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**Israel-Turkey Normalization:
Can Relations Turn Over a New Leaf?**

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The normalization agreement between Israel and Turkey is a positive and even critical development, given the regional challenges facing both countries, particularly those originating in Syria and the Gaza Strip. Since the events of the *Mavi Marmara* in May 2010, ongoing negotiations between Israel and Turkey to resolve the disputes between them have been marked by a series of ups and downs.

Turkey insisted on three conditions for normalization with Israel: an apology, financial compensation, and a lifting of the blockade on Gaza. The first condition was met in March 2013, during the visit by US President Barack Obama to Israel, with a telephone conversation between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then-Prime Minister of Turkey. With regard to compensation, already in 2014 an accord was reached on the establishment of a fund that would distribute \$20 million to families of the *Marmara* casualties, so that Israel would not have direct contact with them. The compensation is a direct outgrowth of Israel's official apology, which constitutes a certain assumption of responsibility (though worded specifically to refer to "errors that may have been made during the course of the incident").

The final condition set by Turkey – lifting the blockade over Gaza – was the most problematic from Israel's perspective. After the flotilla incident Israel reduced a significant number of the restrictions on the movement of goods by land to the Strip, but the naval blockade issue was perceived as an absolute security necessity. Apparently it was creative diplomacy that allowed the parties to overcome this dispute. Israel, which in any case allows Turkey's participation in Gaza reconstruction efforts following Operation Protective Edge, will allow it to develop new projects in the Strip, among them the construction of a power station (in cooperation with Germany) and a water desalination project – ventures that are also a clear Israeli interest, to help prevent the living conditions in Gaza from becoming unbearable. At the press conference announcing the agreement, Netanyahu emphasized that without improvement in the electricity and water conditions in Gaza, groundwater contamination and epidemics could occur in Israel as well. Beyond Gaza's electricity and water, Turkey is already involved in the construction

of a hospital, stadium, and housing units, and in the reconstruction of mosques. Israel also agreed to allow passage of Turkish humanitarian aid through the Port of Ashdod, though already in the past Israel encouraged this option, which allows for Israeli security clearance.

Israel's requirements of Turkey focused on normalization that is not restricted only to formalities and returning the ambassadors to Ankara and Tel Aviv, but also has substantive aspects. Israel already received one significant tangible gain from the agreement with Turkey on May 4, when Turkey lifted the veto on Israeli cooperation with NATO and enabled launching the process of opening Israeli offices at NATO. Ankara had created difficulties for security cooperation between NATO and Israel since Operation Cast Lead began in late 2008, and the lifting of the Turkish veto was a confidence building step that signaled an impending renewal of bilateral relations. Another Israeli requirement pertained to the withdrawal of the legal cases that Turkey had pursued with respect to the *Marmara* episode, and specifically with respect to claims against senior IDF commanders. Due to the time that has elapsed since the incident and the legal proceedings underway in Turkey, legislation must be passed by the Turkish parliament in order to cancel these proceedings. It was former Minister of Defense Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon who conditioned an agreement between Israel and Turkey on the removal of Hamas's military headquarters from Istanbul. While the agreement does not prevent the continued presence of Hamas in Turkey, Israel has been assured that Turkey will prevent military activity against Israel from its territory.

There is an ambivalent attitude among the Israeli public and decision makers regarding relations between Turkey and Hamas. Condemnation of this relationship is offset by an interest in being assisted by these ties, for instance in order to further the release of the Israeli citizens held by Hamas and to recover the bodies of the missing soldiers seized in Operation Protective Edge. Furthermore, Turkey might be able to mediate between Israel and Hamas in the event of a future round of violence in the Gaza arena – although during Operation Protective Edge Israel vehemently opposed the Turkish-Qatari mediation.

Among those on the Israeli side that urged the closure of the agreement with Turkey, there was a desire to take advantage of an opportunity furnished by the Turkish-Russian crisis in the wake of the downing of the Russian fighter plane in November 2015. Turkey's recent attempts to ease tensions with Russia suggested that this window of opportunity was liable to close soon.

Security cooperation was an essential element of the relations between Israel and Turkey during the honeymoon period in the 1990s. Could such cooperation be renewed with the new agreement? Here, cooperation between militaries and intelligence organizations should be distinguished from procurement of advanced defense equipment, such as

unmanned aerial vehicles and anti-missile defense systems. With respect to operational cooperation, the level of suspicion between the parties is still high and will likely make meaningful cooperation difficult. Nonetheless, most probably within the framework of broader cooperation forums Israel will indirectly be able to assist the international coalition operating against the Islamic State, in which Turkey is a member. It seems that the likelihood of Israel's sale of advanced equipment to Turkey is greater, although Turkey is currently demanding more than in the past as to knowledge sharing in order to develop its own defense industries.

While Turkey and Israel may find it difficult to return to close security cooperation, the possibilities for cooperation in the economic field appear more promising. First, both parties appear optimistic with respect to the feasibility of exporting the natural gas discovered off the shores of Israel to Turkey, and from there maybe even to Europe. Nonetheless, without real progress in resolving the Cyprus issue, Turkey and Israel will find it difficult to further construction of a gas pipeline that would run near the economic waters of Cyprus. There is also a question regarding enlarging the volume of bilateral trade. In recent years, Israeli exports to Turkey were not adversely affected and even grew, but in 2015, Israeli exports to Turkey plunged by approximately 40 percent. While part of this decrease was attributed to the fall in energy prices (inter alia, Israel exports refined oil to Turkey), the decline also partly reflects the fact that Israeli companies were denied participation in government tenders in Turkey due to the tension between the countries. Moreover, the crisis has created an atmosphere of uncertainty, which has not encouraged economic collaboration.

The achievement of an agreement between Turkey and Israel is only a first step in restoring the trust between the leaders as well as the populations of both countries. Following the signing of the agreement, it is more important that the parties deal less with questions of respective concessions and achievements, and more with construction of a positive agenda for cooperation. In announcing the agreement, Netanyahu said that Israel had updated several countries on the details of the agreement, among them Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus. Saudi Arabia quite likely worked behind the scenes in order to soften the Egyptian opposition to the agreement out of concern of Hamas being strengthened by the accord. With respect to Greece and Cyprus, with whom Israel has developed a close relationship in recent years, a special effort will be required to preserve what has been achieved, as well as to convince Cyprus that cooperation in the energy field between Israel and Turkey will proceed while taking Nicosia's considerations into account.