
Gaza Offensive Jeopardizes Israel's Relations With Turkey

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ISTANBUL | Israel's Gaza offensive has created fractures in the Israeli-Turkish alliance and deepened ties between Ankara and Tehran in what analysts fear could be the start of a major realignment in the region.

"This will seriously damage Turkish-U.S. relations on a long-term basis," said Graham Fuller, a former CIA officer and author of books on Iran and Turkey. "Israel will get no free ride from Ankara anymore."

Before Israel implemented a cease-fire early Sunday, Turkey's Islamist-rooted ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had mediated between Hamas and the Egyptian government in an effort to end the fighting. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy confidant, Ahmet Davutoglu, shuttled between the Hamas leadership in Damascus and negotiators in Cairo and Europe.

But Turkish contact with Tel Aviv was minimal after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offended Mr. Erdogan at their last meeting a few days before the crisis by not alerting him in advance to Israel's plans to respond to Hamas rockets with a massive offensive.

After the start of that offensive Dec. 27, Mr. Erdogan infuriated the Israeli government by siding strongly with the Palestinians.

The Vatan daily reported that he said that "God will punish Israel" and noted that the comment ranked among the harshest condemnations of Israel, on a par with remarks by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Libyan leader Col. Moammar Gadhafi.

Last Friday, Mr. Erdogan went a step further, demanding that Israel should be expelled from the United Nations while it ignored the organization's calls to stop the fighting in Gaza, which he called Israel's "savagery."

"How is such a country, which totally ignores and does not implement resolutions of the U.N. Security Council, allowed to enter through the gates of the U.N.?" the Associated Press quoted Mr. Erdogan as saying before the cease-fire took effect.

During the crisis, Mr. Erdogan's outspokenness and clips of him visiting Palestinians injured in a Turkish hospital figured prominently in news reports, boosting his domestic grass-roots support.

The images and rhetoric had an opposite effect in Israel.

The Jerusalem Post commented that the "Turkish government [is] guided more by Islamic solidarity and anti-Western sentiment than by pragmatic calculations of interest."

An article, titled "Turkey's Drift Away From the West," predicted that "rather than a part of the West, Turkey could become equidistant between the West and powers like Russia or Iran."

Meanwhile, Iranian officials have been frequent visitors to Ankara in the past few weeks. Turkish officials met with current and former Iranian National Security Council chiefs Saeed Jalili and Ali Larijani and acted as

a conduit for their messages to the Western diplomatic establishment. In January, Turkey became a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, a position it will hold for two years.

"One of Turkey's problems is that it's active on all fronts, it has a finger in every Middle Eastern pie," said Hugh Pope, the Turkey representative for the International Crisis Group and author of "The Rise of the Turkic World."

"Despite its highly talented foreign minister, there's a limit to how many crises one may follow at once," he said.

Turkey concluded navy exercises with the Russian navy in the Mediterranean earlier this month. Last summer, it suggested the creation of a Caucasus Stability Pact that included Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia but neither the United States nor the European Union.

Last week, Mr. Larijani, who is now speaker of the Iranian parliament, visited Damascus for talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad and the Hamas leadership, then moved on to Istanbul. Attending an emergency meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, he called on Muslim states to cut ties with Israel.

Turkey and Iran have enjoyed increasingly close trade and energy ties in recent years. A Turkish construction company built Tehran's new Imam Khomeini airport and Turkish goods are widely available throughout Iran, from Ulker chocolate bars to non-alcoholic Efes beer. Iran is Turkey's second-largest supplier of natural gas after Russia. Turkish energy companies are developing three natural gas fields in southern Iran and relations have improved since 2004 when the Iranian military establishment blocked a Turkish bid to develop a cell-phone network on national security grounds (and to give the lucrative contract to an Iranian firm).

Still, despite the souring relationship with Israel, Turkey's military is not about to trade ties with Tel Aviv for Tehran. The Turkish army has enjoyed warm relations with its Israeli counterpart since the 1990s and Israel values Turkey as a client for weapons and as a larger venue for military maneuvers.

"There is no new Turkish-Iranian alliance to replace the old Turkish one," said a military specialist who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the topic. "The arm deals continue. Israel is still on line to supply the Turkish Air Force with airborne imagery intelligence systems and to refurbish Turkey's main battle tanks. Mounting public indignation over Gaza may change all this but I doubt it."

As for relations between the militaries of Iran and Turkey, "it's cordial but it's not an alliance," said Gunes Tezcur, a political science lecturer at Chicago's Loyola University. "The security establishments in both Iran and Turkey are too suspicious of each other to establish a relationship based on mutual trust. And an Iran armed with nuclear weapons is likely to create a security dilemma for Turkey."

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