

Israel and Turkey: Friends No More

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ISTANBUL, September 19: *Let me begin with shvitz, a Yiddish term I believe that refers to special baths.*

When the hotel I was staying at in Istanbul advertised that guests were welcome to enjoy the Turkish Bath in their basement, I took them up on it. There were two other blondish guys in their birthday suits in the small room sweltering in the small room when I got there. They were drinking beer and conversing in a strange language I later identified as Swedish.

I was in town to speak at a session on Internet freedom at the 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA 2011) at Sabanci Center. They were there, as I slowly learned as engineers loaned out to the America's Westinghouse Corporation to build some nuclear plants in Turkey. Apparently, they were to have been built by the Tokyo Electric company that now has a nuclear disaster of their own on their hands. They were either fired or quit the job in Turkey.

It was something about fears about safety and ongoing risks. Japan is out; the American nuclear industry is in.

So now these shvitzing Swedes have a new job in a country they don't know much about and also have, as they revealed to me, many prejudices and non-nuclear fears about.

We batted around the nuclear safety and storage issues raised anew by Fukushima but they and their Turkish government patrons—unlike the Germans—are moving ahead into the cul de sac of nuclear power. The money is there as well as the arrogant certainty that nothing can go wrong.

The Turkish government now has some other hotter than hot issues to contend with, so the nuclear issue is on the back burner. That government can no longer be easily categorized as pro-American even if they are members of NATO and big consumers of US imports. The reason: the popular government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan—he won an amazing 50% of the votes in a recent election—has initiated its own independent foreign policy in this nation of 70 million and in his Eastern Mediterranean region.

Bolstered by a strong economy, in fact, one of the fastest growing in the world with an 8.8 percent growth rate, Turkey is spreading its influence throughout the world, including Arab countries that has always been suspicious about their motives. Erdogan visited Egypt, Tunisia and Libya last week and received a warm welcome for his economic help, political support for change, and as a champion of secular leadership in a Muslim country.

Beyond that, he is one of the most outspoken regional leaders criticizing Israel. According to

the polls, his stance is popular in Turkey and the Arab world according.

The two countries had been close friends and military allies until Israel launched the deadly Operation Cast Lead against Gaza, just as Erdogan was acting as a negotiating go between Israel and the Palestinians. When Tel Aviv started blowing up Gaza, they also blew up those discussions and embarrassed the Turks and Erdogan.

When a Ngo humanitarian group in Turkey, IHH, sent an a flotilla of aid ships to Gaza, Israeli special forces boarded the lead Turkish Ship, the Mavi Marmara and killed 9 people, 8 Turks and one Turkish American.

Not surprisingly. Turkey went ballistic after this massacre in the Mediterran. When the Israeli government refused a demand for an apology, Turkey sent the Israeli Ambassador home and broke off military cooperation. (What's not widely known is that there are many Israelis here, many coming for travel and business. Some Turkish Jews moved to Israel but retained family ties and are frequent visitors.)

Turkey has also been playing a close advisory and political support role for the Palestinians in the attempt to win a new status at the UN. Israel and the United States oppose that policy and a US veto is likely after Barack Obama speaks at the UN this week.

There are also simmering tensions between Turkey and Israel on two other fronts. There are strong rumors that Israel may support—or is supporting—the Kurdish PKK, a group Ankara sees as terrorist. If true, this will provoke a serious response here.

Also Israel is aligning with Greek Cypriots to explore for oil in a country still divided between Greeks and Turks. The Turkish prime Minister has threatened to send war ships to stop this, arguing than any oil found off the Island nation should belong to Turks and Greeks. This tension may easily expand into open hostilities if cool heads don't prevail. Israel says it will defend its interests.

And now, the Israeli Lobby in America is reaching into its one note playbook and starting to brand Turkey as anti-Semitic on the familiar knee jerk grounds that any opponent of Israel must, by definition, hate Jews.

Watch for more hateful denunciations in the name of fighting hate.

I have already received a propagandize email appeal with the title: "BOYCOTT TURKEY"

"Anti-Semitism is prevalent in many parts of the world and is gaining momentum in Europe and Britain. Synonymous with this ancient form of bigotry is anti-Israelism....

"At this moment, Turkey, which until recent years had enjoyed a decent relationship with Israel , changed dramatically following the election of the Tayyip Erdogan government which is unquestionably aligning itself with Islamic groups who are far from being well disposed towards the Jews and Israel, and is currying favor with such charming people as Ahmadinejad of Iran."

This is preposterous on the face of it. Iran and Turkey are not on the same page. Iran is a Islamic Republic, Turkey a secular democratic one. The former is largely Shia; Turkey is mostly Sunni but they also have major political differences.

This is more guilt by association to demonize a government that has been aligned with Israel because it is furious that its citizens were gunned down on the high seas.

Forget the facts, forget the differences. The pro Israeli hardliners always need fresh enemies to raise money on the back of, and get attention so there they go again, asking, "So what should we as Jews do?"a

"Should we sit back and proclaim that we cannot influence events and close our eyes to the menace of anti Jewish activity or do we react with our money and refuse to support the Turkish economy? I urge you to not purchase Turkish made goods...."

So, now, we have the same people who say they reject in principle the idea of critics of Israel boycotting them, launching a boycott against Turkey, insuring more vituperation and tension in the region.

You can expect parts of the US press to join in with more one-sided trash talk. Some in our media, including "experts" on Turkey are just bashers. One former Wall Street Journal editorial writer came here on a junket with neocon "Prince of Darkness" Richard Perle.

Once the Israeli Lobby goes on the ideological warpath, you can be sure that their fabricated issues will get lots of play from their media assets.

Turkey is a player in this part of the world and can no longer be sidelined or ignored. I will have more on this emerging story soon.

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