

The Turkey Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING

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Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program

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The decision of the Turkish government not to allow the participation of the Israeli airforce in a scheduled maneuver did not cause any major consternation among Turkish commentators. The general consensus among the opinion makers is that the “break” with Israel represents a logical step, dictated by realpolitik, although an attitude of hostility toward Israel is not generally approved of. Of far greater concern is the evolution of the Kurdish issue. The return of a group of PKK militants was initially greeted as a turning point by liberal and pro-government commentators , but the jubilant welcome accorded to the militants in the Southeast has caused apprehension that the opening could be jeopardized.

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IS THE TURKISH-ISRAELI ALLIANCE OVER?

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The Turkey-Israel alliance is over. After more than two decades of close cooperation, the Turkish government is no longer interested in maintaining close cooperation with Israel. Nor is it—for all practical purposes—willing to do anything much to maintain its good relations with Israel. The absence of any substantial, public criticism in Turkey of the Turkish government’s break with Israel does suggest the Turkish-Israeli relationship lacked deeper roots in Turkish society, and hence the potential to become a permanent one.

BACKGROUND: Basically, there were four important reasons for the close cooperation between Turkey and Israel which made eminent sense in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, Turkey and Israel had common enemies, or at least threats. Iraq and Syria were radical Arab nationalist regimes which had problems with both countries. Syria claimed part of Turkey’s territory—Iskenderun—and was backing Armenian and Kurdish terrorists against Turkey. Iraq’s ambitions under President Saddam Hussein were also chilling for Ankara. Iran, as an Islamist state, was hostile to Kemalism and promoted subversion within Turkey. If Arab states were unhappy

about Turkey’s growing proximity to Israel, they weren’t prepared to do anything about it, and had not given Ankara any great benefits previously. Moreover, as devotees of realpolitik, Turkey’s leaders thought that if Arab regimes and Iran were upset or fearful of this new alignment, it would give Turkey more leverage. While Turkish leaders complained that Israel didn’t do more actively to help Ankara win its confrontation with Syria over



its safe haven for the PKK leadership, Damascus's willingness to give in was surely related to the fact that it knew neighbors to both north and south were working together against it.

Second, and related to the previous point, was the preference of Turkey's powerful military which wanted the close relationship with Israel. Aside from the threat assessment, the Turkish armed forces saw Israel as a source of advanced equipment and technology that would be quite useful for itself. Especially useful was Israel's ability to upgrade existing equipment at a relatively low price.

Third, it was believed in Ankara that the relationship with Israel would help its vital connections to the United States, given the perceived strength of the pro-Israel forces there. This benefitted Turkey in regard to Greek and Armenian criticisms of the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Finally, there were mutual economic benefits. Commerce rose to high levels. Tourism from Israel brought a lot of money into Turkey. And there was the prospect of water sales, though these have never really materialized.

But perhaps more important it related to Turkey's need for a new strategy as the Cold War had ground to an end. Turkey's big asset, and the basis of its NATO membership, was Ankara's value in confronting the USSR and its satellite states. How could Turkey replace this lost rationale and maintain its value to the West, whose approval it sought and whose aid it needed? The road to Washington thus was seen as going through Jerusalem (though Turkish policymakers might have said "Tel Aviv.")

These three factors have all eroded, in part due to objective changes in the world though to a very large degree due to the AKP taking Turkey down an Islamic conservative path. While previous

governments had their criticisms of Israel, if the AKP were not in power, the bilateral link would continue rather than being terminated.

Basically, of the four reasons cited above, the armed forces' and commercial interests have not changed at all. The same applies, to a slightly lesser degree, of Ankara's need and desire for good relations with Washington. Under a non-AKP government, all these would remain pretty constant.

The one change has been the collapse of one previous threat—Iraq—and the weakening of another, Syria, which no longer poses a Kurdish problem either, to the point that it wanted to avoid antagonizing Turkey. Yet even these external changes would not have been sufficient to sabotage the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

IMPLICATIONS: From the AKP's standpoint, however, all but the commercial factor are of limited value. Indeed, the AKP government uses anti-Israel and even outright anti-Semitic sentiment to build its base of support. Meanwhile, the AKP regime's passion for Hamas in the Gaza Strip is not matched by any profound concern toward the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

Rather than view Syria and Iran as threats, the AKP government sees these countries as allies. Relations with both countries have steadily tightened. Turkish-Syrian relations have become a virtual love fest with regular visits, agreements, and cooperation.

Rather than have common enemies, then, it could be suggested that the new alignment of Turkey with Iran and Syria have a common enemy in Israel. The Turkish military has faced a steady weakening of its political influence, due both to European Union pressure and to the AKP's strenuous efforts. The cancellation of the planned Anatolian Eagle joint military maneuvers after six

successful such exercises is telling. Although it can be assumed that the armed forces are indeed unhappy with the Turkish government's change of course and would prefer that the close alignment with Israel continues, it has far less say in the matter.

Furthermore, the AKP-run Turkey no longer needs Israel as help in maintaining Ankara's standing in Washington. On one hand, its status with the United States is secure; on the other hand, that connection is far less important for the Turkish government than what it used to be. Israel, in turn, is not in a good position to inflict costs on Turkey for Ankara's hostile, even insulting, behavior though Israeli policymakers have no illusions about the end of the special relationship. There is serious consideration of cancelling some major arms sales, especially given new fears that the technology could find its way to Iran and Syria. In addition, Israeli tourism fell off sharply, at least temporarily, and Turkish Jews knew their future in Turkey is uncertain.

It should be understood that Israel does not want to respond to the AKP's hostility by taking steps that would be seen as "anti-Turkey," such as vigorously backing Armenian genocide resolutions or conducting an anti-Turkey campaign in the United States. Israeli policy makers still harbor the hope that in a post-AKP future – although that may be difficult to envisage at the current moment – more moderate forces in Turkey will eventually

prevail and at least rebuild a friendly bilateral relationship with Israel, if not return to the past alignment.

However, Jerusalem cannot be expected to treat Turkey as a fair-minded adjudicator; Israel will hardly accept Turkey as mediator between Israel and Syria or between Israel and Hamas. At the same time, Israeli leaders will avoid if possible any confrontation with Turkey which Ankara would



use as an excuse to turn the temperature down even further.

Given the AKP's ideological orientation, its redefinition of Turkish interests and Israel's lack of leverage, the relationship appears doomed. The sole real question is how fast and obviously the AKP will move to express publicly—and sometimes demagogically—its hostility in the way that was done during the Gaza War of early 2009.

There is some reason to believe that the Turkish military could play some continuing role as a restraining factor, while American criticism (more likely from Congress than from the White House), and the desire to maintain Israel's trade and tourism might also restrain the AKP government. Perhaps the most powerful issue in this regard is any lingering hope by the Turkish government that it could play a major diplomatic role in Israel-Palestinian, Arab-Israeli issues.



CONCLUSIONS: Israeli decision makers and opinion makers—except for a very small group of marginal voices whose influence might well be

overestimated in Ankara—fully appreciate the momentous character of what has taken place. In contrast, the reactions so far of the mainstream opinion makers in Turkey suggest that there is little appreciation of the fact that the Turkish-Israeli alignment was a mutually beneficiary one, that it not only served the two countries well in economic terms, but that it above all contributed to regional stability.

As was the case when Prime Minister Erdoğan assailed Israel during and after the Gaza War, the anti-Israeli stance of the AKP government enjoys support across the ideological spectrum. It should however be noted that there is some apprehension that the stance taken toward Israel could create tensions in U.S.-Turkish-relations.

Yet, the absence of any substantial, public criticism of the Turkish government's break with Israel does suggest the Turkish-Israeli relationship lacked deeper roots in Turkish society, and hence the potential to become a permanent one.

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TURKEY'S "KURDISH OPENING" CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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The October 24 announcement by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that he was postponing the planned arrival in Turkey from Europe on October 28 of 15 members and sympathizers of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was a tacit admission that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had seriously miscalculated a critical phase in the "Kurdish Opening", which is designed to address the grievances of Turkey's Kurdish minority and persuade the PKK to lay down its arms.

BACKGROUND:

When the PKK returned to violence in June 2004 after a five-year suspension of offensive operations, it was aware that it was too weak to achieve an outright military victory. Its primary goal was to use violence as an instrument of psychological attrition in an attempt to force the Turkish state to the negotiating table; ideally including the recognition of its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan as a legitimate interlocutor and leading eventually to his release and participation in the political process in Turkey.

The return to violence was also an attempt by the PKK to preempt the emergence of an alternative



focus of Kurdish nationalism in the admittedly still limited political space created by the EU-inspired reforms passed by the AKP in 2003-2004. Although the PKK rejected the notion of an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey, it remained vague about its political goals. Indeed, the PKK often appeared more concerned with persuading Turkey to recognize it as the

representative of the country's Kurds than with any detailed demands for a resolution of the Kurdish issue.



Although the PKK was militarily much weaker than during its first insurgency in 1984-1999, it initially appeared likely to be able to sustain a low level insurgency almost indefinitely. However, the November 2007 decision by the US to lift its opposition to Turkish air strikes against the organization's bases and camps in northern Iraq forced the PKK onto the defensive militarily and psychologically. More significant was the adoption by the Turkish authorities – including the armed forces and intelligence service as well as the AKP government – in early 2008 of a policy of constructive engagement with the Iraqi Kurds. Previously, Turkey had feared that direct dialogue would be interpreted as implicit recognition of the Iraqi Kurds' political authority in northern Iraq and encourage them to push for full independence. By spring 2009, there were signs that the policy of engagement was beginning to bear fruit as the Iraqi Kurdish authorities increasingly restricted the movement of militants and supplies to the PKK's camps in the mountains. There were also reports in Kurdish nationalist circles of discreet

contacts between Turkish intelligence and elements affiliated with the PKK in an attempt to determine a roadmap for an end to the insurgency.

As a result, the launch of the Turkish government's "Kurdish Opening" in June 2009 was another phase in an ongoing process rather than a completely new initiative. Initially, the "Kurdish Opening", later re-baptized "Democratic opening" was designed to prompt a public debate, which would then be followed by a number of concessions to Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights. There is no reason to question the sincerity of the commitment of the AKP, and of the Turkish state establishment in general, to putting an end to the bloodshed that has cost

over 40,000 lives since 1984. However, there is also little doubt that the AKP calculated that "Kurdish Opening" would result in a net gain in its popular support in the run-up to the next general election in 2011; and that any lost Turkish nationalist votes would be more than offset by increase in support from ethnic Kurds, particularly as cultural concessions would be accompanied by economic measures to boost job creation in the chronically underdeveloped Kurdish southeast of the country.

The process was always going to be fraught with risk and to require skilful handling if it was not to backfire. The AKP needed to try to minimize the loss of Turkish nationalist votes by ensuring that at least the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was engaged in the process and could be held partly responsible without taking any of the credit. Similarly, the government had to remove any motivation for the PKK to continue fighting without being seen as making concessions to terrorism. More critically from the perspective of its own electoral prospects, the AKP had to make

sure that the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) – which has long been regarded by both its opponents and many of its supporters as being affiliated with the PKK – was unable to take the credit for any concessions to Kurdish rights by claiming that they were a response to its own lobbying efforts.

IMPLICATIONS: The first warning signs came in late summer 2009 when both the CHP and the MHP announced they would refuse to participate in the AKP's "Kurdish Opening." Nevertheless, the AKP continued to hold discussions with the DTP.

On October 17, the DTP announced that a group of PKK members and sympathizers would arrive at Turkey's Habur border crossing with Iraq on October 19 in a gesture of the organization's commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue. The Turkish media immediately described the group as coming to "surrender" and AKP officials publicly predicted that hundreds, perhaps thousands, more would follow until the PKK had laid down its arms.

On October 19, eight serving members of the PKK arrived at the Habur border gate. They were accompanied by 26 residents of the Mahmur refugee camp, which is home to approximately 11,000 ethnic Kurds who fled to Iraq in 1994 when the Turkish security forces burned their villages in southeast Turkey in an attempt to deny PKK militants food and shelter.

However, the thousands of ethnic Kurds who turned out to meet the group at Habur greeted them not as penitents but as conquering heroes, turning their arrival into a carnival of music, dancing, triumphant ululations and a waving mass of PKK, DTP and Kurdish nationalist flags. Under what appears to have been a prior agreement between the PKK and the Turkish authorities, the eight PKK members were not arrested. Over the

next few days, they travelled around the southeast, attending celebrations organized by the DTP and being feted by cheering crowds everywhere they went. The eight PKK members had no hesitation in declaring that they had come not as penitents but as emissaries from the PKK. They even brought a list of demands from Öcalan, insisting that the Turkish state demonstrate its willingness to make concessions on Kurdish political and cultural rights before the PKK would consider renouncing violence. It was clear that both the militants and those who had turned out to greet them regarded their arrival in Turkey as a victory in their long struggle to force the Turkish state to recognize the PKK as a legitimate interlocutor and the representative of the country's Kurds.

Extraordinarily, the AKP does not appear to have foreseen the impact that television footage of the celebrations at Habur would have on the Turkish masses. As the DTP paraded the eight PKK members through southeast Turkey, Turkish nationalists took to the streets to protest in the rest of the country. In several towns, there were scuffles as Turkish nationalists clashed with DTP supporters. On October 24, amid fears of even worse violence, Erdogan announced that the AKP had postponed the planned arrival in Istanbul on October 28 of 15 PKK members and sympathizers from Europe.

In announcing the postponement, Erdogan bitterly criticized the DTP. However, although there is little doubt that the DTP has exploited the return of the PKK militants for its own ends, the protests have also served as a reminder that managing the Turkish nationalist reaction to any resolution of the Kurdish issue is much more complicated than a mere balance sheet of votes lost and gained.

When the Turkish Republic was established in 1923 as a nation state, the only officially recognized minorities were the Jewish, Armenian and Greek communities. For most of the republic's history

even the existence of Kurds has been officially denied. Traditionally, the official Turkish state discourse has equated national unity with ethnic and religious homogeneity. History textbooks still

Under such circumstances, and in the absence of an unequivocal commitment from the PKK to renounce violence, it is not surprising that media coverage of the PKK militants' triumphal arrival in Habur triggered such an outcry from Turkish nationalists. What is surprising is that the AKP does not appear to have foreseen that containing Turkish nationalist sentiments was always likely to be at least as difficult as placating Kurdish aspirations.



teach that national unity is a prerequisite for national survival in the face of relentless foreign conspiracies to divide and weaken Turkey. In recent years, migration and increased confidence has made ethnic Kurds more visible on the streets even of the cities of western Turkey. The result has been a palpable rise in anti-Kurdish racism, which has been compounded by EU pressure for greater Kurdish rights and the continuing trauma of the death and destruction caused by the PKK's insurgency. In poorer areas, resentment has been sharpened by economic hardship, high youth unemployment and the influx from the countryside of young Kurdish migrants looking for work.

CONCLUSIONS: Erdogan's announcement of the postponement of the arrival of PKK militants from Europe is a serious setback for the AKP's "Kurdish Opening". It has also probably put paid to any lingering hopes that the AKP may have entertained of persuading the CHP to join the process. However, it is also a fact that, although it miscalculated and was partially motivated by electoral motives, no other Turkish government than the AKP has ever attempted to solve the Kurdish issue by peaceful means.

It remains to be seen whether or not, once the Turkish nationalist outrage at the events at Habur has abated, the AKP will be prepared to renew its efforts and can find a formula which can put an end to the PKK insurgency while avoiding a potentially devastating Turkish nationalist backlash.

WHAT THE COLUMNISTS SAY

The decision of the Turkish government not to allow the participation of the Israeli airforce in a scheduled maneuver did not cause any major consternation among Turkish commentators. The general consensus among the opinion makers is that the “break” with Israel represents a logical step, dictated by realpolitik, although an attitude of hostility toward Israel is not generally approved of. Of far greater concern is the evolution of the Kurdish issue. The return of a group of PKK militants was initially greeted as a turning point by liberal and pro-government commentators , but the jubilant welcome accorded to the militants in the Southeast has caused apprehension that the opening could be jeopardized.

ALTAN: THE GENERAL STAFF HAS BEEN CAUGHT RED-HANDED

When our daily a couple of months ago disclosed that a unit of the General staff had prepared a plan to topple the government, the Chief of the General staff called the blueprint “a piece of paper” and denied the existence of any such plan at a press conference, reminds Ahmet Altan in Taraf. Either he was lying or he was unaware of what had been going on behind his back at his own headquarters. At the time (in June), a significant part of the Turkish media chose to believe the High command. Like the General staff, those commentators who viciously attacked us built their argumentation on the fact that it was not an original copy that had been presented, but a “photocopy”. The Chief of the General staff assured that the military authorities would take all appropriate measures if it the blueprint was revealed to be authentic. Well, we now know that the blueprint is indeed authentic. The original document, with the “wet” signature of Colonel Dursun Çiçek has been handed over to the law enforcement

authorities. Now, everybody knows for sure that the plan to topple the government was prepared and signed by Colonel Çiçek. The only thing we don’t know is if the Colonel prepared the blueprint on the instigation of the Chief of the General staff General İlker Başbuğ, or on behalf of some other general. Whatever the case, a most serious crime has been committed. The General staff has been caught red-handed.

ÇANDAR: THE KURDISH OPENING WILL NOT BE ABANDONED

Cengiz Çandar in Hürriyet notes that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has declared that the scheduled return of PKK militants from Europe has been postponed as a result of the jubilant welcoming accorded to the PKK militants in the Southeast. That means that the “opening” has now entered a period of “stagnation”, but it does not suggest that it is going to be abandoned. As the Prime Minister emphasized, further steps are now going to be considered. Apparently, the

government was caught off-guard when the return of the PKK militants was transformed into a manifestation. It was not prepared for the political move made by the Kurdish side. Now, the most urgent task of the AKP government is to convince the Turkish side that the opening will be to the benefit of the country as a whole. And that requires a better understanding of the other side. Portraying the PKK militants as terrorists will not help. However we choose to denominate PKK, the fact remains that it is the latest of the Kurdish rebellions that have marked the republic since its founding. If the “rebels” are treated differently than they were in 1925 or in 1937, then Turkey stands a chance of “taking off”.

MAHÇUPYAN: IT IS THE STATE THAT IS REPENTANT

Etyen Mahçupyan in *Taraf* writes that it has been conventionally assumed that a solution of the Kurdish issue depended on the PKK relinquishing its arms, on the PKK militants descending from the mountains. Yet, the oppression to which the Kurds had been subjected since the founding of the republic, and which had acquired inhuman dimensions after the military coup of the 1980 never left the Kurds aspiring for freedom any other alternative than to take up arms. In that respect, it is entirely misleading to depict those who are now descending from the mountains as being “repentant”. The only thing they regretted was living under oppression. In fact, it is really the other way around: It is the state itself that is repentant. The state is forced to abrogate the republican law (in order to accommodate the return of the militants of the PKK), which never allowed for democracy in the first place. One

may speculate over why the state is reversing its policies: Globalization, the spread of a culture of human rights, energy geopolitics could all be enumerated as explanations. Those who prefer to delve more deeply into the issue would point to the change of mentality that has taken place among the pious conservatives during the last two decades. But whatever the explanation, it is an undeniable fact that the state has outgrown its founding ideology. It realizes that there is no return to the past, that it is irrational to assume that continued suppression of political demands, of diversity, will ensure the survival of the regime. Although to pride to admit it, the state is indeed repentant.

CEMAL: THE DTP HAS TO RESTRAIN ITS SYMPATHIZERS

After having spoken to Ahmet Türk, the leader of the pro-Kurdish Democratic society party (DTP), Hasan Cemal in *Milliyet* relates that Türk has grown increasingly alarmed over the reactions to the return of the PKK militants, who were greeted by jubilant masses in the Southeast. Türk assured me that the scenes in the Southeast only testified to the desire for peace. “Yet, I am also aware that the jubilant welcoming creates tensions in the country, and we are trying our best to control the situation”, Türk told me. Indeed, the process of democratic opening is fragile, and could just as easily be derailed. Those who want it to succeed must take into account that there is not only a Kurdish public opinion, but a Turkish public opinion as well. Its sensibilities will have to be taken into consideration as well. The DTP must pull the breaks and restrain its sympathizers.

GÜRSEL: WHY HAS ISRAEL BECOME THE AKP'S WHIPPING BOY?

Kadri Gürsel in Milliyet explains why Israel has become the AKP's "whipping boy": During the 1990s, when Syria gave shelter to the leader of the PKK, security needs dictated that Turkey developed military ties with Israel. The capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 changed the context. And while there are no longer any pressing security reasons for Turkey to maintain a close relation with Israel, the economy on the contrary dictates that Turkey nurtures its relations with the Muslim Middle East. Being perceived as aligned with Israel would only harm Turkey's business interests in the region. Furthermore, as Turkey normalizes its relations with Armenia, there is an expectation that there will not be any "Armenian genocide resolution" in the U.S. congress, which in turn makes Turkey less dependent on the goodwill of the Jewish lobby (that has so far defended Turkish interests). And the fact that the Obama administration is the decidedly least pro-Israeli U.S. administration in years further emboldens the AKP. Finally, the AKP is sensitive to the Iranian point of view. Israel still needs Turkey, but Turkey no longer has the same interest in staying close to Israel. If Turkey had been governed by a centrist party, the relation with Israel would still have been reconsidered, but the current,

unnecessary ideological overtones would have been absent.

KORU: ISRAEL LASHES OUT AT TURKEY IN THE VAIN HOPE THAT THE INTERNATIONAL TIDE AGAINST IT CAN BE REVERSED

Fehmi Kuru in Yeni Şafak writes that Israel is a country that has lost its ways in a changed world. What scares Israel most is the hope of change that the U.S. president Barack Obama represents. We all know that the "neo-insane" who ruled the U.S. during the eight Bush years put Israel's interests above everything else, including the interests of the country whose citizens they are. They tried to remake the world in a way that would have suited Israel, and they failed dismally. Now, the realization that the tide has turned against them terrifies the decision makers of Israel. The unprecedented report of the UN Human rights commission, condemning Israel's human rights abuses during the Gaza war in hitherto unheard language is a first sign. And with the expectation that the U.S. administration will act on the Palestinian issue, Israeli decision makers anticipate that something more terrible than their worst nightmare is about to come true. In the vain hope that it will help it reverse the tide to its advantage, Israel is letting its aggressions out on Turkey. Israel will not succeed.