

Turkey - Israël : diversions, splits, disagreements

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After the bloody incident at sea in the eastern Mediterranean, it is now time for reflection. Time spent lambasting Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for his continuous roaring about the government of Israel (much more than anything else) could be better spent on analyzing what is happening in terms of rethinking relations between Israel, Turkey and the US.

Splits within the Israeli government, based on internal critique of the massacre, are a fact and, in the long run, may signal its collapse. Erdoğan, fully aware of the grave mistake in conduct by the Netanyahu cabinet, is keen on inflicting wounds on it in order to demolish whatever is left of its credibility. He aims either to force it revise its policies regarding Gaza or expose its stubbornness to the eyes of the world.

It is part of his strategy, disguised by a loud, angry voice.

Does this work internationally? According to the analysis of Hélène Flautre, the co-chairperson of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, published yesterday in this paper, it does echo well within the EU, at least.

“With this policy, Turkey is not steering away from the EU or the West. With this new foreign policy, Turkey is exhibiting an effective foreign policy that cherishes our common values. The alternative to this policy is to remain silent to the inhumane policy applied to Palestinians and to go on with Bush’s Iraq policy. This policy, glorified by Netanyahu, Barak and Lieberman, has failed, and lost the support of Europe and even of the US. I advise readers to closely scrutinize the position of the journalists who suggest an axis shift for Turkey as well as the policies they advocate. They will realize that this “axis shift” thesis, which is not popular in the EU, is in the arsenal of certain groups in the US and the zealous proponents of Bush’s Iraq policy,” she writes.

But there is certainly more behind Erdoğan’s rhetoric.

When the Humanitarian Aid Foundation (İHH), the much-debated Islamist aid organization, showed serious signs that it would carry out its intentions to approach Gaza through Israel’s naval borders, and as soon as it became clear that the İHH would not listen to advice from Ankara not to do it the way it did, the issue before the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) became twofold (and it still is). First, how to utilize an inevitable clash with Israeli forces into further popularity. Second, how to get possible mass-hysteria under control.

The crucial element in this context has to do with which political actor in Turkey the İHH identifies itself most closely with. A mixture of various deeply conservative Sunni elements (in terms of sects), the İHH is a social flank of the Felicity Party (SP). It is the child of the famous “Milli Görüş” (National View), founded and still controlled by Necmettin Erbakan, a former prime minister known for his anti-Western, anti-Semitic views.

The AKP has enjoyed some support from that segment over the years, and is keen on not loose it fully to a non-globalist Islamist movement such as the SP, which is at least sympathetic to radical views. This also means not losing other segments who justifiably were infuriated over the incident.

Erdoğan’s outbursts, therefore, need to be explained not only due to the Israeli folly, but also due to the tense emotions which has penetrated his party. But, as the story developed, the emotions had a somewhat

spiraling effect. When remarks watering down the violent and defiant character of Hamas continued to pour, and when President Abdullah Gül declared (wrongly) that Israeli-Turkish relations would never be the same as before, and when there has been remarkable scrutiny of the İHH, some eyebrows were raised.

Fethullah Gülen's comments which followed, and broadened the debate, must be seen in this context. They were first of all a reminder that there have been aid operations conducted by other Islamic movements with the cooperation of Israel. They called for reflection on whether everything was done to avoid such a tragic outcome.

But, there was much more to them in their aftermath. Soon after, Bülent Arınç, the second most powerful man in the AKP agreed fully with Gülen's remarks at a party meeting and was met with powerful applause. This has brought two things to the surface. The first is that, as is rather well-known, there have been splits and conflicting views in the AKP about the İHH's methods, that it would be foolish to see the AKP as a monolithic political actor and that Arınç made it clear that the reactions should not lead to further mistakes and an escalation of fury.

But the second conclusion is even more important: Islamic movements in Turkey are very diverse and do dare to disagree, even on the most binding, moral issues and do it in the heat of the moment. It signals that diversity, a very meaningful element for the continued path of the AKP, might not only help it to make necessary, sound adjustments in its major policies, but also that it should calm strong suspicions abroad down that Turkish society is leaving the axis of common sense. It is simply not true.

Civic adjustments and self-scrutiny within the societies of both Turkey and Israel will help both to stop radicalizing each other.

Sources

Source : TdZ, 07 June 2010, Monday