

The Other Fateful Triangle: Israel, Iran and Turkey

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The thunderous events set in motion by Israel's storming of the Mavi Marmara, the lead ship in the peace flotilla challenging the blockade of Gaza, have thrown important light on the overall situation in the Middle East. Turkey has emerged as the major protagonist among the forces that support the Palestinian cause. This is extremely ironic given that the country has been a loyal member of NATO for six decades and "Israel's most important friend in the Muslim world" (New York Times, May 31, 2010) for as long as one can remember, markedly so in the post-Cold War period and even under the present government. The Turkish national flag competed all over the world for the pride of place with the Palestinian flag in demonstrations protesting the barbaric murder by Israeli commandos of at least nine volunteers on board the Marmara, all of them Turkish citizens. From Istanbul to Toronto, Islamic motifs also dominated most such protests.

What is behind this rise of a new Turkish-Muslim protagonist in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and what does this imply for the system of imperialist domination in the Middle East in the foreseeable future?

To provide an answer to this question, we need to bring into the discussion another unusual set of events: the imbroglio between the U.S., on the one hand, and the co-operation between Turkey and Brazil, on the other, over the question of sanctions against Iran. Barely a week after the Israeli assault on the humanitarian flotilla, on June 8, 2010, a vote was taken at the United Nations Security Council on a fourth round of (reinforced) sanctions on Iran and, lo and behold, [Turkey and Brazil](#), rotating members of the Security Council and two docile allies of the U.S., voted against (and the only Arab country on the Council, Lebanon, abstained).

Only three weeks before that, the same two countries, after tough negotiations in Tehran, had signed an agreement with Iran for a swap of Iran's low-enriched uranium in exchange for enriched uranium to be used for medical purposes, something the Western countries had not been able to convince Iran into last fall. This was seen, as it certainly should, as a manoeuvre by the two countries to prevent the tabling of a motion on a new round of sanctions at the Security Council by the United States. So once again we end up with a similar question: Why this active diplomacy on the part of Turkey (and Brazil) that seems to swim against the current of the U.S. effort to isolate Iran?

Rise of a Regional Power or Islamic Fundamentalism?

There are at least three sets of contradictions to be taken into consideration when looking into the forces behind this new situation. The first of these involves the dynamics of

Turkey's economic and political rise as a regional power that is in search of a new kind of position within the imperialist constellation of forces. The second set of contradictions derives from the triangular contest between the three actual or potential nuclear powers of the Middle East (Israel, Iran and Turkey) and the U.S. stance on this question. The third aspect derives from the explosive contradictions of Turkey's domestic politics. Let us take up these three factors one by one.

Turkey is the foremost ally, with the obvious exception of Israel, of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East. It is also a candidate for accession to the European Union engaged in negotiations for the last five years, although relations have recently soured between the two sides due to the explicit reluctance of the Sarkozy and Merkel governments to carry the accession process to completion. The country is ruled by the most sophisticated and well-organized capitalist class in the Muslim Middle East. It wields the most advanced industrial production capacity among these countries and has increased its exports from around \$30-billion (U.S.) at the beginning of this decade to more than \$130-billion (U.S.) in 2008, before the onset of the world economic crisis. Moreover, 90 per cent of its exports are industrial goods, increasingly focused on such sectors as the automotive industry. It has very recently become a major recipient of foreign direct investment: many multinationals, from Microsoft to Coca Cola, have made Istanbul their headquarters for Eastern Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa.

Turkey is now seeking to become a financial hub and a business arbitration centre for the entire Arab world, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans. Add to this the fact that it has the second largest army in NATO after the U.S., which puts it among the three major military powers of Eurasia, along with Russia and Israel.

It is on the basis of this increasing economic and military clout that Turkish governments have, for some time now, been seeking to become a regional power. It was under Turgut Ozal, a staunch ally of the West and in particular the U.S. (and founder of the [Motherland Party](#) - Anavatan Partisi), that Turkey first started to venture into a pan-Turkic and neo-Ottomanist foreign policy, drawing the conclusion that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant a whole new era of opportunities for Turkey.

A singular product of this new orientation within the ranks of the Turkish bourgeoisie has been the mushrooming network of schools all around the world established by an immensely powerful religious congregation led by a charismatic Imam, Fethullah Gulen, not only in predominantly Muslim countries, but also in such improbable corners of the world as Latin America and the Far East. Fethullah Gulen is not committed to any single political party, but has lately supported the AKP (Justice and Development Party - Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi) government and has disciples within the army of AKP MPs and even within the council of ministers. He himself resides in the United States for fear of persecution by the Turkish secular establishment.

The AKP government has inherited Ozal's orientation and reinforced it through an immensely active foreign policy that at times veers in directions that are substantially independent of, and runs counter to, U.S. foreign policy. The fact that the government party comes from an Islamist background has raised a controversy within the country's ruling circles and the U.S. and EU establishments as to whether this new foreign policy implies an 'axis shift,' i.e. whether the government is moving away from the firmly entrenched pro-Western foreign policy of the traditional wing of the Turkish bourgeoisie in the direction of closer links with the Islamic world. The answer to this question is of considerable

importance, since the government formed in the late 1990s by the more fundamentalist predecessor of this mildly Islamic party, the Welfare Party – Refah Partisi (RP) – of Prime Minister Necmetten Erbakan, was toppled by an alliance of the Turkish military, the Westernist wing of the bourgeoisie and U.S. imperialism through brazen military intervention.

Our characterisation of the situation is that the AKP government is simultaneously attempting to cater to the new expansionist needs of the Turkish bourgeoisie and to become a regional power so as to better negotiate with the U.S. and, in particular, the EU. In other words, the simplistic explanation conjured by the Islamophobics of both the West and of Turkey itself – the idea that the AKP is finally revealing its Islamic fundamentalist nature – is false. The alliance with Brazil is not limited to the question of Iran, but extends across a spectrum of areas both economic and political. It seems that these two midsize rising powers are trying to achieve a level of influence comparable to those of Russia and India, if not China, on the basis of a closer alliance.

However, certain objective factors complicate the situation. For one thing, if Turkey wishes to become a regional power, that necessarily implies reaching out first and foremost to Islamic countries, of which there is no dearth in Turkey’s vicinity, not only in the Middle East and North Africa, but also in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In setting up relations with predominantly Muslim countries, the AKP has a natural advantage over its more secular rivals in Turkish domestic politics, which of course raises certain paranoid reactions from Islamophobics of all stripes. Even more important than this is the fact that Turkey’s rise in the Middle East has coincided with two other developments of substantial import: the conflict over Iranian nuclear efforts and the rise of Hamas as a highly contentious factor in the Israeli/Palestinian drama. These bring us to the second set of contradictions mentioned above.

Turkey: Between Israel and Iran

It should not be necessary to delve at length into the series of contradictions between Israel and Iran that make the hostility between these two countries the most burning question of the Middle East at present. Turkey’s special position vis-à-vis this standoff is what complicates the nature of the new Turkish foreign policy. Turkey is, or at least used to be, the most reliable ally of Israel as well as of the U.S. in the Muslim world. One would expect Turkey to go along with U.S. policy toward Iran, albeit with the circumspection to be naturally expected from a country neighbouring the powerful country that Iran is.

However, the U.S.-Israeli pressure on Iran for its supposed efforts at going nuclear has very paradoxically backfired on Israel by projecting, at least from the Turkish standpoint, the question of the (unacknowledged) nuclear weapons of Israel under the limelight. The Turkish government now insists on a nuclear-free Middle East; and since, whatever its real intentions, Iran, as opposed to Israel, does not yet wield nuclear weapons, this policy implies turning the attention of the region and the world on Israel’s nuclear capability rather than the putative nuclear arming of Iran.

Not without further irony, Turkey is the only other country in the Middle East, apart from Israel, that maintains (so far unacknowledged in this case as well) nuclear weapons on its territory, although these tactical warheads belong to the U.S. and were placed in Turkey

during the Cold War as a deterrent to the Soviet Union. All in all, what we are witnessing in the triangular relationship between Turkey, Iran and Israel is the effort of each of these countries to have the upper hand regarding nuclear clout in the Middle East.

It is on the question of Palestine, and in particular the plight of Gaza, that the semi-Islamic nature of the AKP comes into the equation. Since Hamas was elected in a [landslide in January 2006](#) to rule the Palestinian Legislative Council (eventually becoming isolated in Gaza), the AKP has followed a policy that widely diverges from both that of the U.S. and the EU (and of the so-called Quartet that also includes Russia and the UN). This policy also diverges from that which would have been followed by the rabidly pro-Western and Islamophobic secular parties of Turkey. The Western alliance classifies Hamas as a terrorist organization and rejects engagement with it so long as it refuses (a) to renounce violence against Israel, (b) to recognise the right of Zionist Israel to exist and (c) to abide by the Oslo accords.

The AKP, in contrast, invited Hamas officials to Ankara for talks in 2006 in the wake of the elections, an initiative severely rebuked by Israel and the United States. When Israel attacked Gaza in December 2008, the Turkish government unambiguously came up against the war drive. [During a panel discussion](#) at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in the aftermath of this war in late January 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan ferociously attacked the Israeli President Shimon Peres in an incident that captivated Arab audiences and made him a hero in the eyes of Arab masses. Joint military exercises that had been held for many years were later cancelled by Turkey. The Mavi Marmara incident is thus only the latest drama to be played out in the long agony of Turkish-Israeli friendship.

This clearly raises the question of whether, from the point of view of American interests, the AKP is fit to rule a country with which the U.S. has, in the words of Obama, a 'model alliance.' It is, of course, no secret that the AKP still bears some of the marks of its Islamic origins. The first serious test of the party's usefulness for the U.S. was tested in March 2003, when scores of AKP MPs blocked a government motion that stipulated the use of Turkish territory by the U.S. in its attack on Iraq. This soured relations between the two allies for years on end. Having already refused complicity in the U.S. war against the secular regime of Saddam, the more Islamist elements of the AKP may certainly resist, in the case of Iran, the waging of war on a country that calls itself an 'Islamic Republic.'

The secular opposition in Turkey uses this prospect and the AKP's sympathies for Hamas to drive a wedge between the U.S. administration and the AKP government. One may even speculate on whether the U.S. has not already turned its back on the Erdogan government, supporting the major left of centre secular opposition party (the People's Republican Party -Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) for the general elections, which are to be held at the latest within a year. This kind of support is all the more probable now that for the first time since the AKP came to power in 2002, the centre left has some possibility of outdoing it at the poll booths. The new leader of the centre left, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, uses populist rhetoric addressing the questions of poverty, unemployment and corruption dear to the heart of the masses, instead of the wooden language of the previous leader, Deniz Baykal, chewing endlessly on secularism and the survival of the republic, themes of interest only to the upper middle classes and his other cherished audience, the armed forces.

Political Civil War

This brings us to a third set of contradictions. The international implications of Turkey's new foreign policy are intertwined with the domestic struggles between the two major ruling camps of Turkish politics. We have [explained time and again in our previous writings](#) that the ongoing political conflict between the AKP government, on the one hand, and the broad array of secular forces, first and foremost the Turkish army, on the other, is an expression above all else of a struggle between two fractions of the bourgeoisie over the division of surplus-value and over political power.

The more traditional and entrenched wing of the Turkish bourgeoisie, the pro-Western, self-styled secular wing, adamantly refuses to contemplate any kind of attempt to move Turkey away from the West, even marginally. This wing owes its rise to the Westernizing parameters of the 'Kemalist republic' (Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1923). As opposed to this fraction, a new wing of the bourgeoisie has risen within the last quarter of a century and is now competing for power through the AKP. There seems to be no easy solution to the internecine strife of the bourgeoisie, a conflict we have been calling 'the political civil war of the Turkish bourgeoisie' for many years now.

The new fault lines of Turkish foreign policy interact with this division of the bourgeoisie in domestic political and economic life. Both wings of the bourgeoisie are keen to internationalize the circuits of capital eastward, and extend its political and economic influence toward the surrounding states. But since Islam is the prevailing religious orthodoxy in these countries, the pro-Western wing has a mortal fear that this policy may spill over, under the semi-Islamist AKP, into one of eliminating the Western anchor and becoming an exclusively Islamist one. The AKP government has come under fierce attack by the ideologues of the pro-Western bourgeoisie both for its management of the flotilla affair and its position on the Security Council vote on Iran. As for the masses, these measures of the AKP government are immensely popular, especially but not exclusively with the pro-Islamic electorate of the AKP.

The interaction between domestic and international politics may lead to a host of complications. The more popular Erdogan becomes in the eyes of the popular masses (both Turkish and Arab) thanks to his resolute standoff with Israel, the more difficult it is to remove him from power and the more hysterical become his pro-Western bourgeois rivals. Yet, it needs to be kept firmly in mind, the AKP's opponents in domestic politics are an immensely strong card up the sleeve of the U.S. should the AKP foreign policy become, at a certain point, a real drag on U.S. interests.

What Internationalist Policy for Socialists?

There is no easy path for socialists in this complicated situation. Any acceptable position should certainly avoid the Charibdis of tail-ending the Islamic movement and the Scylla of capitulating to imperialism in the guise of fighting religious bigotry. A nuanced approach to this complex field of political forces needs, moreover, to be combined with a principled support to the oppressed people of Palestine.

The first thing to be noted is that although the Left should, of course, be sworn enemies of nuclear weapons, there is no logic in denying Iran nuclear weapons when Israel manifestly possesses nuclear capacity (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of total nuclear disarmament). A nuclear-free Middle East, as a step toward a nuclear-free world, is the only policy that can be concretely counterposed to the unwarranted aggressive policy toward

Iran followed by the Western powers in alliance with Israel. It should be clear that this means not only full accountability for Israel and destruction of its nuclear arsenal, but also the removal of NATO and U.S. tactical warheads from Turkish territory and the closing down of the U.S. bases in that country.

It is far from demonstrated that Iran is after nuclear weapons and, given its track record in Iraq, the U.S. may be legitimately suspected of aiming for regime change in Iran under the guise of trying to stop nuclear proliferation. Iran should unswervingly be defended against U.S. and/or Israeli aggression. This has nothing to do with defending the fundamentalist Iranian regime against the opposition in that country. And, in any case, any opposition worth supporting for socialists, in Turkey or elsewhere, should be expected to stand up against imperialist aggression on Iran.

Secondly, internationalist solidarity with an oppressed people should not be predicated upon socialists' approval of the political nature of the movement that leads the struggle of that oppressed people. It is not because Hamas (or Hezbollah in Lebanon) are Islamic organizations that the peoples in question support them in mass numbers. It is because they defend, arms-in-hand, their people from colonialist aggression and occupation. To turn one's back on the people of Gaza on the pretext that Hamas is a defender of religious fundamentalism is to abdicate one's internationalist duties.

Defending the rights of the Palestinian people, ranging from the simplest demand of the lift of the blockade on Gaza all the way to self-determination and the right of return ('awda') is a fundamental task of the international movement, irrespective of the political and ideological nature of the Palestinian leadership. A subsidiary task of international socialism should be supporting those tendencies within the Palestinian Left that work toward a political break with the leadership of the PLO, as this organization has - probably irreversibly - descended into collaborationism with imperialism and Israel.

Thirdly, we should be clear that the Islamic movement cannot achieve the emancipation of the Palestinian people. More concretely in today's conjuncture, we must make clear to the masses, whether we are struggling in Palestine, in other Muslim countries or elsewhere, that the AKP government in Turkey and Erdogan personally are no saviours. It is true that a grassroots Islam that disregards the niceties of imperialist diplomacy seriously challenges the treatment meted out by Israel to the Palestinians. The IHH (Insan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı - The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), a rather enigmatic humanitarian foundation and the major organizer of the flotilla, probably mobilised people of such orientation.

The AKP, however, is not at all a party controlled by such grassroots people. On the contrary, the AKP is a party of the up and coming fraction of the bourgeoisie with an Islamist orientation: it is bound, hand and foot, to the capitalist system domestically and to imperialism internationally. In effect, it is precisely this contradictory nature of the AKP, divided as it is between a rank and file bent on questioning the imperialist status quo and a bourgeois leadership that is structurally unprepared to break with it, that explains both the vote in parliament in March 2003 that had an important impact on the Iraq war and the ongoing conflict with Israel.

To present Erdogan as a saviour for the Palestinian masses is to disregard a series of contradictions that hold his government hostage to the status quo in the Middle East. The first and most obvious is the utter hypocrisy of the AKP when it comes to the Kurdish

question. The historical framework of the Palestinian and Kurdish questions differ considerably, but there is similarity in the way they are subjected to national oppression, by Israel and Turkey respectively (although in the case of the Kurds, there is the additional factor of the fragmentation of this people among many Middle Eastern states). To stand up for the rights of the Palestinians and yet deny the Kurds their most elementary rights is a contradiction in the simplest sense of the term and this is exactly what the AKP government is doing.

Erdogan has recently come out and declared that, having won a landslide victory in the elections, Hamas cannot be considered a terrorist organization, forgetting that the legal arm of the Kurdish movement polls more than two thirds of the vote in quite a number of Kurdish provinces! The much-vaunted 'Kurdish overture' or 'opening' that was launched by the AKP government last fall (and abruptly abandoned only months later) amounted to no more than an attempt to liquidate the PKK's (Kurdistan Workers' Party - Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) influence on the Kurds of Turkey in return for token reforms. Given the hegemony of the party, it turned out to be a dismal failure.

There is, then, the fact that the AKP government has no intention of breaking with the imperialist system, but is in fact offering its services to this system through the new hegemony it is attempting to establish over the Muslim and, more particularly, the Arab world. Only days after the Israeli assault on the flotilla, on June 8-9, foreign and assorted ministers of 22 Arab countries came together in Istanbul for parallel meetings of the Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum and the Turkish-Arab Economic Forum, to be treated to sermons regarding the virtues of neoliberalism, privatization, integration with Western capitalism and flexibility in the labour market by none other than Erdogan and his ministers of foreign affairs and the economy. Erdogan, co-chair together with prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero of Spain of the so-called Alliance of Civilisations, a product of the Bush era, in effect acts as a Trojan horse of imperialism in the Arab world.

The attraction Turkey offers economically to other Muslim countries is heavily indebted to its relation to the European Union. This is a relation that is very advanced due to the Customs Union agreement in effect between the EU and Turkey for the last fifteen years. There can be no doubt that a consistent defence of Palestinian rights requires full-scale confrontation with Israel and, thus, the United States. If Turkish skirmishes with Israel have so far occurred without raising the ire of the U.S. administration, that is only because the Obama administration itself is at loggerheads with the present Israeli government over the so-called peace process. However, this is probably about to change: an entire lobby, from the Zionist think-tank JINSA to the neocon establishment, has started to bombard the Obama administration for a break with Turkey. This has included such outlandish demands, given its embeddedness in Turkey and vice-versa, as Turkey's eviction from the security structures of NATO. Things are hardly likely to go this far, but a change of mind on the part of the Obama administration is probable.

So it is clear that the Erdogan government is constitutionally unfit for a full-scale defence of Palestinian rights. But even if Erdogan himself and his co-thinkers were prepared to break completely with Israel and hence the U.S., the nature of the Islamist movement in Turkey would not allow them to go forward. In a move of extreme significance, Fethullah Gulen, the leader of the religious congregation that was alluded to above, talked to the Wall Street Journal days after the Israeli assault on the flotilla. [Gulen condemned the whole Freedom Flotilla enterprise](#), and defended Israel's right to decide what goods should be allowed into Gaza. And he went on to chide the "defying of authority" on the part of the Turkish actors in

the drama (all this in a newspaper controlled by sworn enemies within the U.S. establishment of the AKP). This read as a real cold shower for Islamists of all stripes in Turkey, and clearly implies that Gulen will withdraw his support from behind the AKP should Erdogan and co-thinkers opt for a break with Israel and the USA. This would, in all probability, reduce the AKP to a shadow of its former self.

There is finally the indisputable fact that an overwhelming majority of the Arab governments with which Erdogan is planning to work on increasingly closer terms, from the secular Egyptian dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak (complicit in the blockade on Gaza) to the medieval fundamentalists of Saudi Arabia, have for decades remained deaf to the plight of the Palestinians simply because they are servile followers of the U.S., their great benefactor. The AKP government is itself painfully aware of this situation: one of Erdogan's ministers has gone on record for saying that even Pope Benedict XVI showed more sensitivity to the Mavi Marmara incident than many Arab governments.

Solidarity with Gaza and the Left

The conclusion to be drawn is clear. It is the international socialist movement that bears the responsibility of building a front against Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, starting with the fight against the blockade of Gaza. The flotilla affair has created a most appropriate moment for this. Israel has probably never been so isolated and so severely condemned among the masses of people internationally. One component is turning to the international working class movement to build solidarity with the Palestinian people. The example of the [Swedish port workers' union](#), which refused to load or unload goods from and to Israel for a period of around ten days after the Mavi Marmara incident, is a welcome overture. As are the numerous campaigns for [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#) (BDS) that have been endorsed by unions in South Africa, Canada, France, Britain and elsewhere. These initiatives should be multiplied and systematized.

The socialist movement should also work hand in hand with the democratic and human rights movements to organize a more independent and unitary international solidarity movement, and not refuse to collaborate with the Islamic charity movements when it is a question of enterprises of the Freedom Flotilla type. We should not forget nor let anyone blur the fact that the Freedom Flotilla was by no means an exclusively Islamic affair, that there were, on board the ships in the flotilla, including the Mavi Marmara, clergy from other religions of the Middle East, representatives of secular democratic movements, and, most importantly, socialists and revolutionaries from all around the world.

International solidarity has to continue until the brutal oppression of the Palestinian people comes to an end. The movement for the emancipation of the Palestinians will have to retrieve, from the ashes of history, the question of a democratic and secular state on the historic territory of Palestine. A revival of internationalism for the left-wing movement of the region will also bring on the agenda the vision for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East, which also requires a struggle to construct the political forces necessary for such a project. This is the context to also bring about the emancipation of the Kurdish people from the century-long yoke of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. At this political moment in Turkey and the Middle East, these struggles have become more intertwined than they have ever been with the fate of the international Left and its own prospects for political advance. •

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