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Can Turkey and Israel Mend Relations?

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In an interview with Charlie Rose last week, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced an imminent normalization of the relations between his country and Israel. This is not the first time that an overture towards reconciliation has been raised. During President Barack Obama's visit to Israel in March 2013, he persuaded Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to call Erdoğan in order to begin to improve relations between the two countries, two valuable U.S. allies in the Middle East. However, due to domestic and regional reasons, there is more of an incentive to normalize relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Undoubtedly the Syrian crisis, security concerns, and economic growth are pushing Erdoğan to open a new chapter in Turkish-Israeli relations.

In order to better understand the current uneasy relationship between Turkey and Israel, it is important to understand how and why they have deteriorated under Erdoğan. In 1948, Turkey was among the first "Islamic" nations to recognize the state of Israel. For a long time afterwards, Ankara continued to be among the rare Muslim countries to have good relations with Tel Aviv. When the AKP came to power in 2002, it continued to cultivate good relations with Israel. However, for ideological as well as pragmatic reasons, Turkish diplomacy, parallel with its growing self confidence in the Middle East aided by good economic development and an impressive growing soft power, started to take a more critical stance on Israel and Israeli policy towards the Palestinians.

With relations already strained, tensions grew when in May 2010 the Marmara flotilla, a Turkish humanitarian convoy, sent by an NGO close to the AKP government, wanted to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. The convoy was blocked by the Israeli military, and resulted in the deaths of nine Turkish citizens. After the incident, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel were severed. In order to reestablish bilateral relations, Turkey imposed the following three conditions: one, Israel should offer an official apology, two, compensate the families of the victims, and three lift the blockade of Gaza.

Regardless of past appearances and official support by Turkish officials, this new hostile attitude, after the events with the Marmara flotilla, towards Israel was beneficial to the AKP whose voters sympathized with the Palestinian cause. In terms of regional policy, Erdoğan's anti-Israeli rhetoric helped him and his country earn prestige among Middle Eastern elites and public opinion. However things have gradually begun to change, and, for both domestic and regional reasons, it has become strategically beneficial for the Turkish Prime Minister to show a more conciliatory attitude towards Israel. Back in March 2013 when President Obama made a considerable effort to reconcile his two allies Turkey was receptive. Despite Obama's urging, relations between Turkey and Israel have little improved. Erdoğan's interview last week, however, may be a sign that Israel and Turkey are ready to return to full diplomatic relations. One reason for this renewed interest in a rapprochement is the crisis in Syria, which is affecting both Israel and Turkey.

Prior to 2011 and the Arab Spring, improvements between Syria, a longtime adversary due to their support of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and Turkey was the most successful achievement of Turkish policy of "zero problems with neighbors." The Bashar al-Assad regime became Erdoğan's best ally in the region.

Immediately after the Arab Spring, in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, parties akin to the AKP came to power. This gave the impression that the Turkish AKP was serving as a model for these new governments. When protests broke out in Syria, Turkey, in their newfound role as a model country for the rest of the Arab world, tried to persuade Bashar to reform. However, due to Bashar's stance, Turkey shifted policies and began to support the opposition. This shift hindered its image as a country at "peace with its neighbors." Turkey's position on Syria has endangered its relationships to countries that support the Bashar regime such as Iran, Russia, Iraq, and Egypt (after the downfall of Mohammad Morsi). Without the support of former allies, Turkey is becoming increasingly isolated which could hurt its economic growth. Restoring relations with Israel would prevent this from happening.

Additionally, with the rise of radical Jihadi groups, Turkey is in a precarious state with regards to their own security. Due to their difficult situation, it is apparent that Turkey needs to cooperate with Israel when it comes to intelligence and military collaboration.

Furthermore, Turkey should cooperate with Israel when it comes to business and trade. Due to increase violence, Turkey lost a trade route through Syria that connected it to other Arab countries. Israeli ports, however, can help Turkish companies restore trade in that region. Moreover, Erdoğan is motivated to make peace with Israel due to the discovery of an important gas field, called Leviathan, in Israel's territorial waters. Considering Turkey's huge appetite for natural gas, and the potential natural gas European market that could be tapped there is a greater incentive for a rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. Erdoğan should realize that by partnering with Israel on this gas opportunity, it would not only fuel Turkey's economy but also reduce its dependency on Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and the KRG, Turkey's traditional energy suppliers.

After harming his international prestige as well as Turkey's image because of authoritarian domestic and arrogant foreign policy, Erdoğan needs historical initiatives, such as the peace truce with the Kurdish PKK in March 2013, and, the expression to condolences for the descendants of Armenians who were murdered by Ottomans in 1915, in order to better his chances in the upcoming presidential elections, and the reestablishment of relations with Israel. Although the crisis in Syria is a key factor in reconciliation, security and economic concerns are also fueling an Israeli-Turkish rapprochement.

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