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Israel and Turkey: End of an Alliance [1]

Israel's 2009 war on Gaza has been exhaustively documented: some 1,400 Palestinian deaths (compared to 13 for Israel), a vast, rubble-strewn landscape, international condemnation culminating in the hard-hitting and controversial "Goldstone Report" from the UN, and a blockade, tacitly approved by the U.S. and EU, that led to a humanitarian crisis, and ultimately to the high-seas catastrophe this week on the Free Gaza flotilla.

Less understood, but perhaps no less important, has been the rupture in relations between two of the biggest military powers in the region: Israel and Turkey. This week, in the wake of Israel's commando raid on the flotilla, Turkish President Abdullah Gul declared that relations with Israel would "never be the same again," adding: " Turkey will never forgive this kind of attack in international waters."

This, of course, cannot be good news for Israeli leaders. The political and military alliance between these regional powers was probably more important for the Jewish state, which had looked for a "trusted friend" in the region ever since the 1979 Iranian revolution ended Israel's cozy relationship with the Shah.

Turkey became that "trusted friend," perhaps in part because of a powerful history between the two peoples. In 1492, when the Alhambra Decree ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, Bayezid II, the Ottoman sultan, sent ships to the Spanish port of Cadiz to bring the Jews into his empire, saying: "They say that Ferdinand of Spain is a wise man, but he is a fool. For he takes his treasure and sends it all to me."

Modern Turkey's military found its own treasure from its collaboration with Israel. As Emile Hokayem summed up this week in *The National* (Abu Dhabi):

> The Turkish military is a prime client of Israeli technology and hardware. Israel's defence industry has upgraded Turkish planes and tanks, sold missiles and communications technology. Israel had plans to provide the Turkish military with satellite access and air defence systems. Israel, in other words, has been key to Turkey's defence modernisation. In return, Israel received space where its air force, navy and army could train, and a relationship with Nato's second largest military. Defence co-operation extended to training and joint exercises between Israel and Turkey, many of which were held secretly.

Now that relationship appears all but shattered, owing directly to Israel's military and diplomatic blunders, and the plummeting opinion of the Jewish state, and the Turkish-Israeli alliance, among Turks of all stripes.

The first hard blow was the Gaza war and its aftermath – in particular, a long, condescending

speech made by Israeli President Shimon Peres on the stage of the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos. Also on stage was UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Arab League chief Amr Moussa, and Turkish Prime minister Tayyip Erdogan. When Peres spoke for nearly twice as long as any other speaker, rambling on almost nonsensically at times – "Israel does not want to shoot anybody"; "the people in Gaza are not our enemies" – Erdogan began to respond. The moderator, David Ignatius of the Washington Post, cut Erdogan off, insisting, "We really do need to get people to dinner." (Clearly, Very Important Stomachs were grumbling.) An incensed Erdogan stalked off the stage, vowing never to return to Davos.

At the time some observers declared this as merely stagecraft for a leader playing to his Turkish public. In part, of course, that was true. What these observers underestimated was Erdogan's genuine anger, backed by public protests against Israel and in support of the people of Gaza. Erdogan, who had been brokering back-channel discussions between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights, said those talks were essentially ended by the Gaza war.

As Turkish public anger at Israel grew, in late 2009 the government barred Israeli jets from participating in a Turkish military exercise.

"Turkish public opinion could not agree with the fact that Israeli aircraft would be training on Turkish territory, while at the same time there are gross human rights violations being committed in Gaza," Suat Kiniklioglu, a spokesman for the Turkish parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, told Deutsche Welle.

Meanwhile, a Turkish television show depicting Israeli soldiers as murderous raised a fury in Tel Aviv. The result: a stunning and deliberate diplomatic gaffe committed by Bibi Netanyahu's foreign minister, Danny Ayalon, in a January 2010 meeting with Turkey's ambassador to Israel, Ahmet Oguz Celikkol. For the photo op, Ayalon arranged to be sitting above his Turkish counterpart, so that he could literally look down on him, and made sure the television shot omitted the Turkish flag, showing only Israel's Star of David. This orchestrated public humiliation only worsened the two nations' already fragile relationship. The situation was salvaged, somewhat, when Ayalon finally apologized just before Turkish president Gul's deadline to recall the ambassador to Ankara.

Both Ayalon and Turkish leaders, of course, were playing to public opinion, which have each grown increasingly nationalistic as the conflict with the Palestinians hardens feelings.

For Turks, as for the Arab world, the continuing images of Palestinian suffering, especially in Gaza, fuel ever greater public rage and street protests at the Jewish state. Yet for Israelis, virtually any criticism by outsiders tends to confirm a sense of alienation from the rest of the world. This is fueled by centuries of tragedy – most of all, of course, by the Holocaust itself. The sense of ongoing victimization – you could call it the politics of "never again" -- plays on a visceral level among the Israeli public. The ever presence of the Shoah (Hebrew for Holocaust) has penetrated so deeply into culture and politics in Israel that military leaders describe security policy as "Shoah-proof," according to Avraham Burg, the Israeli author of The Holocaust Is Over; We Must Rise From Its Ashes. "This national tragedy became a de facto national strategy," writes Burg.

These deep-trauma politics explain why Israeli candidates for prime minister last year competed with each other to be ever tougher on Gaza. And they are why Netanyahu, in the wake of a high-seas raid outside of Israel's territorial waters, in which at least nine civilians died, was able to state, without a shred of evidence, that the Free Gaza flotilla was "full of terror supporters

," rather than of humanitarians attempting to deliver food, toys, and medical supplies to Gaza. (Ayalon chipped in, also without offering evidence, that the flotilla "was an armada of hate and violence," and that its organizers had ties to Hamas and Al Qaeda.) Stretching credibility further, the prime minister added: "There's no humanitarian crisis in Gaza." And then, tapping a deep place in the Israeli psyche, Netanyahu declared, "We will never apologize for defending ourselves."

But the bungled raid in the Mediterranean, combined with Israel's defiant response, likely add up to the final blow to Turkey and Israel's strategic alliance. The flotilla, flying under the Turkish flag, had strong support across Turkey. In the wake of the tragedy, Erdogan called the raid a "bloody massacre," accusing Israel of "state terrorism." Protesters in Istanbul surged toward the Israeli consulate. And amid calls for an international investigation, Turkish lawmakers promised a review of the nation's ties with Israel. The entire incident has even prompted speculation that, despite the flotilla's civilian roots, Erdogan was looking for a reason to cut ties with Israel.

Whatever the case, Turkey had begun moving away from its alliance long before the "Fiasco on the high seas". Over the last 18 months, Erdogan has become the most visible public champion of the Palestinians. And last month, Erdogan and Brazil's Lula brokered a tentative nuclear deal with Iran, much to the irritation of Israel and the Americans, who said it didn't go far enough.

But last Saturday, Erdogan essentially accused Western powers of hypocrisy in their dealings with Iran, saying, "you do not show the same approach here but you stir up the world concerning Iran. I do not see this as a fair, honest and sincere approach." He added: "We do not want nuclear weapons in our region" – a message to both the U.S. and Israel about the perceived double standard in nuclear nonproliferation. It was yet another example of the continuing rift in the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

Then, barely 24 hours later, Israeli commandoes stormed the Free Gaza flotilla, apparently shattering what was left of that alliance.