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## Out On A Limb

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Turkey's increasingly aggressive rhetoric against Israel could have unintended consequences, writes Gareth Jenkins in Istanbul

On Monday, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu threatened that Turkey could sever diplomatic relations with Israel unless Tel Aviv accepted its conditions for normalising them. Turkey's ties with Israel were plunged into crisis following the brutal Israeli assault on a flotilla carrying aid to Gaza on 31 May. Nine Turks were killed when Israeli commandos stormed the flagship Mavi Marmara while it was in international waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey described the attack as "murder" and "an act of piracy on the high seas". The Israeli government defended its actions, claiming that many of the Turks onboard had come equipped and determined to use violence, forcing its commandos to defend themselves.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Turkey called for the establishment of an international inquiry and threatened to use every means at its disposal -- including legal action -- to force Israel to apologise and pay compensation to the families of victims. Israel refused.

In reality, Ankara's options were always limited. There is no effective legal mechanism by which Turkey could take Israel to a court. The two countries do not have significant economic ties and their military relationship -- which was very close during the late 1990s -- has weakened considerably since the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP) first came to power in November 2002.

Turkey's best hope of forcing Israel to agree to its demands was persuading the US to apply pressure. But the JDP's increasingly assertive foreign policy, particularly its relentless championing of Iran over its nuclear programme, has also severely strained Ankara's ties with Washington.

On 9 June, despite signals from the Obama administration that it would understand if Turkey abstained, the JDP stubbornly insisted on voting against a US-sponsored package of additional sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council.

In recent weeks, with still no sign that Israel was prepared to concede to Turkey's demands, there had been speculation that the JDP was looking for ways to repair the relationship. Last week, Davutoglu and Israeli Trade Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer held a secret meeting in Brussels. But it soon emerged that the meeting had taken place without the knowledge of Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, while Davutoglu moved quickly to dismiss claims that the JDP was softening its stance by publicly insisting that he had used the meeting to repeat Turkey's earlier demands.

On Monday, Davutoglu upped the stakes and threatened that Ankara could sever its diplomatic ties with Israel unless it acceded to Turkey's demands. Contradicting statements by Turkish diplomats earlier in the week, who had insisted that everything would be evaluated on a case by case basis, Davutoglu also announced that Turkey had imposed a blanket ban on all flights by Israeli military aircraft through Turkish airspace and had withdrawn from the planned Reliant Mermaid search-and-rescue military exercises with the US and Israel.

Extraordinarily, Davutoglu then declared that he expected the US to intervene with Israel on Turkey's behalf.

Lieberman's response was blunt and unequivocal. "We have no intention of apologising to Turkey," he said. "On the contrary, it is they who should be apologising to us."

Davutoglu's decision to increase the tension with Israel and his failure to read the change in mood in Washington has inevitably raised questions, not just internationally but also inside Turkey, about his diplomatic acumen. Since he was appointed foreign minister in May 2009, Davutoglu has antagonised senior members of the Turkish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) by repeatedly ignoring their advice and relying instead on an inner court of handpicked young advisors, several of who are still doctoral students.

Davutoglu's energy and seemingly boundless self-confidence has yet to be matched by results. In 2009, his attempted rapprochement with Armenia collapsed after he refused to listen to warnings that unless the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was resolved first, re-establishing diplomatic ties with Yerevan would infuriate Azerbaijan, Turkey's long-term ally whose support it needs if it is ever to fulfil its ambitions of being an energy corridor to Europe. More recently, Davutoglu and the JDP ignored the advice of senior officials that the flotilla to Gaza should sail in compliance with international maritime norms and deliver the aid to Egypt, from where it could be delivered to the beleaguered Palestinians.

Perhaps more alarming has been Davutoglu's failure to read the region.

Many in the JDP genuinely believe that the Muslims of the Middle East share their nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire. This is not the case.

Nor does Davutoglu appear to understand that, although they support the JDP's calls for Israel to dismantle its nuclear weapons, most Arab states are very concerned about increasing evidence -- which only the JDP appears willing to ignore -- that Iran's uranium enrichment programme is not solely designed for peaceful purposes. After living for so many years under the shadow of Israel's nuclear capability, very few in the Arab world have any desire to live under Iran's as well.

In addition, Davutoglu does not appear to realise the full repercussions of the JDP's attempts to portray Turkey as the leading defender of Palestinian rights. To date, Iran has skilfully used the JDP's defence of its nuclear programme to weaken international opposition without losing anything in return. For Turkey, there have been no concrete benefits, but only damage to its traditional ties with the West. In contrast, Iran has long used rhetoric supporting the Palestinians and attacking Israel as a means of extending its influence in the Middle East. Regardless of whether or not the JDP succeeds in forcing the Israel into making concessions, Turkey is now threatening to usurp Iran's self-perceived role as the champion of the Palestinians. As a result, far from strengthening ties with Tehran, the JDP's increasingly aggressive anti-Israeli rhetoric could turn Iran and Turkey from allies into rivals.

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