

The Israel-Turkey Deal Could Benefit the Palestinians

by **Muhammed Ammash***

An extended period of strained relations has finally ended with a series of lengthy negotiations that culminated in the recent Turkey-Israeli deal in June 2016. The critical point in the negotiations, and also the main reason for the previous breakdown in the two countries' relations, hinged on the Palestinian question and specifically, the situation in Gaza.

After an arduous negotiation process of more than three years, Israel and Turkey reached a compromise on this particular issue. According to the agreement, the Gaza blockade will not be lifted as Turkey demanded; however, it will be “softened” for Turkey. Essentially, Turkey will be able to ship humanitarian aid to Gaza through Israel's Ashdod port, and will be allowed to build a hospital and a power plant in the Gaza Strip. In fact, immediately after the deal was sealed with Israel, Turkey sent its Lady Leyla ship carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza.

The rapprochement with Israel also allows Turkey to play a significant political role in the region. Most opinions suggest that Turkey could be influential in mediating between Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah, and thereby contribute to a long-term unity government in Palestine. Turkey's potential role as a mediator between Palestinians and Israel is also widely discussed. Undoubtedly, Turkey will be able to play these roles after building sufficient trust with Israel following the agreement. However, the sealed deal between the two countries also offers Turkey a chance to play other structural roles in the region, in view of Turkey's soft power and image in the eyes of Arab and Muslim societies in the Middle East, together with its long experience of statehood and diplomacy.

Despite all the challenges that Turkey is currently facing domestically and its image in the West, Turkey's economic stability, democracy, and culture are widely admired. Significantly, Turkey is still seen by many in

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the Middle East as an inspiring role model. After the failure of the Arab Spring and the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian arena remains a platform for Turkey to play important roles that could enhance its positive image in the region and worldwide. Turkey recognizes that playing those significant roles in Palestine is now possible, and that it has gained added credibility by normalizing its ties with Israel. On the other hand, irrespective of the conflict in the region and the continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Palestine remains a stable platform where Turkey could be a constructive player, in comparison to the other countries in the Middle East where civil wars continue.

There is no doubt that the agreement between Turkey and Israel stands to benefit both sides in various areas including economics and security. But how might it affect the Palestinians who are an essential element in the relations between the two countries? According to some opinions, the Palestinians are the only losers in this game, but others emphasize the advantages of Turkey's humanitarian aid and construction plans. In my opinion, the Turkey-Israel Agreement offers the Palestinians benefits that are much greater than humanitarian aid. The deal paves the way for Turkey to play political and structural roles that could improve security in the region and at the same time, contribute to a sustainable peace.

If one goes to the Palestinian territories and asks the locals about the main threats to their survival, livelihood and dignity, the first answer would most probably be “the Israeli occupation.” Truly, the occupation is the primary obstacle to individual security and development in Palestine, but it is not the only one. Other factors, such as internal political and societal divisions and the political foundations on which they rest, are also main causes of human suffering and obstacles to peace. This is where Turkey can play several constructive roles to achieve the following goals: after the deal with Israel: (a) helping to establish unity in Palestine; (b) state building and promotion of democracy; and (c) de-radicalization of extremist groups.

A. Helping to establish unity in Palestine

One of the most important issues facing Palestine is the disunity among Palestinian parties, mainly Hamas and Fatah. After the violent clashes between the two groups in 2006 and 2007, unity among Palestinians has been non-existent or minimal, at best. The rift and polarization in Palestine is evident not only at the political but also at the societal level, negatively affecting any negotiation process with Israel and, consequently, the future of Palestine. Moreover, discord exists over structural matters such as the formation and identity of the future state. Both groups' unwillingness to compromise on their deeply held ideologies makes it difficult to envision the structure of the future Palestinian government. This situation not only weakens the Palestinians' hand in their negotiations with Israel, but is also a source of insecurity and vulnerability for the Palestinian people.

As an active state in the region, Turkey has managed to maintain good relations with all parties in Palestine, despite their differences. On one hand, for the sake of democracy Turkey continued to support Hamas after it won the elections in Palestine, despite the international community's reactions. On the other hand, it advanced its relations with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, specifically supporting it in the United Nations and playing an active role in the Security Council's vote to elevate the status of Palestine from "observer entity" to "non-member observer state."

As a result, Turkey has the ability to facilitate a reconciliation process between Fatah and Hamas, not only in order to establish political unity and establish a new social contract, but also to contribute to the long-term goal of securing a lasting peace between Palestine and Israel.

B. State building and the promotion of democracy

In addition to the necessary internal reconciliation in Palestine, another key pillar for a sustainable peace process as well as for human security and development is democracy and its institutions. Although various Western countries are working to promote a democratic culture and state building, the process is impeded by internal divisions on structural matters and by the Israeli occupation.

The concept of democracy has yet to develop in the Middle East, and Western actors struggle to understand the pulse of the society and the elements that help Middle Eastern countries' advance in the right direction, toward democracy. In this sense, Turkey is a developing country that shares cultural similarities with other Middle Eastern countries, and is experienced in tackling challenges to advancing democracy and democratic institutions. The recent attempted military coup that failed, thanks to Turkish citizens' firm stance, clearly illustrates the milestone Turkey achieved in understanding and implementing democracy. Admittedly, Turkey still has a long road to reach democracy, but at the same time it has managed to remain a stable and working democracy despite the challenges it faced throughout its history, and as such, is a source of inspiration to many societies in the Middle East.

Turkey's long history of statehood and building democratic institutions make it the most suitable candidate to collaborate with its partners in Palestine to advance democracy, build the state's institutions, and ensure their sustainability. This process must certainly go hand in hand with a process of internal reconciliation in Palestine. The conflicting sides must declare their willingness to work together to achieve this goal after they reach an agreement on the foundations of the future Palestinian state.

C. De-radicalization of extremist groups

The question of extremism and violence in Palestine and Israel creates a chicken-and-egg problem that is difficult to resolve. When justifying the occupation, Israel relies on the existence of extremist elements in

Palestine that use violence in their struggle, while some Palestinian groups justify their use of violence on the grounds of the occupation, and they consider violence as the only way to liberate Palestine from the occupation.

As a person of interest with both an Israeli-Palestinian and a Turkish identity, I cannot express any empathy for the use of violence for any cause, whether for liberating Palestine or for countering violent extremism. The violence of one party always feeds the violence of the other. In the Palestinian case, while we cannot ignore the human suffering caused by the Israeli occupation or its military operations, we equally cannot ignore the threats posed by extremist elements who use violence as a tool in the internal struggle in Palestine.

The Israel-Turkey deal does not create an obstacle for Turkey's ability to address the violence coming from both sides, as long as Turkey expresses a balanced position. While Turkey can continue to be a voice for the Palestinian call to end the occupation, it should, at the same time, also recognize the violence coming from the Palestinian side and work on de-legitimizing its use in the internal struggle. In this sense, Turkey's relations with Hamas, which consistently evoked Israeli criticism during the rift in the relations, are important. It is also significant that both Turkey and Israel have agreed that Hamas will continue to operate from Turkey, but only politically and not for other causes that legitimize the use of violence. Excluding Hamas would have resulted in its radicalization, which is what happened when the international community shunned the Hamas after it won the elections in Palestine. The next step that should be taken by Turkey is to maintain open communication channels with both Hamas and Israel, and secure Hamas' agreement to de-legitimize the use of violence.

What are the challenges and how can Turkey pursue these goals?

When examining the roles that Turkey might pursue in the region and the roles that it has already been filling for many years, in addition to humanitarian aid, we see that various Turkish state actors are already working to contribute to economic development and construction in Palestine. However, one element that is essential for the achievement of these goals is almost non-existent: Turkish civil society. Although governmental organizations provide the main resources to achieve these goals, civil society organizations can undeniably play an important role that should not be ignored.

Turkey is very concerned about the Palestinian question, and Turkey's political structure, leaders, economic development, and stability are a source of inspiration for many Palestinian citizens. Therefore, limited participation of Turkish civil society in the promotion of democracy, peace, and human security is a huge disadvantage for Turkey's role in the region. If they wish to contribute to peace in the region, Turkish political leaders should encourage non-governmental organizations and individuals from different sectors to

operate in Palestine. Even though several NGOs are already on the ground, more NGOs from the entire political spectrum are needed to cultivate strong, sustainable cooperation at grassroots, national, and international levels.

Turkey should create an active civil society dialogue abroad, as it has become unimaginable in today's interconnected world to conduct foreign policy without civil society. Political parties and governments have limited tools to access the different segments of societies and promote universal values. Thus, NGOs, which may have greater access to ordinary citizens, should be allowed to operate as change agents and conveyers of universal values to promote democracy, non-violence, and reconciliation in Palestine and elsewhere.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GPoT Center, Mitvim Institute, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Israel-Turkey Policy Dialogue Publication Series

Upon the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the Israeli and Turkish governments in June 2016, and the start of a new chapter in bilateral relations, participants in the ongoing policy dialogue between Mitvim - The Israeli Institute of Regional Foreign Policies and the Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center were asked to offer their thoughts on the lessons that can be drawn from the recent period of diplomatic tension, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing this bilateral relationship in the coming years.

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