘belt’ around Iran to exert pressure on the nuclear enrichment program. The deteriorating relations with Turkey pushed Israel to bolster its strategic cooperation with Azerbaijan, which has trade relations with Iran’s large ethnic Azeri community. Turkey’s close relationship with Azerbaijan also forces Israel to consider Georgia as a backup option. Recent news reports suggest that Georgia is trying to get Israel’s support for the development of its industrial military complex. But all these attempts at cooperation are not enough to stop Iran’s nuclear enrichment project. The normalization of relations with Turkey would help Israel increase the pressure on Iran. Recent statements from Iran show that the normalization process has already created concern with respect to the change in the regional power balance.
The problem of Syria is amalgamating the two states, even though the two have different perspectives on the solution. During the conflict, Israel, Turkey and Jordan have shared similar risks by being in the effective range of Assad’s chemical weapons. The future of Syria and its present status quo interest both Israel and Turkey. Israel fears the growing power of radical Islamist groups in the region and possible clashes on the Golan Heights. In both cases, Turkey has more advantages in terms of contact with the Syria’s new political elites. During this process, if both countries have a chance to deepen their relationship, in the long run, new military technology transfers would flourish between them. Israel, a member of the Mediterranean Dialogue also might raise the issue of its eventual membership in NATO, which had been blocked by Turkey in connection with the Mavi Marmara incident.

Indeed, the recent Israeli elections which brought non-religious parties to the ruling coalition might help initiate the peace negotiation process with the Palestinians in which Turkey could play a constructive role and enhance its position in the Middle East. Recently, the President of Turkey’s Union of Chamber and Commodity Exchanges was appointed as the chair of the Jerusalem Arbitration Center founded by the International Chamber of Commerce, in order to arbitrate between Israeli and Palestinian businessmen in case of disputes between them. This appointment also gives hope to all actors in the region for a possible solution to the Palestinian conflict.

The economic ties between Israel and Turkey are rapidly growing in spite of the diplomatic crisis. The apology will possibly accelerate the trade figures and create new economic interactions. The energy sector has the potential to be the starship of the budding economic ties. The creation of a natural gas pipeline would strengthen both economic and political relations between the parties.

However, the continuing prosecutions of the Israeli commandos and the process of deciding on the specific reparation amounts can be painful and delay the normalization process. Normalization may be a real problem especially after Erdogan’s statement where he warned that the court cases against the Israeli commandos would not be dropped immediately. Erdogan also emphasized that the “normalization of ties will not be quick.” Naftali Bennett, the Israeli Minister Economy and Commerce, responded that “it seems Erdogan is doing everything in his power to make Israel regret it [the apology], while conducting a personal and crude campaign at the expense of Israeli-Turkish ties.” The exchange of sharp statements shows us that the apology is the starting point of a long process which is full of lethal curves.

Endnotes


