



Israel's Apology to Turkey: A Mistake

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel's apology to Turkey for "operational errors" in the *Mavi Marmara* incident is a diplomatic mistake both in terms of substance and timing. It is highly unlikely that we will see a reversal or turnaround in Turkey's anti-Western and anti-Israeli policies. Jerusalem's apology only enhances Turkish ambitions and weakens Israel's deterrence.

It's hard to understand or justify Israel's weekend apology to Turkey. While the use of Israeli force in the *Mavi Marmara* "flotilla" incident was not very elegant, it was perfectly legitimate – as the UN-appointed Palmer Commission unequivocally determined. Moreover, the incident was a Turkish provocation that warrants a Turkish apology to Israel, not an Israeli apology to Turkey.

Worst still, the hopes in Jerusalem for a new era in Israeli-Turkish relations are simply illusory. The Israeli apology will hardly stop Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regular Israel-bashing rhetoric. It has not secured a clear Turkish commitment to the resumption of full diplomatic relations. Moreover, Erdoğan already has conveyed his intention to visit Hamas-ruled Gaza. Such a visit is a slap in the face of both Jerusalem and Washington.

Turkey under the Islamist AKP has gradually adopted a new foreign policy, fueled by neo-Ottoman and Islamist impulses, and has a goal to gain a leadership role in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Attaining this objective requires harsh criticism of Israel, which has generated great popularity for Erdoğan and Turkey. Unfortunately, vicious attacks on Israel come easily for Erdoğan, who is plainly anti-Semitic.

Israel has failed to fully grasp Turkey's new Islamist direction. For several years already we no longer have a pro-Western Turkey with which Israel can cooperate in the turbulent Middle East. Ankara and Jerusalem have very different views on a variety of issues. While Turkey is truly an important and powerful player in regional politics, its behavior over the last decade actually harms Israeli interests. It does not abide by US policy on Iran; on the contrary, Turkey helps circumvent the international sanctions imposed on Tehran. Turkey has even helped Iran, a country with genocidal intentions toward Israel, progress in its nuclear program.

Turkey also sides with Hamas, an Islamist terrorist organization dedicated to the destruction of the Jewish state. It has helped Hamas entrench its rule in Gaza and gain international support and recognition.

Turkey is also actively helping radical Islamic Sunni elements take over Syria. It also supports the idea of violent opposition against Israel's presence on the Golan Heights. As such, the hope that Israel and Turkey can cooperate together with the US in limiting the damage from a disintegrating Syria has little validity.

Furthermore, Turkey, still a NATO member, is obstructing the efforts of Israel in developing its ties with this organization. The Turkish position in NATO also hinders the Western alliance's ability to deal more effectively with the Iranian nuclear challenge.

Turkey's policy in the Mediterranean similarly clashes with Israel's vital interests. Its bullying of Cyprus interferes with Israel's plans to export via this island its newly found gas riches to an energy-thirsty Europe. Turkey, who sees itself as an energy bridge to Europe, does not want Israeli competition. It may even use military force to maintain its role in the energy market.

What is also important is how the Israeli apology will be perceived in a region whose prism on international relations is power-politics. Inevitably, Israel under Netanyahu will be seen as weak, bowing to American pressure. Public regrets about the use of force erode deterrence and project weakness. Perceived weakness usually invites aggression in our tough neighborhood. This is also what Ankara thinks, which is very problematic for Israel. Moreover, Tehran and Cairo, both ruled by radical Islamists, cherish the Turkish victory over the "Zionist entity."

The Israeli-initiated apology is an American diplomatic success, but it reflects a dangerous American misperception of Turkey as representing "moderate Islam," which is incredible naïve. Turkey is distancing itself from the West

and its values. Nowadays, more journalists are in jail in Turkey than in China. Israel's friends in Turkey, part of the democratic opposition, must be bewildered as Israel hands Erdoğan a diplomatic achievement, buttressing the grip of the Islamist AKP on Turkish politics.

The timing is particularly troubling. Turkish foreign policy is in crisis because its much-heralded approach to the Middle East ("zero problems with its neighbors") is in shambles. Turkey needed a diplomatic success here more than Israel did. Israel could have negotiated a better formula to end the impasse in bilateral relations.

Only very recently, we heard Erdoğan call Zionism a crime against humanity. He did not apologize, as he should have, but told a Danish newspaper that he was "misunderstood." This was part of a concerted effort on part of Turkey to prevent additional international criticism on this issue. Nevertheless, the pressure was on Ankara not Jerusalem.

Furthermore, an apology to a Hamas supporter, just a day after Hamas again launched rockets against Israel, communicates terrible weakness. Sanctioning an Erdoğan victory trip to Gaza at this particular moment is terribly foolish, too, particularly when Israel is seeking to bolster the standing of the rival Palestinian Authority.

It is highly unlikely that we will see a reversal or a turnaround in Turkey's anti-Western and anti-Israeli policies. The apology from Jerusalem only enhances Turkish ambitions and weakens Israel's deterrence.

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