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The Bigger Picture: Israel-Turkey Relations in Context

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The fallout from the Gaza flotilla debacle at the end of May provides an opportunity to consider the relative positions of Israel and Turkey both regionally and globally. The furore has reinforced the image of Israel as a growing liability for American and European interests and highlighted the increasing importance of Turkey.

Israel's difficulties stem from its inward looking nature. What has been especially noticeable in the days following the crisis has been the extent to which Israeli leaders have sought to portray themselves as victims rather than villains. In a statement put out soon after the event the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the violence on the part of the protesters was pre-meditated since they were carrying weapons when the Israeli soldiers boarded. Meanwhile Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that while the protesters' deaths were regrettable, the Israeli soldiers were acting in self-defence. Almost overlooked in this appeal to self-justification was why the confrontation happened in the first place, namely the continuing siege against Gaza and whether that policy is yielding results.

The disconnection between Israel and the wider world over this crisis is contrasted with a second factor: the growing attention paid by policymakers in Washington and Brussels to Turkey. Turkey straddles several volatile areas – the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans – which means that its application for European Union (EU) membership, participation in the Israel-Palestine conflict and engagement with Iran over its nuclear programme must therefore be given due consideration by the US and Europe.

Turkey's rising international profile has obliged its governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) party to present itself as a moderating force in order to appeal to international interlocutors like Washington and Brussels. This has posed a particular challenge to the AKP, especially given its attachment to political Islam and pursuit of certain policies. These have included requiring women to cover themselves, allocating jobs and promotions on the basis of religious commitment and pressuring women out of the workforce.

At the same time though there have been a number of pressures that have constrained the AKP's religious zeal – and therefore helped its leadership present itself as reasonable and restrained. Internally, the diverse nature of the AKP's membership (pro-Islamic reformers, bankers, small and medium-sized business people) contributed to a looser ideological commitment and an emphasis on 'conservative democracy'. Externally, the AKP faces pressure on several fronts: from a military willing to intervene to maintain a secular state; an electorate that withholds its votes when the government slows down democratic reforms; and EU members such as Germany who threaten to block Turkey's entry into the EU on religious grounds.

In addition, several other factors have contributed towards a more active Turkish foreign policy in recent years including Russia's military conflict with Georgia in 2008 and Russia's confrontation with Europe over gas supplies. Ankara's response has been to act as a broker in the region, in particular as an energy route. Indeed, perhaps the most recent evidence of an increasing Turkish willingness to take on a more active foreign policy was in last month's fuel swap agreement between Turkey, Brazil and Iran, whereby Turkey agreed to process some of Iran's uranium. The agreement between the three was also significant for illustrating growing Turkish independence from both Washington and Europe, a fact borne out by Turkey's vote against sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council (along with Brazil) on 9 June.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that the respective waxing and waning of Turkish and Israeli influence on the US and Europe is fully complete. It is not yet clear that Turkey constitutes a more important player for American and European interests than Israel. Indeed, both countries have a particular role to play, which is largely shaped by the wider regional context. Compared to the Turks, Israel arguably has much greater influence with the Americans and Europeans, which is due both to internal factors on both sides of the Atlantic and their search for reliable allies in the region.

Israel continues to matter on both sides of the Atlantic, regardless of its actions. Its supporters have penetrated the American and European decision-making processes to a far greater extent than have those for Turkey. The case in Washington is well

known in this respect, with *The Israel Lobby* by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt providing a meticulous account for US support towards Israel even when it runs contrary to its own self-interest. While the Jewish lobby may be less visible in Europe, it is still significant. The recent efforts to build a new pro-Israel, pro-peace movement has generated conflict within the community over who best represents Israel's interests in European capitals.

In contrast to Israel, Turkish lobbying efforts remain weaker and less organised. This is exemplified by both the 23-year EU accession process and the reticence of its politicians and business leaders to lobby actively during periods of military intervention and political uncertainty.

In international terms, a rather simplistic contrast can be drawn between the two in their foreign policy approach: Israel's hardline stick to Turkey's more diplomatic carrot. Both stances have their respective use which Americans and Europeans have readily exploited. In the case of Israel, its denunciation of Hamas as a terrorist organisation has been supported by both Washington and Brussels; indeed, former President George W Bush included Hamas in his 'war on terror'. Meanwhile, Turkey's diplomatic objectives have been generally shared by the US and Europe, including mediating peace between Israel and the Palestinians, stability in Iraq and Afghanistan and a nuclear weapon-free Iran. This last concern prompted support for Ankara's search for a settlement with Iran over its nuclear programme, before it was superseded by a new round of sanctions.

While Israel is currently subject to international condemnation, its more aggressive stance vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear programme could provide useful support should the sanctions embargo lead to a severe deterioration in relations between the Americans and Europeans with Tehran. In other words, a country that may currently seem like a liability could turn out to offer sufficient cover for a non-diplomatic solution.

In addition, that Israel remains in decision-makers' calculation is evident in Americans' and Europeans' reluctance to cut ties with the Jewish state. Unlike the new sanctions regime on Iran (including a ban on the sale of arms systems, ballistic missiles, sea and air cargo inspections and financial and travel restrictions against the regime), criticism against Israel has been more muted, mainly confined to calls for an international inquiry. Neither the EU nor the OECD (which Israel joined days before the flotilla incident) has adopted positions that could pressure Israel to review its policy towards Gaza, such as reviewing economic relations.

Meanwhile, Turkey's diplomatic approach can – and has – been used when necessary, only to be abandoned whenever the need no longer suits. This illustrates its ultimately marginal role, both regionally and globally. As noted above, last month's accord between Turkey, Brazil and Iran was seen as a useful measure by the US and its European allies: it provided scope for a soft-footed alternative to reduce the threat from Iran's potential nuclear weapon programme. That the accord has been so quickly abandoned is due largely to assurances by the US and its European allies to Russia and China, the permanent Security Council members most sympathetic to Tehran, that sanctions would not affect Iran's energy sector or its population. The vote for sanctions highlights the limits of Turkish diplomacy. Its own 'no' vote may allow it to claim a moral victory but it also highlights which countries continue to call the shots.

Elsewhere, Turkish reticence has had other costs. Having opted out of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 it effectively removed itself from any direct control over the war's outcome. On one level Turkey's fear that a wave of potential refugees would flee across its border with Iraq was unrealised. On another level, Turkey's opposition to an independent Kurdish state has been undermined by expanded Kurdish autonomy since the war. This is apparent both in the Kurdish presence in the oil cities of Kirkuk and Mosul and the presence of the separatist Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) which uses the areas as a refuge in its armed struggle against Turkey. This has prompted Ankara to conduct intermittent incursions across the border against the PKK. Similarly, Turkish involvement in the region's other conflict hotspot, Afghanistan, also remains constrained. Often cited as an important and influential Muslim and democratic ally, its present contribution to NATO in the country is less than 2000 troops.

In sum then, it would be wrong to assume that the US and Europe is abandoning support for Israel in favour of Turkey. The American and European policy establishments do not operate in so simplistic a fashion. Both Israel and Turkey offer Washington and its European allies different approaches, the former a robust, confrontational stance and the latter the opportunity for dialogue through an intermediary. Whichever path is chosen will depend on American and European interests in the region and an assessment on a case-by-case basis as to whether it is better served by associating with Israel or Turkey. How that decision is reached though will not be achieved in a completely dispassionate way though. It will include different factors, including support by Israel and Turkey for past policies as well as the relative influence of the Israeli and Turkish lobbies within American and European domestic politics.

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