

US-Turkish tensions and the Israeli assault on the Gaza flotilla

Alex Lantier
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Israel's May 31 assault on the MV Mavi Marmara, a ship departing from Turkey to carry humanitarian supplies to Gaza, has provoked anger and outrage worldwide.

By inspecting and allowing the humanitarian flotilla to depart Turkish ports for Gaza, Ankara made clear its doubts over the viability of its decades-long alliance with the US and Israel. The standoff that has emerged between Turkey and Israel over the aftermath of the assault has highlighted the political explosiveness of Turkey's rapidly deteriorating relations with Israel and the US.

These tensions were on display on Wednesday, when Turkey joined Brazil to vote against US-backed sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council. Brazil and Turkey had agreed to a nuclear fuel swap agreement with Iran last month. Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN, denounced Brazil and Turkey for "standing outside of the rest of the Security Council, outside of the body of the international community."

Mass protests—in Turkey, by Israeli Arabs, and broadly in the Middle East and Europe—have highlighted popular hostility to the policies of war and collective punishment that have dominated the Middle East and Central Asia during the "war on terror." These wars, unpopular in the US itself, threaten to discredit pro-US regimes throughout the region. In Europe, the question of participation in the NATO occupation of Afghanistan underlay the February collapse of the Dutch government and the resignation of German President Horst Köhler last month.

Ankara's emergence as a major economic power over the past decade has deepened its conflicts with the US and Israel. Afraid of the domestic political consequences of supporting US and Israeli wars,

Ankara also finds them harmful to its attempt to develop economic and strategic relations in the Middle East.

In 2003, the new Islamist government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan voted against allowing US forces to invade northern Iraq from Turkish soil. It feared a US occupation would strengthen Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and Kurdish nationalist sentiment in Turkey's volatile east. It was dismayed by Israel's subsequent backing for Iraqi Kurds, whom Jerusalem supported to prevent the emergence of a strong Iraqi state.

At the same time, Erdogan supervised IMF austerity measures. The slashing of Turkish workers' wages turned Turkey into one of the Middle East's main cheap-labor exporters, oriented to Middle Eastern and especially to European markets. Turkey also became a transit state for Caucasian, Iraqi and potentially Iranian oil and natural gas to Europe.

Erdogan initially strove to maintain good relations with Israel and the US. While criticizing Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon and its 2007 air raid on alleged nuclear facilities at Deir-ez-Zor in Syria, in which Israeli fighter bombers traveled through Turkish airspace, Erdogan maintained military cooperation with Israel. Having renewed relations and signed a free trade pact with Syria in 2004, Turkey offered to broker Israeli-Syrian negotiations after the Deir-ez-Zor raid.

US hostility towards Syria and Iran in the aftermath of the Iraq war posed growing difficulties for Ankara, however. In an attempt to dissuade a US attack, Iran supported numerous regional forces, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, which could threaten Israel. At the same time, Iran continued developing its trade ties with Turkey.

The Israeli decision to launch Operation Cast

Lead—the January 2009 assault on Gaza—on the heels of Erdogan’s Israeli-Syrian talks was a major political embarrassment for Turkey. Stephen Cook, a scholar at the US Council on Foreign Relations, wrote that Ankara was concerned “that Erdogan would either look like he was in collusion with the Israelis, or too weak to stop the Israelis from undertaking this action in Gaza.”

Since then, despite continued cooperation on certain military contracts, Turkish-Israeli relations have continued to deteriorate. Turkey cancelled a joint “Anatolian Eagle” air force exercise with Israel last year. In January, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon created a diplomatic incident by publicly humiliating Turkish ambassador Oguz Celikkol during a meeting to protest the portrayal of Israel in a Turkish television series.

Writing in January 2010, the French journal *Politique Etrangère* concluded: “The Turko-Israeli partnership is extremely fragile and is losing its substance, in particular on political issues. Unlike Jerusalem, Ankara no longer considers Syria or Iraq as potential adversaries, but as partners. As for Iran, Turkey apparently intends to develop lasting ties.”

Turkish economic interests in the Middle East also increasingly pull it away from an alliance with Israel. Turkish-Israeli trade was valued at \$3 billion in 2009, but Turkish trade with Iran, Iraq and Syria was valued at \$11 billion, \$5 billion, and \$4 billion, respectively.

The US response to the Turkish role in the standoff has been consistently hostile, while it has moved to block an international investigation of the Israeli raid on the flotilla. The *New York Times* commented, “Mr. Erdogan’s tough talk eliminates Turkey’s place at the table as a moderator with Israel... and also boxes in the Obama administration, forcing it into a choice between allies that the Turks are sure to lose.”

US foreign policy after the fall of the USSR has largely been built around military and political dominance of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans. Wars in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan allowed Washington to regulate relations between its major rivals in Europe and Asia, prevent the emergence of an anti-US bloc, or intimidate them if needed with the threat of military force. However, the weakening of the US economy and the unpopularity of US foreign policy at home are undermining this strategy.

Washington sees the emergence of Turkey as an

independent power—in the center of this contested region, and opposed to US policy on Iran and Gaza—as a threat to fundamental US interests. Stephen Kinzer, an author studying the Middle East, explained to the *New York Times*: “Turks are telling the US, ‘The Cold War’s over. You have to take a more cooperative approach, and we can help.’ The US is not prepared to accept that offer.”

Stephen Cook stated the issue more bluntly: the question being debated in Washington, Cook said in the *Times*, is “how do we keep the Turks in their lane?” Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Cook labeled Turkey “America’s new rival in the Middle East.”

These comments underscore the global ramifications of the confrontation developing in the Near East. One major consideration guiding policy towards Turkey in Washington will be the impact of Turkey’s actions on US relations with Europe.

Summarizing a May essay by former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, *Die Welt* wrote: “The European Union will be able to exist independently of the power centers in the US and China only by uniting its forces. It must therefore deepen relations with Turkey and associate itself with Russia.”

The significance of public advocacy of a political axis between Germany, Russia, and Turkey, aiming to preserve European independence from the US, goes far beyond the immediate prospects that such an axis will emerge. Schröder is remembered in Washington for his opposition at the UN to the US invasion of Iraq. His advocacy of such a political axis will be met by powerful sections of the US political establishment by moves to prevent it from developing.



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