

Between Turkey and Israel, the Wounds Run Deep

By **Marvine Howe**

SpecialReport



Turkey's President Abdullah Gul at his summer residence in the Tarabya resort north of Istanbul, overlooking the Bosphorus.

On the surface, it would seem that relations between Turkey and Israel are flourishing once again, two years after the Mavi Marmara disaster, when Israel Defense Forces assaulted a Turkish cruise ship on a humanitarian mission to Gaza, killing eight Turkish citizens and a young Turkish-American.

While diplomatic relations have been downgraded to the level of second secretary, Turkish Airlines, which has been operating four flights daily between Istanbul and Tel Aviv, announced it would increase flights to 32 a week in October. Commercial trade also is up between the two countries, and while new military cooperation has been suspended, old defense contracts have been respected.

Both senior Turkish and Israeli officials insist they want to restore the normal, friendly relations that prevailed before May 31, 2010, when Israeli commandos accosted the flotilla of six passenger and cargo ships in international waters of the Mediterranean.

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But the two sides appear locked in their original positions. Turkey contends that the flotilla was an international volunteer effort to bring relief to the blockaded Gaza Strip, and demands an apology from Israel for its armed attack on the Turkish passenger ship and the death of nine civilians and injuring of 20. Israel argues that the flotilla organizers were radical Islamists, whose humanitarian mission was a provocation to be followed by other shipments with military aid, presenting a security threat.

The *Mavi Marmara* was the lead ship of the international flotilla, with nearly 700 participants from 36 countries, bearing 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, with the aim of piercing the Israeli blockade of Gaza. It was organized primarily by a Turkish Islamic volunteer agency, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, which has sent aid to countries around the world devastated by earthquakes, floods, famine and conflict. Known by its Turkish initials IHH, the charity organization is well known in Turkey but banned by Israel as a "terrorist organization," because of its contacts with Hamas. The flotilla's co-sponsor was the Free Gaza Movement, a coalition of pro-Palestinian groups and human rights activists, who had succeeded in sending small vessels with medical supplies through the blockade into Gaza twice in 2008.

A Turkish court on May 29, 2012 formally pressed charges of manslaughter against four Israel Defense Forces officers who were commanders at the time of the *Mavi Marmara* incident: Israel's former military chief, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, the former commander-in-chief of the Israeli navy, Eliezer Marom, former chief of Israeli military intelligence Amos Yadlin, and the former intelligence chief of the Israeli air force, Avishai Lavy. The indictment said the four face nine consecutive life terms in prison for "inciting to kill."

"Killing people is unacceptable, especially when their only purpose was charity," Ramazan Ariturk, a member of the Turkish team of lawyers representing the victims of the *Mavi Marmara* raid, declared in an August interview. "We can't bring the people back, but we want to prevent this from happening again." A founding partner of the Elmadag Law Firm at Istanbul's World Trade Center, Ariturk said

that investigations underway show that 174 Israeli soldiers landed on the unarmed ship, and 37 have been fully identified. Turkish lawyers, in conjunction with attorneys from other countries involved in the case, namely France, England and Belgium, also presented the case to the International Court of Justice a year ago. "I believe there will be results," Ariturk said confidently.

Israel has already offered \$6 million in compensation through the Turkish Embassy and would have given \$10 million, Ariturk disclosed, "but we rejected their offer." He thinks the Israeli government regrets not having apologized to Turkey and paid compensation to the families at the outset. "In the long run, Israel will lose," the attorney stated. "Turkey can't go back to the old relations."

Turkish diplomatic sources who followed the case closely stress that the Israeli government had been informed that the flotilla would not breach the blockade and had been instructed to head south to Egypt after its show of protest. The main problem, according to these sources, is that Israel cannot admit that it was wrong to attack the flotilla in international waters. "They should have said straight away: 'we're friends and friends make mistakes,'" said a Turkish diplomat, "and it would have been much easier to reach an accord."

According to this source, there have been three secret high-level Israeli-Turkish meetings in Belgium and Geneva to work out an Israeli apology. "But they failed because [Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin] Netanyahu feared [Foreign Minister Avigdor] Lieberman would pull out of the coalition government," the diplomat said, adding that while the meetings have stopped, there are still back channel phone calls. He stressed that Turkey is not demanding that Israel lift its blockade but that it ease the restrictions to allow humanitarian aid through. "It's their move now if they want to restore relations, but I think they won't solve the problem until there's a change in government," confided the Turkish diplomat.

Over the summer, as the situation in Syria disintegrated dangerously, Israeli leaders made conciliatory statements toward Turkey, apparently in hopes of a *rapprochement* in light of the new common threat. "We want to restore relations with

Turkey,” Netanyahu told a group of Turkish journalists in Jerusalem, adding that Turkey and Israel are “stable and important countries in an unstable region.”

Earlier, Yigal Palmor, a spokesman for Israel’s Foreign Ministry, told Turkish journalists that agreement had been reached on an apology, but it had been put on hold because Turkish officials had posed new conditions. He referred to a declaration by Turkey’s prime minister demanding that Israel lift the blockade on Gaza and statements by other officials that Turkey could not guarantee that private sources would not bring legal action over the *Mavi Marmara* case. The Israeli official also made public the wording of an apology, which reads: “If possible operational mistakes led to unintentional damage and unintended loss of life, then Israel apologizes.” Turkish observers have noted this is not a legal admission of wrongdoing.

“If the Israelis want to talk and reach an accord, then why don’t they?” a high level Turkish official, who requested anonymity, responded. Declaring that Israel has been isolated by its estrangement with Turkey, the official disclosed an underlying grievance the government bears against its erstwhile ally. “The problem is that Israel never appreciated what we did; we gave them an opening to the Islamic world. Turkey is the only Muslim country to invite a high Israeli official, President Shimon Peres, to address parliament, in November 2007. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was the first Muslim to pay a state visit to Israel in 2005 and offered to serve as a Middle East peace mediator.”

More than anyone, undoubtedly, Turkey’s ancient Jewish community, which numbers about 20,000, would like to see a peaceful resolution to the *Mavi Marmara* crisis. I met two leaders of The Jewish Community of Turkey organization in a pleasant café up the hill from the restored synagogue—carefully guarded after two major terror attacks by the rogue Palestinian Abu Nidal in 1986, and by al-Qaeda in 2003, which had made a deep impact on the community. The group’s vice president, Ishak Ibrahimzadeh, said that in the tense period following the *Mavi Marmara* incident, police had been put on guard to avoid any “misunderstandings, such as reactions to Jewish institutions through manipulation.”

Israel “could and should have handled the case better,” the Jewish businessman said. On the other hand, he added, Turkey’s prime minister handled the aftermath of the incident “carefully and responsibly,” declaring that the issue was between the

two governments and not the people of the two countries. The prime minister also stressed that Turkish Jewish citizens should not be linked to what was happening, and thereby the community felt safer.

Deniz Baler Saporta, the Community’s executive director, said the flotilla group and their organizers should have been better considered and evaluated more seriously by the Israelis, and the case should be handled “more responsibly.” Asked if the Jewish community would remain in Turkey, Saporta responded directly, “We believe we have a future here though we still have to make progress in our country for a better collective future.” There were no special laws against Jews, she emphasized: “We’re treated as everyone should be treated; still, issues such as preventing hate speech have to be dealt with more strongly, and the press has to act accordingly and should show the necessary sensitivity.”

Ankara’s Independent Policy

The question is how Turkish–Israeli relations ever became so close in the first place. Turkey, with an estimated population of 80 million—99 percent of whom are Muslim—has observed an independent and seemingly contradictory policy on the Arab–Israeli question. The first Muslim country to recognize the state of Israel in 1949, and a member of NATO since 1952, Turkey has, however, supported the Arabs at key junctures, including the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel; denounced the move of Israel’s capital to Jerusalem in 1980; condemned the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982; and has consistently taken pro-Palestinian positions. But from 1990 to 1997, Ankara signed a number of accords with Israel that openly challenged the Arab policies toward the Jewish state, according to Deniz Tansi, professor of international relations at Yeditepe University in Istanbul.

It was the Kurdish problem that revived old strains between Turkey and its Arab neighbors, which had at one time been subjects of the Ottoman Empire. In 1986, the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, carried out its first armed attack in eastern Turkey, and has waged a deadly guerrilla war against the Turkish state ever since. For a long time, the militant nationalist Kurdish group was based in Syria, which has border and water problems with Turkey. Iraq and Iran have also played the Kurdish card against Turkey at different times. Against this background of continued tension with their neighbors, a group of Turkish military commanders flew to Israel in February 1996 and signed a far-

reaching Military Cooperation and Training Pact. This was soon followed by other accords for upgrading Turkish fighter jets and tanks, military training, defense procurement and intelligence. Under a Free Trade Accord, Israel soon became Turkey’s main export market in the region.

When the new conservative Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002 through a landslide electoral victory, observers expected a significant change in Turkey’s Western-oriented foreign policy. Known by its Turkish initials, the AK Party was led by former Istanbul Mayor Erdogan, Abdullah Gul, former parliamentarian, and other reformists from the banned Islamist-inspired Refah Party, but also included social conservatives, nationalists and independents.

From 2002–2009, however, the AK Party government was absorbed by its overriding ambition to join the European Union. With the charismatic Erdogan as prime minister and the rational Gul foreign minister and now president, Turkey pursued its open, pro-Western policies, including the close ties with Israel, while engaging in reforms demanded by the European Union involving human rights, Kurdish rights and reducing the political power of the military.

According to Sedat Ergin, a widely respected columnist for the Turkish daily *Hurriyet*, the breach in Turkey’s partnership with Israel occurred over the latter’s three-week assault on Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009, in which at least 1,300 Palestinians and 14 Israelis were killed. During a debate on Gaza at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Prime Minister Erdogan vented his rage on his former friend, Israeli President Peres. “When it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill,” Erdogan said, and stormed out of the Forum. The Turkish leader was particularly incensed over the Gaza assault because he had spent the previous eight months promoting Israeli–Syrian peace talks, which fell another victim of the Gaza attack.

Back in Istanbul and around the Middle East, which had seen Erdogan’s clash with Peres on YouTube, the Turkish leader was hailed as a hero. “Every time he slams Israel, Erdogan gains popularity at home and in the Arab world,” Ergin commented. But the Turkish journalist stressed that the situation was dangerous because it was generating hate speech, where people were beginning to blame Israel for everything that’s bad. “There must be an apology for *Mavi Marmara*. We can’t go back to the high intensive cooperation of before,” he acknowledged, “but the situation must be improved.” □