

Mending Ties with Israel and Russia in Regional and Domestic Settings

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Abstract: After weeks and months of Turkish diplomatic effort aimed at normalizing relations with both Israel and Russia, news of accords with both appeared in the same week, just one month after the formation of a new government in Turkey. Both domestic and regional factors are crucial to the rapprochement between Turkey and these two neighbors. Domestic factors might be a catalyst for improvements in relations, but regional factors have played an important role in developing the relationships in the context of Turkish foreign policy. Among the major factors that have played a role in mending Turkish ties with Israel and Russia are continuing security challenges in the Middle East, the ramifications of these challenges for the Turkish fight against terrorism, differences of opinion between Turkish policymakers and their Western counterparts, and the negative economic implications of problematic relations with Russia.

THE NEWS THAT TURKEY WAS MENDING ITS DIPLOMATIC with Israel and Russia was announced in the same week at the end of June 2016.¹ Around the same time, there was also talk of normalizing relations with Egypt and others. While these issues were still being discussed, Turkey experienced a coup attempt which dramatically affected both its domestic and foreign policy contexts. Alongside the headlines and arguments filling the newspapers about “decreasing the number of enemies and increasing the number of friends”, there were lots of questions as to what was happening in Turkish foreign policy. What were the reasons for these rapid realignments? Did they relate to the change of government in Turkey? Were they some result of changing regional dynamics, or did they come about because of domestic political and economic considerations? Although domestic variables played an important role in the revision of some foreign policy priorities, it is mainly regional factors that led decision makers to adjust their stances on most issues.

We are living in an era where classical alliance relationships are questioned and shattered. This is also true for Turkey, given the differences of opinion between Turkey and the US and some other NATO members regarding the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Instability in the Middle East following the Arab uprisings is now in its fifth year and there is no quick-fix solution to the problems of the region on the horizon. The problems of the Middle East in general and within Iraq and Syria in particular have crucial political, economic and social implications for Turkey, and these implications are mainly negative. Other regional problems also affect Turkey’s relations with other actors in other parts of the world. Relations with the US, a long term strategic ally, were badly damaged by differences over Iraq and Syria. In addition to these differences between Turkey and its western allies, the weak and late condemnation of the coup attempt by Western capitals strengthened domestic voices of criticism towards the US

and European countries. Differences between Turkey and the EU regarding the Syrian Kurds and the refugee issue have strained relations with some members of the union. Turkish-Russian relations, which reached a historic peak at the beginning of the 2000s, were seriously hit by the conflict in Syria.

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Turkey's relations with Europe, especially with the EU, were always a facilitator of change in both domestic and foreign policy. In the presence of these great challenges emerging from the Middle East, the EU was seen as anchor and a remedy for the problems. Given the aftershocks of economic crisis and rising xenophobic attitudes in different corners of the continent, however, even keeping up the existing level of relations with the EU has become a hard task for the Turkish government. The general elections in Turkey in 2015 and the political uncertainties that accompanied it did damage to hopes of reviving Turkey's EU accession process. The turning of the tide of the Kurdish issue from July 2015 onwards and subsequent operations aimed at eliminating the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) threat from cities led to some concern from European institutions, which want the peace process to resume.² The refugee problem was a big headache for the EU last year, and the protocol between Turkey and the EU turned this issue into a catalyst for reviving Turkish accession to the EU. Brexit and the debates about Turkey's membership as well as the refugee issue during the campaign added another dimension to Turkey-EU relations. The slow and weak response of European capitals and also EU institutions in support of Turkish democracy during the failed coup attempt led to great disappointment among both the

Turkish elite and the public. As a result of all of these developments, it is increasingly unlikely that the EU will be an effective lever for change in Turkish domestic and foreign policy.

Regional and International Factors

Let's have a look at these changes one by one together with the impact of certain factors on the change of course in Turkish foreign policy. The NATO alliance and relations with the US have been the cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy since the Cold War years. There were ups and downs in this relationship in the past, but the differences became more obvious after the Cold War, especially regarding Iraq in 2003. The respective priorities of Turkey and the US increasingly diverged over the last couple of years following the Arab uprisings. The talk of a 'pivot to Asia' and signs of changing regional alliances and priorities on the side of the US affected the parameters of Turkish policy towards the region. Region-wide changes in the Middle East following the Arab Uprisings were interpreted very differently by the two countries. The scale of the political, economic and social challenges in the region are beyond the capacities of regional actors and require contributions from global actors. The lack of leadership and interest on the part of the US left a vacuum to be filled by Russia, which perceived an opportunity in the Middle East to regain its superpower status in international politics. The transformation of the uprising in Syria from a civilian protest movement into a military conflict therefore changed the parameters of regional politics.

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From last year onwards, Turkey has had to deal with the threat of two terrorist organizations simultaneously: the PKK and ISIL. The collapse of the 'solution process' on the Kurdish issue after the elections in June 2015 and increasing coordination among the members of the anti-ISIL coalition resulted in a cycle of violence in some Turkish cities. As a result of increasing Turkish activism within the anti-ISIL coalition, ISIL targeted Turkish cities with the aim of forcing Ankara revise its policy, but to no avail. Turkey had to deal with these security challenges with a caretaker government established after the elections in June, which failed to produce a stable government. At that time, Turkey lost 211 of its citizens to ISIL terror.³ The general elections in November 1, 2015 gave the AKP a mandate for single-party government after a brief period of turmoil. On the day of the formation of this new government, 24 November 2015, a Russian jet violating Turkish airspace was shot down by the Turkish air force.⁴ This development, along with Russian military involvement in Syria, had direct implications for Turkey's foreign and security policy. Turkey and Russia had developed closer relations during the 2000s and had managed to compartmentalize their differences over certain foreign policy issues in the Middle East and the Caucasus. With the downing of the Russian jet, however, this came to an end, and from that moment on Russia used every opportunity to harm Turkish interests in both the international and regional settings.

The questions about the reliability of existing alliance structures and ensuing instability in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, increasingly began to damage Turkish interests in the region. The size of the security threat to Turkey and its implications for the country in terms of stability, economy and tourism led decision makers to recalibrate Turkey's foreign policy and its policy in the Middle East in particular. Moreover, the formation of a new government in Turkey was seen as an opportunity to overcome some of these challenges. Mending ties with Israel and Russia should be analyzed within this context. Although the news of these two developments appeared in the same week, they both have different policy goals and different contexts, and both rapprochements were the result of weeks or months of negotiations.

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Relations with Israel

Talks between Turkey and Israel have been ongoing since 2013. Following the attack on the Mavi Marmara flotilla, Turkey demanded an apology, compensation and the end of the siege of Gaza. The apology came with the intervention of US President Obama during his visit to Israel in 2013. Talks between Turkish and Israeli officials resulted in an agreement about the amount of compensation to be paid to the relatives of the victims. The issue of the Gaza blockade or siege turned out to be the most difficult issue in finalizing the normalization process. From the point of view of Turkish national interests, the apology and compensation were more important than the blockade. The blockade issue related instead



to regional dynamics. Regional dynamics had dramatically changed over the years and conditions in Gaza had become increasingly dire. With the coup in Egypt and the change of government there, the blockade towards Gaza turned into a full blockade with the destruction of the tunnels providing some of the materials necessary for life inside the strip. The people of Gaza became more desperate and began to have trouble meeting even their basic needs. The interpretation of terms of the end of the blockade should be analyzed within this framework.

In addition to the above changes in regional dynamics, the conflict in Syria and its spillover effects in terms of security threats emanating from the country has led several countries in the region to re-evaluate their foreign and security priorities and make some revisions. We can assume that the conflict in Syria and Hezbollah's involvement there is a welcome development for Israel, since it lowers the threat to its own security. The elimination of Syrian chemical weapons and the destruction of its army may also seem positive developments from the Israeli point of view.⁵ The emergence of a Hezbollah that is the veteran of war and its acquisition of weapons sent by Iran and other allies of the Damascus regime, however, pose a threat for Israel in the future, since the group may use this experience and equipment against Israel. In addition to this, the breakdown of state authority and the emergence of several terrorist and military groups within Syria also creates another type of challenge for Israel given the unknown nature of some of these groups.

From the Israeli perspective, besides the regional security environment, we should also consider the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, developments in Egypt and the possible positive outcome of a gas deal with Turkey. These factors might be secondary in terms of their importance for

a deal, however in the larger picture, these secondary factors have also played a role in convincing politicians on both sides of the need for mending ties. The scale of the challenges in the region have pushed every state to look for opportunities to minimize their differences with other states in the Middle East.

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We should not forget that there were several rounds of talks between Turkish and Israeli officials to reach an agreement, so this was no overnight development. Domestic political considerations on both sides affected the pace of the talks, and some members of the Israeli security cabinet did not approve of the deal.⁶ Despite the protocols, the implementation of the agreed terms and the improvement of bilateral relations will require lots of effort on both sides. There are certain segments of society, both in Israel and in Turkey, that will continue to oppose such an agreement.

Relations with Russia

Problematic relations between Turkey and Russia hurt both countries. Russia is under sanctions because of its actions in Crimea and Ukraine. EU sanctions focus on state-owned banks, an arms embargo, restrictions on the sale of sensitive technology and exports of equipment for the oil industry.⁷ In addition to these sanctions, a decline in oil prices has created several problems for the Russian administration. Moscow's orders to prevent Russian citizens from taking their holidays in Turkey and the banning of import of agricultural products have hurt Russia as well. From an economic point of view some Russian citizens were not able to afford holidays in other countries, but the decline in tourism revenues was also a challenge



for Turkey, especially in destinations like Antalya. This confrontational atmosphere between Russia and the Western world continued in 2015 and 2016, while the EU extended the duration of sanctions against Russia until 31 January 2017.⁸ The Russian economy contracted in 2015 by 3.7% and is expected to contract in 2016 by 1.2%, both because of the sanctions and the decline in oil revenues.⁹ The Russian economy is not able to rejuvenate itself on its own, and a decline in the purchasing power of Russian citizens is also a concern for Russian politicians, since public approval ratings for the government have plummeted.¹⁰

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Deteriorating relations have also led to the freezing or cancellation of several multibillion dollar projects both in Turkey and Russia, economically damaging both countries. Although Turkish contractors had carried out fewer projects in Russia over the last couple of years due to the Russian economic crisis, the atmosphere after the downing of the jet was another blow in that regard. Large scale infrastructural projects in Turkey carried out with Russian financing, like the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and Turkish Stream, were put on hold due to the negative diplomatic environment.

Besides the economic outcomes of the downing of the Russian jet, there were also political implications for Turkey. Russia used every opportunity to create problems for Turkey inside international organizations and in neighboring regions such as the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans. Turkey witnessed increasing contact

between Russian officials and Iranian, Iraqi, Greek and other officials in its neighborhood. Russia used its leverage in Central Asian republics to lower their degree of contact with Turkey. Russia also started a defamation campaign against Turkey. Although some of its arguments were mere propaganda, it did some damage, especially in the former Soviet space.

From Turkey's perspective, negative relations with Russia created problems in security, political and economic terms. After the downing of the jet, contact between Russians and the PKK-PYD became more frequent. The Russian administration even allowed the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to open an office in Moscow. It is argued that Russians also supplied weapons to the PYD.¹¹ It is believed that a Turkish helicopter was shot down by the PKK using a Russian-supplied missile. In order to break this connection, a thaw in relations between Turkey and Russia was a must.

In addition to the factors above, the coup attempt of July 15 and the early reaction of Russia in comparison with European countries positively affected the atmosphere, with the Turkish and Russian Presidents meeting in St Petersburg on August 9. Talks not only focused on bilateral economic issues, but also regional issues like Syria and the fight against terrorism.

In considering the aforementioned international and regional dynamics, it is in the interest of Turkey to normalize its relations with Russia and Israel, and if possible with other actors. The changing parameters of classical alliance structures, the deteriorating security environment in the Middle East, the lack of a positive outlook in the short run, the challenges of the fight against terrorism, and the economic and social implications of all of these challenges for Turkey have led its decision makers to



mend ties with some of its neighbors. There are also incentives for Russia and Israel to ameliorate their relations with Turkey. A change in government in Turkey was seen as an opportunity to make these foreign policy adjustments. Global and regional challenges have led every state to focus on security and stability and look for ways to overcome their differences with other states. These factors are pushing Turkey in this direction as well. Better relations with Russia and Israel will eliminate some of Turkey's regional challenges. We should not, however, expect to see Turkish-Israeli relations return to the close levels of the 1990s because of the different nature of the governments in both countries and also the regional environment. For Turkish-Russian relations, leaving certain problems behind is a positive sign, but we should keep in mind that the priorities of each country strongly conflict over many regional issues. It will take time to overcome some of these conflicting priorities.

Endnotes:

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