

Behind Turkey and Israel's Not-So-Secret Meeting

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Recriminatory words exchanged between Turkey and Israel over the latter's May 31 assault on the Gaza-bound Freedom Flotilla have given way to the pragmatism of national self-interest. On June 30, ministers from the two countries "secretly" met in Brussels to attempt to smooth over differences and repair bilateral ties marred in the wake of the attack.

It was a startling development when contrasted with the indignation voiced by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan after eight Turkish activists and one dual U.S.-Turkish citizen aboard the *Mavi Marmara* were killed by Israeli commandos. At the time, he characterized the damage done to Turkey-Israel relations as "irreparable."

Erdogan quickly became a hero in Gaza. He was seen as the only regional leader who had taken demonstrable action and directly challenged the three-year-old siege. His forthright words were surprisingly unencumbered by the diplomatic baggage Middle Easterners have long come to expect from their leaders:

"Despots, gangsters even pirates have specific sensitiveness, follow some specific morals. Those who do not follow any morality or ethics, those who do not act with any sensitivity, to call them such names would even be a compliment to them ... This brazen, irresponsible, reckless government that recognizes no law and tramples on any kind of humanitarian virtue, this attack of the Israeli government by all means ... must be punished."

Since the raid, Turkey has recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv, cancelled joint military exercises and denied the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) permission to use its airspace.

While in Brussels to discuss its bid to join the European Union, Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with Israel's Industry and Trade Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer. The meeting came at the behest of President Obama when he met Erdogan the week prior at the G20 Summit in Toronto.

Davutoglu was reported to have insisted Israel comply with three demands before relations could be restored: issue a formal apology over the raid, pay compensation to the victims' families and consent to an international inquiry to investigate the operation.

Netanyahu's precarious governing coalition was placed in immediate jeopardy afterward; Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the extremist Yisrael Beitanu party was livid when he learned of the conference on television. Evidently, Netanyahu kept him and the foreign ministry out of the loop, opting instead to make the far more Turkey-friendly Ben-Eliezer his representative.

Snubs and political maneuvering aside, it is clear the leaders of Turkey and Israel endorsed the ministerial get-together. It is also logical that Israel would want to engage in fence-mending with a Muslim nation (and NATO member) which whom it previously had enjoyed good ties and benefited from training in its airspace.

Indeed, Israel had adequately repaid Turkey for negotiating a nuclear fuel swap deal with Iran, possibly setting back its case for a preemptive strike. It had also taken Turkey's mediation between Israel and Syria off the table. Having accomplished these goals, Israel could now afford to try and recoup the perks of the strategic relationship.

For Turkey, the ties are equally important. In late June, a military delegation was in Israel receiving instruction on how to operate pilotless aircraft and drones—the same kind used by the IDF against Palestinians. Such technology is coveted by Turkey in their ongoing battle with Kurdish rebels in the southeastern part of the country and northern Iraq.

As the *New York Times* [reported](#), Turkey's \$190 million deal for Israeli drones has not been cancelled. An analyst from *Jane's Defense Weekly* relays from Turkish sources that military trade between the two nations accounted for \$1.8 billion in 2007, making Israel second only to the U.S. as an arms supplier to Turkey.

As one Israeli official said, "It's business as usual."

Diplomatic initiatives and overtures that reduce Mideast tensions are always welcome. It must be recognized, however, that Turkey and Israel's motives to do so are self-serving. Many will rightly ask if Turkey is more concerned with repairing relations with Israel so it can continue to acquire the desired military technology. They also wonder if Erdogan may yet find cause not to sell out Gaza's Palestinians.

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