

Commentary

Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs

Turkey Suspends Defense Ties With Israel

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Analyst Reva Bhalla discusses Turkey's strategic need for a crisis with Israel and a growing U.S.-Turkish relationship that is increasing Israel's vulnerability.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivered a press conference on Tuesday in which he said Turkey would be suspending defense industry ties with Israel. The announcement follows Israel's continued refusal to apologize for a flotilla incident last May, as well as a leaked report on a U.N. report that largely exonerated Israel before that crisis. Turkey has a strategic intent to ratchet up its crisis with Israel for primarily public-relations purposes, but this is a diplomatic crisis that Israel cannot afford.

Over the past several months, back channel talks between Israel and Turkey that have primarily been mediated by the United States have been taking place in search of a compromise over the flotilla incident. Political personalities certainly play a role in sustaining the sticking points in these negotiations, but there is a deeper interest that Turkey has in continuing this crisis. Turkey is slowly but surely reemerging as a regional power. Last May when the flotilla incident occurred, Turkey's public relations campaign designed to broaden Turkish appeal in the Islamic world, was already well under way. Many will recall Erdogan's outburst at the Davos Summit in 2009. The spread of unrest in the Arab world has accelerated Turkey's rise, pushing Turkey into making difficult policy decisions on everything from cooperating with the United States against Iran and Iraq to developing a contingency plan for a post-Assad Syria. Many countries in the region, including Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are looking to Turkey to see if Turkish talk is all it's worth. There's been a great deal of skepticism in the Arab media in particular, over whether Turkish influence is really as much as it claims.

Playing up a crisis with Israel could help, in part, with Turkey's credibility issues as it seeks to redefine its relationship with Israel and saturate the Middle East with its own influence. The problem for Israel is that Israel cannot afford diplomatic isolation. Israel needs Turkey far more than Turkey needs Israel, especially as Israel is encountering many problems on its borders. From Turkey's perspective, even defense industry cooperation with Israel can be substituted, and that's where we see the United States playing an interesting role. The United States will become increasingly reliant on Turkey to help manage conflicts in the Middle East from Syria, to Egypt, to Iran, and so the U.S. will increasingly prioritize its relationship with Turkey over its relationship with Israel. This is something that Turkey is likely aware of, and is why we think that Turkey may be more serious this time about expanding its presence in the eastern Mediterranean, including the possibility of the Turkish Navy escorting aid ships to the Gaza Strip.

Turkey doesn't need to care too much about what Israel thinks, but it does need to care about what the United States thinks on these issues. Some bargaining can thus be expected between Ankara and Washington. For example, Turkey, in exchange for cooperation on issues that the U.S. cares about, can negotiate U.S. tolerance for a continued diplomatic crisis with Israel. That's even a dynamic that the U.S. could use to its advantage in trying to corner Israel on other issues.

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In that sense, Turkey's decision on Sunday to formally approve the installation of an X-band radar as part of a U.S.-led ballistic missile defense strategy, could serve as a useful indicator that Turkey and the United States have issues, largely unrelated to Israel, that take precedence.