

## **An Israel-Turkey Reconciliation?**

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While Syrians destroy their country and Egyptians fill Tahrir Square with thousands to protest their country's leadership, Israelis find themselves alone on an island in the midst of a seething Islamic sea. Their island bristles with armaments and resounds to the sound of the marching feet of thousands of well-trained citizen-soldiers, yet their confidence in their military superiority over all other nations in the region is an uneasy one.

Not too long ago, before the Arab Spring, they used to be able to rely on a few other advantages. Before the ousting of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Israel could rely on Egypt—as much as any nation can trust another in that part of the world—to abide by the Camp David Accords, forged during the Carter Administration, providing a buffer zone from radical Arab aggression on its southern flank. Now, with the Muslim Brotherhood on the ascendant in Cairo, those days of feeling semi-secure are long past. The Palestinians have a lot longer leash than before, and they could significantly disrupt Israeli security were they not so weakened by internal conflict.

Jordan, too, was once almost neutral in their dealings with Israel, so much so that the prime ministers in Jerusalem could nearly overlook what was happening in Amman to concentrate on greater but more distant threats in Baghdad and Tehran. Even Syria, while it could not be ignored as it propped up Hezbollah in Lebanon and made belligerent feints on the Golan Heights, did not rise to the level of strength and intimidation that would make Israel's military sweat. Except for coddling its Hezbollah fighters, Lebanon itself, handmaiden of Iran, had no hope of attacking Israel meaningfully due to its own civil turmoil. Though these nations are still not strong enough to amount to a serious threat, they would descend on Israel like a pack of hyenas if they smelled weakness and fear.

Until the present administration, the United States has always stood solidly behind the State of Israel. President Obama, however, seems to ignore Israel as long as possible during any crisis, flying in to save the day with strong-arm tactics worthy of a Mafia godfather. And so he did during Israel's ongoing dispute with former ally Turkey, forcing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to express sincere regret and promise compensation to Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Erdogan for the 2010 Israeli commando raid on a blockade-running Turkish ship that resulted in nine deaths. While Obama smiled at the cameras and flirted with Israel's press corps, saying, "The United States deeply values our relationships with both Turkey and Israel, and we attach great importance to the restoration of positive relations between them, in order to advance regional peace and security," he made Israel surrender its position on the matter, weakening it and giving the diplomatic and public-opinion victory to Turkey.

In the mid- to late-1990s, Israel's military alliance with Turkey was the centerpiece of a peace-through-strength initiative designed to deter regional hotheads from even considering setting a match to the Middle East powder keg. Their cooperation expanded to include commercial and trade exchanges and even a fair amount of tourism to and from both nations. Many in Israel would like to see such cooperation return, if for nothing else but to have a friend in the region, but that occurred in a far less radicalized Middle East, before Islamization became such a powerful force in the world.

Turkey itself has become more Islamic than it was at that time. Since 2001, when he founded it, Erdogan has been the leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (also known as the JDP or AKP) in Turkey, which bills itself as a center-right, social conservative political party despite its roots being firmly in the pro-Islamic camp. He has been Turkey's Prime Minister since 2003. In his early years in the post, he withheld or soft-pedaled his criticism of Israel, but since 2006, his rhetoric has escalated to the point that, in February, he labeled Zionism a crime against humanity.

Even so, because reconciliation between Turkey and Israel is a top strategic priority, Netanyahu apologized and promised compensation. Erdogan accepted Israel's apology, and both countries announced that they would reinstate ambassadors and completely restore diplomatic relations. But so far, after the three rounds of talks, these promises have not been fulfilled. Jerusalem is not willing to admit that the compensation payment is the result of a wrongful act. For its part, Ankara demands ten times the amount of money Israel offered, wants Israel to accept blame for a wrongful act, and requires proof that living conditions of Palestinians are improving.

If relations between Israel and Turkey somehow return to normal, they will not look like their former strategic ties. The rapidly changing geopolitical map of the Middle East contains more seeds of conflict between the two nations than before. The huge natural-gas reservoirs that have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean will certainly raise economic and territorial tensions. Jerusalem's stronger relations with Cyprus and Greece will be viewed suspiciously in Ankara.

That said, they have shared interests. Both want to limit the spread of radical Islam in the Middle East. Both nations border on Syria, and neither wants spillover into their territories or Hezbollah to get its hands on Syria's chemical weapons. Both countries are wary of Iran and its nuclear ambitions. Both are democratic, pro-Western, and U.S. allies. Both want stability in the region.

Relations between Israel and Turkey have a long history of ups and downs. While reconciliation seems unlikely and new regional realities make cooperation even more difficult, both nations would probably benefit by seizing today's opportunity to reestablish close ties. For Israel, especially, a friend in the neighborhood would help to ease its stressful isolation.