

WHAT IS BEHIND TURKEY'S ANTAGONISM TOWARD ISRAEL?¹

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There are many different theories about Turkey's increasingly harsh criticism of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians. Some have suggested that the hostility is grounded in the internal struggle between Turkey's secular military and the country's Islamist ruling party. By this logic, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's attacks on Israel are meant to embarrass the army, which has extensive links with Israel's military establishment. Others view Turkey's vocal support for Hamas as indicative of an explicit decision on the part of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to pull the country out of its alliance with the West - while drawing closer to Iran.

An explanation that has gained acceptance among the shrinking Turkish opposition is that AKP's foreign policy in general, and toward Israel and Hamas in particular, is linked to Erdogan's religious agenda. Others view the escalating anti-Israel rhetoric as a symptom of the populist political atmosphere, as Turkey gears up for local-government elections, in late March. And still others view the heightened tension through the lens of regional and international hegemonic struggles. But, even proponents of that approach are having trouble explaining the intensity and tenacity of Turkish insistence on being the one and only regional mediator, and the rage directed by Erdogan at Israel's premiers (not only Ehud Olmert, but also Ariel Sharon before him) for not giving him proper respect and allowing him to exercise what he suggests is his rightful role as a regional mediator.

Indeed, Erdogan's statements about Israel have to be seen in the context of Turkey's changing self-perception vis-a-vis its neighbors and the rest of the Muslim world. Turks increasingly propound a vision of their nation as the moral leader of both. They see themselves assuming a burden inherited from their Ottoman forbears, whose empire stretched from North Africa to Europe and

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Central Asia, a mission that includes fostering regional peace and stability, as well as economic prosperity.

The "Turkish man's burden" requires both taking a more critical stance toward Israel and being seen as protector of the Palestinians. Mediating between Israel and Syria is the other side of the same coin of Turkey's changing self-perception.

In this sense, the shrill complaints about Israel's Gaza offensive do not diverge from the accepted discourse in Turkey in recent years. But it has certainly become sharper and more militant. Attacks on Jewish-owned properties, an "enlisted" press, and the use of state educational and religious institutions to instigate an anti-Israel campaign are only some examples. Israel is portrayed as barbaric, uncivilized, as well as ephemeral, and the Arab regimes that have failed to rush to the defense of the Palestinians are described as dictatorial and lacking in moral legitimacy.

The idea of Turkey as leader of the Sunni Muslim world is not new. It should be recalled that even toward the end of the Ottoman Empire, as the "civilizing project" of founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which embraced secularism and Westernization, was starting up, a feeling of responsibility toward the Arab and Kurdish periphery was developing. Agents of "the project" were sent out to the provinces to disseminate its ideas, and the descendants of tribal elites from all over the empire were assembled for re-education in Istanbul, in the hope that when they returned home they would spread the values of Turkish civilization. At the time, this sense of burden also competed with parallel French, and even American, cultural enterprises in the region. However, with Atatürk's rise to power at the end of World War I, and during the entire Kemalist period, the civilizing efforts were directed inward, with a policy of disengagement from the Arab and Muslim Middle East prevailing through the 20th century.

Erdogan himself has explained his behavior in Davos, where he stormed off stage in reaction to criticism by Israeli President Shimon Peres, as an attempt to defend the honor of the Turkish nation. He is not the first Turkish leader to feel he is entrusted with such a responsibility. Ataturk, and Adnan Menderes - the prime minister overthrown and hung following a military coup in 1960 - are both examples. However, their declarations used to be focused on Turkey domestically.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union reawakened some imperialist notions in Turkey. It began with a sense that it was Turkey's responsibility to introduce democracy to the Turkic populations in the former Soviet republics. These days, the AKP is conducting an information campaign aimed at repositioning Turkey in Central Asia, the Balkans and the Arab Middle East. In its aspiration to hegemony, Turkey is competing with both Iran and Egypt - and, in its imagination, maybe even Israel.

The Kemalist elite is uncomfortable with this attitude. Its members are embarrassed by Erdogan's public outbursts, even if criticism of Israel is acceptable to most. The premier's "non-normative" outbursts have led some establishment commentators to go so far as to publicly question his psychological stability.

The new Turkish "burden" highlights the fact that Turkey is part of the Muslim Middle East. Just as the Kemalists were gearing up for accession to the European Union, Erdogan came along and emphasized the very elements they had tried to suppress for the past century. Just this week, journalists and academics associated with AKP launched a campaign asserting that Europe has no future without Turkey, a claim that seems detached from 21st-century realities. Reality, rather, demands the furthering of reforms and compliance with EU requirements.

Although it is unlikely to happen, it may now be time for Erdogan and his advisers to reassess their foreign policy toward both Israel and Europe, and to tone down their rhetoric. Erdogan's insistence that he is no anti-Semite is probably sincere. But arguing that the world's media are controlled by Jews may not be the best way for him to make his case.