

**GAZA AND ITS AFTERMATH:
Positioning Turkey in the Strategic Map of the US, Israel and the Middle East**

Dr. Gonul Tol
Program Manager, TUSIAD-US

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been enjoying the international praise that it has been receiving due to a burst of diplomacy in which Turkey sought a role as mediator in regional conflicts. Turkey's newly developed regional muscle and its efforts in pushing for cooperation in the Caucasus, playing the mediator role between Syria and Israel, holding a dialogue with Iran on nuclear policy, hosting meetings between Pakistan and Afghanistan were rewarded by a two-year seat on the United Nations Security Council. AKP's response to the Gaza crisis and Prime Minister Erdogan's walking off the stage at a panel discussion on Gaza at the World Economic Forum in Davos, however, have created unease in the Western world about Turkey's position as a non-partisan interlocutor in the region. Concerned about the future of Turkish-Israeli relations, the destabilizing effect of a possible break between the long term allies in the region, its long term implications for Western interests in the Middle East and Turkey's strong pro-Hamas stance, many analysts and policy-makers in Europe and the US raised the question: "Is Turkey turning its back on the West?"

Turkey has had a privileged relationship with Israel and cultural and historical ties with other countries in the Middle East, which makes her a unique actor in the region. The strength of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East is that Turkey has strong relations with all the major players. Especially during the Gaza crisis, the privileged status of Turkey was re-emphasized. Turkish diplomats demonstrated that they had access to places other diplomats did not by talking directly to the senior Hamas leader, Khaled Meshal, in Damascus. And yet, Turkey's pro-Hamas stance did not jeopardize its relations with the "moderate camp" of Al Fatah, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. After the Davos incident, Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Turkey and President Gul paid a visit to Saudi Arabia, indicating the ongoing process of communication among these actors. There is no doubt that, in the words of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, by being the "voice of the voiceless" Turkey won the hearts and minds of the Muslim world. But the future of Turkey's relations with Israel and the US is the real question that needs an urgent answer as the new US administration gets ready to jump start its relations with the Muslim world.

Israel's Gaza offensive and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's emotive response at Davos have certainly created fractures in the Israeli-Turkish alliance, but the episode is unlikely to cause a lasting breach with Israel as both countries benefit from their ongoing ties. The Turkish army has enjoyed warm relations with its Israeli counterpart since the 1990s and Israel values Turkey not only as a client for weapons, but also as a larger venue for political maneuvers. Turkey's military alliance with Israel involves joint training exercises, overflight privileges for the Israeli air force and arms sales to the Turkish military estimated at \$ 1.8 billion annually. The latest deal was signed on the eve of the Gaza bombardment. It was a \$ 165 million agreement on airborne imagery intelligence systems and it is still in effect. Besides, Turkey is Israel's closest Muslim ally in the region who is a NATO member and has close relations with all factions in the Middle East. Turkey is Israel's window to the Arab world and Iran, a role that many other

governments in the region cannot play since they lack the necessary legitimacy and the moral ground. The Gaza offensive has therefore re-emphasized Turkey's importance for Israel by isolating the latter even further and strengthening Hamas politically in the region.

Turkey values alliance with Israel as well. Aside from providing military technology to Turkey, pro-Israel lobby has provided diplomatic support to Turkey in Washington in forestalling the recognition of the 1915 deportation of Ottoman Armenians as genocide. As Turkey lacks a strong lobby of its own in the US, Israeli support is crucial. So the stakes are high for both sides. Therefore, both parties have taken steps to mend fences with officials in Israel and Turkey making conciliatory statements. An AKP delegation coming to Washington after the Davos incident for damage control and to give the US and the Israeli lobby in the US the message that it is still a strong and willing partner of the Western alliance and wants to preserve ties with Israel. Israeli officials made similar comments and some leaders of the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington made it clear that they would not change their opposition to the genocide bill in Congress as "there were too much at stake in the relationship"ⁱ.

As far as the US-Turkey relations are concerned, despite the skepticism that aroused after the Davos incident, the fundamentals of the bilateral relations are still strong. The dynamics of *Realpolitik* dictate so. Both parties need each other and are well aware of this interdependency.

The Obama administration faces a troubled international environment, especially in the Middle East where US influence and legitimacy was severely challenged in the last 8 years. President Obama inherits two unfinished wars, a broken down Middle East peace initiative and an increasingly resurgent Russia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the foundation of the Obama Administration's foreign policy would be the concepts of "cooperative engagement" and "smart power". However, in a context of steady decline of US power and influence, with a ravaged economy, high levels of debt and a new cast of emerging powers unwilling to follow US dictates, it will not be easy to conduct a foreign policy around cooperation. The Obama administration will have to rely much more on its allies, especially in the Middle East, than the previous administrations.

The Gaza crisis, however, weakened US's traditional allies in the region. It has demonstrated that the Middle East is "a region stuck in time, stuck in space, stuck in history and in conflict"ⁱⁱ with a Hezbollah-run failed state in South Lebanon, Fatah-run failed state in West Bank, a Hamas-run failed state in Gaza and a lack of legitimate leadership among the Arab governments in the picture. It is hard for Arab leaders to reach a consensus, let alone a common solution, on the pressing problems of the region. The so-called "moderate camp" has weakened and radical actors of change and defiance of the current order has gained the upper hand since the Gaza offensive. Iran has emerged as the biggest winner of growing stability in Iraq and Israel's Gaza offensive played right into the hands of Iran which increased its area of influence with increasing support for Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank. In Lebanon, political tensions were resolved at the benefit of Hezbollah and Syria through Qatari mediation. The Shiite resistance movement has emerged stronger and more popular from its 2006 war with Israel throughout the Arab and Islamic world. In the Palestinian territories, Gaza offensive has weakened Mahmud Abbas' Fatah-led government. Moreover, Gaza crisis led to severe criticism of US allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and divided the "moderate camp". Therefore, the Obama Administration cannot fully rely on

traditional allies that are weakened or discredited like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Fatah or completely isolated like Israel. If the Obama administration wants to perform its policy of engagement and bring about stability and working solutions to the long lasting problems of the region, it needs an ally that has legitimacy, democratic credentials, and access to all parties in the region like Turkey.

Obama's recent visit to Turkey as part of his Europe trip at such an early phase in his term indicates that Obama administration can clearly see the picture in the Middle East and the challenges it will face without Turkey's cooperation and active involvement. All the indicators point to the fact that Obama's foreign policy will be a "realist" foreign policy guided by pragmatism, as shown by the "hard-nosed" message Hillary Clinton in China sent to the "Free Tibet" movement. In that sense, Obama administration seems to have a clear idea of the delicate dynamics of the region and a realistic strategy to face intensifying crises. Strengthening US-Turkey relations is an important component of that strategy. Although Turkey's role as a mediator in the region's conflicts has been somewhat undermined after the Davos incident, its role in the Obama Administration's foreign policy vision in the broader Middle East remains strong.

Although Pentagon will bring many troops in Iraq out through Kuwait, the US might ask for Turkey's cooperation on the US withdrawal from Iraq. Prime Minister Ali Babacan expressed Turkey's willingness to cooperate but this would probably require approval from the Turkish Parliament. Neither side has forgotten the episode when Turkish Parliament refused to grant permission to the US to carry out part of its invasion by sending troops through Turkey in 2003. Therefore, having Turkish public opinion on its side this time is crucial for the US. Turkey will be a key country after the US withdrawal in maintaining stability in Iraq. The recent Turkish openings to Kurdistan Regional Government will exactly serve this purpose. Cooperation between Turkey and Iraq's Kurds will enable the latter to export their gas and oil and to check Iran's influence in the region. Turkey will also be needed in reaching out to Iran, establishing channels of dialogue with Syria, containing resurgence of Russian militarism, assisting the US mission in Afghanistan and nation-building efforts there, establishing peace and security and promoting economic cooperation and energy security in the Caucasus. Moreover, now that the US is no longer able to supply troops in Afghanistan and Iraq from the base it had been using in Kyrgyzstan, the Turkish base at Incirlik has become much more vital. US troops and aircraft are based at Incirlik. If the US wants to use the base in new ways, friendly relations with Turkey are essential.

On the other hand, Turkey needs the strategic weight of the US on regional and international fronts. Cooperation with the US in the field of energy concerns, the joint projects on the Trans-Caspian, fight against the PKK, revitalizing its EU membership process, redefinition of the NATO-ESDP relations, ongoing negotiations on the Cyprus problem, enhancing security and stability in Turkey's region is vital for Turkish strategic interests.

Both sides are well aware of the necessity of keeping the bilateral relations on good terms. Ahmet Davutoglu, Chief Adviser to the Turkish Prime Minister, has dismissed the claims that Turkey is drifting away from the West and turning towards the Muslim world on several occasions after the Davos incident. An AKP delegation visited the US capital reassuring the value given to the bilateral relations by the Turkish government. High level US visits to Ankara after the crisis are also indications that the US

wants to move forward with its ally whose cooperation is much needed in the new US foreign policy trajectory. In their visit to Ankara, both George Mitchell, Barack Obama's special envoy to the Middle East, and Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, highlighted Washington's appreciation of Turkey's efforts in Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Lebanon and the unique role Turkey can play in US efforts to promote a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. The U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, James Jeffrey, made similar remarks reaffirming Washington's support for Turkey's initiatives in the region.

Obama's new national security team, Hillary Clinton as the Secretary of State, James Jones as the national security adviser and Robert Gates as Defense Secretary, also sends a reassuring message to Turkey. They all have vast experience and a deep understanding of Turkey, Jones and Gates having extensive personal connections to the Turkish Armed forces. Gates and Jones value Turkey's role within the NATO alliance but also see a greater role for Turkey as a balancing force in the Middle East.

In conclusion, Turkey is not turning its back on the West. Prime Minister Erdogan's reaction at Davos has surely left a bitter taste and it has been interpreted as a "diplomatic disaster" among Western policy circles. Turkey's stance on Gaza crisis has certainly raised concerns in the West and in Israel about Turkey's role as a non-partisan mediator in the region, but it did not diminish Turkey's strategic importance for the future of the region. To the contrary, Israeli offensive on Gaza has transformed the regional dynamics by isolating Israel even further, creating disillusionment with traditional US allies such as Egypt which cooperated with Israel in shutting the border and depressed Egyptian popularity in the Arab world and strengthening Hamas. In the newly emerged political landscape of the Middle East, Turkey, with its democratic and Western credentials and its historical and cultural ties to all the players of the Middle East, will likely to fill the power vacuum in the region and be an asset for the new US administration's Middle East peace initiative. Neither Turkey, nor the US and Israel can afford a Turkey which is alienated from the West and they are all too pragmatic and embedded in deep waters of *Realpolitik* to let it happen.

ⁱ Abraham H. Foxman in New York Times, February 4, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Shafeeq Ghabra. (2009) Israeli Arab Conflict: It Is All About Land, Right?, <http://sheikyermami.com/2009/01/24/israeli-arab-conflict-its-all-about-land-right>,