

Israeli-Turkish Reconciliation

June 2016

Introduction

In separate ceremonies in Jerusalem and Ankara yesterday (28 June), Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Dore Gold and Turkish Undersecretary for foreign affairs, Feridun Hadi Sinirlioğlu, signed a reconciliation agreement between their two countries. The agreement – which has been approved by Israel’s security cabinet – renews diplomatic relations between the countries and puts an end to the six-year hiatus that erupted following the death of nine Turkish civilians during a raid by Israeli commandos on the Mavi Marmara, a ship that was part of the flotilla to the Gaza Strip, in May 2010.

BICOM published a [detailed background paper on this issue](#) in March 2016. Below is a summary of the new developments, as well as an analysis of the main components of the agreement and their strategic significance.

Background

Following the breakdown of diplomatic relations in 2010, Turkey made three demands to normalise relations with Israel: an apology for the Mavi Marmara flotilla deaths, an agreement to pay compensation to the families, and an end to Israel’s naval blockade of Gaza. The first two requirements were resolved in March 2013 when Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to pay approximately US\$20m in compensation and issued an apology for any error that may have led to the loss of life. Yet the remaining components surrounding Israel’s naval blockade of Gaza as well as Israel’s call for Turkey to cease hosting Hamas headquarters, remained sticking points in subsequent rounds of negotiations. Israel argued that hundreds of trucks of goods – including those of Turkish origin – were already able to enter Gaza on a daily basis after being inspected in order to prevent the transfer of weapons. Meanwhile, Israel’s close

ally Egypt had also strongly opposed any Turkish presence in Gaza and the potential strengthening of Hamas.

‘Splitting the Difference’ to Reach Agreement

These differences have now been resolved. Turkey agreed to withdraw its demands regarding the Gaza blockade in exchange for an Israeli pledge to facilitate the delivery of Turkish aid to Gaza via the Ashdod port. Israel also gave approval for Turkey to build a new desalination facility, power plant and hospital in Gaza. At the same time, Turkey committed to prevent Hamas from using the country as a base from which to work against Israel, which subsequently led to Israel dropping its call for Turkey to expel Hamas’ command centre from the country. In short, the sides seemingly ‘split the difference’ with both showing willingness to settle for less than they originally demanded.

Why Now? - The Regional Context

To understand why this rapprochement is taking place in June 2016 rather than in March 2013, immediately after Israel’s apology, one should look at the regional context. Turkey has experienced mounting foreign policy challenges with the almost complete collapse of its ‘zero problems with neighbours’ policy. It is facing a resurgent hostile Assad regime, an increasingly independent Kurdish region arising on its borders, strained relations with Egypt, Iran and Russia and has been targeted by Kurdish separatists and the Islamic state (ISIS), most recently yesterday’s attack (28 June) at Ataturk airport in Istanbul. Meanwhile American support for the Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (YPG) – strongly opposed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – and the strengthening of relations between Israel, Cyprus and Greece, Turkey’s historic rival, have further exacerbated Turkish geostrategic challenges. In

this context President Erdogan began to perceive Israel as a stable anchor in a turbulent region, with the two countries sharing strategic interests relating to the threat of the rise of ISIS and the growth of Iranian power. The unstable regional environment also influenced Israeli thinking with Prime Minister Netanyahu describing the agreement as part of an Israeli strategy to ‘create centres of stability in the stormy Middle East’.

Strategic Significance

Security and Intelligence: Israel and Turkey are due to resume their military cooperation although with the secular Turkish army severely weakened under President Erdogan and his Islamic AKP (Justice and Development) Party the countries are unlikely to return to the intensive levels of coordination they enjoyed before relations collapsed. One benefit from the rapprochement which has already occurred is Turkey ending its long-standing veto which prevented Israel upgrading its ties with NATO. Israel opened a permanent mission at its Brussels headquarters at the end of May. Intelligence sharing is also likely to increase which should benefit both sides, although NATO partners have expressed concern regarding Turkey’s intelligence community apparent pivot towards Iran in recent years.

Economic Ties and Energy: Israel-Turkey economic ties remained robust even during the crisis in relations, with Turkey constituting the most popular holiday destination for Israelis and trade doubling between 2010 and 2015 to more than US\$5bn. Netanyahu emphasised the potentially substantial economic component of the agreement in the field of energy, with the sides announcing official talks to lay a gas pipeline and Turkey – already in need of diversifying its gas supplies in light of tension with Russia – expressing interest in purchasing Israeli gas and selling it to European markets. However the road ahead is long. Full utilisation of Israel’s natural gas resources via Turkey will require a resolution of Turkey and Cyprus’ territorial dispute.

Israel, Hamas and Gaza: Israeli critics of the agreement have emphasised the ‘unfinished business’ of Israeli citizens and the remains of two soldiers held by Hamas. Turkey formally promised to seek their return although its ability to pressurise Hamas on this issue is limited, with Hamas perceiving them as bargaining chips with Israel for a significant prisoner exchange. Following the agreement, Turkey may become an

additional effective route to convey messages from Israel to Hamas, thus facilitating a more effective mechanism to end future military skirmishes between the sides.

The Greater Middle East: Israeli-Turkish reconciliation is unlikely to have a significant impact on events in Syria beyond potential dialogue and exchange of information. Israel’s area of focus remains southern Syria, where it fears the Iranian-Hezbollah axis will gain a foothold, whereas Turkey is chiefly concerned with northern Syria and the territorial ambitions of the Kurds.

Conclusion

The agreement signals the reset of relations between the Jewish state and one of the leading Sunni Muslim states in the Middle East and in that sense it is highly significant. One additional important element of the agreement is in facilitating Israel upgrading its ties with NATO and in strengthening economic ties between Israel and Turkey. However, the countries are unlikely to return to the closeness they enjoyed during the 1990s, and tensions between Israel and the Palestinians – particularly over Gaza and Jerusalem – will continue to cast a shadow over future Israeli-Turkish relations.

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