



## WHEN THE BALL COMES TO OUR COURT...

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No doubt, future of the relations between Turkey and Israel relies heavily on what the relations between Israelis and Palestinians will be. Yet, Turkey's insistence on lifting of the Gaza blockage will hardly be enough to turn the tables in Gaza, at least not as of now. Turkey might gain some "persuasive leverage" however, when Assad's regime in Syria is defeated, with the clear Turkish support. Without foreseeing whether Israel really apologises, Turkey should be ready for such a scenario. Bilateral relations between countries are never only bilateral. They always contain regional and even global dimension. If Israel satisfies two of three Turkey's preconditions, few countries will be seeing the blockage of Gaza as an obstacle to the normalization of the relations between the two countries. In other words, we in Turkey might find ourselves with the ball in our court.

"We both [Israel and Turkey] have a border with Syria, and I am sure we both want to see a stable and peaceful Syria", Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said in an interview with the Jerusalem Post.

Stable and peaceful Syria seems to be a key to the stability of the region that for the time being is left volatile and unpredictable by the events of Arab Spring. At the same time, it has become self-evident that whatever will happen in the region from now on, its shape and even its structure will never be the same again. Even though there are not too many crystalized alternatives to Bashar Al-Assad's regime, few observers would argue that the Syria's President is the one who could bring stability and peace to Syria and the region.

As the fight of Free Syrian Army and the forces loyal to the Syria's President Al-Assad is far from over, regional players righteously question how to help to bring the human suffering, as well as the risks of this mayhem being incor-

porated into their borders, to the end. And in the vacuum of concerted international response to the Syrian disaster, it is once more upon the local countries to re-think the regional alliances.

Israelis know very well they cannot take on the Syrian task on their own. They know that their assistance would not be welcomed. In the dramatically changed world where it has become important to what religion you belong to, sometimes more than what values you stand for, they would need a Muslim counterpart to act. Therefore, Netanyahu's remarks can be read not only as a conciliatory message sent to Turkey but also as a decision to break the self-isolationist policy his government imposed on itself.

Now, Netanyahu's message is backed also by the public opinion. According to the polls conducted by an Israeli think tank MITVIM (The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies), 54 per cent of Israelis would favour apology by

Israel to Turkey for the killings of nine aid activists. 68 per cent would welcome an action taken by the Israeli government towards improvement of the bilateral relations and 22 per cent believe that their government is not doing enough in that direction.

22 per cent might be right. In May 2010 Israeli commandos boarded and raided Turkish-flagged Mavi Marmara ship, en route to Gaza but still in the international waters, and killed nine activists of Turkish origin. Despite of the Human Rights report issued by the United Nations defining the raid disproportionate, Israel has sabotaged diplomatic efforts to resolve the row between the two countries. Moreover, it has been defending its position, unusual in the international politics, not to apologise to Turkey for the killings.

The absence of the apology for more than two years has brought the Turkey - Israel relations to the very bottom of the deterioration. Some say that Israel has not apologised as it saw little it could get in return from Turkey. Such a view might be correct. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated couple of days ago the three conditions Turkey has asked to be fulfilled before normalization of the bilateral relations: apology for the conduct on the Mavi Marmara ship, compensation to the families of nine people killed and lifting the Gaza blockade.

“Too little, too late”, one might think about Netanyahu’s words. It seems to be especially too late, since there was the time when Turkey was not fully focused on the main reason behind the deterioration of the former allies’ ties. It was the time when Turkey was stricken by what happened on the Mavi Marmara as well as the refusal to apologise, seeking primarily an apology from the Israeli government.

Now, it has been “remembered” in Turkey that it was the operation “Cast Lead” in the end of 2008 that stroke the blow to the trust of the Turkish government to its Israeli counterpart during mediation between the later and Syria. This, followed by the “Low Sofa” incident in the beginning of 2010 contrasted heavily with the atmosphere just couple of years before when the Turkish AKP government was signing with the Israeli government agreements on political, economic and cultural cooperation, and when and cooperation in terms of the military and intelligence was flourishing.

Let aside political gains or losses, Israel should apologise to Turkey. To be able to say sorry is a morally right thing for a state, which Special Forces killed citizens of another state during the peacetime. Such an act of hostility had not happened since the WWII – till the Mavi Marmara event.

It is also highly probable that Israel will do it, one way or the other. Paying financial compensations is not an issue either. Now, when Israel can get some sort of regional cooperation in return; something that is badly needed especially after the changes in Egypt, it might be also more marketable to those who oppose the apology.

And if it really happens, what will be left then from the three Turkey’s pre-conditions would be lifting the Gaza blockade.

No doubt, future of the relations between the two countries relies heavily on what the relations between Israelis and Palestinians will be. Yet, Turkey’s insistence on fulfilling this precondition by Israel will hardly be enough to turn the tables in Gaza, at least not as of now. Turkey might gain some “persuasive leverage” however, when Assad’s regime in Syria is defeated, with the clear Turkish support.

Without foreseeing whether Israel really apologises, Turkey should be ready for such a scenario. Bilateral relations between countries are never only bilateral. They always contain regional and even global dimension. If Israel satisfies two of three preconditions, few countries will be seeing the blockage of Gaza as an obstacle to the normalization of the relations between the two countries. In other words, we in Turkey might find ourselves with the ball in our court.

I am sure that politicians see all these scenarios as possibilities on the table.

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