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Mounting Israeli-Iranian Tension: Turkey in the Middle

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Israeli and Iranian sabre-rattling, coupled with Turkey's determination to keep relations with Israel in deep freeze as it pressures Tel Aviv to lift its blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, threaten to undermine Turkey's influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

Commentary

THE FALLOUT from last year's killing by Israeli forces of nine Turkish nationals aboard a Turkish aid ship seeking to run Israel's blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip continues to dog Ankara's heels as it emerges as a regional leader in the Middle East and North Africa.

Senior Turkish officials reiterated at the Istanbul Forum recently their refusal to reverse their downgrading of diplomatic relations with Israel to the level of second secretary and their suspension of all military cooperation as long as Israel fails to apologise and offer compensation for the death of the Turkish activists and maintains its blockade of Gaza. The officials said that despite Israeli assistance to Turkey's earthquake-stricken eastern region, their terms for a normalisation of relations were non-negotiable.

To drive the point home, Turkey last week allowed two Irish and Canadian-flagged aid ships to set sail for Gaza from a Turkish port for a renewed attempt to run the Israeli blockade. The two ships were intercepted by Israel and escorted to the port of Ashdod. By ensuring that the two ships were flying foreign flags and had no Turkish nationals on board, Turkey sought to avoid an armed confrontation with Israel.

Israel imposed a naval blockade on Gaza after Hamas seized control of the territory in June 2007, saying it is necessary to prevent weapons being supplied to militants in the Strip. Critics of the sea and land blockade say it is collective punishment of Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants.

Turkey had earlier vowed to have Turkish warships accompany Gaza-bound aid ships to avoid a repetition of the May 2010 attack. The nine Turks aboard the Mavi Marmara, lead ship of last year's flotilla, were killed by Israeli forces who boarded the vessel in international waters. Israel asserts that the activists were armed and that Israeli forces had acted in self-defence.

Closing doors

Turkey's harsh response to the incident has garnered it wide support across the Arab and Muslim world at a time when the Middle East and North Africa is racked by mass anti-government protests. However it has complicated Turkey's efforts to shield itself against being drawn into the region's multiple conflicts.

As a result, Turkey has little ability to bring Israel and Iran back from the brink of a military confrontation; and the escalating conflict could damage Turkey's projection of itself as a regional Islamic, democratic, economic and military power.

Turkish concerns that its hard line towards Israel could lead it into a corner stem from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to seek approval from his cabinet for a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Netanyahu sees Iran as the foremost existential threat to the Jewish state.

His request follows Israel's successful test-firing of a long-range missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as well as a series of Israeli Air Force long-range attack drills in cooperation with their Italian counterpart, including one late October at a NATO base in Italy. The Israeli military has also practised a mass evacuation of civilians in case of an attack in areas near Tel Aviv. The Israeli exercises were held in an advance of the expected release this week of an International Energy Agency (IEA) report on Iran's nuclear capabilities.

Siding with Iran

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi responded defiantly to the test-firing of the Israeli missile as well as the military exercises, asserting that his country was prepared for a possible Israeli attack. Anticipating Turkey's dilemma in case of an Israeli attack, Salehi suggested that Turkey would have no choice but to support Iran against Israel.

While Turkish defence and military officials have little doubt that Israel would prevail in a military confrontation with Iran, even if it is unlikely to fully destroy Iran's decentralised and heavily fortified nuclear facilities, they worry about the effects of likely Iranian retaliatory attacks against Israel as well as US targets in the Gulf and Afghanistan, for that would escalate the confrontation with Iran.

Turkey would increasingly be seen in Tel Aviv and Washington as not only having turned on Israel –often a yardstick in the West for assessing Turkish foreign policy - but also having sided with the enemy. Turkish officials and analysts fear that this could result in covert support for Kurdish guerrillas who have stepped up their attacks on Turkish military targets in south-eastern Turkey. It could also endanger Turkish security cooperation with Iran in combatting Kurdish insurgents.

Turkey's dilemma is heightened by the fact that increasingly it is being viewed in the Middle East and North Africa as a counterweight to Iran. Turkey has dashed Iranian hopes that it would find an ally in Erdogan's Islamist government. Instead, Turkey's pluralist democracy constitutes a popular alternative to Iran's harsh, repressive regime, bolstered by Turkey's hard line towards Israel.

Turkey and Iran have further lined up on opposing sides of the Syrian divide with Turkey supporting opposition against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Iran's closest ally in the Arab world. In response, Iran has sought to portray Turkey as part of a US-Israeli-Saudi conspiracy to stymie the wave of popular revolts in the Middle East and North Africa in a bid to prevent them from spreading to the oil-rich Gulf.

Members of Erdogan's ruling party have criticised him for responding emotionally to Israeli policies and have urged him to repair relations with Israel, while remaining critical of Tel Aviv. This is to ensure that Turkey is not painted into a corner by mounting tension in the region but can truly act as a bridge across the West-East divide as well as the region's fault lines. The key to Turkey's role may indeed lie partially in Israel but Turkey has only a limited window of opportunity to keep the door open.

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