

Turkey-Israeli Relations: It's Not a New Turkey, It's The Right Time

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Uri Avnery's assessment of the recent Israeli-Turkish diplomatic and political row – that “the relationship between Turkey and Israel will probably return to normal, if not to its former degree of warmth” – seems sensible and daring. In my view, however, it is also inaccurate.

Simply put, there is just no going back.

In a recent article entitled “Israel Must Get Used to the New Turkey,” Suat Kiniklioğlu, Deputy Chairman of External Affairs for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) wrote, “Israel appears to be yearning for the golden 1990s, which were the product of a very specific situation in the region. Those days are over and are unlikely to come back even if the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ends up no longer being in government.”

This assessment seems more consistent with reality.

One would agree with Avnery's optimistic reading of events if the recent row was caused by just a couple of isolated incidents, for example, the gutsy public exchange over Gaza between Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and Israel's President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in late January 2009, or the recent premeditated humiliation of Oguz Celikkol, Turkish Ambassador to Israel, by Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon.

However, these incidents are anything but isolated. They reflect a clear and probably irreversible shift in Turkish foreign policy towards Israel, the US and the Middle East as a whole.

For decades Turkey was torn between its historical ties to Muslim and Arab countries on the one hand, and the unstoppable drive towards Westernization on the other. The latter seemed much more influential in forming the new Turkish identity in its individual, collective, and thus foreign policy manifestation and outlook.

But even during the push and pull, Turkey grew in import as a political and economic player. It also grew into a nation with a decisive sense of sovereignty, a growing sense of pride and a daring capacity for asserting itself as a regional power.

In the 1970s, when ‘political Islam’ was on the rise throughout the region, Turkey was experiencing its own rethink, and various politicians and groups began grappling with the idea of taking political Islam to a whole new level.

In fact, it was Dr. Necmettin Erbakan, the Prime Minister of Turkey between 1996 and 1997

who began pushing against the conventional notion of Turkey as a second-class NATO member desperate to identify with everything Western.

In the late 1980s Erbakan's Rafah Party (the Welfare Party) took Turkey by storm. The party was hardly apologetic about its Islamic roots and attitude. Its rise to power as a result of the 1995 general elections raised alarm, as the securely 'pro-Western' Turkey was deviating from the very the rigid script that wrote off the country's regional role as that of a "lackey of NATO." According to Salama A Salama, who coined the phrase in a recent article in Al-Ahram Weekly, Turkey is no longer this 'lackey'. And according to Kiniklioğlu, that's something "Israel must get used to".

The days of Erbakan might be long gone. But the man's legacy registered something that never departed Turkish national consciousness. He pushed the boundary, dared to champion pro-Palestinian policies, defied Western dictates and even pressed for economic repositioning of his country with the creation of the Developing Eight (D-8), uniting the most politically significant Arab and Muslim countries. When Erbakan was forced to step down in a 'postmodernist' military coup, it was understood as the end of short-lived political experiment which ended up proving that even a benign form of political Islam was not to be tolerated in Turkey. The army emerged, once again, all powerful.

But things have changed drastically since then. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was elected to power in 2002. The AK Party leadership was composed of savvy, yet principled politicians who aimed for change and even a geopolitical shift in their country's regional political outlook.

The AK Party began to lead a self-assertive Turkey which was neither pleading for European acceptance nor American validation. By rejecting the use of Turkish territories as a launchpad of a US strike against Iraq in 2003, Turkey was acquiring a voice, and a strong one at that - with wide democratic representation and growing popular support.

The trend continued, and in recent years Turkey dared translate its political power and prowess into action, without immediately severing the political and military balances that took years to build. So, for example, while it continued to honor past military deals with Israel, it also made many successful overtures to Syria and Iran. And, in being willing to be seen as a unifier in the age of Muslim and Arab disunity, it refused to take part in the conveniently set up camps of 'moderates' and 'extremists'. Instead it maintained good ties with all its neighbors, and its Arab allies.

Starting in 2007, the US began seeing the emergence of the "New Turkey". US President Barack Obama's visit to the country soon after his inauguration was one of many signs that the West was taking notice of Turkey's 'special' status. Turkey is not to be bullied, threatened, or intimidated. Even Israel, which has for long defied the norms of diplomacy, is now becoming more aware of its limits, thanks to Turkish President Abdullah Gül. Following Israel's belligerent insult of the Turkish Ambassador, he said, "Unless there is a formal apology from Israel, we're going to put Celikkol on the first plane back to Ankara." Israel, of course, apologized, and humbly so.

It took Turkey many years to reach this level of confidence and the country is hardly eager to be anyone's 'lackey' now. More, Turkey's united and constant stance in support of Gaza, and its outspokenness against the threats against Lebanon, Iran and Syria show clearly that the old days of "warmth" are well behind us.

Turkey, of course, will find a very receptive audience among Arabs and Muslims all over the world who are desperate for a powerful and sensible leadership to defend and champion their causes. Needless to say, for the besieged Palestinians in Gaza, Erdogan is becoming a household name, a folk hero, a new Nasser in fact. The same sentiment is shared throughout the region.

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