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Israel's troubled relationship with Turkey and Iran: the "periphery" dimension

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Summary

Israel's approach to Turkey and Iran must be understood against the backdrop of its "periphery doctrine" of forming alliances with non-Arab and non-Muslim regional actors and its search for a Middle Eastern identity. The "periphery strategy" it pursued in the 1950s led to alliances with, among others, Turkey and Iran, who were viewed as natural allies against the hostile and powerful Arab "centre" spearheaded by Nasserism. In Israel's eyes, "periphery" peoples also seemed to have broadly accepted the legitimacy of having a Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East.

Though the Arab core may have begun to accommodate Israel, it has not become fully reconciled to the idea of Jewish self-determination. The current fragility of a number of states in the Arab world, and the loss of influence of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, leave Israel increasingly fearful of the regional ambitions of the Islamist regimes in

Turkey and Iran. It sees Turkey as having betrayed the old alliance formed between the two countries in the face of a hostile Arab world and has thus been reluctant to respond positively to Turkey's offers to mediate in Israel's disputes with Islamists and Syria. Tentative efforts to do so were scuppered by the Israeli attack on Gaza in December 2009 and relations with Turkey have seriously deteriorated since the flotilla incident in May 2010.

If Israel is to change its approach to Turkey and discover the possible advantages of dealing with a regional power whose foreign policy departures have increased its commerce and influence in Asia, Europe and the Middle East, it will have to abandon its "periphery thinking". As for Iran, Israel needs to separate its calculations in dealing with Tehran's hostility from over-optimistic assessments of the fragility of the Iranian regime. In short, it needs to recognise the regional facts of life.

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Introduction

Israel's relations with Turkey have been deteriorating for some time, with last May's Gaza flotilla incident seeming to bring matters to a crisis. Turkey, under the Erdogan government, has for several years been dynamically expanding its regional ties, including with Islamist states and movements, while Israel, against a backdrop of the prolonged failure of peace efforts, has moved into ever greater international isolation.

From an Israeli standpoint, Ankara's conscious policy decision to distance itself from Jerusalem in some respects dovetails with Israel's far more dangerous confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the origins of which can be directly traced back to the fall of the Shah in 1979. In the 1950s, within a few short years of its emergence on the regional scene, Israel had forged close ties with both Turkey and Iran, viewing them – along with a number of non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities in the region and one or two geographically distant Arab countries – as natural allies on the Middle Eastern ethnic "periphery" against the hostility of a powerful Arab "centre" spearheaded by Nasserism and Arab nationalism.

This "periphery strategy", while confined largely to security ties, nevertheless evolved into an aspect of Israeli identity, namely how Israeli elites, particularly security elites, see and define themselves in the region. This paper assesses the Israeli approach to Turkey and Iran against the backdrop of the "periphery doctrine" and Israel's search for a Middle Eastern identity. The objective is to enhance understanding of Israel's strategic decision-making and its search for regional security.

Turkey, Iran and the "periphery doctrine"

Enunciated by prime minister and defence minister David Ben-Gurion in the mid-1950s, the "periphery doctrine", as a strategic approach to the Middle East, derived from the perception – essentially correct at the time – that Israel was surrounded by a wall of militant Arab states, headed by Nasser's Egypt, that were seeking its total destruction.

Accordingly, Israel set out to establish relations with countries and minorities on the geographic and ethnic periphery of the Sunni Arab core of the Middle East which appeared to share its fears of Arab encroachment. These states sometimes also offered the additional attractions of being pro-western and having large Jewish minorities whose immigration Israel sought.

In Ben-Gurion's thinking, the notion of establishing alliances with the periphery was linked to the expectation that such a strategy would eventually generate a desire on the part of the Arab mainstream to enter into similar alliances with Israel – once the Arabs recognised how valuable an ally Israel could be. Meanwhile, the forging of military links at the periphery would pin down Arab units that might otherwise be deployed at the front against Israel, for example, in Sudan (links with the southern Sudanese) and Iraq (links with Iraqi Kurdistan).

In addition, such alliances were seen as a means of attracting the interest of a great power, the United States, by demonstrating that Israel could be helpful in collaborating with key states in which the US had a strategic interest. In this sense, the "periphery doctrine" interacted with a second strategic tenet enunciated by Ben-Gurion early on in Israel's history as a modern state: the need to have close military ties with a major power.

An outflanking strategy

"Periphery thinking" ("periphery" is clearly an Israel-centric perception and the doctrine itself was never institutionalised) led Israel to establish diverse alliances: strategic relationships with non-Arab Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia which shared borders with the Arab Middle East; links with Sunni Arab Morocco and Oman on the fringes of the region; ties with an "ethnic periphery" of non-Arab or non-Muslim minorities within the Arab Middle East, such as the Maronites of Lebanon, the Kurds of northern Iraq and the southern Sudanese; and a diplomatic and aid campaign among the emerging independent countries of Black Africa. Virtually all were perceived by Israel as sharing its fears of

Arab designs – hence the perception from Israel's standpoint that it was pursuing a broad outflanking strategy.

One formal expression of the doctrine was the forging of an Israeli-Iranian-Turkish intelligence alliance, known as "Trident". Directed against the Arabs and the Soviets, it emerged in the late 1950s and flourished for a number of years. Unusually in the annals of Israel's "periphery relationships", an alliance with Turkey was effectively renewed and strengthened in the mid-1990s when Turkish-Israeli military cooperation was instrumental in forcing Syria, under President Hafez Assad, to abandon support for the Turkish Kurdish terrorist movement PKK. That alliance carried on into the early years of the current millennium when the two countries embarked on extensive commercial and security cooperation.

A critical feature of "periphery peoples" in Israeli eyes was their apparent acceptance of Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East. Indeed, in the eyes of other Middle Eastern minorities such as the Kurds, the Maronites and the southern Sudanese, Israel appeared to offer a model worth emulating.

Role switch

The outflanking strategy was one of the pillars of Israeli foreign and defence policy for about two decades. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, its logical foundations were becoming considerably less viable as the Arab core and the non-Arab periphery in many ways began to swap roles. The Sadat peace initiative of 1977 and the emerging de facto co-existence between Israel and Jordan reflected a readiness on the part of the Sunni Arab core to deal with Israel politically rather than militarily.

By contrast, the "sovereign state periphery" itself was becoming radicalised – Marxist in Ethiopia, Islamist in Iran – while the limitations of the "ethnic periphery" became painfully obvious when, in 1982-83, the Maronites of Lebanon proved unable or unwilling to support a strategic

alliance with Israel. Turkey, first in the 1960s and again in recent years, weakened its security and intelligence cooperation with Israel when its interests in the Arab and Islamic worlds appeared to dictate a different orientation.

Yet the role switch was far from complete. The Arab core may have begun to accommodate Israel but, to this day, it has not become fully reconciled to the idea of Jewish self-determination in a homeland located at the heart of the Arab world. Most Arab states are no longer hostile (as they were in Nasser's day), are themselves concerned about Turkey and Iran's regional ambitions, and have offered Israel a formula for normalising relations once Israel-Arab peace has been achieved; however, the state system within the Arab world is worryingly fragile. No fewer than six members of the Arab League (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) are currently plagued by different types of ethnic and territorial fragmentation while the traditional leaders, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, no longer exercise the regional influence they once had.

"Periphery thinking" still alive

In parallel, for some Israelis the periphery has intermittently continued to beckon. For example, Israel undertook its adventure with the Maronites in Lebanon in 1982-83 knowing it would jeopardise the nascent Arab-Israeli peace process. And the Iran-Contra affair of the mid-1980s reflected a perception that persists to this day among some Israelis that Iran will ultimately revert to its pre-Khomeini stance and be Israel's ally once again.

Israel's periphery strategy is also still alive here and there in Arab thinking. For example, Egypt's periodic suspicions of Israeli involvement in alleged attempts by Ethiopia to divert the sources of the Blue Nile are difficult for Israel to rebuff because they stem from Israel's past alliance with Ethiopia against Nasserist support for Arab nationalism in that region. And the likely secession of southern Sudan from Sudan is frequently termed a "Zionist plot" in the Arab press.

The outflanking strategy has to some extent become internalised in Israel's strategic thinking, even as the country is faced with the risk of attack from Iran and its proxies, a sweeping revision of regional strategy by the Erdogan government in Ankara and, on the other hand, the launch of an extensive peace initiative by the Arab League. This is striking since all the evidence shows that Israel's state allies on the non-Arab periphery – Turkey, Iran and even Ethiopia, and even some of its minority "allies", such as the Lebanese Maronites – have almost always approached the relationship along purely pragmatic and even cynical lines of *realpolitik*.

This dichotomy – translated by some Israeli strategic thinkers into a sense that the country has been betrayed by its natural allies – goes a long way toward explaining Israel's difficulty in adjusting to Turkey's new policy departures. Israel's cautious attitude toward the extraordinary regional outreach being undertaken in the Middle East by Turkey under a moderate Islamist regime is heavily influenced by its previous sense of being allied with Turkey's military establishment against the very same radical Arab and Muslim states that the Erdogan government is now befriending.

Israeli-Turkish relations as a case study

The predominant view in Israel and, to some extent, in western and moderate Arab countries as well, is that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) are steadily leading Turkey on a path toward extremism. They are linking Ankara to the most radical countries and movements in the Middle East, from Iran and Syria to Hamas and Hizbullah. Further, Erdogan is seeking to usurp the role played by more moderate countries and governments in dealing with Islamist extremists, namely to replace Egypt in mediating the needs of Hamas and, together with Brazil, to displace the United States in making deals with Iran.

Erdogan's rhetoric against Israel, often invoking Turkey's honour, has become inflammatory and at times anti-Semitic. Given his government's

ongoing friction with Turkish Kurds, its prolonged stalemate in Cyprus and its refusal to come to terms with the Armenian genocide, Israelis and others perceive a certain degree of hypocrisy in his regional policies when he shrilly condemns Israel for its attitude toward the Palestinians.

Further apparent proof of Erdogan's intentions can be found at domestic level in Turkey where his government, with popular support as evidenced in the recent constitutional referendum, is slowly introducing Islamist concerns, neutralising the constitutional leadership role assigned to the armed forces under Kemalism and stigmatising and even bringing criminal charges against traditional pro-western elements.

Betrayal of former alliance?

The perception that under Erdogan Turkey is somehow betraying an alliance with Israel that was founded on Arab hostility constitutes a significant mental block among some Israeli leaders in their dealings with Ankara. Israel also fails to understand how commerce, tourism and even military relations could have flourished to date unless Turkey, by virtue of its very Middle Eastern identity, were inherently more friendly with Israel.

Accordingly, Israel's leaders have not adapted well to the more attractive aspects of Turkey's new proactive approach, such as its offer to mediate Israel's problematic relations with Islamists and with Syria. In 2008, the then prime minister, Ehud Olmert, did take advantage of Ankara's offer to hold proximity peace talks with Syria, at a time when the Bush administration in Washington was not interested in advancing such talks.

But tellingly, the talks ended in late December of that year when Olmert, just days after a very successful session in Ankara, launched Israel's attack against Hamas in Gaza. Erdogan, who received no advance warning from Olmert (Egypt apparently did), has harboured a fierce grudge ever since. Israel has nurtured that grudge by rejecting renewed Turkish offers to intercede with Syria.

This all seemingly culminated in the recent flotilla incident. Seeking to spearhead contacts with Hamas, a Turkish Islamist group with close ties to the government launched a provocation that was horribly mishandled by Israel. Ankara is now demanding an apology and reparations and has begun downgrading relations. They may be beyond repair, particularly since Israel is currently run by a hawkish government that has become paranoid about much of the world's intentions. A Turkish gesture of aid to Israel in fighting a huge forest fire on Mt. Carmel in early December did usher in a round of Turkish-Israeli negotiations over ways to get beyond the flotilla incident. But even in a best-case scenario, relations will hardly be restored to their earlier warmth.

But sadly, Turkey and Iran are strong and their regimes are stable, while the Arab state system is in disarray. Even Israel's recent tightening of military and commercial relations with Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria, apparently to balance the decline in its relations with Turkey and "outflank Ankara", appears of little consequence in the overall regional balance. Of course, this does not make it any easier for Israel to develop a post-periphery regional orientation. But at least the regional facts of life should be recognised.

Conclusion: overcoming "periphery" nostalgia

Could Israel approach Turkey differently? Olmert seemed to move in that direction in 2008. If Israel can stop seeing Turkey as having betrayed an alliance, it might come to realise that there are advantages in dealing with a regional power whose foreign policy departures, led by Erdogan's former adviser and now foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, have opened doors to commerce and influence in Asia, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Middle East. Conceivably, there are ways in which Jerusalem can still benefit from Turkish good offices despite Erdogan's objectionable rhetoric, but only if it is able to overcome its "periphery" nostalgia.

Therefore, unless and until there is a radical change in Turkey, Israel would be well advised to abandon its fond memories of Ankara as an ally. As for Iran, Israeli strategic decision-makers must strive to separate their calculations with regard to how to deal with the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme and its calls for Israel's destruction from alluring assessments concerning the fragility of the Tehran regime that tend to be based mainly on wishful thinking.

"Trident" is dead and the tables are turned: most Arab states are now probably closer in orientation to Jerusalem than Ankara and Tehran are, and that paradigm is not likely to change in the near future.