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The collapse of Israel's 'Periphery Doctrine'

Posted By **Leon T. Hadar** ■ Saturday, June 26, 2010 - 5:21 PM ■ [+](#) Share



Reports that Turkey would halt military cooperation with Israel and not send back the ambassador it withdrew after the deadly Israeli commando operation to stop a Gaza aid convoy make it apparent that the partnership between Ankara and Jerusalem is coming to an end. Moreover, the rupture in the relationship between these two governments indicates that one of the major components in Israeli national security--the so-called Periphery Doctrine of forming alliance with non-Arab states in the periphery of the Middle East with which Israel has not had direct conflict, including Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia, as well with ethnic and religious minorities, like the Maronites in Lebanon and

the Kurds in Iraq--has been tossed into the dustbin of history.

The Periphery Doctrine, advanced by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion and by Eliahu Sassoon, one of Israel's leading Middle East experts and the first Israeli diplomatic representative in Ankara, was conceived as a way of offsetting the diplomatic and economic boycott of the Arab World and as a traditional balance-of-power strategy aimed at countering pan-Arabism. The fact that Turkey, a member of NATO, as well as the Shah of Iran and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, maintained friendly ties with Washington and the West and had long standing conflict with Arab states (Turkey with Syria; Iran with Iraq; Ethiopia with Sudan) helped strengthen Israel's partnerships with these pro-American and non-Arab countries.

But Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders regarded the Periphery Doctrine as a temporary strategy that needed to be sustained as long as the Arab nations refused to recognize Israel and make peace with it. It was not seen as a substitute for the central tenet in Israeli policy--achieving peace with Israel's Arab neighbors. Nor could it serve as an alternative to a strategic relationship with a strong, external military power, such as the Soviet Union in the 1940's, France in the 1950's, and the United States after 1967.

Overall, the Periphery Doctrine proved to be at best a cost-effective but short-term form of Realpolitik, and at worst a long-term strategic illusion. Israel's close relationship with Ethiopia and Iran foundered after the fall of their *ancien regimes* and the ensuing political turmoil that engulfed each country. And it could not sustain a long-term and steady relationship with ethnic and religious minorities in the region, such as the Maronites and the Kurds.

In fact, it was obvious to Israeli policymakers that as long as Israel remained in a state of war with the major Arab countries, economic considerations, military interests and religious affinity would place clear limits on the willingness and the ability of Turkey and other periphery nations and minorities to expand ties with Israel. From that perspective, the relationship between Israel and Turkey--or for that matter, Iran or Lebanon's Maronites--never amounted to a "strategic alliance." The Turks, like other targets of the Periphery Doctrine, regarded their ties with Israel as a way of hedging their bets, providing them with additional diplomatic and military resources to resist pressure from aggressive Arab nationalist governments and movements.

From that perspective, the notion advanced by neoconservative foreign policy types since the First Gulf War, that a stronger Israel-Turkey "strategic" alliance would transform the post-Cold War Middle East and help form a U.S.-oriented condominium in the region, forcing pro-American Arab governments like Jordan and Egypt to join the new bloc, while isolating more radical actors like Saddam's Iraq and the Ayatollahs' Iran, was just one more example of the fantasies concocted by those who had brought us the "liberation" of Iraq.

Daniel Pipes, who was a staunch proponent of the Israel-Turkey alliance along these lines, wrote in 1998 in *Commentary* magazine that the post-Cold War 'New Middle East' was "rapidly sorting itself into two new regional power blocs." At the center of one bloc "stand Turkey and Israel, two countries that in many ways are natural partners." Both countries are non-Arab, democratic, and Western oriented, and "each maintains a large military and faces a major threat of terrorism." Both put great store in their relationship with the United States, and each "has problems with both Syria and Iran, the two countries that happen to stand in the center of the opposing bloc." Pipes even suggested that unlike the "superficiality" of the relations between Syria and Iran, which according to him, were reminiscent of those between Germany and Japan during World War II, the relationship between Israel and Turkey "resembles that between the United States and Great Britain in that war."

It was the high level of expectations produced by Pipes and other champions of the Turkish-Israeli "strategic" alliance that may have ended up helping produce the kind of cracks now so apparent in the imaginary "special relationship" between the two, and the conventional wisdom that seems to see a direct relationship between the Islamist ideology of the current Turkish government and the deterioration in the relationship with the Jewish State.

But in general, the peaks and dips in the Israeli-Turkish relationship, even during the rule of secular governments in Ankara, were reflected inversely by developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the waves of strain and rapprochement in the relationship between Turkey and the Arab states. In 1947 Turkey voted against the United Nations partition plan and the creation of Israel; but in 1949, after Egypt and Jordan signed armistice agreements with Israel, Turkey became the first Muslim state to recognize Israel. Diplomatic missions were opened in December 1950 at the legation level in Ankara and Tel Aviv, although from 1956, following the attack by Israel against Egypt, the legation in Tel Aviv was reduced to the lowest diplomatic level of *charge d'affaires*. This lasted until December 1991--six weeks after the start of the Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid--when the Turks decided to upgrade the diplomatic representation of Israel (and the PLO) to the ambassadorial level. Earlier on during the First Intifada, Turkey had signaled its support for the Palestinian cause by becoming the fourth country--and the only government then maintaining diplomatic relationship with Israel--to recognize Palestine as an independent state.

Indeed, while much has been made of the recent Turkish strategy of improving ties with the Arab states, Turkey's long term interests have always been based on the understanding that geographical proximity, economic interests and civilizational considerations require that it normalize the relationship with its neighbors. These were the very same factors that were making it unlikely that Ankara would establish a full-fledged alliance with a Jewish state as long as Israel remained at war with the Arab World.

Short-term political and military considerations--the two countries' problems with Syria and tensions with Iran--as well as the need to contain the pressure from Arab nationalist led by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and backed by the Soviet Union--created an regional environment more conducive to Israeli-Turkish cooperation. At the same time, the relationship between the two countries soured when Turkey leaders concluded that maintaining the nation's interests in the Middle East required distancing it from Israel.

Hence Turkey downgraded its relationship with Israeli after forming the Baghdad Pact with Iraq in 1955 (joined by Britain, Pakistan and Iran) and pledged to come to the support of Jordan if attacked by Israel. Moreover, Turkey joined most of the Arab and Muslim governments in denouncing Israel in response to its invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories, reflecting the reality

in which Turkey regarded Israel not as an ally--but as just another important regional player with which it shares some mutual interests.

But not even the members of Turkish secular elites, including the military, bought into the strategic fantasy advanced by Pipes and others of joining Israel in becoming the American hegemon's twin sheriffs in the Middle East. Indeed, the Turkish opposition to the American invasion of Iraq and the isolation of Iran, as well as to Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, were opposed by the majority of the Turks. Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War, the downfall of the radical pan-Arabist project, as well as the Arab peace agreements with Israel provided new opportunities to improve their ties with the Arab states.

Interestingly enough, some Israeli policymakers, including former Israeli foreign minister and Labor Party leader Shlomo Ben-Ami, were mirror-imaging this new Turkish orientation by stressing that long-term Israeli interests lied in improving relationship with Egypt and the rest of the Arab World, including the Palestinians, and in abandoning the illusion that an alliance with Turkey would be a substitute for a strategy to integrate Israel into the Middle East.

Israel's periphery alliance with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia "was created in the 1950s as a tool for avoiding peace with the Arabs," explained Ben-Ami in a recent interview with the Israeli daily Ha'aretz. "A return to this alliance goes through reconciliation with the Arab world," he stressed, concluding that "Turkey is telling us in effect: In order to reach us, the second circle, you have to make peace in the first circle, and we want to be the mediator."

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