



Some Recommendations Following the Gaza Operation and the Israeli Elections

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March 2009

Defining the Problem

The crisis that started with Hamas winning the Palestinian Authority (PA) elections in January of 2006 seems to have entered a new stage with the start of 2009. Israel, which provides the occupied PA with the bulk of its economic resources, the US and the EU classifying Hamas as a terrorist organization and the resulting 3 year long economic siege and blockade, and the Israeli operation that started on the 27th of December and lasted for 22 days have all made the humanitarian situation in this region unbearable.

The fact that around 1300 people, 500 of them civilians, have died in Gaza, many families are left without their homes or workplaces, and children are left orphaned and in need of care has meant that the international community cannot ignore the region's situation any longer. It is unlikely for the countries that have held Gaza under

a blockade for 3 years to maintain this position. In order for the humanitarian situation in Gaza to improve, for donations to reach their target and for a meaningful peace process to be carried out, it is vital that the PA achieves inner peace.

On the other hand, the fact that right-wing parties have come out of the elections in Israel having increased their votes is cause for concern. The human and financial aspect of the latest Gaza Operation has proven that the parties making up the coalition government and the attitude towards the conflict will determine Israel's relations with her allies. Thus, the future of the peace process will also be an indicator for the future of bilateral relations with Israel.

The latest developments in the region have caused tension between the Turkish and Israeli administrations. Turkey, which

cares about the stability of the region and has become a meeting place for parties to the conflict in the Middle East, needs to develop a policy that takes into consideration the struggle for power within the PA and the political reality that has emerged in Israel.

The New American Administration

There is no doubt that the timing of the Israeli attacks, which took place before the Bush Administration's term came to an end, is directly related to the change in administrations in the United States (US). The Israeli government carried out the operation conscious of the knowledge that following the Bush Administration, which for eight years had turned its back to the Palestine question, the Obama Administration would not continue the same policies. While he has made the financial crisis his priority and focused his diplomatic efforts on relevant regulations, the new American President Barack Obama has signaled through the special envoys he has appointed to Iran, the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan that he cares about dispersing the anti-American sentiment formed in the previous eight years.

The President's special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell (who is of Lebanese descent) headed the special commission established in 2000 after the Second Intifada

broke out, and is a very knowledgeable figure in terms of the current developments in the region. The fact that the Mitchell Report, published in 2001, was written in a fair manner strengthens expectations of success in his new mission. In addition, that Mitchell gave his first official interview to an Arab channel, Al Arabiya, and mentioned the Palestinian problem is a manifestation of his belief that a Palestinian state needs to be established.

However, as stated above, it is clear today that the methods employed so far will not yield any advances in solving the Palestinian problem. Specifically, a new strategy is needed in place of isolating Hamas; in this sense peace within the PA is a priority.

Peace Within Palestine

The politics of isolation against Hamas date back to the election night of January 2006, when Hamas claimed victory. At the prompting of Israel and the US, Fatah rejected Hamas' calls for a unity government following the preliminary election results. Later in June 2006, hours before its formation, the operation carried out by the radical factions in Hamas against Israel, during which Gilad Shalit was captured, rendered all efforts futile.

The coup by Hamas in Gaza the following year severed all ties between Hamas and Fatah. The violent conflict between the parties and mutual arrests created mistrust, backing Israel's "we do not have an addressee for peace talks" claim. This division has harmed the people of Palestine the most, as the blockade on Gaza has been strengthened and with the exception of basic humanitarian needs, inflow and outflow of products has almost been brought to a halt.

Hamas being in power constitutes a problem when it comes to ensuring the flow of aid sent to the region following the latest attack on Gaza, given that Hamas is on the West's list of terrorist organizations. However, Hamas is a legitimate leadership that was voted in by the Palestinian people in democratic elections. If the government included actors from outside of Hamas, it would mean both that a democratically elected government is not ignored and that the West is not helping a "terrorist organization."

To this end, parties in Palestine got together in Cairo in the last week of February and decided to start meetings in early March in order to form a unity government. This government is anticipated to stay in place until the next elections. A Palestinian unity government would include all factions of the Palestine Liberation

Organization (PLO), as well as factions that are outside of the PLO, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. One of the actions of this government would be to regulate the Egypt-Gaza border.

Palestinian factions have decided on forming five committees, while Fatah and Hamas have agreed to mutually release prisoners, not getting involved in disputes in the media and other confidence-building measures. The committees will work on the formation of the government, the rebuilding of institutions, regulation of presidential and parliamentary elections, resolving security issues and cooperation.

There are a number of setbacks facing peace within Palestine. Leaving outside pressure from Israel aside, the questions on the table involve how to form the government and who to include in it, what position should Fatah and Hamas take within the "resistance - acceptance - negotiation" triangle of relations with Israel, how to distribute the aid, how to include Hamas and other factions in the PLO and how to establish a culture of democracy.

Israeli Elections

In the wake of the elections in Israel, held on February 10th 2009, the question was whether central Kadima, which built its

campaign on “the two state solution” and defined the elections as a “chance for peace”, or the right-wing Likud, which did not have a vision for peace and talked about “economic peace” as a way to resolve the conflict would prevail. Despite Kadima coming first in these elections, where the Israeli democracy essentially tried to answer the question of whether it wanted a two state solution, right-wing parties forming the majority in the Knesset showed that the Israeli electorate is divided into two camps when it comes to solving the Palestinian problem.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the elections for the Israeli society and politics is the virtual elimination of the Labor Party and Meretz, which represented the Israeli left, from the political scene, while Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Lieberman, former member of the Kach Party that was banned by the Israeli Supreme Court for its racist program, came third. The fact that in the new term Labor has eleven and Meretz has three seats in the 120-seat Israeli Parliament is the manifestation of the biggest defeat the Israeli left has faced since the 1977 elections. Lieberman’s election victory with its radical discourse towards Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, on the other hand, can be interpreted as the atmosphere of violence, which also made Hamas an actor in the already muddled Middle

Eastern conflict, reflected on the Israeli society’s political preferences.

Thanks to Livni’s rejection of Netanyahu’s proposal to form a coalition government on the grounds that they have different political agendas, and Barak’s decision to remain in the Opposition, in the new term Israel will be governed by a coalition formed by Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, and small parties with religious programs. Much like what the previous government tried to manage through economic embargoes and military operations, at the center of the policies of the 32nd Israeli Government regarding the Palestinian issue will be Israel’s recognition, abidance by past agreements, and an end to violence-based politics.

In the case of Hamas not taking the above mentioned steps, the new Israeli government is likely to continue employing the current policies in order to keep Hamas from taking root and gaining strength in the region. Netanyahu, who lost the seat of prime minister in 1999, will want to use this opportunity by forming the strongest possible coalition government and, despite the expectations of the international community, expanding on the peace process. However, exactly how Yisrael Beiteinu will coexist with United Torah Judaism and Shas, which have drastically different party programs than it does, and

the lifespan of this coalition remain big question marks. These small religious parties are likely to threaten Netanyahu's government with quitting the coalition should their demands be rejected. Given the new American administration's willingness to build dialogue with states and groups defined as thugs by the previous government, the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana's statement that good relations between Israel and the EU depend on the support given to the two state solution by the new Israeli government and the negative impact of the latest Gaza operation on Israel's bilateral relations, it is not likely that the new government will harm the peace process.

How Netanyahu will keep such a coalition together and how he will manage Israel's vital issues are dependent upon not just developments in Israeli politics, but as mentioned above, on peace within Palestine and regional politics as well.

Turkish-Israeli Relations

Turkish-Israeli relations have entered a new phase since 2002 both due to the regional situation and the AKP's foreign policy. The most apparent characteristic of Turkish foreign policy in this phase is her desire to eliminate the problems with her

neighbors and playing the role of an arbiter in solving regional problems.

This vision has brought with it the reappearance of the Palestine question in Turkey's Middle East policy and a diversion from the policy of developing relations with Israel independently from the Palestinian problem, which had been the case since the second half of 1990s. This diversion, however, did not mean improving relations with Arab countries at the expense of the relations with Israel. In our opinion, the fact that during the AKP rule there have been more than thirty diplomatic visits, including on the level of the president, the prime minister and ministers, that bilateral trade volume has reached 4 billion dollars and that military and intelligence cooperation remains intact are enough indicators of the government's will to develop relations with Israel while reproaching the Arab world.

However, developments during and after the Gaza Operation disrupted the balance Turkey had been trying to establish between Israel and the Arab world since 2002. While Turkey described the operation as desultory and having been started with concerns for the upcoming elections, Israel accused Turkey with wrongly analyzing the situation and not acknowledging that Hamas is a terrorist organization.

Thanks to anti-Semitic protests in Turkey, Prime Minister Erdoğan's quarrel with the Israeli President Peres in Davos, IDF General Avi Mizrahi's criticisms towards Turkey and the Turkish Foreign Ministry's note of protest to Israel, the Turkish-Israeli relations, be it military, political, diplomatic or societal, are going through their most tense days since mid-1990s.

The current tension in relations threatens both countries due to the treaties they belong to, as well as conflicting with their regional politics. In order to keep the relations from deteriorating further, President Abdullah Gül has written a letter to President Peres expressing his desire to visit Israel, while Foreign Ministers Livni and Babacan came together at NATO's foreign ministers meeting in Brussels to discuss the recent course of bilateral relations.

Bilateral relations are likely to improve with visits first on the ministerial then presidential levels, followed by the American Jewish community's renewed veto on the Armenian genocide bill, which is to be sent to the Congress in April.

For its part, Turkey can overcome the issues of trust between Israel and herself through diplomatic efforts towards peace in Palestine and attempts at negotiating captured Israeli

soldier Gilad Shalit's release.

Given Turkey's policies in the region, the Palestine policy adopted by the new government in Israel will continue to be the determining factor in bilateral relations with her ally Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey's relations with both state and non-state actors that directly threaten Israel's security will affect the new government's attitude towards Turkey, as well as the course of Turkish-Israeli relations in the near future.

Recommendations

The necessary course of action for Turkey in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be summarized as follows:

- Using the influence over Hamas to get it to be cautious about its anti-Israel rhetoric
- Working to ensure that Hamas refrains from provocative statements that will increase the tension
- Working towards reconciliation by emphasizing common goals between Hamas, Fatah and other factions
- Advising Hamas that terrorist activities worsen the problem
- Working towards Gilad Shalit's release

- Ensuring that aid is going in and reaching those in need by actively using the Turkish aid agencies operating in the region
- Making sure the new Israeli government does not give up the two state solution
- Expanding on the efforts at ending the tensions between the two countries following the Gaza operation and Prime Minister Erdoğan's scolding in Davos...

Bora Bayraktar is an experienced journalist specializing in the Middle East. He has two books published in Turkey: "A'raf: the Middle East from the Oslo Accords to the Al Aqsa Intifada" (Aykiri, 2003) and "HAMAS" (Karakutu, 2007). He is currently completing his PhD in Political History of the Middle East and International Relations within the Middle East Studies Institute in Marmara University and writing his thesis on "Why the Oslo process failed". He has followed many of the recent developments including President Guls historic Armenia visit, international aid efforts in Afghanistan, the political crisis in Pakistan, various crisis points in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hamas' 2006 election victory, Israil's Disengagement from Gaza, Arafat's funeral, the Macedonian civil war and various phases of the crisis in Kosovo. Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, Israeli President Shimon Peres, PMs Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak and Pakistan's former PM Benazir Butto are among the leaders Bayraktar has interviewed. Bayraktar has participated in the Knight Wallace Fellowship, associated with University of Michigan, as well as CNN's Professional Journalism Program in Atlanta in 2002 and a journalism course by Reuters. He has worked for the CNN-Turk channel for 9 years, serving as a reporter, senior correspondent and head of the Foreign News Desk. He is currently the editor of ATV's Foreign News Desk. He writes articles for various newspapers and magazines.

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Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) was established as a research unit uder the auspices of Istanbul Kultur University in 2008.

GPoT Center aims to produce innovative and distinctive policy recommendations by analyzing the contemporary trends in regional and international politics.

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