

## **WHO WILL MEDIATE BETWEEN TURKEY AND ISRAEL?**

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The behavior of Israel's deputy foreign minister, Danny Ayalon, toward Turkish Ambassador Ahmed Oğuz Çelikkol, greatly embarrassed the Israeli public. The public's argument is not with Ayalon's message – that the Israeli government has reached the limits of its patience toward the unrestrained verbal attacks against Israel by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu – but rather with the way the message was conveyed. The Israeli public, as well as Cabinet ministers and senior officials in the Foreign Ministry, are embarrassed by the pathetic manner in which their protest was presented. Their embarrassment is strongly reminiscent of the discomfiture of many Turks by the behavior of their prime minister at Davos. Whereas most of them agreed with the criticism of Israel over its actions in Gaza, they recoiled from the populist and emotional style of their prime minister. Following the incident, members of the Turkish elite analyzed the psyche and behavioral problems of their leader. In both cases, senior representatives exhibited behavior that is out of line with the manners and comportment of the "civilized" Westerner who, no matter what the context, remains polite.

The two countries are similar not only in the public's reaction but also in the fact that their foreign policy is tightly linked to domestic policy and politics. In Turkey, because of legal limitations, the foreign arena has become a place where religious agendas and imperialist dreams can be expressed freely. In addition, criticism of Israel provides an opportunity to criticize the Kemalist military establishment, which is seen as promoting immoral relations with the Israeli military establishment. As criticism of Israel increases, the legitimacy of the military decreases. In Israel, Turkey serves as a means of goading extremist parties and politicians, such as Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. The Israeli press uses Turkey to serve its political agenda of promoting talks with Syria and – at the local level – to besmirch Lieberman's rightist party and to advance the interests of centrist parties, Labor and Kadima, as well as the interests of the defense industry. However, the attitude of Labor Party politicians toward Turkey is no less patronizing and embarrassing than Lieberman's. The declarations of Industry, Trade and Labor Minister and Labor MK Binyamin Ben-Eliezer have given rise to the mistaken perception that he will "repair" relations between the countries – not by changing Israeli policy, but rather by "explaining" the situation to the Turks. However, even Defense Minister Ehud Barak's trip to Turkey, covered in press reports that contrasted him favorably with Lieberman, did not improve relations between the countries and certainly did not tone down Turkish declarations against Israel. Perhaps Barak's visit will bring some improvement to the defense industry, but it is a pity that the analysis of relations between the two countries should be limited to patterns of behavior and colored by domestic politics.

We are witnessing complex diplomatic processes. One of the goals of Turkey's foreign policy under Erdoğan and his energetic foreign minister, Davutoğlu, is to improve Turkey's standing in the international arena. If Turkey wants to become an important country, Davutoğlu claims it must free itself of its dependence on the United States and build psychological strength and power. While Turkey is failing with regard to the European Union, is forced to give up its assets and claims in northern Iraq, and is making no progress on the Cyprus question, the Turkish press and Turkish politicians are talking about transforming Turkey into a regional power. Not a day passes without an article that repeats the slogan, "Turkey is an important country." Turkey, it is repeatedly argued, is the key to turning the European Union into an effective organization; without its mediation, the Islamic and Western cultures will clash; and only Turkey can lead to regional peace and mediate between the hawks in the region.

A strategic change in Turkey's foreign policy is linked to the disappearance of the United States as a significant player in the region. Obama's policy is ethical and correct, but only in theory. Talks instead of conflict, regional treaties instead of the hegemony of a superpower – this policy has restored the ethical standing of the United States for the moment. But in the long run, it is precisely this policy that will lead the region to a clash, and the relations between Israel and Turkey are the clearest manifestation of this process. Turkey's desire to free itself from dependence on the United States has led to the building up of the Russian alternative and a regional treaty with Arab countries, including Syria. The treaty that was meant to promote Turkish economic interests is wrapped in an alternative ideology that is similar to Obama's rhetoric: peace and negotiations instead of conflict. Turkey's independent stance in its foreign policy and the breaking of the isolation of Syria in the service of Turkish interests have harmed both American and Israeli objectives. Unsuccessful in promoting peace between Israel and Syria, they have damaged relations between Israel and Turkey. The new doctrine of the Turkish foreign policy has changed Israel from a strategic ally to a competitor. This policy was adopted long before the war in Gaza. It reflects a new world view, both in ideological and practical terms, that encourages Turkey's activism in the entire region, from Bosnia to the Caucasus and from the Black Sea to the Gulf of Suez. It is linked to the disappearance of an alternative of Arab leadership in the Middle East and the transformation of the Turko-Persian arena to the dominant one in the region, replacing the Arab one. This activism becomes aggressive in places where Turkey has failed to convince others of its role and abilities. The Turkish offers to mediate between Israel and Syria, for example, have in the past year become a persistent demand, which incorporates a demand for recognition of the right of Turkey to be involved in the region because of its imperial Ottoman history. While Western countries are trying to erase their colonialist past, Turkey is trying to revive it.

The Islamic populism of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, goes well with the demands for a place under the sun in the international arena. Both derive from the feeling that the Muslim world is not sufficiently recognized

internationally and is not adequately represented in international institutions. The United Nations, for example, in which Turkey now has a seat on the Security Council, has become a platform for Turkey's attempts to raise its status while transmitting to Turkish constituents a sense of greatness. Perhaps the most worrisome characteristic of Turkish politics today is "Putinization." The Russian model has been adopted and the new regime has made the Turkish press its captive. Those who dare to criticize the government and its diplomatic line are prosecuted and subject to disproportionate fines. The Dogan Group fine of \$2.5 billion should have served as a wake-up call. Freedom of expression in Turkey exists only among those who toe the government's line.

Turkey may not be the one to teach Israel how to behave toward minorities and others. However, this fact does not mitigate Israel's unwillingness to accept legitimate criticism of its use of excessive power toward Palestinians. Reinstating the peace process will give the Israelis and the Palestinians hope and will restore Israel's international standing. And as for relations with Turkey, it appears that the desire of Israel's defense establishment to export defense merchandise is more powerful than any other consideration. That is a pity. Relations cannot be based on the desire to export defense products. Understanding the aims of Turkish foreign policy as well as the subtleties of its domestic politics will help create a realistic policy. Turkey, too, must better understand the domestic politics of Israel. Turkish concepts do not always translate well to Israeli ears. Erdoğan's attempts to explain that he is not against the Israeli people but rather against the Israeli state or government are drawn from the traditional Turkish distinction between the people and the state, which dates to the 1950s. In Israel the words are interpreted differently. As long as there is no mutual recognition of a different conceptual world, and in the absence of similar interests and suitable foreign policies, it would be worthwhile to search for someone to mediate between Turkey and Israel.