Charting Turkish Diplomacy in the Gaza Conflict

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ABSTRACT
On December 27, 2008, Israel launched a deadly attack on Gaza. Turkey responded immediately to the Israeli attacks and strongly criticized the operation. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embarked on a tour of Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to garner support for an immediate ceasefire. Turkey’s active diplomacy in the Gaza crisis is an indication of Turkey’s new foreign policy vision and a self-confidence consolidated by strengthening relations with regional powers. Turkey’s proactive policy in the region does not suggest that it will discontinue its relations with one side or the other. In fact, this supposition is marked by the old belief that Turkish foreign policy has a single axis or dimension. By observing the balance of power and keeping all actors involved in the process, Ankara has a greater chance of finding a just and sustainable solution to the Palestinian problem.

When Israel launched its operation against Gaza on December 27, 2008, it was the scope of the attacks, not the operation itself that came as a surprise. The Gaza region is no stranger to casualties, bombings, attacks and creatively named operations. Statements made during the six weeks prior to the attacks by both sides, and aggravated conditions resulting from the Israeli blockade of Gaza, had already heightened tensions. It was expected that Israel would respond to the rockets attacks by Hamas after it discontinued its ceasefire on December 19. And yet, what bewildered world public opinion was the fact that the Israeli operation went far beyond a response. Since the beginning of the Israeli operation on Gaza, more than 1,000 Palestinian have lost their lives and over 4,000 people have been wounded. According to the UN, one third of the victims are children.¹ Israel’s decision to expand the scope of its operation despite calls from the international community...
Turkey’s war on terror bears no similarities to the Israeli operation. The Israeli analogy between these two very different cases is not only simplistic but artificial indicates that if no ceasefire is achieved, conditions in Gaza will further deteriorate.

Turkey responded to the Israeli attack on Gaza immediately, strongly criticizing the operation. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan denounced the attack as a “crime against humanity,” and declared a suspension of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Erdoğan’s statements reverberated in the Arab and Israeli media, and stirred heated discussions in the Turkish press.

Lying behind Erdoğan’s strong reaction was Olmert’s promise, made during his visit to Ankara on December 22, just five days before the start of operation, that “no humanitarian tragedy will be experienced in Gaza.” In light of Olmert’s promise, Erdoğan called the Israeli position an act of disrespect to Turkey. Gabby Levy, Israel’s Ambassador to Ankara, did not deny that such a promise had been given; nevertheless, the Israeli government claims that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza and that it is not realistic for Ankara to expect to be informed of such military operations.

The short time span between Olmert’s visit to Ankara and the Israeli attacks on Gaza is one of several facts that have pushed Turkey to the wall. Tzipi Livni, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Cairo for an urgent meeting just one day before the beginning of the Israeli operations on Gaza. According to the news reports, Livni informed the Egyptian authorities that Israel could no longer tolerate being the target of Hamas attacks. Based on these reports, it is claimed that Livni undertook this visit to inform the Egyptian government about the operation. Those who hold this view speculate that Olmert’s visit to Turkey might have had a similar purpose, i.e. that of informing Ankara of the forthcoming attacks. Turkey’s role as a mediator during the talks between Israel and Syria illustrates the difficult position Turkey faces. The Israeli-Syrian talks are currently suspended; Turkey cannot be expected to mediate peace negotiations between these countries while war is going on in Palestine.

In order to quell Turkish criticism, Israel has long attempted to establish an analogy between Hamas and the PKK. Israeli statements emphasize that Israel’s operation against Hamas is no different than Turkey’s war against the PKK. This frequently touted line of argument was even reiterated by US President George W. Bush when Turkish President Abdullah Gül called him to discuss the Gaza situa-
It is self-evident that this analogy has no grounds beyond its propagandizing aims. Today, Israel is an occupying force in the Palestinian territory. This fact has been confirmed by more than one UN resolution. Hamas, on the other hand, is one of the organizations resisting the Israeli occupation. Hamas took part in the 2006 elections and came to power by the votes of the Palestinian people. Turkey’s war on terror bears no similarities to the Israeli operation: Turkey is defending its territorial integrity against an armed terror organization, a right that is recognized by the international community and by international law. Therefore, the Israeli analogy between these two very different cases is not only simplistic but artificial.

Those who find PM Erdoğan’s reaction “excessive” criticize his statements in view of the future of Turkish-Israeli relations. However, this is not the first high-level criticism to have come from senior representatives of the Turkish state against Israel. Turkish foreign policy making has always been responsive to Turkish public opinion regarding the Palestinian issue, and Israel’s policies and military operations in the Palestinian territory have been strongly criticized by various Turkish governments. In fact, then PM Bülent Ecevit described the Israeli attacks on the Jenin refugee camp in 2002 as “genocide.” On several occasions, Turkey has signed resolutions condemning Israel. Ehud Olmert’s promises, presented as guarantees that there wouldn’t be attacks on Gaza, at a time when Olmert must
have known that Israel had already made military plans for an operation, damaged the trust between Turkey and Israel. Pushing Turkey to the wall at a time when Turkey was facilitating Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations has also damaged Turkey's image in the international community. PM Erdoğan's reaction should be evaluated with a perspective that takes both the unexpected consequences for Turkey, and the humanitarian costs of the crisis into account.

Turkey’s strong reaction might have sparked expectations of even more radical actions to follow. However, calls for stronger responses, for example that Turkey should discontinue its diplomatic, military and economic relations with Israel, are far from realistic. Breaking relations with Israel would not contribute to the establishment of peace in the region; rather it would cause Turkey to become isolated from the process of peace talks. Friendly relations and trust between the two countries until today have enabled Turkey to acquire a privileged position from which it can contribute to the establishment of peace in many quarters of the Middle East. Although Israel deeply trusts the US, the US does not enjoy the same level of trust in the rest of the region. Lack of trust regarding the United States on the part of many countries in the region has created an opportunity for Turkey to undertake the role of mediator, most notably in the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. Abandoning all channels of communications with Israel would undermine Turkey’s ability to contribute to the establishment of a ceasefire and to negotiate for stability in the region. Although some would argue that keeping communication channels with Israel open will have no impact on convincing Israel to end the attacks, the only way Turkey can continue to contribute to the peace process in the mid to long term is to remain in the field and keep its relations active with all sides.

Turkish-Israeli relations cannot be analyzed merely within the confines of crises in the Middle East. Relations between the two countries peaked in the mid-1990s following several military and economic agreements. Many of these agreements are still in force today. One reason to continue relations with Israel lies in the fact that Turkey needs these military agreements. Turkey is forced to purchase military technology and weaponry from Israel, especially in situations wherein the US either refuses to sell or introduces quotas. Moreover, in contrast to the US Congress and the European Parliament which make the use of weapons in the war against PKK terror organizations difficult, Israel’s policy to remain indifferent in this matter is yet another reason to uphold the military agreements. It has been claimed that a new military agreement was signed during Olmert’s recent visit to Ankara. In fact, Israeli companies, Elbit Systems and Israel Aerospace Indus-
tries announced that they have singed an agreement with the Turkish Air Force worth 141 million dollars. Unfortunately this announcement, which came amid continuing Israeli attacks on Gaza, undermines Turkey’s efforts as a mediator for peace and raises questions as to the validity of Turkey’s reactions to Israel.

Adding another dimension to Turkish-Israeli relations, the Jewish lobby in the US has, so far, supported Turkey’s position against acceptance of the “Armenian genocide” bill by Congress. This is another factor that emerges as a dimension in Turkish-Israeli relations. During the presidential election campaigns, Barack Obama made statements indicating that he would recognize the Armenian claims. His imminent takeover of the American Presidency deepens Turkey’s concerns. After the elections, Turkey explained to Obama’s foreign policy team that the bill would harm Turkish-US relations. Despite this warning, it is unlikely that Turkey’s position vis-à-vis the Armenian lobby will escape challenges. In this context, a potential switching of sides by the Jewish lobby could have a direct effect on the US decision.

Turkey’s position regarding Israel should be anchored in a policy that engages all of the actors involved in the region in efforts to establish peace in the Middle East. In fact, it should be kept in mind that Turkey initiated the first diplomatic effort following the Gaza attacks to ensure that a ceasefire is achieved. The most significant result of Erdoğan’s Middle East tour is not the “two-staged plan.” There are, indeed difficulties involved in implementing this plan which requires a ceasefire first and then reconciliation among the Palestinian groups. Erdoğan’s tour covers Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, yet it will not be easy to reach a consensus on solution of the crisis even among these countries in the near future.

Despite the complexities and difficulties on the ground, PM Erdoğan’s tour in the region demonstrates that Turkey has established strong working relations with regional actors. The most meaningful step of this tour will be the meeting between Ahmet Davutoğlu, Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, and Khaled Meshaal of Hamas in Syria. Ankara’s contribution at this point is to motivate Hamas to take pragmatic steps and ensure a rapprochement among the Palestinian factions. Ankara can produce solutions from its relations with Hamas. Professor Richard Falk, the UN’s special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, has indeed acknowledged Turkey’s role in this context. Referring to the Ankara-Hamas
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Today, Turkey is trying to build up a similar environment. Although some believe that Turkey has only limited power, its initiatives are closely watched by the international community. The Arab League’s announcement, after its resolution in Cairo to support Turkey’s diplomatic initiatives to end the crisis indicates that Turkey’s contribution is highly sought after. French President Sarkozy’s call for help from Turkey after the second meeting of Ahmet Davutoğlu with Khaled Meshal in Damascus is yet another testimony to the importance of Turkey’s initiatives in the region. In this context, Turkey’s name is also mentioned for the position of establishing an international force that might be stationed in Gaza. This is in itself indicative of the fact that Turkey’s image among the regional countries is changing. The media in the Arab world acknowledges Ankara’s efforts and praises Turkey’s policies as far as the recent crisis is concerned. It reports that PM Erdoğan is pursuing a multidimensional foreign policy and engaging with regional actors to improve relations despite the risk of criticism that might come from the US and Europe. In this context, Fahmi Huvaydi of Al-Jazeera illustrates Turkey’s position as follows: “I believe that Turkey will be more honest than those mediators who hide that they take a position and mess up the relations rather than improving them.”

Turkey’s active diplomacy in the Gaza crisis is an indication of Turkey’s new foreign policy vision and a self-confidence that has been consolidated by strengthening relations with regional powers. Turkey pursues active diplomacy not only in the Middle East but also in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Africa and the Far East. In all such efforts, Turkey pursues a proactive foreign policy of contributing to peace and stability not only in the country of interest itself but also in neighboring regions and countries. Thus, interpreting Turkey’s efforts in the Gaza crisis in isolation from this large picture and describing it as the use of “Islamic relations” means leaving out the other state actors involved in formulating the country’s foreign policy. The National Security Council on December 30, 2008 adopted a
decision stating that the Gaza incidents are a cause of deep concern. It called for an immediate halting of the military operation, ending clashes, facilitating diplomatic efforts, creating a safe environment for the distribution of humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, and reconciliation among the Palestinian groups. The National Security Council’s resolution reflects the current policies pursued by the Turkish government and indicates that there is a consensus among senior state officials on the matter. There are those who argue that the strong reaction to Israel means that Turkey has opted for a new partner against the Western world. In fact, this interpretation is marked by the old belief that Turkish foreign policy has a single axis or dimension. The Military Cooperation Agreement signed between Turkey and Israel in 1996 had brought these countries closer, but at the same time it caused a deterioration of already fragile relations with other Middle Eastern countries. This agreement was deemed necessary by the Turkish side not only for economic and cultural reasons but to achieve security and stability. Turkey’s proactive policy in the region today may come at the expense of weakening its relations with Israel, but that doesn’t mean that it will discontinue its relations with one side or another. Ankara’s efforts to observe the balance of power and utilize its relations by keeping all actors in the process at the same time will increase Turkey’s chances of finding alternative solutions. For this reason it is important to combine strong reactions with multi-channeled diplomatic efforts instead of engaging in hard-line and inconclusive policies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Turkey’s role became more prominent during the process of seeking a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict. Turkey can contribute to the solution of this crisis in many ways, ranging from the achievement of a ceasefire to the provision of humanitarian aid to the region.

1- The Israeli-Palestinian question is a multi-layered problem involving many actors. The complex nature of this question will make it hard to find a lasting solution in the near future. However, the multidimensional nature of the problem enables Turkey to make contributions on several levels which may facilitate the finding of a path for a lasting solution. In this context, Turkey’s efforts to support the French and Egyptian initiative cannot be underestimated.

2- Israel’s launch of an attack on Gaza at a time when Turkey was acting as a mediator, in conjunction with statements made thereafter, have damaged the trust between the two parties. Normalizing relations between the two countries will increase Turkey’s contribution to the peace process. Turkey’s policy to main-
tain diplomatic relations with Israel has been made clear. Israel’s’ future policy regarding this issue will determine the course of events and the level of Turkey’s reaction.

3- During the Israeli-Syrian talks and meetings with Hamas, Turkey has demonstrated that it favors a peaceful solution in the region. Low levels of trust towards the US in many countries of the region, Iran’s troubled relations with the Arab world, and Egypt’s reservations against Hamas have created a diplomatic vacuum. If this vacuum is filled effectively and properly, it may create an opportunity for Turkey to become an indispensable actor in this process. However, Turkey’s agency also brings heavy responsibilities. Therefore, Turkey should formulate its policies with a far-sighted vision by carefully calculating every aspect of the crisis.

4- Despite its limitations, Turkey’s membership in the UN National Security Council creates an important opportunity for Turkey to pursue an active policy, communicate its policy preferences, and shape public opinion. By using this channel, Turkey can keep the Palestinian question on the world agenda.

5- The EU’s statements and its passive position cannot be accepted. The Georgian crisis proved how effective reactions can be in finding solutions to world problems. Therefore the EU should be part of the solution and use its power to put leverage on Israel. Turkey should work actively to get the EU involved in this process more effectively.

6- It is vitally important to reach reconciliation among the Palestinian groups in order to establish lasting stability once a ceasefire is achieved. As proposed in the “two-staged plan,” Turkey should take an active role in establishing unity in Palestine.

7- Necessary steps should be taken for the re-inclusion of Hamas in the political process. Continuing a rapprochement is as important as achieving it. One of the main reasons behind the dissolution of the National Unity Government, formed with difficulty in 2006, was the refusal of Israel, the US and the EU countries to meet with Hamas members of the government and their decision to continue relations with al-Fatah only. The survival of rapprochement depends on the acts of the Palestinian groups in conformity with the spirit of reconciliation as much as getting support from the international community.

8- Many Palestinians lost their lives during the attacks on Gaza and it has become an uninhabitable place for those left behind. Turkey should take part in the
reconstruction of Gaza and invest in the rehabilitation of its people. In order to accomplish such undertakings, Turkey should construct a hospital and a network of rehabilitation centers where volunteer doctors are encouraged to work. A scholarship program should be initiated to enable a number of students to continue their university education in Turkey, a project which will strengthen relations between Turkish and Palestinian societies.

**Endnotes**