From apology to regional cooperation: 
The future of Turkish-Israeli relations

By OZGUR ERKAN

Following the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations after the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in May 2010, the long-awaited Israeli apology finally came, shortly before President Barack Obama was about to complete his official trip to Israel. While the apology was reported as the last-minute major event of the day in the Turkish press, both Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reportedly found Israel's apology satisfactory.

The apology is without question an important step for the rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. However, both sides need to move forward and engage in a regional cooperation, given the common security threats both Israel and Turkey face from Syria and Iran, and given the potential benefits to both countries from the natural gas project in the Mediterranean.

In a nutshell, the militaries of Israel and Turkey should start working together to face the national security threats in the region, a type of cooperation which was also the basis of the golden age of bilateral relations between the two countries in the 1990s. This time, however, cooperation should exceed the military dimension and include new parameters such as the natural gas project in the Mediterranean and a future triangular alliance with Azerbaijan.

The most imminent threat both countries currently face is Syria. The civil war in Syria as well as potential the rise of radical Islamists in the country constitute a major national security threat for Turkey on its southern border and for Israel on its northern border. To deal with this threat, the two countries need to participate in joint military training and share intelligence on both the Assad regime and the radical Islamists, regarding military capabilities and (potential) use of chemical weapons.

Such military cooperation, especially in terms of intelligence, can reduce the threat of potential attacks, to which both countries are prone at the moment. Take for example the recent attack from the Syrian side on Turkey in February 2013, where a explosives-laden vehicle was detonated at the Turkish-Syrian border, killing 14 civilians, including Turkish citizens. Similarly, the Golan Heights have been subjected to mortar shelling from the Syrian side since November 2012.

Furthermore, if a NATO intervention takes place in Syria, similar to the Libya intervention of 2011, Turkey will be the key NATO ally in this operation, and Israel will be the critical Western ally in the region supporting this operation from outside. Put differently, an efficient American and Western hard-power approach to Syria will work more efficiently once the two best US allies in the region are fully cooperating.

ANOTHER REGIONAL threat to both countries is Iran. While the threat to Israel posed by the Iranian president is crystal clear, Turkey was implicitly threatened by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in recent months; Khamenei asserted that Turkey would pay a high price for emplacing NATO Patriot missile batteries. At the same time, both countries enjoy a very close alliance with Azerbaijan, which is in Iran's back yard. The optimal step Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel can take against the Iranian threat would be to establish a "strategic triangle" and cooperate in terms of joint military training and military intelligence sharing.

This step would also integrate Israel more into NATO; Turkey is already a notable NATO member and Azerbaijan enjoys a partnership with NATO under the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). Moreover, if such a strong triangular alliance would also help the US work more efficiently against Iran through the combination of trade sanctions and a potential military response.

IN ADDITION to the security threats, Israel and Turkey can potentially enjoy the fruits of a regional cooperation with Cyprus on the natural gas project in the Mediterranean. Given the financial crisis Cyprus finds itself in, it is clear that Cyprus lacks sufficient financial assets to continue the exploitation of this promising natural gas project. Moreover, Israel cannot shoulder the entire financial burden on its own. In other words, a critical third partner with major interests in the island is needed.

Turkey could play a major role here thanks to its solid economic growth. Such a coalition would not only deepen Turkey's ties with Israel, but would also be the first step toward Turkey engaging in direct, face-to-face negotiations with Cyprus and the legitimization of the Republic of Cyprus. Leaving the economic benefits aside, this alliance would also significantly bolster Turkey's negotiations for EU membership, given that its failure to engage in direct talks with Cyprus has played a role in retarding Turkey's acceptance.

In a nutshell, both Turkey and Israel can hugely benefit from a close regional alliance, given the common security threats with Syria and Iran and the potential opportunities with Azerbaijan and Cyprus. The main framework both sides need to use for a close alliance and regional cooperation is a common phrase in Hebrew: "Smoch alai," trust me.

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