Turkey Drifts Towards Israel

As is well known, the current foreign policy of the Turkish leadership in the region widely known as “zero problems with neighbours” has failed completely and in fact become “zero relations with neighbours.” The sharp deterioration in the Russian-Turkish relations after the launch of the Turkish missiles on the Russian military aircraft has completed the process of Turkey’s political isolation across its borders. Today, almost all states bordering with Turkey are among its enemies or competitors (Syria, Iraq, Iran, Greece, Cyprus, Armenia). The only exception are the good-neighbourly and mutually beneficial relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan as an entity of the Federation of Iraq. Yet, relations between Ankara and Baghdad have significantly deteriorated and even become aggravated after the Turkish authorities flagrantly violated the sovereignty of the country by bringing military units with artillery and armoured vehicles to Nineveh province without the permission of the central authorities. Ankara has made it clear that it is dissatisfied with the pro-Iranian Shiite government in Baghdad, which, to make the matters worse, supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

In general, Ankara’s attempts at overt intervention in the internal affairs of Syria and Iraq, revealed facts of transit of foreign jihadist fighters to these countries via the territory of Turkey, cooperation of the Turkish authorities and private business with the Islamic State (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamic rebel groups of the region in the trade of oil, arms, museum objects, a new military campaign against the Turkish and Syrian Kurds – all these activities are criticized by the majority of members of the global community, as well as by traditional Turkish allies – the USA and other NATO states. The European Union, in turn, expresses its dissatisfaction with the unwillingness or inability of the Turkish authorities to stop the transit of refugees and illegal migrants from the countries of the Middle East to Europe. The growing isolation of Turkey in the region and international arena, coupled with a sharp deterioration of its economy, has become evident.

All this is forcing Ankara to seek new, at least temporary allies and partners in the world and the region, which include Israel. Turkey was famously the first Islamic state to recognize the State of Israel and establish diplomatic relations with it in November 1949. Till now, Turkey is the only Islamic state where Jews (about 20 thousand people) are entitled to equal political, civil, economic and cultural rights on an equal basis with other ethnic groups. Moreover, the Turkish Jews belong primarily to the prosperous and middle class of the country. A pragmatic interest in each other has allowed both countries to maintain the high level of bilateral cooperation for a long time, especially in terms of economy, tourism and military and technical cooperation. There was even an exchange of intelligence between their law enforcement agencies. By 2010, trade turnover between the two countries reached 3.5 billion dollars a year, and Israel was ranked the 17th in the list of exporting countries in the Turkish market, while Turkey was the 6th biggest trade partner of Israel.

However, the supporters of Turkish Islamisation who came to power, the Justice and Development Party in particular, tried to win greater credibility in the Islamic world, and started to make hostile statements about Israel and gradually distance from the “Zionist entity”. R. Erdogan openly accepted a visit of Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in Ankara, announced the possibility of rapprochement with Iran, and condemned the Israeli military operation “Cast Lead” in the Gaza Strip in 2008–2009. The entire reason for the break of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel was the incident with the Mavi Marmara ship, which was a part of the so-called “Freedom Fleet” that tried to
break into the Israeli blockaded Gaza Strip during the night of May 30–31, 2010. The fleet of six ships was stopped by Israeli commandos in neutral waters; nine citizens of Turkey who made physical resistance to the Israeli boarding team were killed in the clashes, and about 30 people were wounded. At a session of the Turkish parliament it was decided to reconsider relations between Turkey and Israel, to recall the Turkish Ambassador from Tel Aviv, and close Turkish airspace for Israeli non-commercial aircraft. Several joint military projects were frozen, and Turkish resorts were closed for Israeli tourists.

As it became known later, the whole idea of the breach of the sea blockade of the Gaza Strip was inspired by the Turkish intelligence agencies, and its purpose was not to deliver humanitarian aid to the Palestinian, but to earn a greater reputation in the Islamic world by R. Erdogan. By that time, the Neo-Ottoman ideology had become the basis of the foreign policy of Turkey, as Ankara tried to restore its authority in the borders of the former Ottoman Empire using other, non-military methods. R. Erdogan skilfully played his anti-Israel card to win leadership among nationalistic and Islamic social groups inside the country and in the Muslim Sunni (Salafi) world. This strategy was integrated in the Arab Spring that swept away the traditional regimes in the Middle East.

However, expectations that the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad would fall by the end of 2015, Turkey would bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power in the country and it would take the position of Iran in Syria, as well as strengthen its position in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon have failed to materialise. Iran's agreement with the West on its nuclear program, and consequent expected lifting of restrictive sanctions against Tehran significantly increased military and economic potential of this country and its influence in the region. The Russian Aerospace Forces' participation in the military action in Syria in favour of the government forces completely ruined all Erdogan's plans.

On the eve of the new year of 2016, R. Erdogan visited Riyadh and tried to strengthen the existing partnership with the leadership of Saudi Arabia. The main points of contact between Ankara and Riyadh are a common hatred of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, their desire to limit the influence of Iran and Shiite communities in the region by all means, as well as their alliance with Washington. The same reasons can explain the expected renewal of relations between Turkey and Israel. It is no coincidence that during a visit to Saudi Arabia, Erdogan stressed, that “Israel needs an ally such as Turkey. And we must admit that we also need Israel.”

The restoration of diplomatic relations and the reopening of the Turkish-Israeli cooperation under the auspices of the United States in the current circumstances satisfy many parties. In December 2015, the Turkish authorities confirmed that they had reached a preliminary agreement with Israel during negotiations in Switzerland to normalize bilateral relations. According to the agreements reached, Israel is to create a fund worth 20 million dollars to pay compensation to the victims of Israeli commandos, while Turkey is waiving all the claims against Israel in this matter. In addition, Israel is obliged to ease the blockade of the Gaza Strip. The latter is obviously mentioned to “save face” of Mr. Erdogan before his supporters; in fact, nothing is likely to change in the maritime border of Gaza. One should not forget that the other ally of Israel – Egypt – absolutely opposes the lifting of the blockade. Representatives of Turkey allegedly promised the Israelis that they would stop the activities of Hamas on its territory should the blockade be lifted in the Gaza Strip.

Amid the strengthening of Iran’s positions in Syria and the region and the revitalization of the Lebanese political-military group Hezbollah, Israel is extremely interested in finding new allies and partners in the Arab and Muslim world. Recently, Jerusalem has managed to establish links and contacts with Saudi Arabia, and strengthen relations with the new Egyptian regime by way of secret diplomacy behind the scenes. Turkey may become yet another important link in the system of regional security of Israel. Today, Turkey and Israel have many more common interests and points of contact than grounds for confrontation. In addition, their mutual trade and economic benefit from this cooperation is evident. Turkey is considered the most important investor in the development programs of the Israeli military industrial sector, as well as of the long-term project on the development of Leviathan gas deposit and construction of the underwater pipeline, through which Israeli gas will be supplied to Turkey. According to Turkish media, Ankara intends to restore military cooperation with Israel and purchase its advanced observation and surveillance systems and modern unmanned devices.

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