Turkey and Israel: no military alliance yet

After the incident three years ago involving the humanitarian flotilla en route to the Gaza Strip, tensions between Turkey and Israel, both of which are allies of Washington and supporters of its interests in the region, greatly complicated US policy in the Middle East. That is why, after persistent US prodding, these two states that have so much influence in the region recently began moving towards rapprochement. But how strong will their relationship be after exchanging so many demarches?

The parties met recently in Ankara for the first round of negotiations concerning compensation payments to the victims and families of the Turkish citizens who died when Israeli special operations forces seized the Mavi Marmara ferry as it was taking a humanitarian cargo to Gaza. It is difficult at this point to know what the first meeting in three years means, except that official contacts between the two countries have resumed, and the main item on the agenda is settlement of victims’ claims and an agreement on the amount of compensation to be paid. According to Bülent Arınç, Turkey’s deputy prime minister and official spokesman, the overall tone of the meeting was positive. Once the parties settle on the amount and the agreements are documented, the incident with the ferry will be over. What comes next?

So long as Ankara says normalization of relations should proceed gradually, the issue of military cooperation is not on the table. At least no announcement has been made regarding a quick revival of the military alliance between the two countries that some analysts in Israel and the United States have been talking about. There are a number of reasons for that, and op-ed articles do not always take them into account.

Let’s first return to the issue of compensation and note that Turkey’s demands are an order of magnitude higher than Israel is willing to pay, and the relatives of the victims have refused to withdraw their lawsuits against Israeli politicians and military commanders. The court proceedings may continue, and if the plaintiffs, which include the former head of Israel’s general staff, lose the case, that could very well prolong — if not freeze — the ongoing reconciliation process.

Second, any new exacerbation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could damage even the slight improvement in relations between Jerusalem and Ankara. Prime Minister Erdoğan has already been warned that his planned trip to Gaza is undesirable. Both the Israeli government and US leaders are opposed to his visit. Erdoğan will apparently give in and cancel his trip to the Hamas-controlled enclave in order to avoid killing the normalization process just as it is getting underway. After all, it is unlikely that Tel Aviv will decide to lift the blockade on Gaza, which is Ankara’s prerequisite for normalizing relations with Israel. It is true that Israel has begun easing the blockade, but its complete removal as Ankara demands is not near. However, the Turkish authorities do not appear to be very concerned about that, although it may give the domestic opposition cause to criticize the Erdoğan government, which, don’t forget, has cast itself as Islamist.

The third reason is that military reconciliation with Israel is unpopular in Erdoğan’s own Justice and Development Party. Many of his colleagues would like to see the party retain a pale version of Islamism. After all, in choosing
between Israel, the United States and the West on one hand and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the other, they will have to choose alliance with Tel Aviv while traveling the Islamic path in international relations mouthing anti-Israeli slogans.

Fourth, we obviously should not forget that Turkey’s five-year 2010 National Security Strategy lists Israel as a foreign threat, and Iran was removed from the list along with a number of other countries. There is no point in looking for consistency and integrity in these decisions by the Turkish National Security Council or in Erdoğan’s talk about joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The country’s foreign policy is clearly out of control and in danger of committing another blunder that the opposition can use against Erdoğan.

Fifth, there are two sides to the normalization process, and there is opposition to it in Israel, also. For example, Israel Our Home party leader and Knesset member Avigdor Lieberman called the apology to Turkey for the ferry incident a mistake. Netanyahu was also strongly condemned by other Israeli politicians. Even considering that Israel formed a new government just recently and it still has quite a bit of time left in office, Netanyahu cannot afford to ignore the views of those opposing unilateral concessions to Turkey. Especially since in using concession as a diplomatic tool the prime minister is risking the loss of face without achieving his strategic goal — getting Ankara’s consent to the full restoration of the 1996 military agreement that would allow Israel to use Turkey’s military infrastructure for strikes on Iran. Even Israel’s hope that Turkey would stop exercising its right of veto in matters affecting cooperation between NATO and Israel could prove unrealistic. In general, the anti-Iranian orientation of the Turkish-Israeli alliance suits both Tel Aviv and Washington, which sparked the alliance’s revival in the face of new realities, and it may present an insurmountable obstacle for Ankara.

The Iranian factor is the sixth matter hindering a rapid revival of the military alliance between Turkey and Israel. It is quite clear now to both Tel Aviv and Washington that sanctions and military threats can only slow Iran’s future economic growth, not halt it. As one of the countries in the region with the highest GDP, Iran is literally stepping on Turkey’s heels (the two countries rank 18th and 17th in the world, respectively, in terms of GDP). A change in regional leadership is not in the US interest, and Tehran remains Washington’s main enemy in the Middle East after the administration turnover that occurred with Obama’s election to a second presidential term. And Iran is not simply a geostrategic enemy. As experts justifiably say, it is a “useful enemy” because it gives the United States a reason for remaining in the region. The Americans see the alliance between Turkey and Israel primarily as a buffer against Iran’s growing influence and a guarantor of US interests in the region.

Israel is a less obvious choice for Turkey, however, with energy security being a major factor. That makes it the seventh reason cited in this article, although it is not seventh not in terms of its significance for predicting renewal of the military alliance in the near term. According to Iran’s Ministry of Petroleum, the daily volume of fossil fuel deliveries to Turkey is about 28 million cubic meters, or just over 10 billion cubic meters annually. There has been no reason until now to expect that Ankara would want to stop purchasing Iranian gas. Not even US pressure has caused Turkey to join the embargo on energy imports from Iran, and Turkey has not stopped buying Iranian oil and gas. Iran meets 30% of Turkey’s total demand for oil and 25% of its natural gas needs. That is the way things currently stand, but how much can Turkey get from Israel, and when? There is a good possibility that Israel’s Leviathan field could supply gas to the Turkish market. The Israelis plan to export gas to Turkey and later to Europe by gas pipeline through Turkey. American companies may join the project. According to Alon Liel, a former Israeli diplomat who is working in Turkey, the energy issue was an important factor in the reconciliation decision. It is difficult to disagree with that. According to Turkey’s Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, by 2020 the country’s need for energy, particularly natural gas and electricity, will increase by 2.5 times. The annual demand for natural gas will grow from 70 to 80 billion cubic meters during that period. Turkish leaders are very concerned that Russia and Iran will only meet 80% of this growing demand. They are interested in Israeli gas, but for now there is no alternative but to burn Iranian gas.

In conclusion, I would point out that Turkey has apparently not made a final decision. As yet, there is no reason to expect a rapid and radical reorientation of Ankara’s defense strategy. The impact of that would extend beyond the Middle East. Israeli strikes on Iran from Turkish territory are a worst case scenario in the US strategy for dealing with Tehran by proxy because it would be impossible to limit the conflict to a unilateral action by Tel Aviv. Considering Iran’s inevitable response, it is simply unrealistic to expect that it would remain confined to the Middle East.

Nikolai Bobkin, Candidate of Military Science, is an expert on the Middle East and an Associate Professor.
This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.