

PRIME MINISTER RISKS TURKEY'S ROLE AS THE REGION'S HONEST BROKER

Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasingly harsh criticism of Israel and his vocal support for Hamas are worth examining. Erdoğan's Davos performance won him praise among Turkish and Arab public but at the expense of sabotaging Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East region. It remains to be seen whether or not the close ties and long-term relationship between Turkey and Israel will survive. But Erdoğan-led Turkey will no longer be seen as the region's honest broker.

Özgül Erdemli Mutlu *



*Özgül Erdemli Mutlu is a civil activist, a member of the ARI Movement, and the Director of Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership Center of KAGIDER. The views expressed here are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect any organization.

There are so many questions one wants to ask the Turkish Prime Minister. This essay will be a mere attempt of a Turkish citizen who finds it difficult to understand the recent actions and speeches of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that seem to affect Turkey's international standing, if not its foreign policy. There are concerns, however, that Prime Minister Erdoğan's dominance in foreign policy may set the tone of changing foreign policy priorities for Ankara. Turkish-Israeli relations can be a case in question where one can detect signs of shifting priorities from Erdoğan's perspective. To be able to analyze whether or not there is a change in Turkish foreign policy one needs to approach the issue from several angles as well as from several actors' perspectives and actions. Nevertheless, the single case of Turkish-Israeli relations can still give us some hints about shifting priorities and new calculations. The Davos incident can be interpreted as the culmination of new calculations on the part of the Turkish Prime Minister.

Turkish public tends to personalize official contacts in foreign relations. This may be considered as normal, however it should have limits for the diplomats and the leaders. It is critical to understand why Erdoğan slammed the Israeli President Shimon Peres during a public discussion at the Davos summit in January. It was a common sight for Turkish viewers who are by now used to seeing their Prime Minister's public persona, and his attacking, shouting and losing control over domestic debates. It was, for an international audience however, an unusual incident, for a foreign Prime Minister to have an outburst of anger in the course of a panel debate which was also attended by the General Secretary of the UN Ban Ki-Moon and the General Secretary of the Arab League Amr Moussa.

Theoretically speaking there may be a direct relationship between political and social trust with issues of identity, values, interests and emotions. One can argue that prior to the Davos panel, at least one of the two leaders came on stage well prepared, looking for an excuse to orchestrate the show. The long intervention of the Israeli leader regarding Israeli actions, followed by the moderator David Ignatius' efforts to end the session because it was past time to adjourn for dinner, ignited tension. Ignatius actually prevented the Turkish leader from responding to Peres' remarks about Israel's Gaza campaign. Little was needed to provoke Erdoğan and extra unwarranted time given to Peres to have the last word irritated the Turkish Prime Minister. "Mr. Peres, you are older than me. Your voice is too loud out of a guilty conscience. When it comes to killing, you know very well how to kill... Your holy book says you shall not kill" Erdoğan tried to rebut Peres.¹

¹ The video of the incident can be seen at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7125732350997917369>.

The Washington Post's associate editor and columnist Ignatius failed to moderate the panel impartially, however the Turkish Prime Minister's jittery response was perceived as overreaction to say the least. No doubt many witnesses perceived Erdoğan's overreaction as Turkish arrogance, whereas his supporters in and outside Turkey perceived it as proud leadership for taking a stand against the Israeli aggression. Erdoğan's "charismatic street smarts" in the international arena won over the masses and he was greeted as a hero who chanted "We are proud of you, Conqueror of Davos".

Had the Davos performance been the response of a Turkish civil activist, it could have been considered simply overly emotional. But the performance was staged by the Prime Minister and his storming out of the Davos forum was undiplomatic, unbalanced and theatrical. AKP's opponents and Turkish journalists have been victims of Erdoğan's infamous temper and his "Kasımpaşa attitude". AKP supporters interpret Erdoğan's gestures as evidence of the fact that "he's from the hood". Kasımpaşa is the lower middle class Istanbul neighborhood in which Erdoğan grew up. Kasımpaşa men are proud and blunt in word; some call them "local cowboys". His Kasımpaşa roots are seen as an important part of his charisma in a country where emotions and distrust run close to the surface.

The critical issue is whether Erdoğan's outburst was planned or not. It would be naïve to argue that the Davos performance stems from Erdoğan's mixing emotions and the business of foreign policy. Even if the tone of Erdoğan's speech and his manners were excessive, there must have been some other calculations leading to his Davos walkout.

According to some sources including journalists who were covering the World Economic Forum's meeting in Davos, a private meeting between Erdoğan and Peres was cancelled by the Turkish side before the panel. A short while ago in Cairo, Amos Gilad, the head of Security Bureau at the Israeli Defense Ministry refused to meet with Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's senior foreign policy adviser. Apparently the Turkish Prime Minister wanted Davutoğlu to be involved in cease fire talks between Hamas and Israel. Neither Egypt nor Israel was willing to involve Turkey in the talks.² Erdoğan's verbal attack of the Israeli Prime Minister for lying to him and acting behind his back regarding the beginning of the Gaza operation³ had already undermined the ties at the leadership level.

² There were rumors that claimed Erdoğan-led Turkey cannot be an honest broker anymore.

³ "Review of the World Press," TRT World English, 6 February 2009; "Gaza op has put an end to Israel's honeymoon with Turkey," *Ha'aretz*, 11 February 2009.

Clearly, there was something in the air suffocating the Turkish Prime Minister even before he got on stage at panel. It is important to note that despite Erdoğan's harsh criticisms over Israel's Gaza offensive, Turkey and Israel have long enjoyed close diplomatic relations. With its strong relations with the Palestinians (the governing party El-Fetih in the West Bank as well as Hamas which controls Gaza), AKP has been eager to play a role among Israel, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. But when it comes to Hamas, Israel and Turkey are at loggerheads. The former sees it as a terrorist organization whereas the latter views Hamas as a democratically elected party.

Israel's war in Gaza strained the relationship between the two countries, the full implications of which were not clear before the World Economic Forum in Davos. Many politicians and political analysts sense a shift in the relationship especially in the past three years. The relationship is no longer defined as "business as usual". Then again, Davos was not the right place for the clashes in policies to surface. Seasoned diplomats and experienced politicians of the two countries have various avenues to conduct foreign policy. Misunderstandings and misperceptions do not necessarily end in sharp changes in foreign policy. Foreign policy is a long term exercise and calculations in the international area cannot be based on feelings, for personal feelings may end in miscalculations. Values and emotions, however significant, do not directly affect political issues, interests and needs. This is not the case for Turkish foreign policy, but maybe for Erdoğan who may have other calculations regarding the path he is willing to take.

One can apply the football analogy to Erdoğan's performance; however the arena of foreign policy is clearly different from a football game. And if you are a prime minister you have to take foreign policy actions based on well calculated scenarios including potential gains as well as risks. Furthermore, any forward strike must be planned and based on strategic thinking as is any foreign policy. In international games, a concerted foreign policy is essential not only to win the game, but also to stay in it. Insults can be detected where none is intended among politicians, but an aggressive forward strike resulting in a score does not always end in international victory in the long term.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who used to play football when he was young, seemed like an aggressive football player at Davos who was trying to score a goal in a Kasımpaşa football match. But before the referee whistled to end the game, he

walked off the field saying “Davos is over for me.” For his supporters, “Shimon vs Tayyip ended 0:1”, for the crowds he became a hero, for his team he was a pretentious lone player, for his opponents he was not only not playing by the rules, but also dictating new rules.

No doubt Erdoğan is a powerful leader in Turkey and its neighborhood, and he can use Turkey’s prestige and leverage to help the Palestinian cause as well as the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet at Davos, he was far from a responsible regional leader who claims to play the role of a facilitator in the regional conflict. The highly public and vociferous defense of Hamas can serve Erdoğan’s AKP in the upcoming local elections on March 29 given Turkish public opinion is strongly in support of Palestinians, across the political spectrum. According to the polls AKP is comfortably ahead, however Erdoğan and his close circle are concerned that if their party receives less than 47 percent, it will not be a victory. The stakes being high seem to have led Erdoğan come up with other tools to expand his support domestically.

Erdoğan’s Davos performance seemed to have played out extremely well in Turkey. It is hard to accept, however that the Turkish Prime Minister was willing to risk the foreign policy of Turkey that claims to be a regional power for the sake of local elections. Ankara’s efforts to position Turkey as an impartial mediator between Israel and the Arab world have been harmed. Furthermore, Erdoğan’s standing sparked concern not only about Ankara’s foreign policy direction but also about Turkey’s orientation.

Erdoğan’s Davos behavior increased his popularity among the Arab street and in a few capitals in the region. Erdoğan was praised by Arab societies and was hailed as the courageous leader of the Arab world as opposed to the coward Arab leaders who fail to burn the bridges with Israel.

Popularity may be important but highly popular actions and policies of Erdoğan tend to encourage the radical camp in and outside Turkey and demoralize the moderate one. The moderate camp in Turkey is in favor of a balanced and sustainable foreign policy which continues on the path of the EU membership, strong Atlantic ties and impartiality regarding the regional conflicts.

Turkish engagement in the neighborhood has led to several positive developments in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, in the international rapprochement towards Iran, in the Israeli-Syrian peace talks as well as in the Georgia-Russia war recently.

As the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Turkey has much to gain from consensus building. Turkey's international standing will not benefit in the mid and long term if Erdoğan's rhetoric prevails over Ankara's foreign policy. According to some reports there is disappointment at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the recent tension and diplomats are holding talks with their counterparts to moderate the crisis.⁴ Rifts can undermine close ties in the near future, however left unmended, they can also cause rupture in the long term.

Foreign Ministry and Prime Ministry need to work together and act in sync regarding regional disputes. It is important to underline that unless aggressive foreign policy moves of the Turkish Prime Minister in multilateral arenas are controlled, Turkey's credibility and influence will be harmed. When indoctrination takes the place of reality and moderation, it will be very difficult to reverse the trend.

⁴ Barak Ravid and Yoav Stern, "Erdoğan's Davos Behavior may ruin relations," *Ha'aretz*, 3 February 2009.