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Plausible Reset in Turkish-Israeli Relations

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The beginning of the year 2021 brought renewed hope of rapprochement in Israeli-Turkish relations. These hopes were revived after the Turkish Presidential adviser confirmed the same regarding the proposed bilateral talks. He also indicated the possibility of restoration of full diplomatic relations between the two nations by March 2021. One of the foremost reasons for the probable thawing of Turkish-Israeli relations remains the recent politico-regional conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed land of Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey and Israel find a common ground to converge in this conflict. In fact, it is reported by many media outlets that the intelligence support through Israeli and Turkish drones actually played in favour of Azerbaijan against Armenian forces, which have the support of the Iranians. Furthermore, in case of Israel – which is trying to build an informal coalition against Iran in the region by normalising relations with a number of Muslim nations – the inclusion of Turkey in this list will definitely improve the conciliatory image of Israel not only in the West Asian region but also globally. Therefore, the sections below will briefly analyse the issue of a plausible reset between Israel and Turkey in the near future.

Root of the Crisis

The relations between Israel and Turkey deteriorated after the Mavi Marmara incident. To be more specific, Israel defence forces' bloody raid on the Mavi Marmara flotilla in the year 2010 caused the death of nine Turkish civilians, eventually leading to a crisis situation between Israel and Turkey. Following the incident, the relations between both the nations were strained, with Turkey withdrawing its Ambassador to Israel and expelling the Israeli envoy from Ankara, thereby leading to downgrading relations between the two nations. It is safe to say that the relations between Israel and Turkey are still acrimonious due to this incident. However, Israel clarified that its actions were in self-defence and later apologized for the incident in the year 2013. Furthermore, the UN investigations found that out of nine, six deaths can be considered as “summary executions.”

Furthermore, former US President Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the punitive response by the Israeli forces to the street protests by the Palestinians along the Gaza border could also be cited as another reason for the collapse of relations between Turkey and Israel. Due to both these incidents, there was a diplomatic upheaval between these two nations in May 2018; however, they retained their respective embassies and consulates. Amidst the diplomatic upheaval, Turkish President Erdogan and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu engaged in abusing each other periodically, although it can be interpreted that the aim of this kind of name-calling was only meant for their respective political gains at home.

Historically, both Turkey and Israel are the two non-Arab West Asian giants that were regarded as the natural allies in the region. Both the nations had collaborated at various levels in order to counter the influence of their shared regional nemeses for decades in the past. Still, with this long-time cooperation, their relationship progressed to be a strategic partnership only in the 1990s. The American support to the strengthening of this strategic partnership between Israel and Turkey cannot be ignored. The Clinton administration, during the 1990s, benefitted by the enhancing relationship between Israel and Turkey by transferring military aid to Turkey. This was done by convincing the US Congress that assistance to Turkey would also benefit Israel. During that time, highly sophisticated military transfer of technologies also happened between Israel and Turkey. So, it can be said that military cooperation and coordination with Israel actually perfectly related to the secular ideological perspective of the Turkish defence establishment. Turkey's military structure and posture was more focussed on NATO and the Mediterranean region. Therefore, from the Turkish perspective, Israel as an ally fitted perfectly in this regional political view. From the Israeli perspective, its defence establishment was fully aware of the geostrategic significance of Turkey, as well as the potential of the defence collaboration that existed in this bilateral relationship. All these factors played in favour of the Turkish-Israeli relations in the earlier decades.

Current Scenario

Apart from providing military and strategic support to Azerbaijan in its recent conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, another significant factor that can bring Turkey and Israel to converge are the energy resources. In August-September 2020, Lebanon held discussions related to reconciliation with Israel regarding oil and gas resources that were discovered in the Mediterranean region in the year 2010. The same was also mediated by the US. However, the issue between Israel and Lebanon pertains more to maritime and land borders in the Mediterranean region. The same was reached at negotiations in October 2020 related to the demarcation of their disputed maritime borderline. While the discussions regarding oil trade were made with Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt to enter into a multilateral trade association with Israel; Turkey was left out of this discussion and association. Still, it cannot be ignored that Turkish markets can be profitable for Israeli oil and gas trade via pipeline. Though it is far too early to discuss these generalisations in the volatile West Asian North African region, but the changing regional and geopolitical scenarios makes it a plausible alternative for both Israel and Turkey. At the same time, Israel's current emerging ties with Egypt and Greece will make it [Israel] tread a careful path with Turkey so as not to jeopardize these ties with Egypt and Greece.

Another challenge to this emerging rapprochement between Israel and Turkey can be Ankara's support to the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, Israel's archenemies in the region. In such a scenario,

it becomes difficult for both Israel and Turkey to find a common, mutual ground for convergence. With the deep disagreements between both the nations related to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Ankara's support for political Islam, re-forming the erstwhile bilateral camaraderie is likely to become difficult for both the nations.

Conclusion

Israel's emerging synergy with a number of Gulf nations is related to both the aim of restraining Iran and distrust related to Turkey because of the incidents that happened in the past decade. Still, it cannot be ignored that any kind of rapprochement between Israel and Turkey could become a means to further isolate Iran in the region, considering the increasing bonhomie between Tehran and Ankara following the Qatar crisis of 2018. At the same time, this could also undermine the Israeli efforts of warming its relations with the Gulf nations recently. Nevertheless, reinstating the ambassadors in Israel and Turkey can be done without any major concessions from both the nations to each other. Where, on the one hand, there are chances that this step might not result in the desired bonhomie between Israel and Turkey, however, it could still become a modest reason for a slight lowering of tensions in the volatile West Asian region.