48 Hours in Turkey: Diplomatic Victory and Defeat followed a Terror Attack

The first two days of the past week saw two momentous developments on the diplomatic front take place on the Turkish scene. But Tuesday night then witnessed a heinous terror attack that left the country reeling. The ruling Justice and Development Party (or AKP), led by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım (aka Hapless) and staunchly supported by the nominally neutral President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (aka the Prez), appeared in shock following a triple suicide attack on the Atatürk Airport in Istanbul . . . but could it be that these seemingly random and unrelated events are somehow interlinked and interconnected??

Last Monday and Tuesday (27-28 June 2016) have constituted a most momentous 48 hours for Turkey. At the very outset of the week, things looked up with the Turkish media (read, the state propaganda apparatus) reporting that Israel had finally decided to make reparations and reinstate cordial relations with Turkey, relations that have been shaky ever since then-PM Erdoğan's "One Minute" performance at Davos (30 January 2009) and the subsequent deadly Mavi Marmara incident (31 May 2010). Later on during the same day then news emerged that Turkey had, in turn, made overtures towards Russia, in an attempt to patch up things between Ankara and Moscow, between Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin. Following these two major developments on the political scene, pundits and the public alike were busy regurgitating the facts when Tuesday night, towards 10 PM, terrorist struck at Istanbul's main communication artery, the Atatürk Airport in Yeşilköy, the nation's biggest and Europe's third largest, in operation since 1924, serving more than 60 million passengers last year.

The Israeli Gambit

Those 48 hours began so well, the staunchly pro-AKP daily Sabah even proudly carrying the headline that Turkey had forced Israel to lift its blockade of the Gaza strip. Turkey's hapless PM Binali Yıldırım subsequently announced to the world that the "Gaza embargo [is] to be largely lifted," even adding that "Turkish ship[s] carrying 10,000 tons of aid will move toward [the] Israeli port of Ashdod on Friday." In this way, Turkey proclaimed that is has apparently done its bit for the besieged Palestinians living in the "world's largest open air prison" as the Israeli embargo on Gaza has now been "largely lifted." The Israeli authorities, on the other hand, as worded by the Jerusalem-based journalist Allison Deger, beg to differ as they seem to indicate that the "blockade over the Gaza Strip . . . will remain in full". In fact, Bibi (as in Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's more than hawkish PM and an apparent Jewish mirror image of the Turkish Prez himself), has made this abundantly clear that "[t]his [, the Gaza embargo] is our supreme security interest; I was not prepared to compromise on it." Still, for Turkish domestic consumption, the AKP spin doctors are more than happy to bend the truth and paint the Prez and Hapless as the ultimate champions of oppressed Muslims worldwide, in particular of the Palestinians.

The English-language Arab broadcaster Al Jazeera reports in detail that the "deal will see Israel provide economic compensation worth $20m to the families of the 10 Turkish citizens killed by Israeli forces who raided the six-ship [Mavi Marmara] flotilla heading to break the Israeli siege on Gaza and provide humanitarian aid to the almost two million Palestinians living there. In addition to the compensation, the agreement will allow Turkey to deliver humanitarian aid, build a 200-bed hospital, a housing project and a desalination plant in Gaza, under the condition that materials go through the Israeli port of Ashdod first." Even though Hapless made it seem that Turkey's aid delivery to "[the] Israeli port of Ashdod" constitutes but a first step towards lifting Israel's siege of Gaza, the reality
is that Turkey will deliver aid to the Palestinians via the good offices of their jailers and occupiers, the State of Israel. Still, ties between Turkey and Israel will be restored, leading to revived trade links and a possible influx of Jewish tourists into the AKP-led country. These trade ties will not include arms’ deals however, as explained by an Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity: “This agreement does not confer a green light to restore the intimacy we once knew among our defense industries and military cadres, even if there was such a desire in Turkey, which is doubtful.” All in all, it seems to me that the Turkey-Israel deal, which was signed in Rome, looks a lot like a PR exercise on behalf of the Prez and Hapless, a PR exercise that conveyed impression of a clear Turkish victory over Israeli wrongdoing, a victory that provides an lessening of Muslim (as in Palestinian) suffering.

**The Russian Gambit**

In the course of the same Monday that followed the previous Sunday, when Feridun Sinirlioğlu, undersecretary to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, and attorney Dr. Joseph Ciechanover, acting on behalf of the Israeli government, had started negotiating the deal in Rome, another news item appeared on the Turkey’s horizon. The news agency Sputnik namely reported that Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov had made an important announcement: “President Putin has received a letter from Turkish President Erdogan where the Turkish leader expresses interest in resolving the situation around the downing of a Russian bomber jet.” Peskov went on to say that in his letter, the Prez declared that Turkey “shares the pain of the downed Su-24 pilot's death with his family,” even referring to it “as Turkey’s pain." Dmitry Peskov continues that “[i]n the letter, the Turkish President also says he has always seen Russia as a strategic partner and a friend." And that Tayyip Erdoğan in his missive literally said that “[w]e never intended to shoot down the aircraft of the Russian Federation." In this instance, the Prez appears to have been eating humble pie in dealing with his Russian counterpart. Quite a reversal from late last year when he literally engaged Putin in a duel of words. At the time, neither side held back, taking swipe after swipe at his opponent. But times have clearly changed now and having abandoned his bluster with regard to the Russian President, Erdoğan did apparently not shy away from having an emotional missive penned on his behalf.

The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters in Moscow that Tayyip Erdoğan’s "message includes both words expressing regret and the word 'sorry,' both are in there." In contrast, earlier and to be precise, on Thursday, 26 November 2015, for instance, the Turkish President emphatically told the press “I will not apo-lo-gize!” But now he has, even assuring his Russian counterpart that Moscow and Ankara are strategic partners. And going on to say that Turkey will pay compensation, as his missives pledges that Turkey will take all the steps necessary to "relieve the pain and severity of damage," inflicted upon the relatives of the Russian pilot Oleg Peshkov who was killed in mid-air. After having ejected from his plane, the pilot was shot by a member of the Turkish ultra-nationalist militant group the Grey Wolves (affiliated to the extreme rightwing MHP or Party of the National Movement), apparently fighting alongside Turkmen terrorists (or freedom fighters, if you will) battling the Assad regime. His name is Alparslan Çelik and the Turkish authorities arrested him and 16 other suspects on 31 March 2016 in the district of Karabağlar in the coastal city of İzmir. But as it happened, on the Monday prior to Dmitry Peskov’s statement regarding Tayyip Erdoğan’s letter, the Islamist and clearly pro-AKP daily Yeni Akit reported that the presiding judge had taken an interim decision, discharging seven suspects prohibiting them from leaving the country.

**A Matter of Timing: It's the Gas, Stupid**

It seems highly suspect that these two diplomatic developments just happened to occur at the same time. And both events seem to have very strong economic ramifications. A cynic might just say that the Prez simply swallowed his pride to attempt to secure the return of Russian tourists to Turkey’s Mediterranean coastal resort of Antalya. Turkey’s tourism trade has incurred dramatic losses over the past months: “the number of Russian tourists visiting the resort [of Antalya] between June 1 and June 16 declined by 98.5 percent, and German tourists by 45 percent, compared to the same timeframe in 2015.” At the same time, the energy factor should not be discounted either as Turkey imports nearly 99% of the natural gas it consumes. Last year, before the infamous downing of the Russian Su-24, Turkey imported about 58% of the natural gas is from Russia (the remaining percentage points being Iran with 18%, Azerbaijan 12%, Algeria 7.7% and Nigeria 2.4%). And the Israel deal might also have a definite gas angle. The State of Israel might just be angling for a potential customer for its offshore gas exports. Israel’s 2014 assault on the Gaza Strip, carrying the quasi-poetic name Operation Protective Edge (8 July-26 August 2014) was in small part carried out to secure the “Marine-1 and Marine-2 gas wells, inside the Leviathan field and off the Gaza coast." The Geneva-based Anais Antreasyan rightly points out in the University of California’s Journal of Palestine Studies that Israel’s long-term goal is “to integrate the gas fields off Gaza into the adjacent Israeli offshore installations”. But, as the international security journalist and academic Dr. Nafeez Ahmed appropriately underlines, the 2014 “Israel-Palestine conflict is clearly not all about resources. But in an age of expensive energy, competition to dominate regional fossil fuels are increasingly influencing the critical decisions that can inflame war.” And arguably Turkey
would be a more than willing recipient of Gaza gas, via the infrastructure provided by the State of Israel -- not just for its domestic consumption but also to fulfill its ambition of becoming a veritable and viable energy hub in the region. And the preparatory groundwork for this deal was done when last month Turkey rescinded its veto on any Israeli activity with NATO and the Jewish State was subsequently allowed to open offices in the Brussels NATO headquarters. It is thus no wonder that Hamas, the political force in charge of the Gaza strip, was not part of the current Israel-Turkey deal. This appears particularly curious, as on Friday, 17 June, the Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal met the Prez in Istanbul. The Secretary-General of the Palestinian National Initiative, Mustafa Barghouti, for his part, appeared unable to hide his displeasure: "If it is true that the [Turkey-Israel] deal relates to a future gas deal, it will be very dangerous and disappointing," adding that "[w]e are very worried about any country that cooperates with Israel in exporting gas. It’s a profitable measure and we view it as one that rewards the occupier. It is disappointing, especially from a country that says it supports Palestine."

These heady developments between the threesome of Turkey, Russia, and Israel were all the talk during Monday and Tuesday, but then suddenly at 10 PM these diplomatic machinations all became secondary, as 3 unidentified suicide bombers attacked the Foreign Arrivals terminal of the Istanbul Atatürk Airport, killing 41 (of whom ten were foreign nationals) and injuring more than 200 innocent bystanders. This was the the fourth suicide bombing in Istanbul in 2016. Siobhán O'Grady, a staff writer at Foreign Policy, opined that the "attack comes just three months after a group of Islamic State militants launched a similar attack in the departures wing of the Brussels Airport, killing 15 people. The Turkish government has already blamed the strikes on unspecified terrorists, but has not yet named which group they believe is responsible. The two most likely suspects are the PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party) or the Islamic State, both of which have repeatedly carried out terrorist attacks in Turkey in recent years." The Prez was quick to add his words, reminding his domestic as well international audience that Turkey would "continue [its] fight against these terrorists until the end, tirelessly and fearlessly." The Hapless PM has since fallen in line with his boss and declared that "[t]his attack, targeting innocent people, is a vile, planned terrorist act . . . The findings of our security forces point at the Daesh organisation [or the IS/ISIS/ISIL] as the perpetrators of this terror attack."

The Triple Suicide Attack: Another Caliphal Strike or Something More Sinister!?!?

But this triple suicide attack, perpetrated by individuals travelling to the airport in the same taxi cab, came hot on the heels of a suicide car bomb attack earlier this month in the popular Istanbul neighborhood of Vezneciler, killing 11 people and wounding dozens more. The authorities also quickly pointed the finger at the Caliph and Merry Men (aka the Islamic State or Daesh/IS/ISIS/ISIL), though the outrage was never claimed by any terror group. But owning up to a terror act is nevertheless the usual MO followed by members of the Islamic State, who are keen to publicize their dastardly deeds widely via the internet and other social media. On Tuesday night, in the hours following the triple suicide attack, the German public-service broadcaster ARD floated the suggestion that the terror group TAK (the Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan or the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) could be responsible for the outrage. And this might appear sensible indeed, keeping in mind the Ankara government’s continued war on sections of Turkey’s Kurdish population in the south-east of the country. On an earlier occasion, I also pointed to this terror group, active in Turkey. But the Prez and his sidekick Hapless appear keen to involve the Islamic State in Turkey's War-on-Terror, deflecting attention from the Kurdish Issue and insinuating that firm government policy has all but snuffed out any initiative Kurdish terror groups might possess in Turkey. At the same time, this latest terror outrage also carried a number of arguably positive developments in its wake. For one thing, Vladimir Putin telephoned his Turkish counterpart on Wednesday, 29 June, expressing his condolences and vowing cooperation against terror threats all around. The telephone interaction happened for the first time in seven months. and both men spoke for 40 minutes. Rather than Tayyip Erdoğan having to make a first telephone overture towards Moscow following his by now quite famous letter, the Atatürk Airport attack moved Putin to break protocol and extend his hand in friendship -- debatably, some kind of a minor diplomatic victory for the Turkish Prez. He also received other telephone calls of course, most notably from Barack Obama. White House press secretary Josh Earnest told the press gaggle in Washington, D.C. that "'[t]his morning, the president was on the phone with President Erdogan of Turkey . . . [offering assurances of] any support that the Turks can benefit from as they conduct this investigation."

But then Fuat Avni tweeted as long ago as Thursday, 23 June 2016, that "[a]ctions will be taken that will bring the country to the edge of a civil war. Explosions, conspiracies, the burning of vehicles will follow one another." At the same time, CNN Türk's Ankara representative Hande Fırat on air stated currently that "[a]t the beginning of June, about twenty days ago, intelligence units [had] sent a written warning to the highest reaches of the state and all of its sections in connection with Istanbul. This piece of writing included the names of locations as well." Whether the Atatürk Airport was on that list remains unknown though. Do Fuat Avni and Hande Fırat's statements now indicate that the events in these 48 hours had all been pre-planned?? That the diplomatic victory and defeat at the outset...
would become offset by an event of much greater immediacy and urgency, an event that would succeed in deflecting attention from potentially embarrassing details, liable to throw a bad light on the Prez and his image?? Or is this just another conspiracy theory to do with the oh-so popular but equally divisive Recep Tayyip Erdoğan?

Dr. Can Erimtan is an independent scholar residing in Istanbul, with a wide interest in the politics, history and culture of the Balkans and the Greater Middle East, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”