

The Path to Normalization between Israel and Turkey

by Arad Nir*

It was July 3, 2016, only a few days after the security cabinet had convened in Jerusalem and approved the reconciliation agreement between Israel and Turkey. The bow of the Lady Leyla ship slipped into the breakwaters at the entrance of the Ashdod port. When the ship was safely tied to the dock, ten thousand tons of humanitarian aid sent by the Turkish government to the people of Gaza via Israel was unloaded. Twenty-four hours earlier, at the port of Mersin in southern Turkey, Turkish dignitaries had stood on the dock and applauded the signing of the agreement that enabled Turkey to “break the blockade” and assist the suffering people of the Gaza Strip. Media outlets in Turkey and in Israel adopted the narratives that were marketed by the respective leaders of their countries: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey (via the new Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım) and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. The television networks, internet sites and newspapers in the two countries covered the sailing voyage of the Lady Leyla. None of them bothered to emphasize the fact that Turkey could have sent aid to Gaza via the Port of Ashdod, subject to Israeli security inspection, even without the agreement that was signed at the end of negotiations that extended over six years.

Throughout that long, wasted period of ups and downs, agreements, disagreements and various crises, both sides dug themselves into their respective positions and refused to budge an inch. When the time was right, and the strategic decision to normalize relationship was taken both by Turkey and by Israel, the heretofore “critical” stumbling-blocks became negligible. Proving that when there's a will, there's a way.

When the agreement was completed, the prime minister of Israel and the prime minister of Turkey held simultaneous press conferences. Benjamin Netanyahu convened his press conference in Rome, where he went in order to meet with American Secretary of State John Kerry on other issues. Binali Yıldırım convened the journalists in his chambers in Ankara. These press conferences were widely covered by the media outlets in both countries, and broadcast live on all the relevant television networks. These press conferences were the last stage of the process that was widely covered by the media in both countries. The stages that followed were conducted almost in secrecy, and not because of lack of public interest. The agreement was signed simultaneously in Jerusalem by the Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr. Dore Gold, and in Ankara by the outgoing Undersecretary of ministry of Foreign Affairs, Feridun Sinirlioğlu. The two

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men did not even meet for the signing of the deal, let alone for a festive celebration. Thus the signing ceremony was low profile with little media coverage. The representatives of the two countries did not walk off into the sunset together and did not declare the beginning of a wonderful friendship. In other words, it was not a reunion of two old lovers, but a marriage of convenience due to current constraints.

The distinction of the agreement that was concocted by teams headed by Israeli envoy Joseph Ciechanover and Turkish representative Sinirlioğlu is that it lends itself to flexible interpretation, allowing each of the sides to find in it a reflection of their needs, demands and constraints. This makes it easier for both sides to market it back home. The signed agreement does not remove the closure imposed by Israel on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and does not require Turkey to deport Hamas members from its borders at all times. Nevertheless, Netanyahu did not refrain from boasting about the achievements of the agreement that led to a supposed halt of Hamas activity in Turkey. He also talked about the accompanying classified letter, in which Turkish President Erdoğan allegedly instructed his foreign and security apparatus to take action in order to locate the missing Israeli citizens and soldiers being held by Hamas in Gaza.

These ostensible achievements served Netanyahu well to refute the arguments of his opponents. One group of critics had demanded that the agreement with Turkey must include a commitment by Hamas to release the Israelis it is holding in Gaza. Another group has never forgiven the Turks for attacking IDF (Israeli Defense Force) soldiers when the latter took command of the Mavi Marmara. The members of this second group also held that the official apology and payment of compensation by Prime Minister Netanyahu, was an insult to the honor of the IDF soldiers and their commanders involved in the Mavi Marmara incident. Many Israelis felt betrayed by the circumstances of the Mavi Marmara tragedy. They felt that the official Turkish state had laid a trap for Israel, forcing IDF soldiers to kill others so as to save their own lives. The vocal criticisms loudly voiced by Erdoğan against Israel and the IDF, reached new levels in the course of the last round of fighting in Gaza in 2014, the Protective Edge campaign. This criticism was uttered after Netanyahu had already apologized to Erdoğan about the flotilla events more than a year earlier, in a telephone call initiated by President Obama during his visit to Israel. This seemed to vindicate all those who had opposed the deal.

On the other hand, President Erdoğan had to convince his supporters that Israel – whom he had portrayed as the epitome of evil time after time, as the perpetrator of war crimes and crimes against humanity – was suddenly a worthy partner. And he had to do this even though the harsh conditions in Gaza would not be improved at all, at least not in the near future (until Turkey will complete the electrical and water desalination plants that evidently appear in appendices of the agreement). President Erdoğan also had to allay the ire of the families of those killed in the flotilla, for agreeing to receive damages from Israel. All of the families are devout Muslims and members of the IHH, an Islamic charity group (the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation). To the families, the compensation money is blood money (money received in exchange for murder, or Kan Parası in Turkish). This means that once the money is paid, the people who caused the deaths of their loved ones are no longer legally responsible. Thus the agreement concocted by Ciechanover and Sinirlioğlu, with its make-everyone-happy features, is called the “Compensation Agreement” in Turkey and “Normalization Agreement” in Israel.

The public atmosphere in Israel moves back and forth like a pendulum: it seems that Netanyahu has received more public and political backing on the flotilla crisis with Turkey, than on any other issue. Every time that talks between Israel and Turkey reached a dead end, public opinion and media atmosphere in Israel gave full backing to Netanyahu's stance. Yet Netanyahu also received similar support when he apologized to Erdoğan; when he took his time in completing the agreement; and even when he ultimately decided to pay compensation.

Results of a poll conducted by Mitvim (The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies) in August 2012, testify to the dominant mood and state of mind prevailing in the public and the media. The large majority of the Israeli public (79 percent) said that Israel should take action to improve its relations with Turkey, and even apologize for the killing of civilians on the Mavi Marmara, as per Erdoğan's demand. Fifty-four percent supported an apology, in exchange for signing the deal. When I published the findings of the survey on the popular Channel 2 televised news it aroused fierce criticism in social media as well as in newspapers op-eds, regarding its credibility and publication. The public, and many of Israel's public-opinion leaders, understood that reconciliation with Turkey is vital and that the price to be paid – an apology and compensation – is reasonable. However, they still had a hard time accepting it on the emotional, “gut” level. This difficulty evidently explains why Netanyahu hurried to bring the agreement to the cabinet for approval: He viewed the deal as a bitter pill that ought to be swallowed quickly. In contrast, Erdoğan took his time and remained cautious regarding the approval of the deal.

The vote of approval of the agreement took place in Turkey's Ankara parliament on Saturday August 20, 2016, at three am. It was held at the last minute, before the parliamentary representatives leave for the annual summer recess that continues until the middle of October. Turkish sources explained that the laggardness in approving the deal was rooted in an unrelated blow received by the elected government in Turkey: the failed coup attempt that transpired on July 15. Afterwards, it was necessary to invest time, resources and attention to deal with the coup's ramifications, they said. However, on those same days during which the final version of the reconciliation agreement with Israel was crafted, Turkey also completed another reconciliation agreement – with Russia. The Turks hurried to complete the latter agreement despite the internal drama playing out in their country and on August 9, President Erdoğan went to a summit meeting in St. Petersburg with President Vladimir Putin. In that meeting, it was decided to roll back the Russian economic sanctions on Turkey, and the two sides coordinated their positions regarding the ongoing, burdensome war in Syria. Therefore, we may assume that the slow, cautious Turkish modus operandi will continue to characterize the normalization process between Turkey and Israel in the future as well.

Nevertheless, this cautiousness does not detract from the importance of normalizing relations between Israel and Turkey; in fact, the opposite is true. When Erdoğan returned from Russia, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hurried to pay a warmhearted visit to Ankara, where he met with all the heads of state. Not long afterwards, it emerged that Russia uses Iranian bases from which to launch strikes against

Syrian targets. The Turkish foreign minister even visited Iran to prepare Erdoğan's visit there. Turkey curbed its opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime, thus inched closer to the Russian-Iranian position. Turkey's moderation was in exchange for a promise by Putin that he would not allow the Syrian Kurds, allies of the United States, to establish an independent entity in Northern Syria. Meanwhile, Turkey voiced a strongly worded demand to Obama: the immediate extradition of Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania. The Turks believe that Gülen is the leader of the conspirators behind the failed coup. In light of all these dramatic developments, US Vice President Joe Biden paid an important visit to Ankara at the end of August.

The Middle East seems to be on a roller coaster these days, and Turkey is an important, central cog in the roller-coaster's engine. It is well-known that it was the Washington administration which continuously pressured, pushed and steered Israel to accept the basic conditions set by Turkey for normalizing relations between the two countries. This included an Israeli apology for killing Turkish citizens on board the Mavi Marmara and paying compensation to the families of the slain activists and to the wounded. The removal of the blockade on Gaza was never part of the official demands, it remained a rhetorical statement that was repeated by Erdoğan over and over at public rallies. Completion of the reconciliation process was of strategic importance to the United States. It smoothed the way for bringing Israel into the NATO alliance – Turkey is still a senior member of NATO – and allows Washington to attempt to consolidate a counter-strategy to Putin. Yet in addition to all this, reconciliation with Turkey was an important Israeli interest. One important incentive behind the deal was the possibility of advancing a natural gas agreement with Turkey. However, there are other, more critical factors as well.

Turkey changed dramatically since Erdoğan assumed power, especially in the six years that passed since the Mavi Marmara incident, when ties between Jerusalem and Ankara were completely severed. The renewed rapprochement between the two countries should not be based on principles from the past. Instead, completely new mechanisms ought to be formulated. Israeli decision-makers must internalize an important change: that while in the past the armies were the pivot of the relationship, what set the tone between the two countries – those days are gone and will never return.

First and foremost, Israel must take action to establish communication channels between the elected leaders in the two countries. Since a foreign minister has not yet been appointed in Israel (Prime Minister Netanyahu holds this portfolio as well), Minister Yuval Steinitz is a likely candidate to lead the renewed contacts. Steinitz as the current Minister of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources (henceforth: Energy Minister) was one of the more vociferous and important voices who called for resuming diplomatic relations with Turkey, in order to exploit the natural gas reserves that lay under the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. But he is also very aware of the wider strategic contexts of the agreement. As a confidant of Prime Minister Netanyahu, Steinitz can leverage the gas issue to make advances in other cooperative ventures with the Turks. Thus it is very important that he enlarges his activities beyond the narrow field of gas. Steinitz is the most appropriate minister in the Israeli government to coordinate the

normalization of ties with Turkey. Since this involves the furtherance of joint initiatives in diverse spheres, Steinitz must be assisted by the general managers of the governmental offices, and they would try to contact their Turkish counterparts. Aid to the Palestinians can also serve as a platform that would facilitate rapprochement with the Turkish side. But it is important to widen joint Israel-Turkey activities to many other spheres as well.

Another decision of extreme importance will be the identity of the new ambassador who will be sent to Ankara when the agreement will be fully implemented. Israel's last ambassador Gabi Levy was expelled from Ankara in 2011 when Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations with Israel and reduced diplomatic representation of both countries to the level of second-secretary. The lower-level Israeli diplomatic representatives who remained in the embassy did their best to preserve Israel's status and position. But their Turkish hosts did not make it easy for them; in fact, they put obstacles in their way. The Turkish Foreign Ministry changed beyond recognition. Veteran diplomats were replaced. Sinirlioğlu, who had conducted the negotiations with Israel down to its final conclusion out of a sincere belief in the strategic importance of Turkish-Israeli relations, was distanced from positions of power. He was sent before his retirement to represent Turkey in the UN in New York. Sinirlioğlu will continue to serve as a key channel for diplomatic rapprochement. But Israel's new ambassador to Ankara will have to start from scratch in re-creating vital connections and contacts in the Turkish corridors of power.

It is necessary to be prepared for additional crises between the two countries, mainly in light of two issues: the absence of an agreed-upon solution with the Palestinians, and the unrelenting violent conflict with Hamas in Gaza. The media in both countries will be on the alert: Turkey will emphasize any harm that Israel inflicts on the Palestinians, and Israel will emphasize Turkish denunciations and reprimands. The new ambassadors are likely to be summoned not infrequently to a “demarsh” (reprimand or diplomatic protest) in the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs. However, after the relations are normalized, it will be possible to resolve disagreements through direct talks, and not via loud, inflammatory public statements. Despite the difficulties that are still anticipated, it seems that the prevailing strategic approach in Ankara and Jerusalem is positive and clear, even if progress will continue to be cautious and slow. As they say in Turkish, “Yavaş Yavaş”.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GPoT Center, Mitvim Institute, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue Publication Series

Upon the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the Israeli and Turkish governments in June 2016, and the start of a new chapter in bilateral relations, participants in the ongoing policy dialogue between Mitvim - The Israeli Institute of Regional Foreign Policies and the Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center were asked to offer their thoughts on the lessons that can be drawn from the recent period of diplomatic tension, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing this bilateral relationship in the coming years.

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