

THE AFTERMATH OF ISRAEL'S RAID ON THE GAZA AID FLOTILLA Is Turkey a new rogue state?

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The *Mavi Marmara*, leading ship of the flotilla headed for the Gaza Strip

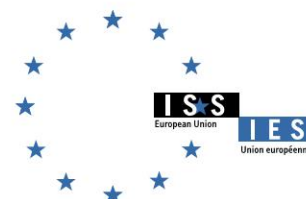
There is no doubt that the drama surrounding the raid by Israeli elite troops on 31 May on an aid flotilla carrying supplies to the Gaza strip – an incident in which eight Turkish passengers and another of Turkish descent were killed – has shaken relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv to their core. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is threatening serious consequences if Israel fails to apologise and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu even compared the ‘psychological’ effect of the event on Turkey with that of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US. Difficult though it may be right now to imagine a complete break in diplomatic relations – Turkey is still a member of NATO and a candidate for European Union membership, and remains a major buyer of

Israeli arms technology – it is clear that the ‘strategic alliance’ between the former allies no longer exists.

Does this mean that Turkey is lost to the West? Europe and the US have registered with surprise how Ankara has moved closer and closer to the Muslim world in recent weeks – as demonstrated in the way Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received Erdogan with a brotherly kiss, in how the Arab street has celebrated Erdogan as a new Nasser and a conqueror of Israel, and how Palestinians have raised Turkish flags in Gaza. Liz Cheney, daughter of former US Vice President Dick Cheney, even went so far as to add Turkey to the ‘Axis of Evil’, depicting the country as an Islamist rogue state.

But the younger Cheney could hardly be more mistaken, and Ankara’s new foreign policy posture has far less to do with Islamism than many observers might wish to believe. A closer look makes it clear the country’s ‘moderate Islamist’ Justice and Development Party (JDP) is actually guided to a far greater extent by populist and pragmatic as well as by nationalist interests. It was sentiments within Turkey that clinched matters with regard to the government’s response to Israel’s actions – Erdogan knows that no other topic would win him favour among so many different segments of Turkish society as his criticism of Israel’s policies regarding Palestinians. He is enjoying the approval coming his way from his own electorate and now from the Arab world as well. And although Israel is said to have warned Erdogan of the security risks, he

*Daniel Steinvorth is Istanbul correspondent for the German weekly magazine and news website *Der Spiegel*.



could hardly have stepped in and publicly stopped the Gaza flotilla activists. Still, the Turkish government's role leading up to the mission seems fairly dubious and it remains unclear to what extent the JDP government may have encouraged escalation on the part of radicals among the 'aid activists.'

The current chill between Tel Aviv and Ankara also comes with a complicated history. Erdogan has not forgotten that Israeli soldiers marched into the Gaza Strip in the winter of 2008-2009, at the same time as Turkey was attempting to moderate peace talks between Israel and Syria. The Turkish prime minister, who would have distinguished himself in the eyes of the West too, had he produced an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, felt personally deceived by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Since then, Erdogan has not lost an opportunity to denounce Israel. Turkey's cancellation of Israeli involvement in an international military exercise, the airing of a television series Israel considered anti-Semitic on Turkish public broadcaster TRT and the public humiliation of Turkey's ambassador in Tel Aviv by Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon are the latest milestones in a series of crises.

The raid on the *Mavi Marmara* overshadows all previous diplomatic incidents. It provoked a wave of outrage in Turkey, but this should not disguise the fact that the anger springs essentially from nationalist rather than Islamist sources. This highlights an important difference, since in Turkey, unlike in the Arab world, Islamism has always been overshadowed by nationalism. Turkey's national identity has generally been stronger than its religious identity.

The fact that Turkey is turning towards Iran and the Arab states at the same time that it is turning away from Israel is worthy of attention, but Islamism is not the decisive factor here either. Far more, this new interest in the Middle East indicates a recognition on Turkey's part that it has neglected its political and economic interests in the region for decades. Turkey, an aspiring regional power on the look-out for new markets, is now

focusing on trade with its former archenemies, under the aegis of its Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu. It is no coincidence that when Erdogan and President Abdullah Gül travel to the Persian Gulf states, Syria and Iran, they are accompanied by businesspeople rather than preachers or religious scholars.

Previous governments also imagined expanding Turkey's sphere of influence into Central Asia and the Arab world, in something of a 'neo-Ottoman' foreign policy. The key difference between then and now is that the country did not have a realistic chance of becoming a superpower in the region until after 2002. Since then, Turkey has been only too glad to fill the power vacuum created by the Iraq War and the US's dwindling ability to shape the Middle East. In the same spirit, Ankara no longer seems particularly impressed by rejection from the EU, nor is the country lacking in self-confidence. When in doubt, taking a stand on the world stage against the US together with Brazil and Iran appears to be a more attractive option than being strung along as an EU candidate country. For this reason, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates believes that the European Union bears a considerable portion of blame if the West has indeed lost Turkey.

But is Turkey really lost? It is also possible that, after feeling understandable anger over nine dead aid activists, an awareness might prevail in Turkey that it makes sense for the country not to completely sacrifice the political capital of maintaining relations with both the Arab world and Israel. If the bloody drama aboard the *Mavi Marmara* truly has increased Turkey's prestige among Palestinians, Turkey could use that influence, for example, to wrest from Hamas the concessions Israel demands: a recognition of Israel's right to exist and an end to rocket attacks. Israel, meanwhile, should recognise the damage it has done to its sole Muslim ally (or former ally) and take pains to make amends, instead of branding Turkey as a new Islamist enemy. Israel should also realise that a normalisation of Turkish-Israeli relations will not be possible right now without the international probe into the Gaza flotilla incident that Turkey is rightly demanding.

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