

# Turkey-Israel Relations and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard.

Turkey redraws Sykes-Picot

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A new Bermuda Triangle has been spotted, but this one is in the eastern Mediterranean — between Turkey, Cyprus and Israel. Turkey’s foreign policy shift is now in full gear. Having kicked out the Israeli ambassador and rejected the UN Palmer Report, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu says that Turkey plans to take its case against Israel’s blockade of Gaza to the International Court of Justice, not alone, but with the support of the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the African Union. “The process will probably reach a certain point in October and we will make our application.”

Israel’s refusal to say “I apologise” has already proved to be very expensive, and will continue to reverberate, not just in the hollow halls of the ICC, but off the shores of Israel itself, as Turkish warships accompany flotillas breaking the siege, and when Turkey begins drilling for gas in waters that Greek Cyprus and Israel claim for themselves. It will echo when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who US International Trade Undersecretary Francisco Sanchez said was “like a rock star”, crosses the Rafah border to visit Gaza. No one can mistake Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias for Elton John.

There are many reasons for the deterioration of the once smooth relations between Israel and Turkey. Firstly both nations have moved away from their secular roots — Turkey with the return of Islam as a guiding principle in political life under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Israel with the rise of Likud in 1977 ending the long reign of Labour. Turkey is naturally returning to its traditional role under the Ottoman Caliphate as regional Muslim hegemon, while the Zionised version of Judaism has ended any pretence of the Jewish state being interested in making peace with the indigenous Muslims.

Israel’s relations with both Cyprus and brotherly Greece — both longstanding foes of Turkey — have warmed up considerably since Israel killed nine Turks last year and Turkish-Israeli relations plunged. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman became the first such Israeli official to visit Cyprus last September. Their Foreign Affairs people have been meeting regularly since, as it becomes clear that Israel is using Cyprus as its proxy in gas and oil exploration in the eastern Mediterranean.

While no one was looking, Greek Cyprus began exploring for gas off the coast. The project by the Texas-based Noble Energy prompted Erdogan and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTC) President Dervis Eroglu to hurriedly sign an agreement last week on delineation of the continental shelf, while the leaders were attending the United Nations General Assembly meetings. Ankara announced Turkish Petroleum Corporation has

commissioned a Norwegian oil and gas firm to set up its own oil and gas exploration rig nearby — accompanied by a warship. In Nicosia, Turkish Cypriot Prime Minister Irsen Kucuk vowed “to make every effort and show every kind of resistance to protect our rights and interests”.

With the announcement of the exploration project, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz suggested the risks for Nobel are considerable. “I do not think they will undertake such a work in such a risky area, from a technical and a feasibility point of view.” Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc said Turkey’s plans were “no bluff”. The US Israel Lobby’s Richard Stone called Turkey’s actions “a reason for war”.

The new friendship between Greece, Cyprus and Israel is a major headache for Turkey, but — apart from possibly leading to war — also has other drawbacks for the Greeks, their Cypriot cousins and the EU as a whole. The gas and oil drilling will put paid to the long-suffering attempt under UN auspices to reunite the island. Greek Cyprus has been divided since a Turkish intervention in 1974 triggered by a Greek-inspired coup. UN-sponsored peace talks between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots have stumbled since they were relaunched in 2008.

Davutoglu warned UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York last week that the Greek Cypriot drilling plan will doom the island to permanent division. “If they claim they have their own area where they can do whatever they want, then, by implication, they accept that Northern Cyprus has its own area as well. This is a shift to a two-state mentality.” In the latest move, the KKTC president proposed to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon this week that there be a mutual freeze in drilling or at least a joint committee to resolve the dispute. The Cypriot leaders will have a tripartite meeting with the Ban in New York at the end of October.

Hopes for Turkey’s accession to the EU are also dashed. Referring to Cyprus taking on the rotating presidency of the EU next summer, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay said, “If the negotiations [on Cyprus] do not end positively and the EU hands over the presidency to southern Cyprus, we will freeze our relations with the EU.”

Cyprus says its hydrocarbon search is to the benefit of all Cypriots, but it fails to mention in its press releases that it is working jointly with Israel on this project. In effect, Israel is getting Cyprus to do its dirty work for it, as an Israeli-sponsored rig would be a red flag to the Muslim bull. This recapitulates the cozying up of Israel to Greece in the past year, their new military cooperation, and Israel’s use of Greece this summer to prevent the Freedom Flotilla from setting out from Greek ports to break the Gaza siege. Cypriot President Christofias accused Turkey of being a regional “troublemaker”, failing to point to the Israeli bull in the regional china shop.

While Cyprus and big guns such as Sarkozy and Merkel openly reject Turkey’s admission into the EU, playing to their rightwing anti-immigrant base, sensible voices can still be heard. Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjorn Jagland said that Turkey was important for Europe, and that Erdogan’s call in Cairo to create a secular constitution and order in Egypt and Middle East was “of utmost importance”. At a Liberal Democratic Party meeting in Birmingham UK, Turkey’s Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek said, “The EU needs Turkey if it wants to remain as an important actor. Turkey will help the Union become a global economic player.” Turkey’s economy grew 9 per cent in 2010 as Europe’s slid. Asked to

describe the ruling AKP, Simsek said: “In issues such as family we are conservative. In economy and relations with the world we are liberal. And in social justice and poverty we are socialist.”

But already Turkish opinion is turning against kowtowing to Europe, just as kowtowing to the US and Israel is no longer acceptable. Erdogan’s spectacular reception on his visits to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya shows where Turkey is appreciated. It is the big winner in the Arab Spring, leaving the US, Israel and Europe to wonder where they fit in.

Hopes to turn a grateful Libya into a NATO base are vain, as Islamists immediately rose to prominence; much like the Communist resistance did in the aftermath to WWII, after bearing the brunt of the Nazi war machine. French President Nicolas Sarkozy should read his French history, including the humiliating consequences of France’s last dabbling in the region — its invasion of Egypt in 1956.

Can the West reshape Libya as it did post-WWII Europe to meet its goals of neocolonial hegemony? Not likely, as Turkey was pragmatic enough to get in on the ground and will be able to ensure that Libyans are not duped by their clever Western advisers. Ditto Tunisia and Egypt. The forceful and principled foreign policy moves of Davitoglu are leaving the West and Israel breathless in the new Bermuda Triangle.

Israeli whining about their trashed embassy in Cairo or their unceremonious expulsion from Ankara can impress no one. Just imagine the scenario if Cyprus is replaced by Egypt in the Bermuda Triangle, and a Turkish-Egyptian alliance decides to take on Israel. The current blockade of Gaza will look like child’s play. Egypt controls the Suez Canal, and Turkey — the eastern Mediterranean. One can only marvel that it has taken over 60 years for Israel’s powerful neighbours — with 20 times the population of Israel — to realise their collective power and ability to impose a just regional order without any kowtowing to Washington.

What is surprising is that the AKP faces no domestic opposition to its policy with either Israel, Cyprus or the EU. The Republican People’s Party is even competing with the AKP on who is more anti-Israel, protesting against plans to install a NATO early warning radar. The once-feared Islamists clearly represent the overwhelming Turkish sentiment, and geopolitical dictates are creating a fait accompli.

Willingness to stand up for the nation’s rights, and to stare down the Israeli enemy and the Islamophobic Euros is where it’s at, and there is little the increasingly powerless US can do about it. The US better wake up soon or, like the EU, it will lose its true ally in the Middle East, and will merely speed up the consolidation of a pax turkana, a latter-day caliphate once again led by Turkey.

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