

THE FURIOUS PASSAGE OF TAYYIP ERDOGAN*

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Turkey's prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, is not a man who brooks being contradicted and a panel debate on the Gaza war at the World Economic Forum was no exception. What was hoped to be a bridge-building exercise to ameliorate Erdogan's harsh criticisms of Israel's incursion into Gaza and support for Hamas has turned out to be a public relations disaster.

Erdogan delivered his own presentation in a forceful tone, calling for Hamas to be included in the solution and expressing Turkey's willingness to be included in the process. However, after Israel's president, Shimon Peres, had made his presentation, Erdogan responded with a tirade against Peres but was reminded by the moderator of a time limit. Erdogan pushed the moderator away, rose to his feet and left the stage, declaring he did not think he would be coming back to Davos, because he had not been allowed to speak.

The reaction has not been long coming. This morning AJC, the American Jewish Committee, issued a statement calling Tayyip Erdogan's attack "a public disgrace" and "gasoline on the fire of surging anti-Semitism". Furthermore, last week AJC and four other American Jewish organizations sent a letter to Erdogan, expressing concern over the current wave of anti-Semitism in Turkey, and Erdogan's outburst has done nothing to allay these fears.

Unfortunately the Turkish prime minister has a track record of shooting himself in the foot, which, if the sport became an Olympic discipline, would guarantee him a number of gold medals.

At the EU summit in Copenhagen in December, 2002, when Turkey tried to press the EU to fix a date for starting accession talks, European leaders were

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shocked by Turkey's "blackmail campaign", and one prime minister called Erdogan's behaviour "very counter-productive". The French prime minister, Jacques Chirac, a representative of Old Europe, told a summit dinner: "It's not enough to respect European law, you also have to be polite and civilized".

At the EU summit two years later, when Turkey was finally given a starting date, Luxembourg's foreign minister, Jean Asselborn, declared "We were gobsmacked", when at the end of the summit Erdogan suddenly refused to recognize Cyprus. The summit was almost derailed, and Erdogan's volte-face caused Asselborn to remark: "We are not carpet dealers here in Europe."

The Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, also experienced the Turkish leader's abrasive style when Erdogan paid an official visit to Denmark in November 2005. After lunch there should have been a joint press conference, but when Erdogan learned that there would be a representative of the Kurdish tv station, Roj-tv, present, he immediately left for the airport, leaving Fogh Rasmussen to stand alone on the podium like an abandoned bride at the altar.

A fortnight ago Tayyip Erdogan paid his first visit to Brussels since the EU summit in December 2004 to revive Turkey's flagging hopes of EU membership, but he immediately started off on the wrong foot. In a thinly veiled threat he informed the European Commission that he would review his support for the Nabucco gas pipeline if Cyprus continued to block the opening of the energy chapter of its accession talks. José Manuel Barroso, the EU Commission's president, dismissed any connection between the two issues, and Erdogan, backtracking, declared that the project had enjoyed Turkey's full support "all the time".

At the same time Erdogan used his Brussels visit to express his support for Hamas, and called on Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and the whole world to respect the election results as the will of the people "so that

democracy could win in the Palestinian Autonomy and not to satisfy Mahmoud Abbas”.

Tayyip Erdogan’s latest outburst could threaten his ambition to be the Middle East mediator, and as he outlined in his presentation at Davos, Turkey has hosted five rounds of talks in the Israel-Syria question as a prelude to direct talks. There could be other fallout too. Turkey’s efforts to block the Armenian genocide resolution in Congress are contingent on the support of the Jewish lobby, and these efforts could come unstuck if President Obama keeps his pre-election pledge to recognize the events of 1915 as genocide.

There could be another form of backlash. If Israel compares its struggle with Hamas to Turkey’s efforts to combat the PKK, and if the Jewish lobby in the USA seconds this motion, Turkey’s efforts to maintain its territorial integrity could be undermined.

There is also the shadow side of the humanitarian concern Tayyip Erdogan emphasized in his presentation. When the Turkish prime minister visited Khartoum in 2006, he declared that no genocide had been committed in Darfur, and Sudan’s president Omar al-Bashir has twice been cordially received in Ankara. This raises the question of the sincerity of Mr Erdogan’s commitment and whether this is colored by his preoccupation with Islam.