



The Week that Cut Turkey's Ambitions Down to Size

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Although signs of policy adjustment have been in the works for several months, the events of June 2016 were an emphatic marker of a shift in Turkey's foreign policy priorities. Rapprochement with Israel, an "apology" to Russia, and a horrific attack at Istanbul's airport all coming in a span of mere days underscored how priorities in Ankara must be changing.

Turkey's Regional Ambitions

There was a time not long ago, when nations were aspiring to become a member of the European Union (EU) and not leave it. Turkey had long been one of those nations. Its desires to join the EU however were never fully realized. As negotiations dragged on, seemingly endlessly, the Europeans demanded reforms from Turkey as conditions to ascension and the Turks grew increasingly frustrated with what they viewed as unreasonable demands if not double-standards.

With the arrival of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the Turkish political scene in 2001 and its subsequent dominance in Turkish politics in the decade and a half to follow, Turkey's frustration with the protracted European Union negotiations coincided with political stirrings to look east instead of west. While the geographic and economic rationale for Turkey to join the EU were quite compelling, culture, language and religion were actual stumbling blocks – or at least were perceived to be in the eyes of many. It was those very stumbling blocks with Europe that served as building blocks in terms of ties with the Arab world, and soon enough a shift toward the Arab world became evident in Turkish foreign policy.

Straddling Europe and the Middle East, Turkey had many connections to the Arab world. In many Arab eyes and memories, these were not all good connections. Many Arabs were skeptical of neo-Ottomanism within AKP's political agenda, but at a time when a Western military presence in the region was only increasing, those wary of Western imperialism had bigger concerns than the specter of the "Sublime Port." The AKP's affinity for political Islamists, seen as a strain of resistance in a

region dominated largely by Western-friendly autocratic regimes, helped endear Ankara to Arab publics who primarily distrusted the West and Israel.

The Break with Israel

Turkey and Israel long enjoyed strong relations. For years, the pro-Israel lobby in the United States assisted Turkey in staving off efforts in Congress to recognize the Armenian Genocide. But the relationship was greater than just political and diplomatic. Indeed, Israel, one of the leading arms suppliers in the world, found a major client in Turkey. Israeli arms exports to Turkey reached a pinnacle in 2009 when transfers to Turkey exceeded all Israeli arms sales to all other nations combined in the previous year. But this all changed on May 31, 2010, when Israeli naval commandos descended in the Mediterranean Sea on the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla” - a convoy of six civilian ships carrying humanitarian aid to the besieged Gaza Strip, killing nine Turkish civilian activists.

As a matter of fact, the beginnings of the split preceded the killings on the Mavi Marmara. On December 22, 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyeb Erdogan, welcomed then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Ankara as part of a series of discussions over the potential return of the Golan Heights to Syria through Turkish mediation. Ties were still warm then. Only five days later, Israel launched “Operation Cast Lead” in Gaza, an air campaign followed by a ground offensive into the besieged Gaza Strip that would leave 1,400 Palestinians dead, most of whom were civilians. The war was devastating for Gaza on a level not yet witnessed before, and the timing of the Olmert-Erdogan meeting would lead many to wonder if Turkey was indeed aware of the impending massacre. Erdogan was incensed -at a moment when Turkey was hoping to warm up to the Arab world- that the timing of events seemingly put Turkey on the wrong side of the Arab-Israeli divide. He made sure that his outrage was known just a month later; as Gaza was still smoldering from the 22-day war, Erdogan stormed off stage after berating Israel’s President Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum. A year later, in another sign of fraying relations, Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon staged a diplomatic stunt aimed at embarrassing Turkey. He summoned the Turkish Ambassador to Israel, Ahmet Celikkol, seated him in a lower chair and rebuked him with only an Israeli flag on the table separating them. While Israel was ultimately forced to apologize for the childish behavior of its Foreign Ministry, the spectacle left a bad taste and the flotilla incident served, just 4-months later, as the last straw that broke the camel’s back.

Gaza was central to the Israel-Turkey dispute. Turkey was not only critical of Israel's war and the ongoing siege, but the AKP party had an affinity for Hamas, a political Islamist group that Ankara saw as having been denied a fair opportunity at governing after winning at the ballot box in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The Turks had long demanded that ending the rift with Israel would require an end to the siege of Gaza. The agreement that was ultimately reached on June 26, 2016 in Rome stopped well short of that. Reportedly, the agreement will allow Turkey to send some aid to Gaza and build some humanitarian facilities there but it leaves the siege intact while Turkey agreed that all supplies to Gaza will go through Israel first, a de facto acknowledgement of the siege's legitimacy in Israeli eyes. Israel agreed to pay compensation to the families of those that were killed by Israeli soldiers on the Mavi Marmara, a de facto acknowledgment of responsibility. Relations would then be restored. The agreement allows both sides to save face to some extent but it is clear that Turkey sold Gaza for a cheap price as the siege will continue. Given the regional context, however, and the verdict it has delivered on Turkish foreign policy it is clear why the Turks decided to cut their losses and move forward.

The Arab Spring's Bitter Harvest for Ankara

The Arab Spring offered a unique opportunity for Turkey to see the model of political Islam deriving legitimacy from the ballot box replicating itself across the Arab world. While this seems to have succeeded in Tunisia, the biggest prize was always Egypt. In no place were political Islamists better established and uniquely poised to compete than in Egypt; and yet, simultaneously, in no place was the deep state and the military better poised to eliminate the competition by the Islamists.

After the historic election of Mohamed Morsi, the first elected President in the multi-millennium history of Egypt was deposed by a military coup only one year into his term. The counter-revolution was on and backed by funding from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, while Turkey and these Gulf states were on opposite sides of Egypt's domestic scene, they were allied in the aim of ending the rule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, even if through different avenues.

Here too, however, Turkey's objectives have gone unfulfilled. Regardless of their intentions, any objective assessment of the situation in Syria must be seen as a disaster for Turkey. Before the war in Syria, Turkey had a calm neighbor in Syria. Today, Syria which sits on Turkey's southern border is a source of a major flood of refugees and subsequent instability. Elevating the objective of removing Assad over everything else, even as Assad's backers have proved obdurate, has resulted in a

deteriorating situation in Syria where ISIS, thought by many anti-Assad states to be the lesser evil, has metastasized. One of the areas where Moscow and Washington seem to have found common ground is that ISIS is the primary evil and should top their common security agenda. This has led to cooperation with forces on the ground that are spearheading the effort to take territory back from ISIS, primarily the mostly Kurdish YPG in the North and the Assad regime in other limited parts of the country. For Turkey, this has meant mobilized and militarized Kurdish units on their southern border. Turkey preferred an outcome in Syria where the country's territorial integrity remained intact and certainly did not want to see an outcome where Kurdish players would have any sort of autonomy in the north of the country. The battle against ISIS however has created a security situation that is trending in the opposite direction.

Prioritizing Inner Security over Outward Ambition

For several years, Turkey has turned a blind eye to the potential risks of its regional policies and for several years it navigated a turbulent region largely unscathed. Recently however, the rewards of its regional approach have diminished as counter-revolutionary forces have decimated the Arab Spring. Furthermore, the security situation in Syria has left the Kurds, ISIS and the Assad regime empowered while Syrian opposition forces are in disarray. ISIS and Kurdish groups, which Turkey doesn't differentiate from the YPG, have carried out numerous attacks in Turkey in the last year. In some cases, it seemed ISIS was targeting Kurds in Turkey, bringing the battle in Syria across the border. In other cases, including most recently, ISIS attacked targets in Turkey that had no discernible connection to the Kurds and aimed at tourist sites instead, like last week's attack on June 28, 2016 at Istanbul's Ataturk International Airport.

Ankara's rapprochement with Israel seems to signify a yearning to return to the pre-2009 status quo. At the same time, Turkey's apology to Russia over the downing of one of its jets which briefly entered Turkish airspace while operating above Syria against anti-Assad rebels, suggests Ankara might be sensing the need to work with Moscow to bring some sort of stability to Syria, the epicenter of conflict driving instability into its neighbor to the north and much of the region.

The identities of the attackers that killed dozens of people and injured many more at the Ataturk International Airport in Istanbul last week also sent an important message about shared risks and priorities. The attackers were reportedly ISIS operatives that hailed from Dagestan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This highlighted the risk Russia perceives from ISIS fighters in Syria, who may have

access or connections that would give them the opportunity to carry out attacks in Russia in the future as they return home from Syria.

Turkey, Russia and other players in the region involved in the war in Syria may not agree on the desired political outcome in Damascus but there looks to be more agreement about the urgency to arrive at one. The events of the last week suggest that Turkey's regional ambitions are increasingly taking a back seat to its domestic security needs.

Winners and Losers

In this week's reshuffle of Ankara's priorities, who came out a winner and who lost? There are many gray areas. What is clear is that Palestinians living in Gaza will not benefit tremendously from the deal between Israel and Turkey. Turkey effectively legitimized Israel's siege by backing down on the demand to end it and, in fact, has done damage by claiming that the siege has been lifted when there were only relatively minor humanitarian concessions that Israel has permitted. Politically, Turkey renewed relations with Israel without severing them with Hamas will put Turkey in a position to possibly act as an intermediary in the future, a role often played by Egypt but increasingly less so since the counter-revolutionary coup of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

In Syria, in the short term the events of this week would seem like a blow to the anti-Assad opposition who may be less able to rely on Turkey now to maximize their leverage at the bargaining table. Nonetheless, that effort has continuously been met by the regime and its backers with equal and most often greater force, ensuring that the status quo of horrific war continues. The continuation of this war has given breathing room to ISIS which in turn has effectively re-prioritized the interests of states like Turkey who have long backed the Syrian opposition.

In the long term, the events of the past week may prove to be the beginning of a process that moves the political bargaining over the future of Syria forward. It will likely come at the expense of some of the demands of the opposition and surely be a bitter pill to swallow.

For the United States, this should be seen as an opportunity to push further for an end to the political and humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq. If these shifts, particularly on the Russo-Turkish front, facilitate the end of hostilities in Syria or move the situation in that direction, then there will be silver linings for all involved.