

Turkish foreign policy: growing conflicts with the West

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20 January 2010

Tensions have been growing in Turkish-Israeli relations for some time, and a major foreign policy crisis was only recently adverted at the last moment. The background to the tensions between both countries is the growing political weakness of the US, which is responding with an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, particularly towards Iran.

The trigger for the latest outbreak of Turkish-Israeli tensions was the TV serial “Valley of the Wolves,” transmitted by a private Turkish television station. The hero of the series, which combines nationalism with extreme brutality, is the secret agent Polat Alemdar, who fights a range of enemies both inside and outside Turkey. One program featured agents of the Israeli secret service Mossad kidnapping a Turkish child and training her to fight against the Palestinians. The Israeli government declared the program to be “anti-Semitic” and summoned the Turkish ambassador.

The Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon then went to great lengths to provoke a diplomatic row. At the meeting between the two sides, the Turkish Ambassador Oguz Celikkol was required to sit in on a low seat and look up to the Israeli government representatives. The table between the two sides was adorned with just one flag—that of Israel. Ayalon refused to shake hands with the Turkish ambassador, did not smile and even explained in Hebrew to an Israeli television team the humiliating treatment he was meting out to Celikkol.

Later, the Turkish ambassador complained that he had not been informed about the reason for the meeting prior to attending and complained that he had never received such humiliating treatment in 35-year diplomatic career. Ayalon’s crude tricks represent a serious breach of diplomatic protocol and reflect the new aggressiveness on the part of Israel. Ayalon, like

the Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, is a member of the ultra-right Israel Beitenu party.

Turkey immediately demanded an apology, but the first reaction of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanjahu was to side with Ayalon. Israel only backed down when the Turkish side issued an ultimatum that it would withdraw its ambassador from Tel Aviv, i.e., break off all diplomatic relations, should the Israeli side refuse to issue a formal apology.

The US adopted a “neutral” stance towards the Israeli affront, advising Turkey to maintain a pro-Western policy and carefully avoided any criticism of the Israeli provocation. Both Israel and Turkey are important allies of the US. Turkey has historically played an important role as a mediator in the Middle East, and Washington hoped it would continue to do so.

In Israel the incident was described as a plot by Avigdor Lieberman, aimed at undermining Defense Secretary Ehud Barak from the Labor Party. Barak had travelled to Turkey and met with his Turkish colleague Vecdi Gönül and Foreign Minister Davutoglu in Ankara last Sunday. On the day before Barak’s visit, Ayalon again stressed that should the Turkish series “Valley of the Wolves” continue to demonize Israel, then Tel Aviv would expel the Turkish ambassador.

Both the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from the ruling Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party), and the head of the Turkish army both refrained from meeting Barak. Erdogan accepted the apology from Israel but remained steadfast in his criticism of Israeli policies.

For his part Barak did everything he could to play down the incident. With obvious satisfaction the Turkish paper *Today’s Zaman*, which supports the government, reported that Barak had defended Israel’s actions, but also expressed his understanding for the

criticisms of Israel made by Erdogan. At the same time, Barak criticized the “unfair” report given by one “Jewish judge,” i.e., the recent report by the UN official Richard Goldstone, which accused Israel of war crimes in its offensive against the Palestinians one year ago.

Barak’s visit took place within the framework of the Turkish-Israeli military pact, which has existed for over 10 years. Turkey wants to buy 10 surveillance planes worth over 100 million euro from Israel and plans to use the aircraft in particular in its offensive against nationalist guerillas of the Kurdish Worker’s Party.

Turkey—the only country with a predominantly Islamic population to maintain a military pact with Israel—has frequently criticised its ally in recent months for its treatment of Palestinians. Tensions came to a head a year ago, when Erdogan walked out of a panel discussion with the Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Turkey also cancelled a joint military manoeuvre with Israel last year.

Shortly before the conflict surrounding the TV program, Erdogan again sharply attacked Israel in the course of a visit to Lebanon. Erdogan described the violations of Lebanese air space by the Israeli Air Force in January as “terrorism” that threatened world peace. In addition, he repeated his criticism of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and also declared his opposition to the development of nuclear weapons by “any country” in the region. In other words, he was calling for the same criteria to be applied to both Iran and Israel, whose nuclear weapons are an open secret.

On the one hand, Erdogan’s stance is based on the longstanding and increasingly close cooperation by Turkey with Iran and Arab countries such as Syria, and on the other hand flows from the weakness of the US and European Union. As long as the Soviet Union existed, Turkey functioned as an advance post for NATO in the Western alliance and largely refrained from an independent foreign policy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, it has sought to assume more power in the region by developing closer contacts to all of its neighbours. The confrontational course adopted by the US and its Israeli and European allies against Iran now threatens Turkey’s approach and confronts the country with a dilemma, which in turn is reflected by sharp conflicts within the Turkish elite.

Last week Erdogan and five ministers travelled to Russia. In Moscow, Erdogan met President Medvedev and the head of government, Vladimir Putin. While little was revealed over the meeting with Medvedev, Erdogan confirmed with Putin Turkey’s guarantee from last August to support the South Stream pipeline project that is due to transport natural gas across the Turkish Black Sea to the west, thereby bypassing Ukraine. Russia, in turn, plans to support a pipeline from the Turkish Black Sea port of Samsun to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, allowing Russia to export oil over the Black Sea while avoiding the Bosphorus bottleneck.

According to a recent report in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Russia is also eager to participate in a consortium for the building and running of a Turkish nuclear power plant. A first attempt to establish such a project failed unexpectedly last autumn, but a new tender is expected to be announced soon. Turkey also plans to purchase Turkmen gas to be transported over Iranian territory—a pipeline from the Iranian city of Täbris to Ankara has already been in operation since 2001—and the connection of a new pipeline between Turkmenistan and Iran was sealed a few weeks ago in the presence of the Turkish energy minister.

For both political and economic reasons Turkey has no interest in the isolation of Iran, not to speak of a war against the country. The US-led war against Iraq has already had far-reaching domestic consequences. In 2003 the AKP faction in the Turkish parliament refused to follow Erdogan’s lead that the country accept the stationing of US invasion troops on its soil.



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