
Bad New Vibrations

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The special relationship between the Turkish and Jewish states is at risk

WIDESPREAD outrage over Israel's assault on Gaza has sharply soured the tone of Turkey's people and government towards the Jewish state. The prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, castigated it for hammering the Palestinians. So far he has resisted a clamour in Turkey to loosen or even sever his country's close ties with Israel. But some advocates of the strategic friendship between the two countries fear it may be at risk.

Behind the scenes, Turkish policymakers, especially military ones, still cherish their ties with Israel. Speaking this week in Switzerland, Mr Erdogan seemed keen to draw a line under the row. He explained that he was incensed by the war in Gaza particularly because his tireless mediation had brought Israel and Syria close to a deal over the Golan Heights. He said he had also been trying to fix a deal with Hamas over a prisoner exchange, including freedom for a kidnapped Israeli corporal.

Similar rows have occurred before. In 2004 he annoyed Israel by calling it a terrorist state after it assassinated Hamas's founder, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, as he left a mosque in Gaza. Mr Erdogan then invited Khaled Meshaal, Hamas's present leader, to visit Turkey. But Israeli-Turkish relations were mended after prodding by the United States. Military co-operation went on. Israel has invariably chosen to turn a deaf ear to Turkey's occasionally fierce rhetoric for the sake of that strategic liaison. In a bid to soothe the anger of Jews and Israelis, Turkey's foreign minister, Ali Babacan, urged Hamas to decide "whether it wants to be an armed group or a political movement".

But this time Mr Erdogan had been a lot angrier. Israel, he railed, was "committing a crime against humanity...The world must not turn a blind eye to Israel's savagery...How can such a country, which totally ignores and does not implement the UN Security Council's resolutions be let through the gates of the UN?"

An education ministry circular particularly annoyed Israel by telling Turkish schoolchildren to observe a minute's silence in solidarity with Palestinian children. In the event, the Israelis persuaded the Turks to cancel a proposed essay and drawing contest for schoolchildren to air their feelings of hatred towards Israel. Israeli officials were apparently poised to respond by proposing a programme in Israeli schools for discussing the genocide of Armenians by Turks in the first world war.

In any case, anti-Israeli anger on Turkey's streets rose during the assault on Gaza. In rallies across the country demonstrators chanted "Killer Israel! Nazi Israel! Turkish armies, march on Jerusalem!" 9 D Calls to boycott Israeli goods and scrap military co-operation grew louder.

Not for the first time, anti-Semitism reared its head. In the western city of Eskisehir, members of a nationalist group brandished placards that read, "Only dogs can enter: no Armenians or Jews!" An outcry from Turkey's 25,000-strong Jewish community, plus pressure from the foreign ministry, shamed a local prosecutor into launching a probe. Turkey's Jewish community issued a rare statement saying that "we Turkish Jews, an inseparable part of the Turkish Republic, feel deep sorrow for the comments appearing in recent days in certain media outlets that belittle and insult our religion and present us as targets."

An ancient alliance Turks deny accusations of anti-Semitism, noting that the Ottoman Sultans opened their doors over 500 years ago to Jews fleeing from Christian persecution in Spain. In 1948, Turkey was among the first countries to recognise Israel. Under a military co-operation deal in 1996, Israeli pilots have been training in Turkish skies. In 2007, bilateral trade rose to \$2.7 billion. Between 2006 and 2007, the number of Israelis visiting Turkey went up from 362,000 to 511,400--more than 7% of Israel's population.

Turkey has also earned praise from the Americans for its recent mediation between Syria and Israel.

But anti-Semitism is often part of a general anti-Christian and anti-Western feeling.²⁰ "Jew" and "Armenian" are both often used as slurs.

Last year a Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that anti-Jewish sentiment in Turkey had risen: 76% said they had negative views towards Jews, whereas only 7% said they looked kindly on them.

Anti-Semitism was also blatant during a campaign against an Israeli financier, Sammy Ofer, who had planned to invest with a Turkish partner in rehabilitating Istanbul's historic Galata district and its port near the Golden Horn. The tender was cancelled amid widespread claims that the deal was crooked and that "Jewish capital" was trying to take over the country.

Radical Turkish Islamists have long tried to stir up anti-Semitism. Their long-standing jibe against the secular Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's founder, was that he was "really a Jew". In recent years assorted leftists and Kemalists have joined an anti-Jewish chorus that frequently accompanies hostility to America, which is often accused of plotting with Israel to set up an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq that will eventually take large chunks out of south-eastern Turkey.

Behind-the-scenes lobbying by Turkish, American and European Union diplomats may have persuaded Mr Erdogan to tone down his language. He recently told Turkey's parliament, "As a leader, I have said that anti-Semitism is a crime against humanity." But if anti-Israeli rhetoric in Turkey persists, the Israeli lobby in the United States could hit back by backing a congressional resolution to call the mass killings by Turks of some 1m Armenians "genocide". Hitherto, Israel's influential lobby in America has repeatedly helped block such a resolution, though Barack Obama and his vice-president, Joe Biden, have both referred to genocide in the past and have pledged to back the bill.

Secret talks between Turkey and Armenia to open diplomatic ties and reopen their borders are hotly opposed by some in the Armenian diaspora's lobby in America. American Jews have long felt queasy about defending Turkey over the massacre of Armenians. Hitherto, pragmatism has prevailed and they have sided with the Turks. But if Mr Erdogan keeps on lambasting Israel, they may change their mind.
